

E. Richard McKinstry

Paper ephemera

Online collections and resources

Whether we realize it or not, we see ephemera every day. But what is it? From the *Oxford English Dictionary*: In more extended application: that is in existence, power, favour, popularity, etc. for a short time only; short-lived; transitory." English collector and bibliophile Maurice Rickards called ephemera ". . . transient everyday items of paper—mostly printed—that are manufactured specifically to use and throw away."¹ Ephemera can also be defined as printed oddments and fragmentary documents of everyday life.

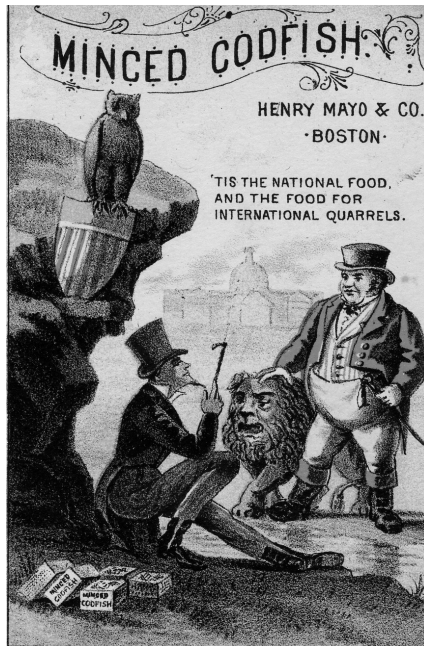
In practice, however, ephemera has a much broader definition. Today it is used as a word that refers to the many varieties of paper that pass through our lives. For historians, as well as private and institutional collectors, it is memorabilia that provides evidence about how our forebears lived.

For us, movie and other show tickets, product labels, advertising circulars that seem to arrive in the mail just about every day, retailer's catalogs, credit card receipts, and many other items qualify as ephemera—things we either create or use and then discard either immediately or in time. But this is nothing new. In years gone by, our ancestors also produced and used ephemera,

and then they threw it away. Except not all of them did, which makes today's historians and collectors grateful.

Printed and manuscript ephemera are primary sources for studying and illustrating the history of the United States and other countries. For example, during the late 1880s, Henry Mayo & Co., a Boston food business, advertised one of its popular products, minced codfish, using an illustrated trade card. As he did, the United States and England were battling diplomatically over fishing rights off

the coast of Canada. The trade card depicts figures representing America (Uncle Sam)



Henry Mayo & Co. illustrated trade card.

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and England (John Bull) and has the words: "Tis the national food and the food for international quarrels." Mayo's card dovetails neatly with other resources of the day to help tell the story of international discord.

In addition to furnishing historians with resources, ephemera is collectible. Some of it is high-priced—an 18th-century architectural drawing of a Boston townhouse could cost thousands of dollars—while some of it is inexpensive, such as a \$10 modern reproduction of a 19th-century Currier & Ives print.

This article includes a sampling of websites that are devoted to historical paper ephemera.

Library collections

A number of libraries have cataloged and digitized their ephemera holdings.

- **The Art of American Advertising, 1865-1910.** Harvard University's business school library offers this online exhibition. According to the website, "The emerging advertising profession after the Civil War represents a marketing revolution in which technology, creativity, and art were marshaled together to serve commercial ends." The exhibit offers many illustrations and essays on ephemera printed to help sell consumers the nation's goods. *Access:* <http://www.library.hbs.edu/hc/artadv/>.

- **Center for Popular Music.** Three libraries have particularly outstanding collections of music ephemera. Each offers an electronic catalog, describing their holdings. The Center for Popular Music, which was established in 1985 and supports faculty research and student development, is located at Middle Tennessee State University. Its collections detail American vernacular music traditions. Among other resources, the center collects such paper ephemera as sheet music, songsters, and broadsides. Separate databases provide access to these and other media. *Access:* <http://www.mtsu.edu/popmusic/>.

- **John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera.** In Great Britain, the Bodleian Library at Oxford University is the home

of the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera, an archive of tens of thousands of items that offers information about the changing nature of everyday life in the United Kingdom from the 18th into the early 20th century, as well as art and literature of the period. The archive was created by John de Monins Johnson (1882–1956), printer to the University of Oxford, and is acknowledged to be the most significant single collection of its kind in Great Britain. *Access:* <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/johnson>.

- **Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collection.** The collection is located at Johns Hopkins University (<http://levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu/>). It includes more than 29,000 pieces of sheet music and song sheets from 1780 to 1980 and is strong in documenting 19th-century American history through its song. Lester S. Levy wrote about the collection: "We sang the virtues of a war or a president. We touched on the American sense of humor. We sang about our mode of dress or advances in technology, or the prevailing attractions of the people at any particular time. Our popular music covered every situation."

- **Library of Congress.** Numbering more than 15 million images, the Library of Congress has one of the finest institutional collections of ephemera anywhere. The online catalog of the library's Prints and Photographs Division records 95% of its holdings, and many of those holdings have been scanned into JPEG and TIFF files for online viewing and publishing. *Access:* <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/>.

- **Maine Music Box.** Located at the University of Maine, the Maine Music Box boasts a collection of approximately 23,000 pieces of sheet music and musical scores. Two components of Maine Music Box help make it unique. First, many tunes written before 1923 are available for listening through a MIDI file or Scorch, which is interactive. According to the site, "It allows users to view the Scorch formatted score within a web page and listen to the score as a cursor follows the sound played back."

There are also options to change the key, tempo and instrumentation of the score.” Second, Maine Music Box gives instructors the opportunity to register for access to its instructional component, giving them a way to craft lessons based on the site’s content. “The Instructional Channel is a versatile teaching facility for teachers of music, social studies, history, the arts, and other disciplines. Lyrics, fully searchable by keyword, offer rich textual material for social, historical, and literary purposes. Sheet music covers are a treasure-trove of period art and advertising. . . .” *Access:* <http://mainemusicbox.library.umaine.edu/musicbox/index.asp>.

- **Norman B. Leventhal Map Center.** The Boston Public Library houses the Norman B. Leventhal Map Center. Established in 2004, the center provides access to records of 200,000 maps, 5,000 atlases, and 7,700 digitized items. As the website of the collection points out: “The map collection is global in scope, dating from the 15th century to the present, with a particular strength in maps and atlases from the New England region, American Revolutionary War period, nautical charts, and world urban centers.” Staff at the center hopes that students and others will develop their geographical literacy by using the collection. *Access:* <http://maps.bpl.org/>.

Nonlibrary collections

Nonlibrary websites are frequently devoted to a single subject and more often than not are created by a single individual.

- **T209-Contentnea Cards, 1909-1910.** Baseball cards are important resources for investigating the history of sport. This site considers a small segment of baseball history, spotlighting tobacco cards from the minor leagues of the South, specifically the Carolina Association. Issued by tobacco producer Erwin-Nadal Co. of Wilson, North Carolina, the Contentnea cards were

circulated in both color lithographs and black-and-white photographs. *Access:* <https://t209-contentnea.com>.

- **The American Menu.** The American Menu covers what its name suggests. Maintained by collector Henry Voigt, The American Menu features about 125 essays on historic menus and their importance to American studies. Voigt writes: “Menus aid our cultural memory. They provide unwitting historical evidence—not only of what people were eating, but what they were doing and with whom they were doing it; who they were trying to be; and what they valued.” *Access:* <http://www.theamericanmenu.com/>.

- **The John and Carolyn Grossman Collection.** John Grossman began acquiring paper ephemera in 1974, and, more than 40 years later, his collection numbers about 250,000 items. The Grossman Collection website highlights special holdings within the larger collection, records image themes and categories, points out the rarest pieces of paper ephemera in the Grossman Collection, and has an introduction to chromolithography, the printing process used to produce so much ephemera during the 19th and 20th centuries. *Access:* <http://www.johngrossmancollection.com/>.

- **Sheaff: ephemera.** This website categorizes ephemera according to an eclectic assemblage of topics. *Access:* <http://www.sheaff-ephemera.com/>

- **The Trade Card Place.** Historians have long recognized that trade catalogs and trade cards have had a significant impact on the development of commerce. Bibliographer Lawrence B. Romaine wrote that “Manuscript material and printed reports are indispensable, but the catalogs [and cards, I hasten to add] that actually sold the nation the inventions and improvements are the backbone of business history.”² The Trade Card Place includes 36 articles on various trade card topics (Currier & Ives trade cards, clipper ship cards, turn-of-the-century

bitters cards, etc.), a Victorian scrapbook that displays about 1,250 trade card images and summaries of 18 books on trade cards. *Access:* <http://www.tradecards.com/>.

- **Victorian Treasury.** An untold number of printed greeting cards have been circulated since the mid-19th century, and handmade ones date from centuries before. The finest website for becoming familiar with and studying one type of greeting card, the valentine, is Nancy Rosin's Victorian Treasury. An essay about Esther Howland (1828–1904), the “Mother of the Valentine,” anchors the site, while other articles and images focus on, among other topics, puzzle purse valentines, and leap year valentines. Links include one to a CBS News production about valentines in Nancy Rosin's collection (<http://www.cbsnews.com/videos/collectors-rare-valentines-day-cards/>). *Access:* <http://www.victoriantreasury.com/>.

Organizations

Many organizations devoted to collecting and studying paper ephemera have websites.

- **Centre for Ephemera Studies.** The first of its kind and located at the University of Reading, the center is part of the school's Department of Typography and Graphic Communication. At the nucleus of the center is the collection of ephemera amassed and then donated by Maurice Rickards. It is a representative collection of around 20,000 items, which is used in undergraduate and graduate classrooms, for symposia, and in workshops. *Access:* <https://www.reading.ac.uk/typography/research/typ-researchcentres.aspx>.

- **The Ephemera Society.** In Great Britain, The Ephemera Society, founded in 1975, maintains an ever-changing website. It has sections on news and articles, as well as a query page for posing questions. Nicely illustrative, a recent landing page showed Shakespearean characters depicted on Victorian Christmas cards. An item of the month column, which is archived back

to 2003, concentrates on the importance of a specific piece of ephemera. *Access:* <http://www.ephemera-society.org.uk/>.

- **Ephemera Society of America.** The site of the Ephemera Society of America had its beginnings as a one-page site in the late 1990s and has grown since to include a countless number of screens. Highlights of the society's website include pages defining ephemera and discussing examples, news and articles, and links to Internet sites on ephemera. Not surprisingly, the society, established in 1980, also uses its website to promote its annual conference and fair. *Access:* <http://www.ephemerasociety.org/>.

- **Ephemera Society of Australia.** Another English-speaking society is located in Australia. Having begun in 1987, the Ephemera Society of Australia, while not ignoring earlier topics, offers a website that often promotes 20th-century ephemera through imagery and text. Illustrated essays feature such topics as ephemera associated with Australian currency change in 1965, aviation ephemera, 1930s illustrated stationery, and Art Deco ephemera. *Access:* <http://www.ephemera-society.org.au/>.

- **Le Vieux-Papier.** The oldest national society with a website is from France. Organized in 1900, Le Vieux-Papier has grown from 35 members to more than 500. The website's section “Thesaurus illustré” illustrates the collecting interests of current members, showing images of, among other things, a period vehicle, sa cognac bottle label, and Metro tickets. Other sections promote Le Vieux-Papier's publications and events. *Access:* <http://www.levieuxpapier-asso.org/>.

Notes

1. Maurice Rickards, *This is Ephemera: Collecting Printed Throwaways* (Brattleboro, Vt.: The Gossamer Press, 1977), 7.

2. Lawrence B. Romaine, *A Guide to American Trade Catalogs, 1744-1900* (New York: R. R. Bowker Co., 1960), 395. *↗*