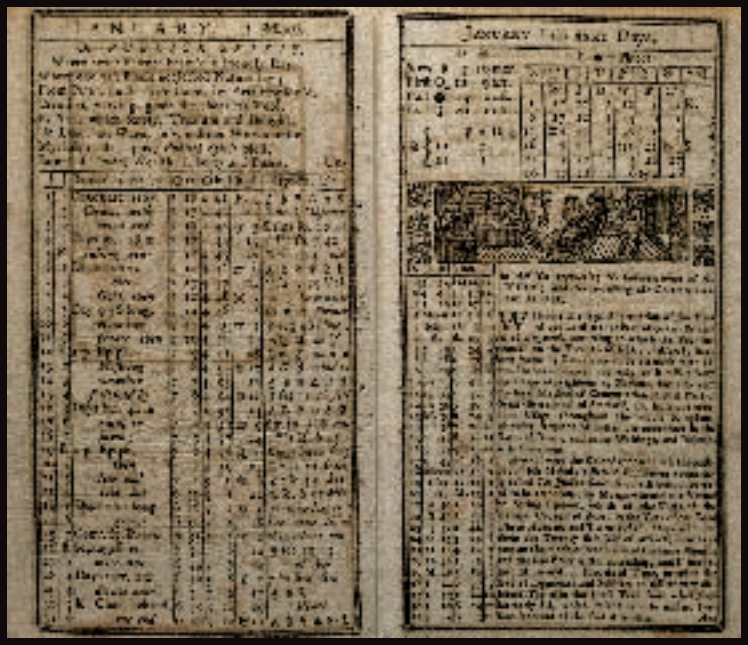

1752


Of the Eclipses, 1733.

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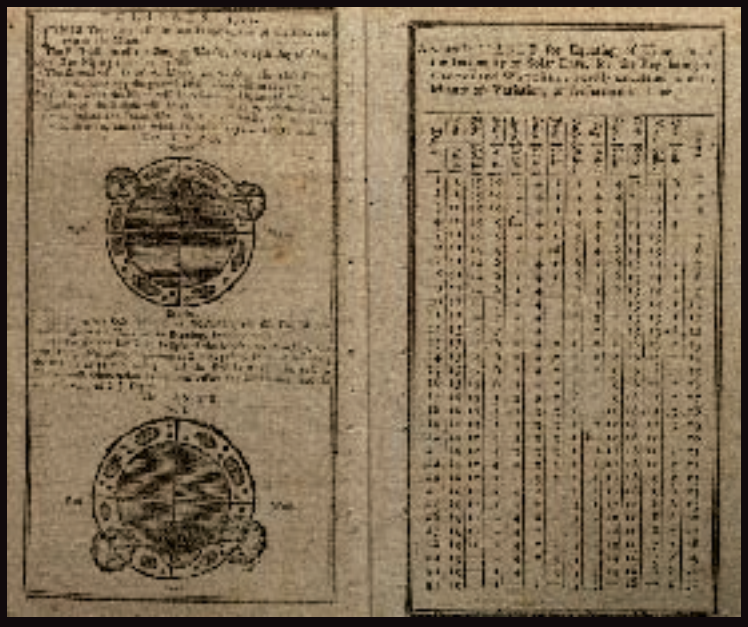
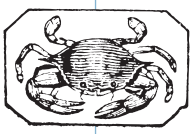


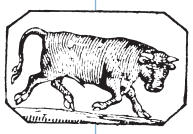
THE OLD FARMER'S ALMANAC

An essential tool to the early American family

"Most prolific, most indispensable of books, which every man uses … the supreme and only literary necessity—preferable even to the Bible or daily newspaper."
Moses Coit Tyler, *A History of American Literature*








A typical 19th-century American farm required only one comprehensive reference book: an almanac. Seemingly a library in itself, within its pages were a calendar, weather forecasts, agricultural reports, recipes, essays, tales, poems and humor. It was said that a Bible addressing the hereafter, and an almanac highlighting the here and now, offered all the information a person might ever need.

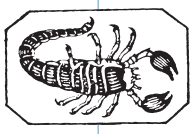
Published annually since 1792, *The Old Farmer's Almanac* is the oldest continuing periodical in North America. In rural 19th-century America, the book provided farms with news from the outside world, including current events, innovations and fashions. The coronation of a young English queen named Victoria was of minor interest, but the development of a steel plow was genuine news. Women on the farm might never see a bustle or a whalebone corset, but at least the almanac kept them informed of the latest fashions. Today, *The Old Farmer's Almanac* is not the primary source of news, but 18 million readers still find it a handy and enjoyable reference.

Although the almanac was a staple in early American life, its origins date back to antiquity and to the pagan beliefs in the zodiac. Observing the skies, one could see a relation between the movement of the stars and the changing seasons.

Ancient man later concluded that the movement of the stars could predict the future in addition to determining weather patterns. In the second century, a Greek scientist named Ptolemy wrote a table correlating the alignment of the stars with corresponding events on Earth, which could be regarded as the first almanac.








by Eugene Finerman

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Actual pages from *Poor Richard's Almanac* contained not only weather predictions, articles and stories but the wit and wisdom of its creator, Benjamin Franklin, page 20. *The Old Farmer's Almanac* covers from 1793 (left), 1851 (center) and 2009 (right), reveal evolution in design but not in content, above. Second century Greek scientist Ptolemy's early scientific discoveries contributed to many of the almanac's current features, below.

Moorish scientists in 11th-century Spain then applied their mathematical precision to astrology. Their efforts produced new astrological tables—and gave us the world almanac. "Al manakh" is Arabic for the reckoning or calendar. Written in 1088, the almanac gave the daily positions of the heavenly bodies—with a corresponding mix of scientific and astrological interpretation. It was a scholarly work and not for popular consumption. A Latin translation was soon available and inspired a renewed enthusiasm for astrology in Christian Europe.

The church regarded astrology and its predictions as relics of paganism, but tolerated its study so long as astrologers conceded that God moved the stars.

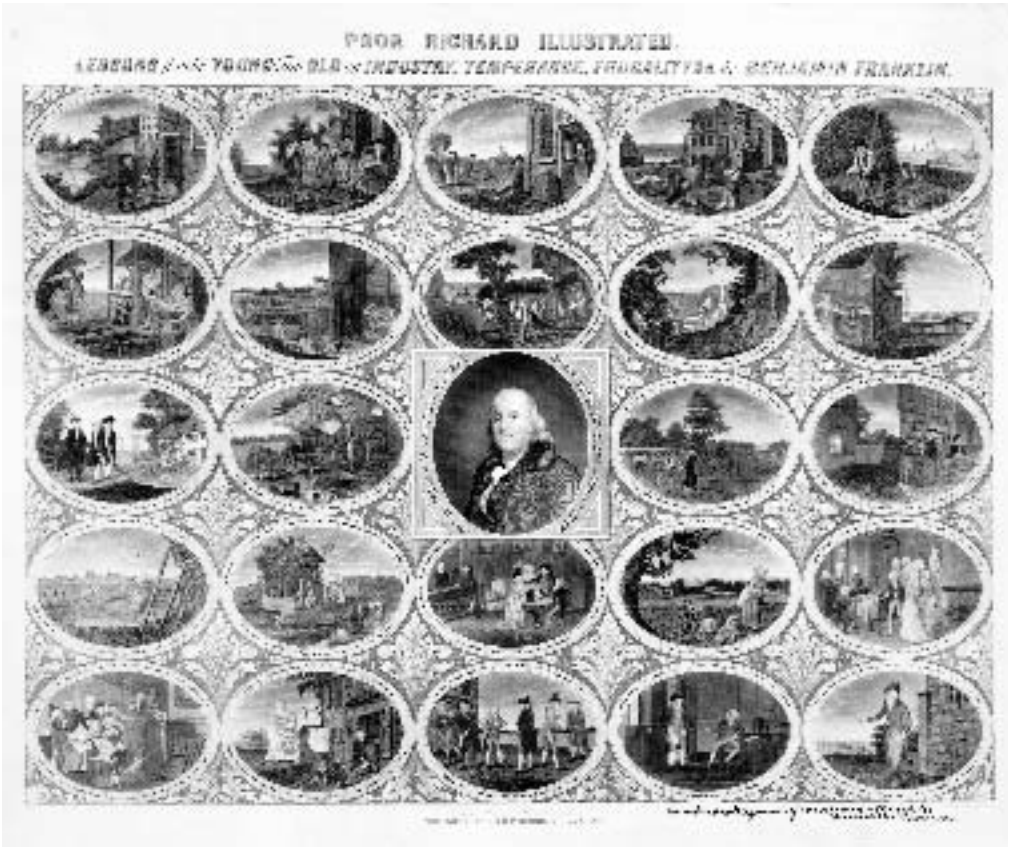
By the 14th century, Europe was experiencing the first promise of the Renaissance and the newly founded universities—at Padua, Bologna, Paris and Oxford—all had professors of astrology, who published their studies as almanacs.

Despite the almanac's intended academic audiences, the advent of the printing press in 1453 would introduce it to the general public. The first almanac was printed in 1457 by Johannes Gutenberg, himself. Since the public was not fluent in Latin, almanacs soon were printed in contemporary languages, including the first English version in 1497.

The public proved interested in astrological predictions, and astrologers and publishers were all too eager to produce almanacs. The once scholarly tabulations now were gossipy tabloids. Of course, the predictions—especially about kings—had to be vague or tactful. Publishers could be executed. Two were—after having predicted a major fire in London; when it occurred, the publishers were accused of arson.

In England's American colonies, the first almanac was published in 1639 under the auspices of the newly founded Harvard College. (The first continuously published newspaper in the colonies would not be distributed until 1704.) The "Almanack Calculated for New England" reflected the Pilgrim attitudes of its readers. It was a practical application of astrology, not a frivolous prognosticator, and provided a useful reference for agriculture and health. (If planets could affect the oceans' tides, they certainly must have influence on the fluids in a human body.) This "Almanack" became the model for the current notion of the book —the ready reference tool and the thumbnail encyclopedia.

Almanacs soon were published throughout the colonies, with calculations and articles reflecting each region. The New England book had become an American genre. According to *The American Bibliography*, between 1639 and 1799, more than 1,100 different almanacs were published in



A lithograph from *Poor Richard's Almanac* illustrates adages taken from Benjamin Franklin's writings, right.

America—and almanacs were published in greater quantities than all other books in America combined.

Of these 1,100 works, only *The Old Farmer's Almanac* continues to be published. However, one other almanac is also honored in the American anthology. *Poor Richard's Almanac*, which appeared continually from 1732 to 1758, featured the wit and wisdom of its author: Benjamin Franklin. *Poor Richard's* was such a success—selling 10,000 copies a year—that Franklin retired to lead a comfortable life.

Robert B. Thomas emulated Franklin's example when he began publishing his own almanac in 1792. "To be useful with a pleasant degree of humor" was the pledge of his publication. Thomas, the son of a Massachusetts farmer and schoolmaster, attended Harvard but eventually withdrew. From his own regimen of education — including astronomy, mathematics, agriculture and bookbinding, Thomas derived a secret formula for forecasting the weather. His predictions would be a major feature of his almanac. *The Old Farmer's Almanac* still uses his calculations for weather predictions and claims a 78 percent accuracy rate. That includes a correct forecast in 1816 of a snowstorm in summer. By contrast, the almanac claims that the U.S. Weather Service has an accuracy rate of 65 percent.

Originally called *The Farmer's Almanac*, Thomas' book was an immediate success despite some 20 other almanac titles that were in print in New England at the time. Selling for 9 cents a copy (when $1 was a good day's wages), its first edition of 3,000 almanacs quickly sold out. The following year, Thomas printed and sold 9,000 copies. This almanac would entertain as well as educate; the long winters of rural New England required some distraction, so Thomas included comic characters including opinionated Tom Bluenose and the less-than-sober saloonkeeper Toddy Stick.

In 1832, in tribute to the enduring popularity of his publication, Thomas revised its title to *The Old Farmer's Almanac*. Thomas would write the almanac until 1846 when he died at the age of 80; the book's longevity owes something to his. The next editor, John Henry Jenks, added a distinguishing feature to the almanac. For the 1851 edition, he commissioned a cover illustration that depicted the four seasons as well as portraits of the two inspiring spirits of the almanac: Benjamin Franklin and Robert Thomas. That trademarked illustration remains the cover of every edition.

The almanac also has another unique feature: there is a hole in the upper-left-hand corner of the book. It is a reminder of the book's unrefined practicality. For easy reference, the almanac could be hung from a nail in a toolshed, workshop … or outhouse. The almanac was never meant to be a coffee-table book.

By the mid-19th century, *The Old Farmer's Almanac* had a circulation of 225,000 and extended far beyond New England's borders. A copy in Illinois was used as evidence in an 1858 murder trial. A witness had claimed to see the crime by the light of the full moon on an August evening. However, the defendant's attorney, a Mr. Abraham Lincoln, cited the almanac to prove that there was no full moon that night. Mr. Lincoln won the case, but he is remembered for other successes as well.

The Old Farmer's Almanac has survived the changes in American society and the challenges of history. During the Depression of the 1930s, the almanac experienced its only drastic decline in readership; its circulation in 1938 was less than 90,000. During World War II, the almanac's weather forecasts were subject to government censorship; a German spy had been found with a copy of the book.

Today, there are only 2 million U.S. farms; more than 80 percent of Americans live in metropolitan areas. The 18 million readers of the almanac are more likely to be weekend gardeners than farmers. Yet, in its content and tone, Robert B. Thomas would recognize *The Old Farmer's Almanac* of today.