Scaleboard binding

with Katie Smith

CONSERVATOR

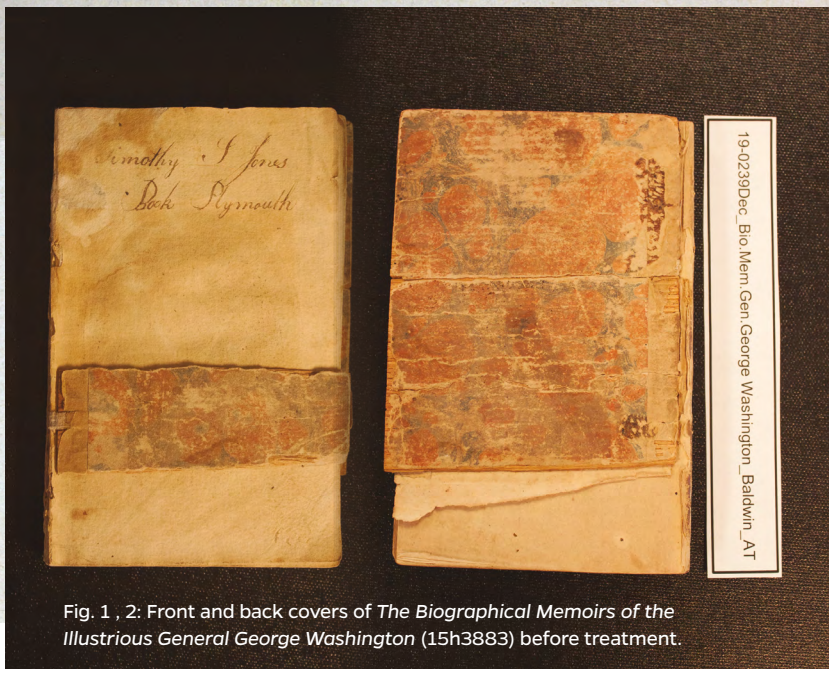


Fig. 1 , 2: Front and back covers of *The Biographical Memoirs of the Illustrious General George Washington* (15h3883) before treatment.

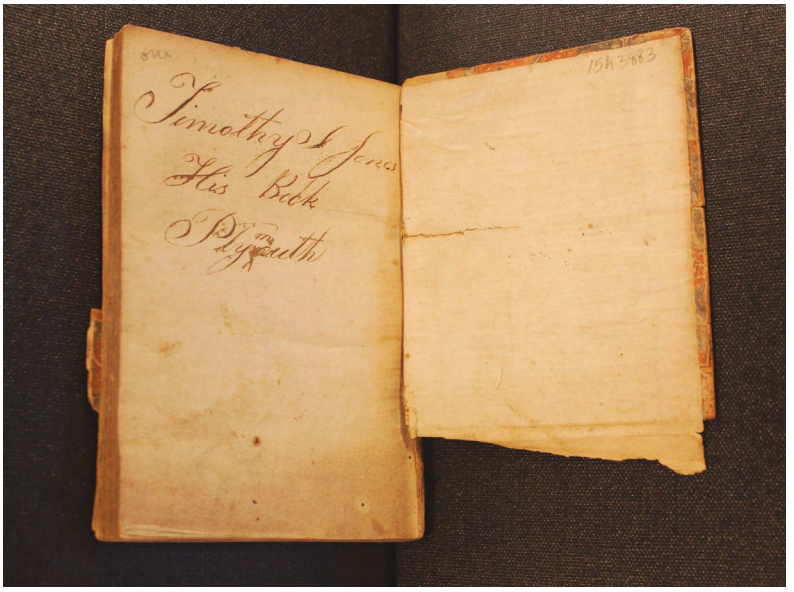
Objects can be lovely pockets of history—and lead to many delightful questions we have yet to answer. The Baldwin Library's copy of *The Biographical Memoirs of the Illustrious General George Washington*, published in 1809, is a great example of the mysteries we encounter during the conservation of our collections [Fig. 1, 2].

This book structure is called a scaleboard binding (or scabboard, scaberd, scabbard, scabbard, scale-board—we'll just stick to scaleboard), referring to the thin, wooden boards used for the cover of the book. As these volumes were meant to be inexpensive, most surviving examples have been re-bound over the years. So, when we see a scaleboard in all its wooden loveliness, it is an uncommon delight.

Often when people think of books with wooden boards, the first images that come to mind are heavy, thick, wooden-clad medieval books with leather, metal clasps, and large embosses. While it is true that many wooden books are this type, books evolved into many different forms and styles—wooden boards included.

The material used for the pages inside books have, primarily, determined their covering material. Before Europeans used paper, parchment was used and this material needed the weight of thick, heavy boards and clasps to stay flat and usable. As paper slowly replaced parchment, the boards diminished in weight and thickness since paper does not need pressure to maintain its shape. At the same time, paper also became useful for the boards themselves as several layers could be adhered together to create a solid, protective board. Laminated paper board was easy to use, never split, and offered good protection. The ease and versatility of laminated boards was such that by 1600, thick wooden boards were minimally used in book production (Miller, 247).

However, this did not end the use of thin wood boards for covers. Typically used for box-making and veneer, thin wood was affordable and readily available for the savvy bookbinder (Miller, 252). English and German binders in particular continued to use the material for small, cheap books and some of these craftspeople took their preferences to the New England colonies.



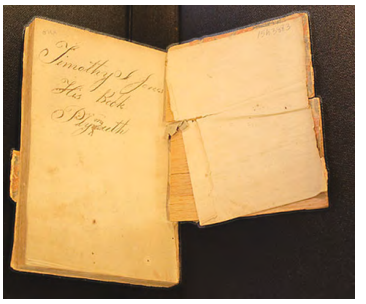


Fig. 4, 5: Back cover: before conservation (above) with wood split in two and paste-down unattached. After conservation (left) with wood adhered together and paste-down smoothed down and attached.

In the colonies—particularly New England Colonies—thin wood board structures thrived from the 17th to 19th centuries (AIC Wiki page). These scaleboard books became a popular choice for anything needing an inexpensive retail binding. People could buy these with various coverings—from leather to paper—to suit their needs [Fig. 3].

But why did the New England Colonies produce many scaleboard bindings when Europe was using paper laminated boards [Fig. 4, 5]?

While, as noted previously, the interior pages of a book determine the outer cover, market also plays a role in materials used. The importation of goods into the Colonies was expensive—and most of the supplies for bookmaking were imported. Laminated board, leather, and paper were all imported into the colonies and therefore expensive. Using local wood and materials, although inferior in quality, was likely a practical choice when faced with colonial customers who could not afford the extravagant costs of European materials. It doubtless helped that the New England lumber industry was booming (Williams, 313).

Yet material costs were not the only thing that made a book expensive. Making a well-bound book takes hours to several days. The expense of time also had to be diminished for poor colonials needing inexpensive books. Scaleboard provided this opportunity. Quick and easy to make, there are accounts that these books could be bound by a craftsperson in 15 minutes, minus the curing time for the adhesives (RBS video). This reduced the burden of cost on the consumer.

With cheap, local supplies and rapid production, scaleboard bindings found a ready market in the retail world. To say that they were only used for school primers or missionary texts is a little bit minimizing, but this was its target audience. The books were small, easy to carry, cheap, but had one big problem. A problem that leads us wondering why they were made for so long (two centuries!) in the United States.

Fig. 3: Flyleaf and Title page with loss repaired using thin Japanese paper and wheat starch paste.

They fall apart fast.

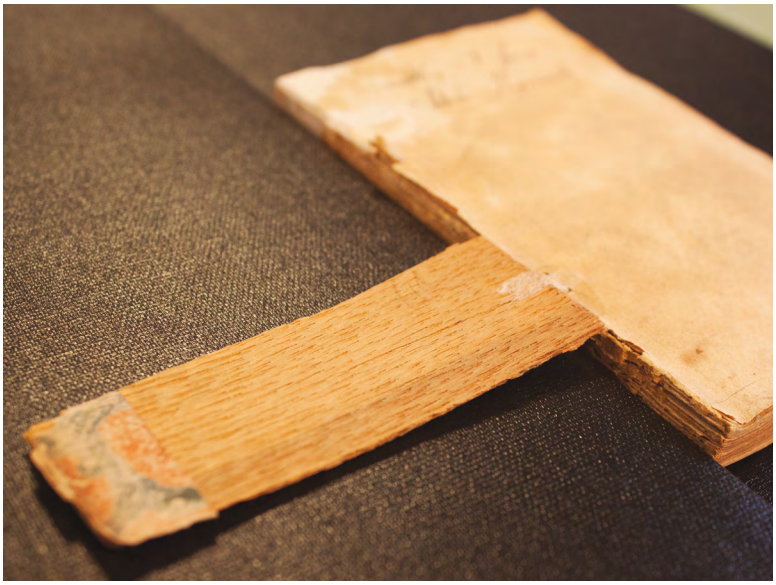


Fig. 6: The inside of the only remaining piece of the front cover.

Thin wood—usually only one to two millimeters thick—splits. This may be one reason why England's guilds tried to ban their use at one point in time (Ligatus). With the constant motion of a book being opened and closed, this splitting and loss is even more possible if the grain of the wood is running vertical (from top to the bottom) on the book. Most scaleboard bindings have a horizontal grain that minimizes this, but it does not fully prevent damage, as we found with this volume. Laminated paper boards can withstand more use overtime. So, it is a bit odd that binders would use thin wood to cover heavily used children's primers—what was their excuse or justification to do so? Was it just because of cost? And as paper mills cropped up in the States, paper boards became more accessible and economical, yet scaleboards still managed to be made in America. Why?

Julia Miller, in her studies on scaleboard bindings, has stated that, "the fact that American binders appear to have used scaleboard for so long after paper boards were readily and cheaply available encourages us to think of scaleboard as a particularly American choice [...]" (Miller, 248). Miller does not go down the road of surmise, but holding this book in one's hands certainly makes one want to go down this unknown rabbit hole. For scaleboard bindings could possibly have been considered not just an available and cheap choice, but also a patriotic one. The Stamp Act of 1765 taxed all paper goods. A popularized catalyst of the American Revolution was an issue surrounding paper and British taxes, so the choice of wooden boards over paper boards likely started out as an economic necessity, but may have morphed—like many things involving paper—into a patriotic choice. A choice, let us not forget, involving mostly educational and morally-related texts that often-linked moral action with the new, burgeoning sense of American patriotism. And culture like this lasts well after its logical end.

Fig. 7 (right): Close up of holes punched into the paper for sewing, but ultimately never used. Books of this period have been known to have pre-punched sewing holes that were never utilized during the sewing or binding process.

Is this a possibility? Yes. Do we know for sure that making books with scaleboard was a cultural form of American patriotism? No. To date, no one has found any evidence suggesting this. If patriotic, it is also worth noting that The Davey Company of New Jersey revolutionized the mechanical production of paper board covers in 1842. Before then, all paper-based book board had been made by hand and therefore more expensive than quickly split wood (Williams, 315). That being said, this book of George Washington propaganda certainly makes one feel like capitalism and patriotism may be linked and hopefully a researcher may find some extant proof for or against this argument.

Whatever the reason for making a scaleboard binding, the job of the conservator is keeping these bindings around. This volume, for which UF holds multiple editions including digital copies, is a perfect example of a book whose historic value is the binding itself not the words on the page. With so many questions unanswered, it is vital that we maintain this original binding. Many scaleboard bindings have been rebound as their bindings have fallen apart, which has created a rare hole in the history of the American book form. UF has a small number of these types of bindings in our Baldwin Library of Historical Children's Literature. These help us navigate and piece together American binding history, even though they are a tricky puzzle of how best to maintain their fragile structure for future study.

Instead of full rebinding, we do a minimal amount of repair to the original structure. This involves re-adhering loose pages and attaching small strips of supporting material to keep covers and book pages together. Our most important conservation effort is creating enclosures that will fully support books whose covers have missing pieces. Boxes whose sides open flat are the safest for our most vulnerable texts. Known as 'four-flap enclosures,' we infill parts of the boxes to take the space of lost covering material [Fig. 8, 9].

So, for now, we have this delightful thing safely stored and available in our collection. An object to study, learn from, and be curious about. A piece of history where everything about it is so quickly, easily, and cheaply made—and so quintessentially American.

Fig. 8, Below: Open four-flap enclosure— Closer look at infilled bottom walls of the box.

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