Antebellum Americans had a strong interest in the unknown, which manifested itself simultaneously in highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow culture. Venues such as scientific institutions, lyceums, lecture halls, the "penny-press," and the dime-museum all catered to American curiosity. Exploring Other Worlds examines this "culture of curiosity," arguing that curiosity was a defining trait of antebellum America, transcending many of the boundaries we often associate with the era. Curiosity promoted intellectual interest in science, but it also led to the sensationalism of modern commercial popular culture.

The inter-related lives of Elisha Kane and Margaret Fox demonstrate this thesis. Kane was America's first celebrated Arctic explorer, serving as surgeon on the First Grinnell Expedition (1850--1851) and commanding the Second Grinnell Expedition (1853--1855) in search of the lost British explorer John Franklin. While Kane's expeditions did not succeed in discovering Franklin, his books describing his voyages were very popular. They successfully blended Arctic science with adventure-story sensationalism.

Kane was romantically involved with the spirit-rapper Margaret Fox. Fox was well-known as one of the Fox sisters, whose "mysterious knockings" led to the emergence of Spiritualism in antebellum America. By cracking their toe joints, the Fox sisters convinced many that they could act as "mediums" between the living and the dead. Fox's spirit-rapping, like Kane's Arctic exploration, mixed science with sensationalism. Various theories about the nature of the mind, such as mesmerism, clairvoyance, and phrenology, fanned the flames of the Fox sisters' sensational rappings. Like Kane, Fox became famous by appealing to an American desire to explore the unknown.

When rumors about the Kane/Fox affair became known, the sensationalism they had inspired in their professional lives spilled over into their personal lives. Once again a "culture of curiosity" defined how they were discussed in public, but this curiosity lost all resemblance to the quasi-scientific curiosity that defined their earlier public lives. It pointed to the commercial sensationalism of a later era.

Recommended Citation
Chapin, David Alexander, "Exploring other worlds: Margaret Fox, Elisha Kane, and the antebellum culture of curiosity" (2000). Doctoral Dissertations. 2114.
https://scholars.unh.edu/dissertation/2114
Hansel, C.E.M. (1989). *Exploring Other Worlds* tells the intertwined stories of the Arctic explorer Elisha Kent Kane and the spiritualist medium Margaret Fox and examines their unlikely relationship. Kane, from a prominent Philadelphia family, became one of the most renowned and honored explorers of the antebellum era. They brought experiences to their listeners that were exotic and delightful. The bourgeoning commercial mass culture of antebellum America provided a natural venue for tales of huge icebergs, fierce polar bears, and messages from the dead.