

Bulletin for the History of Chemistry Best Paper Award for 2015

The winner of the Best Paper Award for 2015 is Professor Matthew Lavine of the History Department at Mississippi State University. The paper was “The Two Faces of Radium in Early American Nuclear Culture” that appeared in Volume 39, No. 1, 53-63 (2014).



Matthew Lavine obtained his A.B. in Music from Kenyon College in 1997. He earned the Ph.D. in the History of Science from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2008, working with Richard Staley, with a thesis titled: “A Cultural History of Radiation and Radioactivity in the United States, 1895-1945.” He has been at Mississippi State since 2008 and is now Associate Professor.

Professor Lavine is a cultural historian with interests in American nuclear culture and the history of science popularization. His research deals with the relationship between science and the culture of expertise in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America – in particular, how people not affiliated with orthodox scientific institutions tried to redefine what it meant to be “scientific” or an “expert” for the broader public. His first book, “The First Atomic Age: Scientists, Radiations and the American Public, 1845-1945” appeared in 2013 (Palgrave Macmillan).

The Bulletin paper recounts the early history of radium commerce in America. Actors ranging from orthodox physicians to spa resort owners promoted the association between radioactivity and healthful, “natural” sunlight in the public discourse. As a result, products containing (or claiming to contain) radium ore were popular with American consumers for decades, even as skepticism and eventually alarm about the harmful effects of irradiation grew.