

Bits of history: Intriguing tidbits

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [January 12, 2010](#) issue

Some intriguing tidbits of American history that I gleaned from recent reading:

The lone judge to repent of his part in the Salem witch trials was also one of the first white Americans to write against slavery. Samuel Sewall recanted his role in the Salem trials of 1692. In 1700 he published *The Selling of Joseph*, an antislavery brief that used the Old Testament story of Joseph to insist that just as Joseph's brothers had no right to sell him into slavery, so no person had the right to sell or possess another.

Stories involving balloons have long been apt to take in and fool the American media. In the summer of 2009, cable TV swallowed hook, line and sinker the idea that a Colorado boy was stuck in a weather balloon that accidentally went aloft. In 1844, Edgar Allan Poe, an inveterate hoaxer, concocted a faux account of a transatlantic crossing by a hot-air balloon. The *New York Sun* ran the story as front-page news.

When Lincoln delivered his Second Inaugural Address, it was mostly African Americans who appreciated it. The larger part of the president's audience that day, according to contemporary newspaper accounts, did not respond to applause lines and dispersed listlessly when the speech was finished. But as the *New York Herald* observed, several newly freed African Americans were present, and, as Ted Widmer notes, "midway through the speech they began to murmur appreciatively, engaging Lincoln in the call-and-response pattern familiar to their church, and offering a steady chorus at the end of every sentence, full of 'bless the Lord' and similar encouragements."

At first the telephone was conceived as a prosthetic enhancement. Both the mother and the wife of Alexander Graham Bell suffered hearing impairments, and in the early stages of his experimentation and invention, Bell hoped his device would help them hear. Helen Keller understood as much and dedicated her autobiography to Bell. Avitel Ronell elaborates: "Many of Bell's projects, from the construction of the telephone to the splitting of nipples in his later experimentation with ewes, were designed to produce supplementary body parts to enhance" the bodily sense of

sound.

The theme of God's judgment being rendered through natural disasters has a long pedigree in America. Kathleen Moran writes in reference to the San Francisco earthquake of 1906: "When Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson linked the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, with God's wrath at the immorality of a liberalism identified with San Francisco, they were echoing a theme voiced in 1906: San Francisco, awash in sex and sin, secularism and hubris, had called down God's punishment." Moran adds: "But most San Franciscans, then as now, rejected the notion of a biblical curse—as one advertisement asked, 'If, as some say, God spanked the town for being over-frisky, why did he knock the churches down and save Hotaling's Whiskey?'"

At his genesis, Tarzan was a hero for racists. Gerald Early links the early success of Tarzan to the story's historical context. When Edgar Rice Burroughs wrote *Tarzan of the Apes* in 1911 and 1912, Jack Johnson reigned as the first black heavyweight champion of the world. Race riots broke out in 1910 when Johnson defeated white former champion Jim Jeffries. Thus, says Early, for whites insecure about their assumed superiority to blacks, the idea of "a white lord of the apes who is able physically not only to beat the apes but also African warriors was not without its political significance."

Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" was composed on the edges of newspaper, pieces of toilet paper and anything else his confidantes could smuggle in to King. The letter was at first reproduced only in bits quoted in national news outlets, then disseminated in full as a pamphlet by the American Friends Service Committee. On June 12, 1963, two months after it was written, it was published in a national periodical—the *Christian Century*. The letter has become a kind of canonical American text, but the original scraps of the manuscript were thrown away.

If you find these gleanings even half as fascinating as I do, you will be interested in my single-volume source: *A New Literary History of America* (Harvard University Press), edited by Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors. With some 200 articles and contributors who include novelists, historians and literary scholars, this 1,128-page book never fails to engross and edify.

I could say more, but you have to experience it for yourself. So while you hie to a bookstore, I'm going to read the articles on the Winchester rifle, the first appearance of Mickey Mouse and "The Plight of Conservative Literature."