

Made in the USA: Early American Bindings 1750–1860 at the National Archives

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the unraveling of a mystery—and once what was thought to be an impossible task—that of identifying who bound-by-hand our country’s earliest original manuscript legislative records, specifically the “Rough Journals” of the Continental Congress at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). The process of examining well-preserved physical details (e.g., original intact binding details such as business trade cards adhered inside the volume, unique decorative tool marks, and binding techniques) combined with supporting documentation (e.g., birth records, payment ledgers, newspaper advertisements) developed by Hannah French¹ and Willman Spawn² to identify early American imprints proves to be successful as NARA staff applies their groundwork and approach to our earliest journals and ledgers, that were created as stationery blank books. The journals were made by immigrant binders who were acquaintances with and in some cases also freemason brothers of our founding fathers. This paper will focus on two of these binders, one confirmed; the other being an attribution in progress. William Trickett bound many of the Continental Congress rough journals including *Volume 3*, written in on the day that the United States declared independence from England, Printer and binder Robert Aitken (and possibly Aitken’s daughter, Jane) bound for Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. There are many more binders who can be considered in this study: Stephen Potts, Franklin’s binder and friend, and Frederick Mayo, Thomas Jefferson’s last binder, who may have also bound records in NARAs holdings. This paper also introduces our efforts to capture the details and some of our treatment techniques digitally. This allows for preservation of the artifacts, thereby maintaining their intrinsic value and integrity. Based on the information the physical evidence may contribute to the materiality of blank-book-writing and to the scholarship of

American history, preserving original stationer’s bindings intact is an important consideration for book conservators, archivists, librarians, historians, curators, and scholars.

NOTES

1. French, Hannah D. *Bookbinding in Early America: Seven Essays on Masters and Methods with catalogues of bookbinding tools prepared by Willman Spawn*. 1986. Massachusetts: Worcester, American Antiquarian Society.
2. Spawn, Willman and Thomas E. Kinsella. 2007. *American Signed Bindings Through 1876*. Pennsylvania and Delaware: New Castle and Bryn Mawr, Oak Knoll Press and Bryn Mawr College Library.

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