

Wednesday, May 9 in The Barn at Quarry Farm

7:00 p.m.

“High Style in Mid-Nineteenth Century Elmira: The Architecture & Interiors of the Jervis Langdon Mansion”

Walter G. Ritchie, Jr., *Independent Scholar*



Jervis Langdon

By the 1860s, Jervis Langdon, Mark Twain’s father-in-law, was ready to create a home that announced his status as one of Elmira’s most successful and influential businessmen. After purchasing a house built in the 1850s, he immediately arranged to have it enlarged and remodeled in the fashionable Italianate style. The result was an imposing three-story brownstone mansion that was counted among the largest and most elegant residences in the city. Langdon then commissioned Pottier & Stymus, one of the leading cabinetmaking and decorating firms in New York City, to decorate and furnish a number of the principal rooms on the first floor of the house. After her husband’s death in 1870, Olivia Lewis Langdon continued to patronize the firm, purchasing bedroom suites and other furniture. This lecture will explore the architecture, interiors, and furnishings of the Langdon mansion, sadly destroyed in the 1930s, but well documented by period photographs showing both the exterior and interior. Surviving pieces of furniture made by Pottier & Stymus, now preserved in various museum and university collections, will be discussed to illustrate how the Langdons, through the guidance of the firm, demonstrated their good taste and familiarity with the latest modes in household decoration and furnishing.

Walter G. Ritchie, Jr. is an independent decorative arts scholar and architectural historian specializing in nineteenth-century American architecture, interiors, and furniture. He has written, lectured, and taught courses on a variety of decorative arts subjects, in addition to having served as director and curator of a number of historic house museums. He is currently researching and writing a book on the history, furniture, and interior decoration of Pottier & Stymus.

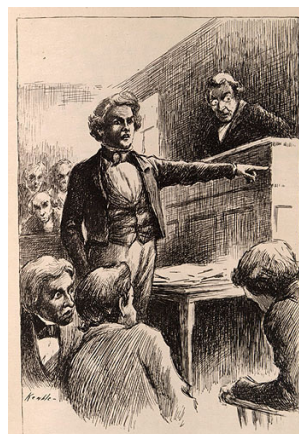
Wednesday, May 16 in The Barn at Quarry Farm

7:00 p.m.

“Raising the Bar: Satirizing Law in *Puddn’head Wilson* and *The Sellout*”

Rebecca Nisetich, *University of Southern Maine*

This lecture explores how American writers use satire to expose the ways that “race” operates in our political institutions, social practices, and cultural discourses. In *Puddn’head Wilson*, Twain shows what happens when legal discourse is taken to its logical extreme. Contemporary novelist Paul Beatty similarly satirizes America’s racial structure and—like Twain—he takes aim at the legal system that supports it. Twain’s novel is produced in the legal wrangling leading up to the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision; Beatty’s novel responds to the present-day nadir of African American jurisprudence: the 2013 Supreme Court ruling which overturned critical aspects of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the effect of the subprime lending crisis on African American homeowners, and the spate of “Not Guilty” verdicts in the deaths of African American men. As Twain, Beatty, and others demonstrate, we cannot escape these fundamentally racist legal and social structures until we have created other viable options. As racial satirist Patrice Evans writes, “When we laugh... we are making light, but [we are] also setting the groundwork for raising the bar.” For these American writers, satire becomes a powerful means for undermining racist narratives.



From the 1899 Harper & Brothers Edition of Puddn’head Wilson

Rebecca Nisetich directs the Honors Program at the University of Southern Maine, where she teaches inter-disciplinary courses on race and identity in the U.S. Her manuscript, *Contested Identities*, explores characters whose identities are not clearly articulated, defined, or knowable. The project underscores indeterminacy—as opposed to ambiguity or “mixture”—as enabling writers to undermine the “one-drop” conceptions of race that dominated the discourse on race in early twentieth century America. Her essays have appeared in *African American Review*, *Studies in American Naturalism*, and elsewhere.

Wednesday, May 23 in Cowles Hall on the Elmira College Campus
“An American Cannibal at Home: Comic Diplomacy in Mark Twain’s Hawai’i”

7:00 p.m.

Todd Nathan Thompson, *Indiana University of Pennsylvania*

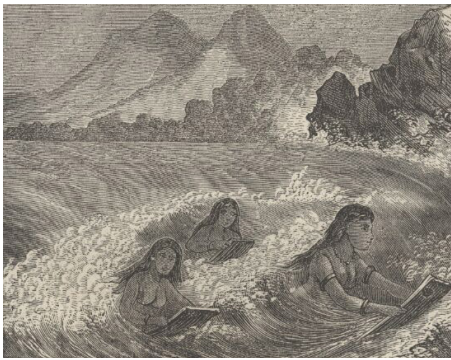


Image from Chapter 73 of the first edition (1872) of *Roughing It*

During and after his 1866 visit to Hawai’i, Mark Twain wrote about the place, its people, and their relationship to the United States in several different genres: newspaper articles, first as a correspondent for the *Sacramento Union* (1866) and then for other papers, including the *New York Herald*; a popular lecture titled “Our Fellow Savages of the Sandwich Islands” (1866-1873); two travelogues, *Roughing It* (1872) and *A Tramp Abroad* (1880), and an unfinished novel (1884). In his talk, Todd Thompson will investigate the comic strategies he employs in these works—particularly self-effacement, satiric levelling, comic foils, physical comedy, and sarcastic irony—to show how Twain leveraged the ambivalence of social humor to stoke Americans’ interest in Hawai’i while simultaneously defending Hawaiians from “other”-ing stereotypes that—even as early as 1866—he saw as intimately tied to Americans’ imperialist urges.

Todd Nathan Thompson is associate professor of English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where he also serves as assistant chair of the English department. He is author of *The National Joker: Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Satire* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2015). Thompson’s work on political satire and pre-1900 American literature has also appeared in *Scholarly Editing*, *Early American Literature*, *ESQ*, *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, *Journal of American Culture*, *Studies in American Humor*, *Teaching American Literature*, *the Blackwell Companion to Poetic Genre*, and elsewhere. He is currently at work on a new book project entitled *Savage Laughter: Nineteenth-Century American Humor and the South Seas*

Wednesday, May 30 in Cowles Hall on the Elmira College Campus
“My penchant for silence: Mark Twain’s Rhetorical Art of the Unspoken”

7:00 p.m.

Ben Click, *St. Mary’s College of Maryland*

There is no shortage of commentary on Twain’s penchant for talk, how he transliterated and employed it. He perfected the mock oral narrative, precisely rendered of frontier and river vernacular, created the stunning narrative method of Huck Finn’s voice, and crafted countless, repeatable maxims (ironically, one being: “I talk until I have my audience cowed”). Yet, silence permeates the writings of Mark Twain—for example, there are over 150 references to silence in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* alone! Examining its functions is an overlooked, yet integral, aspect of his writing for silence mediates and influences the discourses of his fictive and personal worlds. Rhetorical theorist Cheryl Glenn argues, “silence—the unspoken—is a rhetorical art that can be as powerful as the spoken or written word”. Twain too understood that power: “The unspoken word is capital. We can invest it or we can squander it.” Indeed, Twain crafted the full measure of that art on the page throughout his writing life. This talk examines representative (and powerful) rhetorical uses of silence in the arc of Twain’s fictive writing.

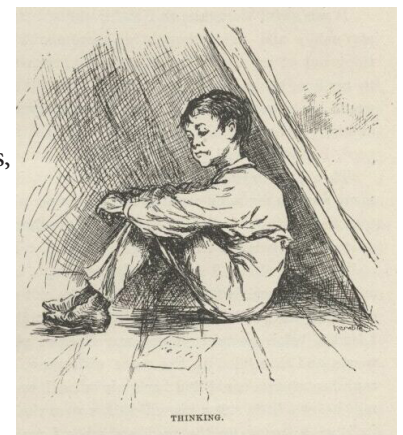


Image from Chapter 31 of the first edition (1885) of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Ben Click is a professor of English at St. Mary’s College of Maryland, director of the Writing & Speaking Center, director of the Twain Lecture Series on American Humor Culture, and the associate editor of *The Mark Twain Annual*. With Larry Howe and Jim Caron, he published *Refocusing Chaplin: A Screen Icon in Critical Contexts*. He has given numerous lectures and scholarly papers on Mark Twain, published articles and book chapters on the teaching of writing and writing assessment. He is also working on a book that examines humor as a rhetorical strategy in environmental writing, a genre that is sometimes seen as taking itself too seriously.

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