

**CATALOGUE OF  
ORNAMENTAL LEATHER  
BOOKBINDINGS EXECUTED  
IN AMERICA PRIOR TO 1850**

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Catalogue of Ornamental Leather Bookbindings Executed in America Prior to 1850 by Various

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**VARIOUS**

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LEATHER BOOKBINDINGS  
EXECUTED IN AMERICA  
PRIOR TO 1850**



**EXHIBITED AT  
THE GROLIER CLUB  
NOVEMBER 7 TO 30  
1907**

*R. B.*

#### NOTE

IT is often said that bookbinding as a fine art did not exist in America before the time of William Matthews. That the business of bookbinding was followed in the Colonies and that the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries produced many binders of books, some known by name, but more of them unknown, cannot be doubted by readers of such admirable works as Isaiah Thomas's *History of Printing in America* and Leander Bishop's *History of American Manufactures*, nor by the collector of the printed books of these periods. From these two writers we learn that a binder named John Sanders took the freeman's oath in Boston as early as 1636, before any printing even had been done there, and that one John Ratliffe was employed on Eliot's Indian Bible, which, when published, bore the date of 1663, having come from England for this purpose. Indeed, the binding of these Bibles, Ratliffe said, in a petition to the Commissioners in 1664, was "the only encouraging work which upon good Intelligence caused me to transporte myself, and family into New England."

Of the ninety or more booksellers who carried on business in Boston before the Revolution, over thirty had binderies, also, attached to their establishments, and a number

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of them confined their attention chiefly to this branch of book-making.

Even a casual glance at the newsletters shows that the early settlers soon began to bring over from home the books which were necessary to their literary and spiritual well-being, some bound and some in sheets to be bound after their arrival. In January, 1770, Alexander Hamilton laid before the House of Representatives his able and voluminous report on the subject of manufactures, calling attention to the large number of printing presses as sufficient to render us independent of "foreign countries" and recommending a duty of ten per cent. instead of five as an aid to the business at home. "To encourage the printing of books," he said, "would also encourage the manufacture of papers" as well as, he might have added, all of the rest of the book arts.

Certain it is, that something, either the tariff or the progressive zeal of the people, led to an enormous production of books in the first half of the nineteenth century and to the binding of books in a style which completely overshadowed those of the middle of the same century.

It devolved upon a former president of the Grolier Club, and a most enthusiastic lover of books, Mr. William Loring Andrews, to point out that the eighteenth century producers of books attempted to infuse into their productions something of the element of the beautiful and that with no small success. In his delightful essay *Bibliopegy in the United*

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*States*, Mr. Andrews treats this subject in a manner calculated to awaken the interest of those who had not previously considered it a matter worthy of consideration, and so as to stimulate the enthusiasm of those who had already arrived at his conclusions.

Bishop and Thomas, as we have said, called attention to the important part played by the early binder, but without giving any of the information that is necessary to the complete history of the craft, and especially to its considerations to be ranked as an art—what leathers, papers, and gold were used, what tools were employed, what the character of the tools were, and what the quality of the workmanship. Mr. Andrews, while touching upon all of these matters, could not, in the length of his essay, go into such things in details and with the broad generalizations that come from the study of a large number of the same class of books. It is only in an exhibition like this that such materials can be found. Here spread out in carefully planned classes the student, and even the casual observer, may see the development of the desire which probably actuates any and all workmen to add something of the ornamental to their more ambitious productions. Here, in a collection chiefly brought together by the able hand of a single wise collector, one may find answers to many of these questions which may be asked concerning our early book-makers, and which the pioneer writers on the subject have left unanswered.

The answers to the questions concerning



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leathers and papers are comparatively simple, notwithstanding that they involve quite separate trades. To study the materials on the books before us is to trace the history of the rise and growth of the two important industries from the earliest period, when the simplest forms of sheep and calf were the only leathers to be had in the Colonies to the time of the Centennial at Philadelphia, when a wide variety of leathers had begun to be used; it is to find them all poorly treated, thin in weight and elementary in color. The native leathers were, in course of time, mixed with a fusion from England and possibly from other places, but even the importations, while adding variety, did not improve the quality since it was a period of split leathers of poor grades all over Europe. To follow out this branch of the binder's art would be to follow the history of the tannery from its simple beginning and the spread of an industry, which to-day furnishes important figures to the statistician.

The early historians of printing in America give much space to the consideration of paper and paper-making from the time when the first mill was started in Roxborough, near Philadelphia, by William Rittinghuysen, in 1690, to the latest developments that come under their personal observation. The curious in these matters are referred to Joel Munsell's *Chronology of the origin and development of Papermaking*, printed at Albany in 1856 and to its succeeding editions. While the matter may seem to be one of small im-

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portance in the consideration of leather-bound books, nevertheless it is a problem to be reckoned with. Here we may see in the end-papers the transition from the white papers of the eighteenth century to the newly invented mottled and marbled papers of various hues of the early nineteenth century mixed later on with the highly calendared, thick, colored papers of the autograph and floral albums. It is a fact worthy of note, that it was not until quite recently, until the time of William Morris and his school, in fact, that anything like variety or taste in end-papers was made possible to the professional binder.

More difficult are the questions to be answered about gold and tools.

Although we cannot state it as a positive fact, it seems reasonable to infer that the gold used by the early binders was imported from England. Its quality was of the best, a survey of the books here under consideration showing it to have stood the test of time perfectly, putting to shame much of the gilding of later times as seen in the works of many more sophisticated binders, English as well as American. In color it is generally light; it is light also in quantity, but in this it resembles the gold of the period both in England and in France.

The tooling in some cases, notably Nos. 36 and 40-42, was firm and solid. This matter of tools is the most important in the consideration of binding, for upon the quality of the tool depends the quality of the

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work, especially in so far as delicacy and style are concerned. Whether tool-makers were to be found in the Colonies is not vouchsafed to us to know, nor when they became a recognized company of workers. Judging from the fact that to-day the city of New York boasts only a few cutters of binders' *petit fers*, and that most of the finer kinds of tools are made in France, we shall not think our forefathers unprogressive if they, too, were content to fetch their implements from abroad. In 1800 the "tools of the trade or profession of persons who come to reside in the United States" were entered free of duty and this fact will account for the styles, which, as we presently shall see, were in vogue at that period with the many binders whose names begin to appear in the directories. Reference to the books will show what is carefully noted in the catalogue, that the binders of different places seem to have used the same tools or rolls, thereby indicating either that they obtained them from a common source or else that they borrowed from each other. Should it happen that with further research it is learned that the early binders' tools were made at home, the results of the tooling will stand even more to the credit of the early workman than they do at present.

The earliest bindings, like some of those in Case 1, were of the simplest sort. They were usually well sewed, or tied into beech or oak boards, cut quite thin though not over-carefully, having white paper on one side for end-