

Dana D. Nelson
Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor of English and American Studies
332 Benson Science Hall
Vanderbilt University
Nashville, TN 37235
615-343-3185

“The free action of the collective power of individuals’: Vernacular Democracy and the Sovereign People”

Abstract: The Constitution’s opening phrase, “We the People” famously grounds its authority in the sovereignty of the people. This talk questions whether the so-called power-of-the people was accurately represented by the Constitution’s institutionalization of sovereignty. The Framers’ skepticism about democracy has long been acknowledged, but little attention has been paid, until recently, to the ground-level democratic practices of ordinary folk in the British colonies and early nation, or their own ideas about the powers of the people. Recent scholarship has begun to flesh out those practices, principles and commitments, enabling us to raise questions about democratic power theoretically, as well as for our ability to appreciate vernacular or extra-institutional practices of democratic society in the early United States.