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Early American Bookbinding
in Brigham Young University’s Special Collections

Kylie Ladd
Bookbinding is a tradition that began in America before America itself. The earliest identified binder was John Ratcliff, who came to Boston from England about 1662.\(^1\) In fact, bookbinding preceded printing in America—the first (anonymous) binding was completed in 1636, and the first printer didn’t appear until two years after that.\(^2\) Save for a few major figures, most binders and the bindings they completed remain anonymous, identifiable only by the style of decoration.\(^3\) In this paper will attempt to study the characteristics and traditions of early 19\(^{th}\) century publishers and book binding through a case study of a period binding, *The Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* by Rev. B.B. Edwards.

*Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* was published in 1835. This book will be discussed in context of the publishers as well as the decorations on the binding itself. Two publishers are listed on the title page- Fessenden & Co. in Brattleboro’, Vermont and Shattuck and Co. in Boston. Shepard, Oliver and Co. are listed as the stereotypers, or typesetters, of the book.

The earliest printed books were directories and pamphlets, materials not requiring sewing and hard covers. Bookbinding was primarily associated with printing and publishing houses, with binding often carried out in the printer’s shop and later, the bookseller’s shop.\(^4\) Often, a publisher worked with one binder almost exclusively. In early America, Boston was the main center of the book trade, with Philadelphia following and New York “some distance behind.”\(^5\) Not surprisingly, these were the centers of the bookbinding world in America as well.

As an example of the fairly quick growth of bookbinding in early America, one can turn to early city directories. In the first Boston Directory of 1789, four people are listed


\(^4\) ibid

with the profession of “book binder.” By 1835, that number increases almost tenfold. Even more individuals are listed as simply “binders.” Many times, binders, printers and publishers switch occupations – many binders are also booksellers and later become publishers. This makes it difficult to get an exact number of binders at any given time in early America as they may not have their profession listed as “bookbinder” in the directory.

Due to a variety of factors, it can be difficult to attribute a binding to a specific binder or bindery. There have been attempts in the past, and Willman Spawn is perhaps the foremost scholar on early American binding. However, as Hannah D. French points out, only three or four bindings have even been attributed to the same binder, and that is just the work from binders that can be identified. There are many binders whose works remain anonymous; as French points out, “[the history of bookbinders] consists only of lists of names of craftsmen and their localities, and of descriptions of styles.” Binders are lesser known because, unlike publishers and printers, binders rarely sign their works. Binding was often considered a profession more than a craft or an art. Occasionally bindings can be attributed based on the style of stamping and the tools used.

6 Charles Stimpson, Boston directory, 1789
7 Charles Stimpson, Boston Directory: Containing the Names of the Inhabitants, Their Occupations, Places of Business, and Dwelling Houses, and the City Register, with Lists of the Streets, Lanes and Wharves, the City Officers, Public Offices and Banks, and Other Useful Information. (Boston: Charles Stimpson, Jr., 1835), [http://www.archive.org/stream/bostondirectory03bost#page/n5/mode/2up](http://www.archive.org/stream/bostondirectory03bost#page/n5/mode/2up) (accessed November 1, 2011).
8 French, Bookbinding in America, 79.
10 ibid
In his treatise entitled “The Evolution of American Binding Styles in the Eighteenth Century,” Willman Spawn details his process for identifying bindings based on the style of decoration. Spawn has collected binders’ tools, used for stamping or otherwise imprinting patterns, and has made rubbings on paper of the stamped or tooled patterns that these tools create. Through the gathering of these rubbings, Spawn has been able to collect enough evidence to “link all the various appearances of a particular tool; distinguish it from any other tool of similar design; establish the time span over which it was used; and, finally, assign it to the shop of a particular bookbinder through supporting documentation.”

As stated previously, Fessenden & Co.’s *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* was published in both Boston and Brattleboro’, Vt. As it is not clearly identified in which location the example referenced in this paper was published, I will discuss the history of the publishers in both locations. On the copyright page, Lemuel Shattuck and John C. Holbrook are listed as the copyright holders. In the 1835 Boston directory, compiled and published by Charles Stimpson, Jr. - “Bookseller, Stationer and Binder” - Lemuel Shattuck is listed as “(Shattuck & Co.), publisher, 8 School [Street], h[ouse] 79 Front [street].” School Street is located in the heart of downtown Boston, “from 137 Washington [street] to the Stone Chapel”(See Fig. 2).

Many members of the book trade operated on School Street. Named because it is the sight of the first public school in the United States, the Boston Latin School, the Old

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11 part of the catalogue from Bryn Mawr College’s exhibition “Bookbinding in America: 1680-1910”
12 Spawn, 30
13 Stimpson, Boston Directory.
14 Stimpson, Boston Directory, 326.
Corner Bookstore was located at 135 Washington Street, at the corner of School and Washington Streets (See Fig. 3). In addition to Shattuck & Co., eight individuals - printers, editors, publishers and even binders - are listed in the 1835 Boston Directory of operating business on School Street. The publishing company William D. Ticknor, later called Ticknor and Fields, operated out of the Corner Bookstore from 1832 to 1865. The Old Corner Bookstore became the gathering place of authors such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. 8 School Street would have been located approximately across the street from the Old Corner Bookstore, putting the publishing company Shattuck & Co. in close proximity to other publishers and authors.

Five individuals are listed with their business address at 8 School Street. Lemuel Shattuck & Co., publisher; Samuel G. Goodrich, editor; J. H. Jenks, publisher; Tuttle & Weeks, printer; and Theodore Abbot, bookbinder are all listed as working at 8 School Street (See Figs. 5-9). Considering their proximity and the tradition of publishers working with in-house binders, it would be safe to assume that these individuals worked together, perhaps even collaborating on projects. Due to this, it is possible that Theodore Abbot is bookbinder that bound the Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge.

The other publisher listed, Fessenden & Co. operated out of Brattleboro, Vermont. Printing was established in Brattleboro as early as 1805. In 1811, a paper mill was built

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16 ibid
on the north side of Canal Street in Brattleboro. In 1815, the mill burnt down and John Holbrook, an early resident of Brattleboro, returned to the city to rebuild the mill. Born in 1761, Holbrook started publishing in 1808 with the firm he established, Holbrook, Fessenden & Porter. After rebuilding the paper mill, he continued to publish under the name Holbrook & Fessenden until 1836. Joseph Fessenden, Holbrook’s son-in-law, became a partner in 1820. In 1828, John Holbrook’s son John Calvin Holbrook, the “John C. Holbrook” that is the copyright holder for Fessenden’s Encyclopedia started a career in Boston as a partner of Richardson, Lord & Holbrook, “on the site of the Old Corner” (See Fig. 10). Among the books John C. Holbrook published was the Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge. According to “The Annals of Brattleboro,” “over $30,000 was expended by Deacon [John] Holbrook on the publication of a comprehensive commentary on the Bible... and of the Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge which followed it.”

At the height of business, in 1836 Holbrook & Fessenden’s paper mill was also a “power-press printing office and book bindery”, indicating that the majority if not all books published under the Holbrook & Fessenden name were bound in house. Due to the death of his father, the Panic of 1837, and his lack of business knowledge, the younger John Holbrook sold the rights of Encyclopedia to Lippincott and moved to Iowa to become

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20 *Annals of Brattleboro*, 312.
23 *Annals of Brattleboro*, 313.
24 ibid.
a preacher. Because both publishers are listed on the title page of the *Encyclopedia* and considering their close proximity for a period of time, it is probable that not only did they co-publish the book, but that the same binder was used.

Even with all of the information gathered on the publishers and individuals associated with the *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, no knowledge can be gathered on the binder without examining the binding itself (See Figs. 12, 16, 17, 18). The book is bound in tree calf mottled brown goatskin leather, with gold stamped patterns on the spine and covers. On the front and back cover, there is a narrow rolled design of an arabesque pattern (See Fig. 13). On the spine, *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* is stamped, with rectangular arabesque designs (see Fig. 11). The book is sewn on four cords, with recessed bands. The pastedowns and page edges are marbled with a stone pattern.

The *Encyclopedia* is particularly interesting for the information it contains. Considering the origins of America, it should be no surprise that religious texts were some of the first books printed and considered important in early America. In fact, the 1835 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* is not the first edition of the title, nor the last. BYU’s Special Collections itself has two later editions of the book. A note on the inside front cover of *Encyclopedia* says it contains “probably the earliest article on Mormonism ever published in a work of reference.” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints was officially organized on April 6, 1830 – and the edition of *Encyclopedia* published five years late includes an article on “Mormonites” on page 844. Although the

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tone used to discuss Mormonism is skeptical, it is significant that it is included in a text of a religious encyclopedia alongside Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and many other world religions at the early date of 1835.

The decorations on *Encyclopedia* are stamped rather than embossed. Stamping is produced through pressing a metal piece or wood block with the design into the leather creating a slight recession while embossing appears as a relief.27 Much of the decorations on early bookbindings were stamped.28 This ornamentation happened after the book was completely bound. Contemporary books published and bound around the same time as *Encyclopedia* were often more ornate. For example, *The Token*, bound by C.A. Wells in 1386 shows the overly decorated style of the time (see Fig. 19). Although *The Token* is embossed, the styles of stamping and embossing are similar. Even the stamped decorations on *Constitution of Freemasons*, bound by Bela Marsh in 1838 is more decorated than *Encyclopedia*. In fact, the simple, thin rolled decoration found on *Encyclopedia* is similar to a book bound in 1810 by John Roulstone (see fig. 21). This convention of decorating the edges of the board with a narrow rolled design was very common for early American bindings.29 Despite the lack of evidence in catalogues of early American bindings such as Michael Papantonio’s collection, this pattern of stamping was prominent even in the 1830’s. The difference in styles simply indicates that the more ornate styles are seen as more attractive and collectable today.

Comparison to other bindings tentatively attributed to Mr. Theodore Abbot or the publishing house of Lemuel Shattuck and John C. Holbrook is an ideal way to confirm the

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27 ibid, 8
28 ibid.
attribution. Unfortunately, no other bindings have yet been attributed to Theodore Abbot of 8 School Street. Little is known about Abbot in general. Theodore Abbot is the publisher of several books in the 1840’s, including *The Cold Water Melodies* and *Washingtonian Songster* and *Narrative of Charles T. Woodman, A Reformed Inebriate.* Many other surviving copies of *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, of which The Library of Congress has several, have unfortunately been rebound, removing most of the original material that could potentially lend to an attribution (see fig. 22). However, in the Library of Congress’s holdings is the copy that was officially entered into the State of Vermont’s copyright office, as per state law. This copy has also been rebound, but the marbled fore edges, which match the marbling on BYU’s copy, remain, indicating the probability of the two copies having been bound in the same place. Recent technology has enabled the mechanical application of marbling on the edges of books, but a book published in 1835 would most assuredly have been marbled by hand. In addition to this, the hand-written note acknowledging the Library of Congress’s copy as the official copyright entry, which is attached to the first blank page before the title page, is written on a scrap of marbled paper that matches the style of the marbled paper used as the pastedowns in BYU’s copy (see fig. 23). These two remaining artefactual details on the Library of Congress’s copy indicate the strong relationship between the two books.

Although sufficient evidence has been provided to tentatively attribute the *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* to Theodore Abbot, it may never be definitively established. Like most early American bookbinders, Theodore Abbot and his bindings may forever remain anonymous.
Works Cited


Works Consulted


Illustrations

Figure 1: 1835 Boston map. Cartographer: George W. Boynton. Accessed online, Norman B. Leventhal Map Center at the Boston Public Library.

Figure 2: Detail of George W. Boynton’s 1835 Boston map, showing School Street. Accessed online, Norman B. Leventhal Map Center at the Boston Public Library.
Figure 3: the Old Corner Bookstore, on the corner of Washington and School Street. c. 1898. Accessed from Boston Public Library’s Flickr collection.

Figure 4: a panoramic view of City Hall on School Street, c. 1903

Figure 5: detail of p. 326 of Stimpson’s 1835 Boston Directory, showing Lemuel Shattuck. Accessed online: archive.org.
Figure 6: detail of p. 183 of Stimpson’s 1835 Boston directory, showing Samuel Goodrich. Accessed online: archive.org.

Figure 7: detail of p. 225 of Stimpson’s 1835 Boston Directory, showing J.H. Jenks. Accessed online: archive.org.

Figure 8: detail of p. 360 of Stimpson’s 1835 Boston Directory, showing Tuttle & Weeks. Accessed online: archive.org.

Figure 9: detail of p. 61 of Stimpson’s 1835 Boston Directory, showing Theodore Abbott. Accessed online: archive.org.
Figure 10: John C. Holbrook. From the Boston Athenæum.

Figure 11: detail of the spine of Fessenden & Co.'s *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, showing the stamped title and the rolled decorative stamps
Figure 12: front cover of the *Encyclopedia*, showing the tradition of a simple cover, decorated with a narrow roll design.

Figure 13: a detail of the front cover of *Encyclopedia*, showing the narrow roll design.

Figure 14: a detail of *Encyclopedia*, showing the marbled edges.
Figure 15: a detail of *Encyclopedia*, showing the marbled pastedowns

Figure 16: Fessenden’s *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*

Figure 17: Fessenden’s *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*
Figure 18: Fessenden’s *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*

Figure 19: an embossed binding from Boston, 1836. From the exhibition catalogue “Early American Book-bindings: From the collection of Michael Papantonio”
Figure 20: a stamped binding from Boston, 1828. From the exhibition catalogue “Early American Book-bindings: From the collection of Michael Papantonio”

Figure 21: a stamped binding from Boston, 1810. From the exhibition catalogue “Early American Book-bindings: From the collection of Michael Papantonio”
Figure 22: The *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 1835. In the Library of Congress’s collection

Figure 23: handwritten note inside the Library of Congress’s copy of *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, acknowledging this as the copy officially entered into the District Clerk’s office