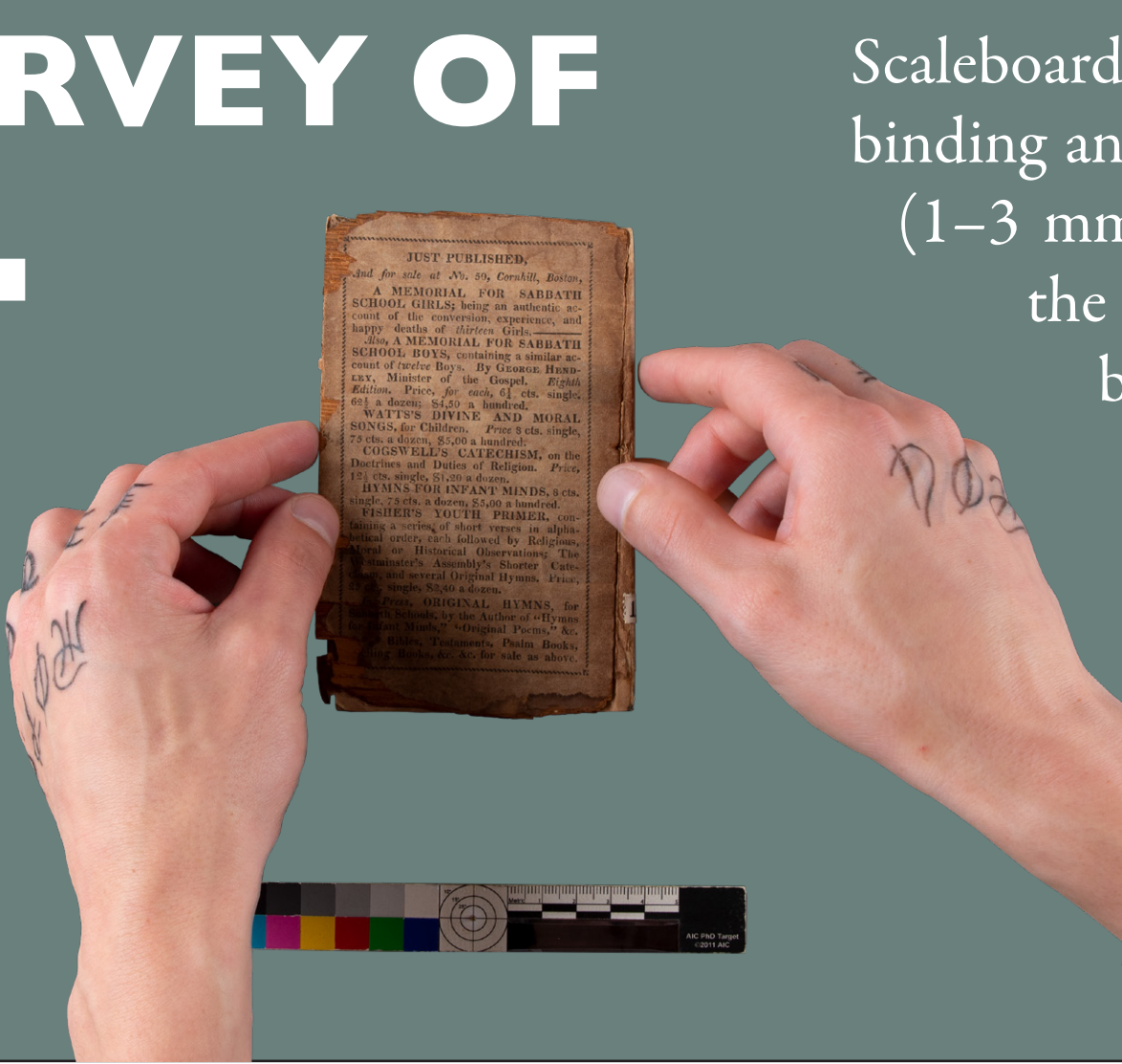


# KNOWLEDGE BEFORE ORATORY: A PRELIMINARY SURVEY OF SCALEBOARD BINDINGS AT THE BOSTON ATHENÆUM

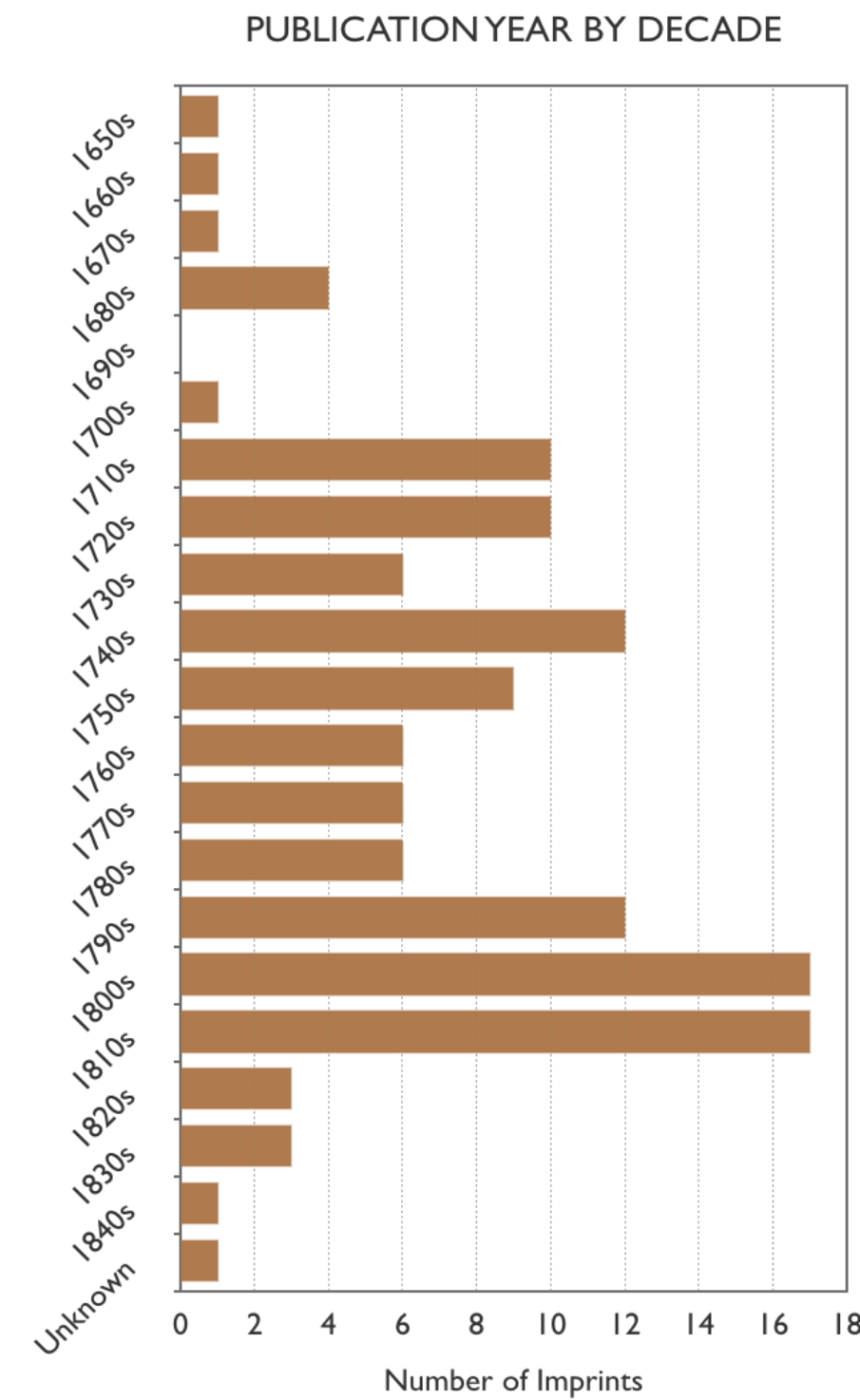
by Mitchel Gundrum and Jane Knoll

16 May 2023

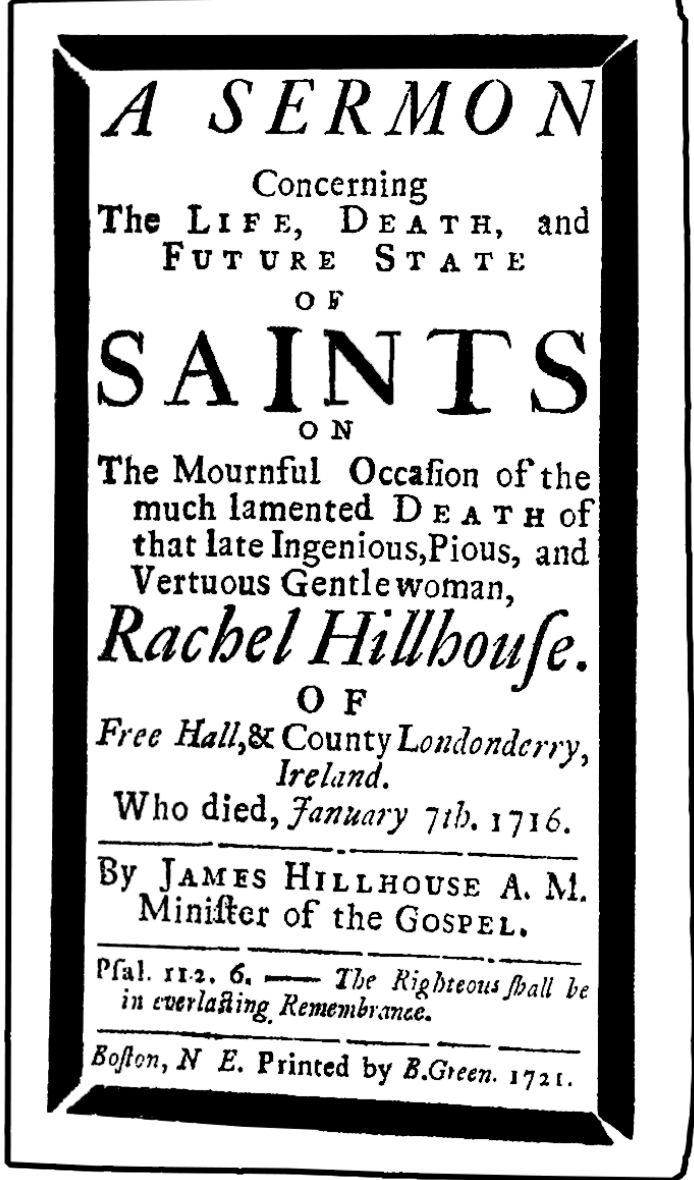


Scaleboard bindings are a culturally significant facet of book-binding and publishing history, characterized by thinly planed (1–3 mm) wooden boards, around two hundred years after the popularization of paper-based boards in Western bookbinding. 127 scaleboard bindings were analyzed and recorded at the Boston Athenæum during a survey conducted in June 2022. Scaleboards were located through a systematic examination of the boards in every binding in targeted special collections shelves. Where the presence or originality of any element was in doubt, it was recorded as “indiscernible.”

## CONTENT



**Subject**  
65% contain religious texts (e.g., sermons, psalms). 15% are educational (e.g., school-books, primers). Other genres include politics, letterwriting, astronomy, and the occult. The only non-printed example is a manuscript account book from 1828.



**Dates**  
Imprint dates range from 1656–1841. The average date of our sample is 1766, and the earliest American imprint is dated 1683.

## TEXTBLOCK

**Size**  
Portrait-oriented scaleboards average 157 × 104 × 22 mm, while the 2 examples of landscape bindings average 122 × 212 × 23 mm. The largest scaleboard in the sample is 210 mm tall, and the smallest a tiny 105 mm.

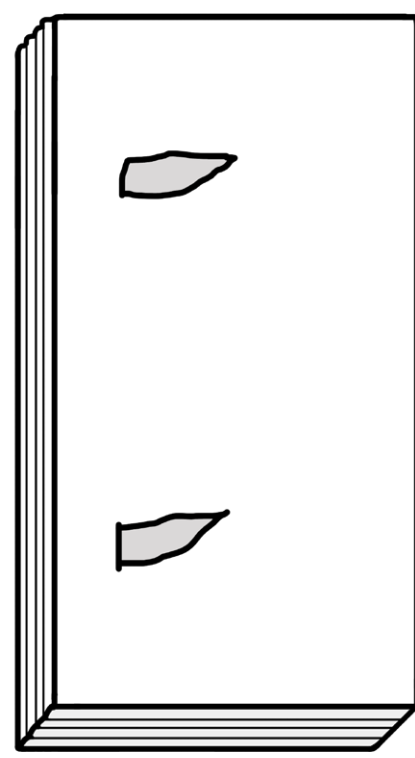
**Textblock composition**  
Textblocks were 79% laid/antique laid paper and 20% wove paper, plus 1 indiscernible and 1 mixed-variety textblock.



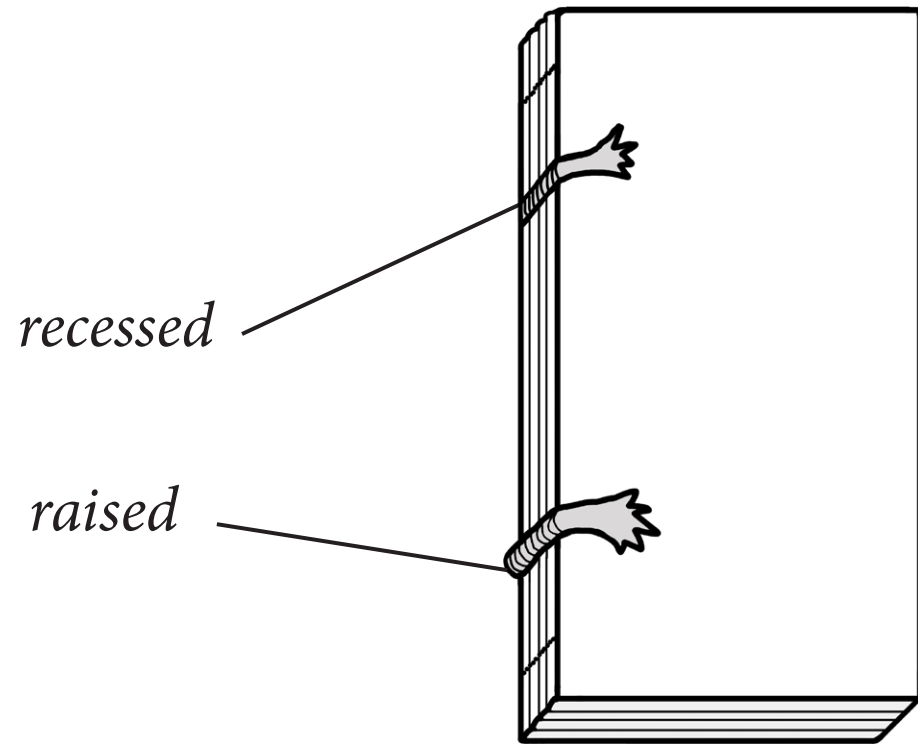
landscape-format

**Endpapers**  
The most common discernible endpaper structures are single folios (stabbed or sewn) and sewn double folios, in some cases with an adhering waste leaf used for board attachment. Where discernible, endpapers are plain, except for 2 marbled examples and 2 blue examples.

**Leaf attachment**  
Leaves are connected by stabbing supports through the textblock or by sewing over supports. No unsupported sewing structures were found in this sample.



**Stabbed (51%)**  
All of the stabbed bindings have 2 supports which, where identifiable, are alum-tawed skin (69%), cloth tapes (17%), and tanned leather (5%).



**Sewn (45%)**  
Sewn textblocks feature 2–5 supports, which are either recessed or raised. Where identifiable, supports are cords (74%), alum-tawed skin (18%), or tanned leather (2%). Sewing is almost always two-on.

## SPINE TREATMENT

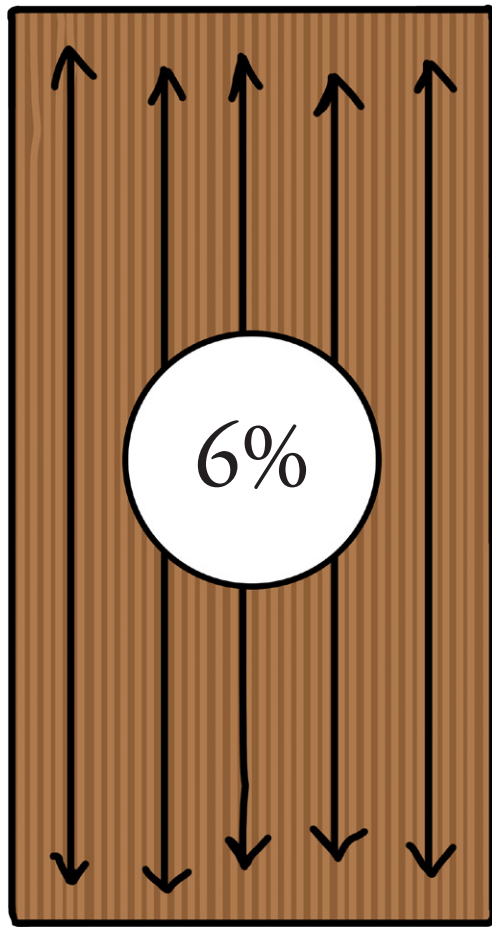
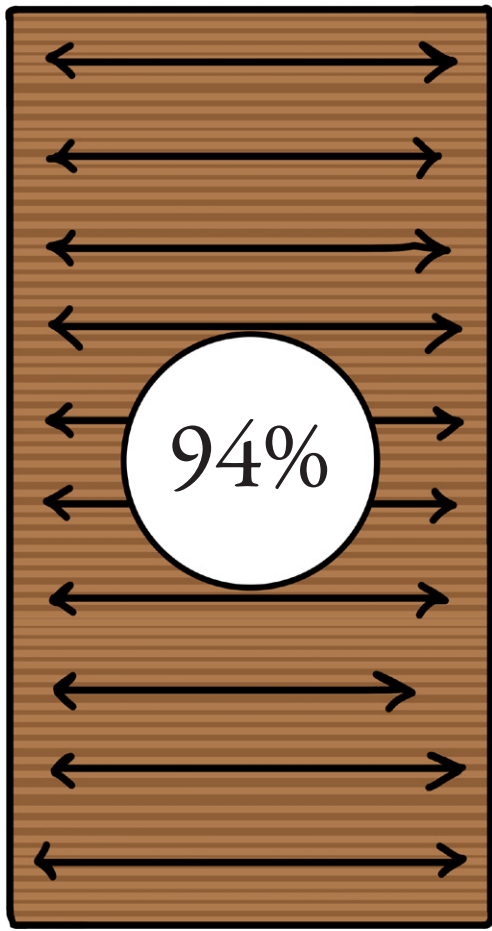
**Rounding and backing**  
33% of spines are neither rounded nor backed; 20% are both rounded and backed; and 12% are just rounded. In the remaining 35% of bindings, rounding and backing could not be determined.

**Endbands**  
Only 7 bindings feature original endbands, and of these, 6 hold European imprints. 5 endbands are sewn, and 2 endbands are stuck-on.

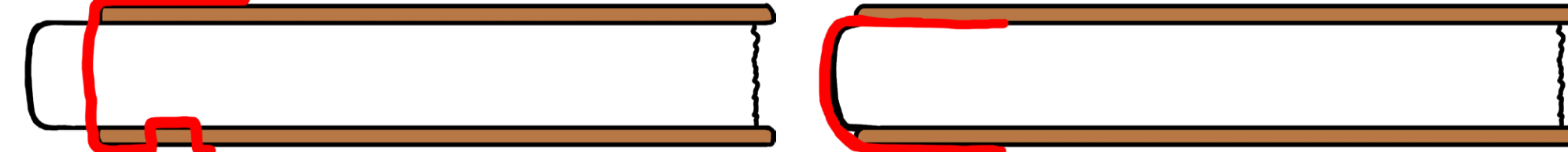


## BOARDS & BOARD ATTACHMENT

**Boards**  
In 94% of bindings, the grain of the wooden boards runs perpendicularly to the spine. All 7 parallel-grain examples are on pre-1750 imprints, 6 are covered in full leather, and 5 hold European imprints. 17% of boards are backcornered.



**Board attachment**  
Boards are attached by supports, endpapers, and covering material. In some cases, boards were adhered using a waste leaf.



**Stabbed support paths**  
In 95% of stabbed bindings, supports finish outside the boards. In 1 example, supports lace into the boards. 3% are indiscernible.

**Sewn support paths**  
In sewn bindings, 46% of supports finish inside the boards, 33% outside, 9% are laced into the boards. 12% are indiscernible.

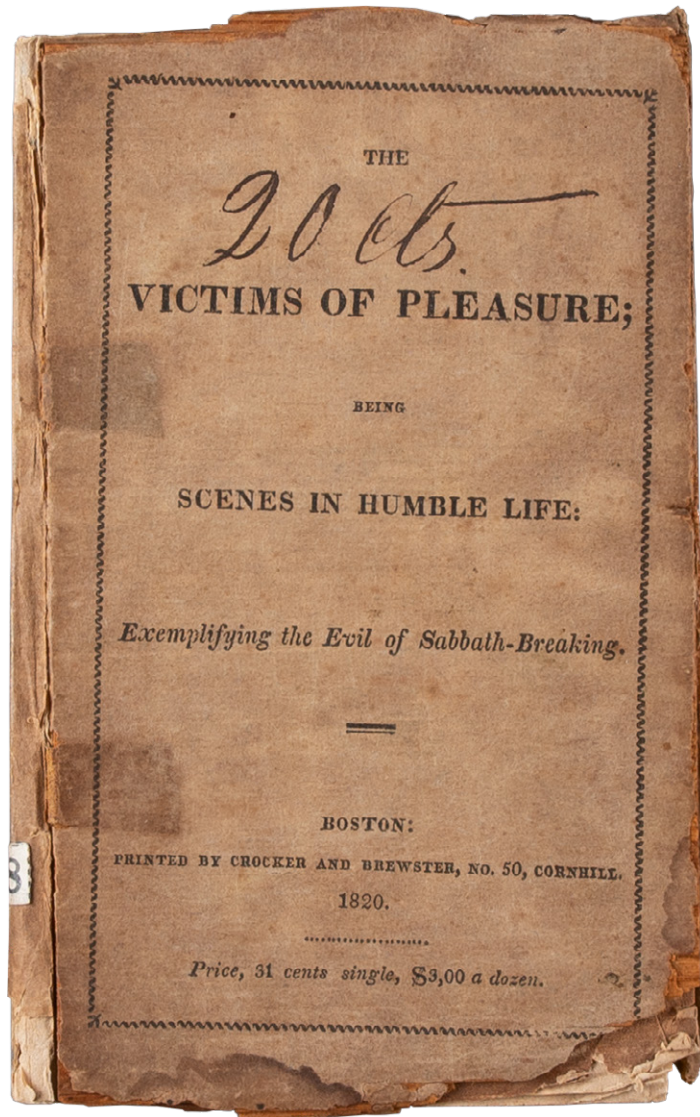
## COVERING



**Full leather (65%)**  
Full leather is the most common covering, likely because this sample skews early. The median imprint date of full leather examples is 1748, and 88% of scaleboards with pre-1790 imprints are bound in full leather.



**Quarter leather (26%)**  
Quarter leather bindings have a median imprint date of 1806. Siding paper is blue (82%), decorated (15%), or plain (3%). This category includes 8 reversed-skin bindings, in 6 of which the skin could not be confidently identified as vegetable-tanned leather (see below).

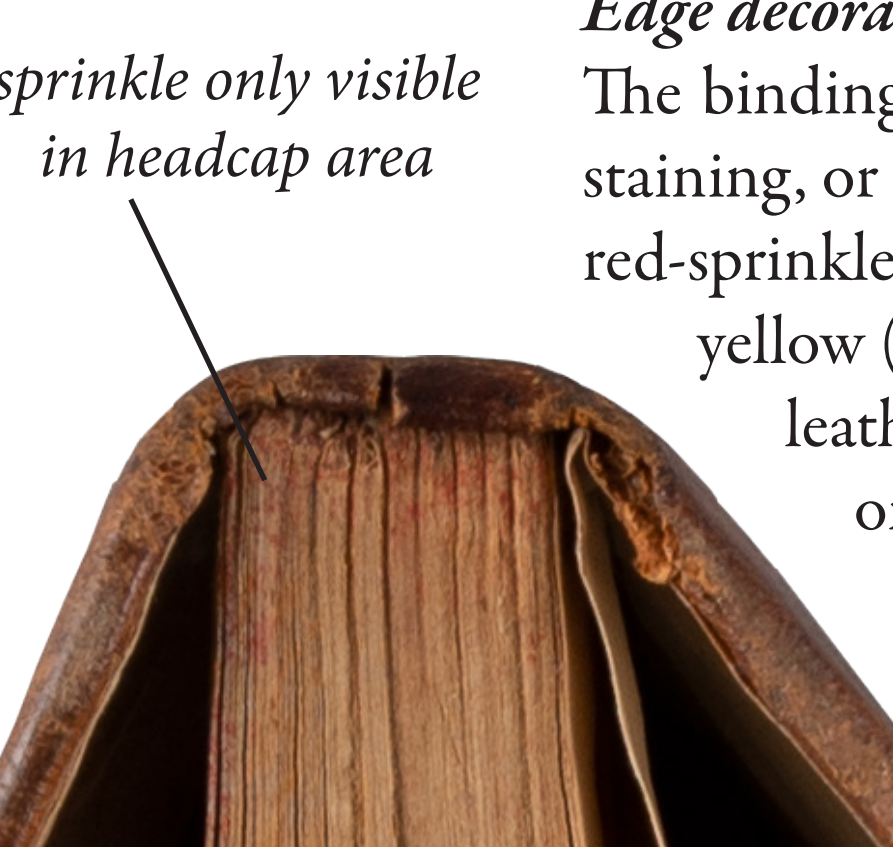


**Full paper (6%)**  
7 bindings are covered in full paper, with imprint dates from 1715 to 1835. These include 5 colored or plain papers (of which 3 are printed) and 2 marbled papers.



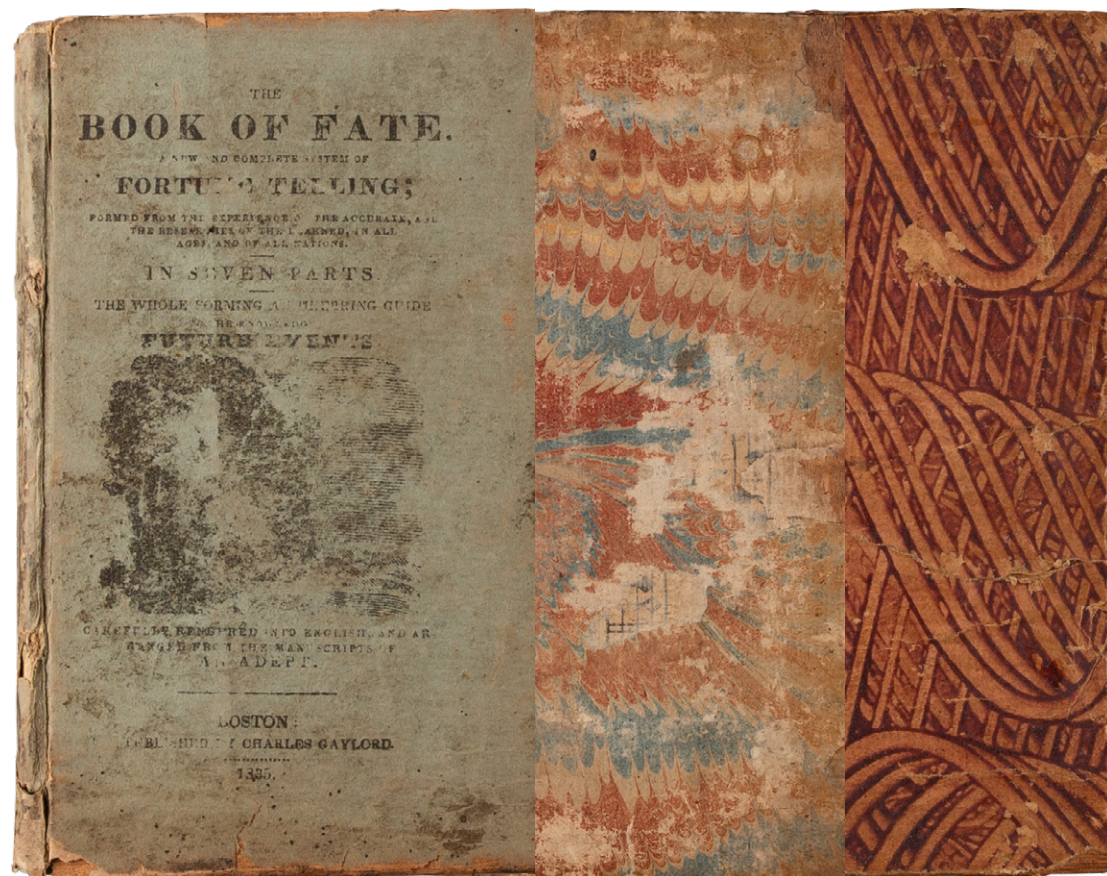
**Outliers (3%)**  
Outliers include 2 books bound in full canvas, 1 in quarter plain paper with blue paper sides, and 1 in quarter cloth with blue paper sides. See below for full parchment bindings, which were not included in this dataset.

## DECORATIVE TECHNIQUES

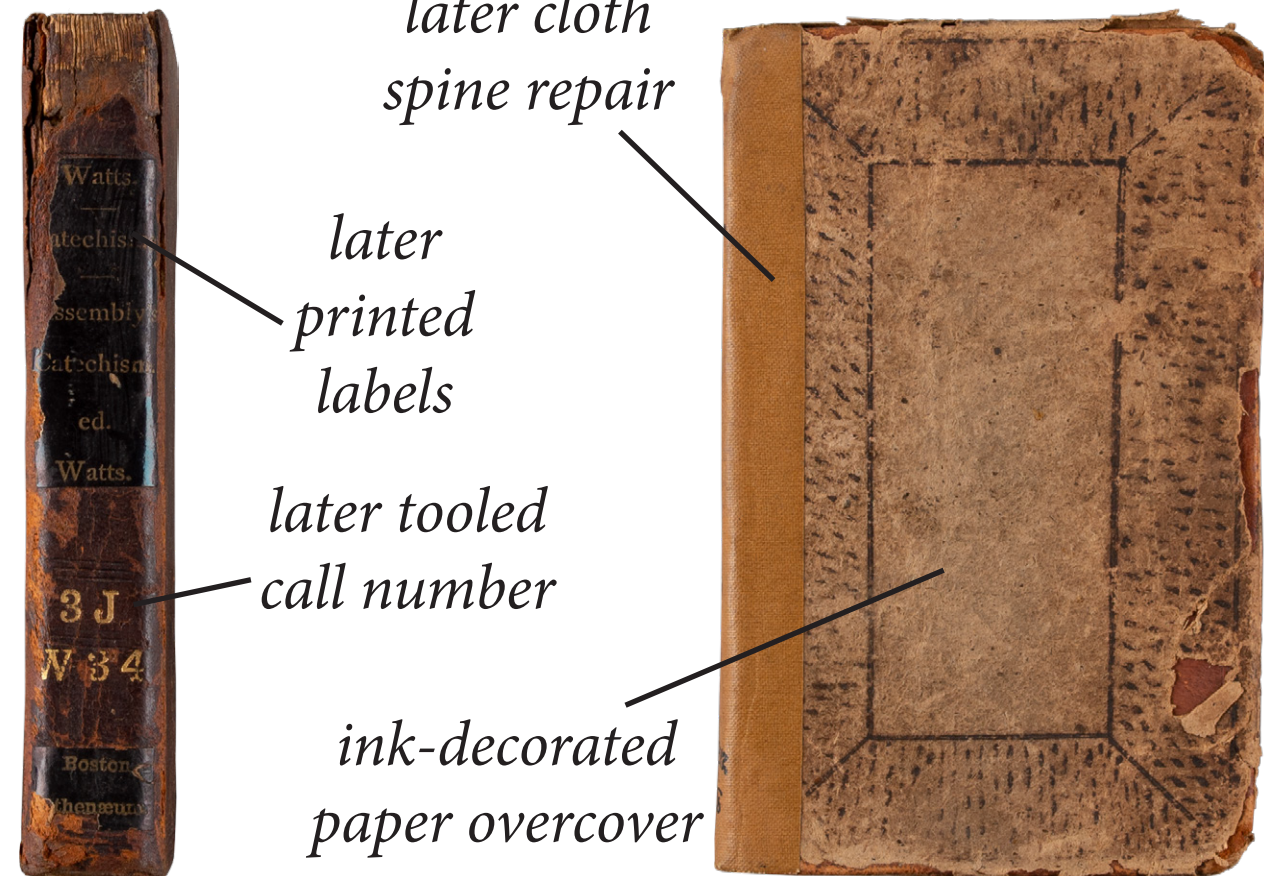


### Edge decoration, tooling, decorated papers

The bindings frequently feature textblock edge decoration, tooling, leather staining, or decorated paper. 51% of the scaleboards have decorated edges—red-sprinkled are most common (72%), followed by blue-sprinkled (15%), full yellow (6%), marbled (3%), and a single example of solid red edges. Full leather bindings often feature staining and blind-tooled decoration on the spine, boards, and board edges. Tooling on quarter-leather bindings and gold tooling are uncommon. In addition to the near-ubiquitous blue papers, this sample includes marbled (6), printed (4), and paste-decorated (1) covering papers.

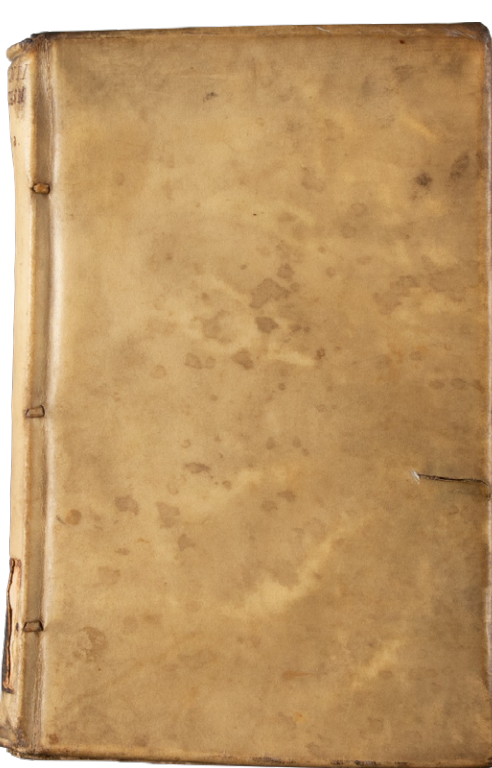


## OWNER INTERVENTIONS



**Ownership markings, repairs, overcovers**  
Almost every book in the sample has ownership markings, including tooled or adhered titling, inscriptions, and bookplates. 52% show some degree of repair or structural alteration, to be expected for such fragile structures. Full, partial, or vestiges of overcovers were found on 18% of the bindings; all but 2 are blue or plain paper, with single examples of full leather and full fabric.

## BUT WAIT THERE'S MORE



**Parchment scaleboards**  
5 parchment bindings with thin wooden boards were not included in the dataset but rather treated as a distinct subcategory. All contain European imprints from 1648–1745, and all but 1 have boards with grain parallel to the spine. They are larger than the other bindings, averaging 169 × 117 × 40 mm.



**Spine notching**  
Recesses were sawn, sliced, or cut into the textblock spine in at least 75% of the stabbed bindings. Only 3% were definitely unnotched. The authors believe this was a forwarding step performed after gathering and before gluing up to prevent the sections from sliding during the stabbing process, but more research is needed.



**Unidentified skin**  
6 bindings are quarter bound with unidentified skin of a suede texture, which is thin and greyish brown. The color, texture, and thickness are not similar to the examples of reverse vegetable-tanned skin. Thongs of this material are also present as stabbed supports in at least 2 bindings. Further research is needed to identify this skin.



**A growing data set**  
This survey forms one part of an ongoing scaleboard survey by the authors, comprising 540 bindings across six collections at the time of writing.

## CONTACT

Questions? Comments? Scaleboards that need studyin'? Contact us at [MitchelGundrum@gmail.com](mailto:MitchelGundrum@gmail.com) and [JaneCEKnoll@gmail.com](mailto:JaneCEKnoll@gmail.com)

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## RESOURCES

Miller, J. (2013) 'Not Just Another Beautiful Book: A Typology of American Scaleboard Bindings' in Miller, J. (ed.) *Suave Mechanicals: Volume 1*. Ann Arbor: The Legacy Press.  
Wolcott, R. (2013) 'Splintered: The History, Structure, and Conservation of American Scaleboard Bindings', *The Book and Paper Group Annual*, Vol. 32.  
Language of Bindings Thesaurus (Ligatus). Available at: <https://www.ligatus.org.uk/lob/>