

Notes on American Bookbindings

THE 'DOVE BINDER'

The great folio Bible issued from the Isaiah Thomas printing office at Worcester in 1791, in its splendid gold-tooled, red-leather binding, was one of the first books to be seen in the initial search for specimens of early American workmanship. The elaborately decorated spine is adorned with three different stamps of birds, the most memorable being a dove with outstretched wings carrying an olive branch in its beak. It appears on a number of Thomas imprints of the last decade of the eighteenth century. A copy of George Washington's *A Collection of the Speeches of the President of the United States* (Boston, 1796) in the Boston Athenæum's Washington library bears the dove in the center of its elaborately decorated front cover, its symbolism suggesting the olive branch petition of 1775.¹ The binder of both volumes, anonymous as the great majority of binders were, came to be known as the dove binder.

Other anonymous bindings attracted special attention. A three-branched, leafy, fern-like stamp appears on various Worcester bindings of the period, as well as on Samuel Rogers's *Pleasures of Memory* (Boston, 1795), illustrated here. Certain titles on small books appeared in lowercase italics, a practice not known elsewhere. As the fern tool was not found in conjunction with the dove it was assumed that they were used by two different binders. A signed binding was to bring them together on one important binding.

Twenty years after the research began, in 1960, a signed binding with the two tools on it was reported by Carolyn

¹ Hannah D. French, 'Early American Bookbinding by Hand, 1636-1820,' in *Bookbinding in America*, ed. Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt (Portland, Me., 1941), Illus. 21, f. 65.

Horton, who was repairing and restoring it.² This unique binding covered another folio Bible, this one printed in Philadelphia in 1798 and bound in Boston the year following for presentation to the town of Salisbury, Connecticut, by a native son, Caleb Bingham, bookseller in Boston. The binding is unique in bearing a gold-tooled signature at the foot of the spine giving both place and name of the binder: 'Bound in Boston by Henry Bilson Legg.'

The Salisbury Bible is decorated on its front cover by the dove placed between two serpents, one above and one below, its symbolism appropriately religious. On the spine the fern tool is used twice in each panel. A third tool, a tiny, narrow leaf roll, appears on both Bibles. The four books discussed here exhibit a dozen rolls and sixteen stamps of a master binder alert to changes in style.

The location of Legge in Boston led to a search through directories and newspapers. His shop was listed in various places in Boston between 1798 and 1804, in which year he died 'aged forty-one.' A newspaper notice of 1799 advertised that Legge had had 'much experience in London and different parts of America,' without specifying *where* in America.

Legge tools appeared impressed on New York bindings covering Hugh Gaine imprints of 1793 and 1795, making it probable that he had a bindery in that city, but he is not listed in directories or noticed in newspapers. We are led to speculate that he was the binder that Thomas Greenleaf boasted about in his *New York Journal*, December 21, 1791, stating that he had engaged 'a complete binder, gilder, and ruler at an extraordinary salary. . . .'³ Since Thomas Greenleaf had been trained to printing by Isaiah Thomas it seems likely that Thomas would have known of this binder even in advance of

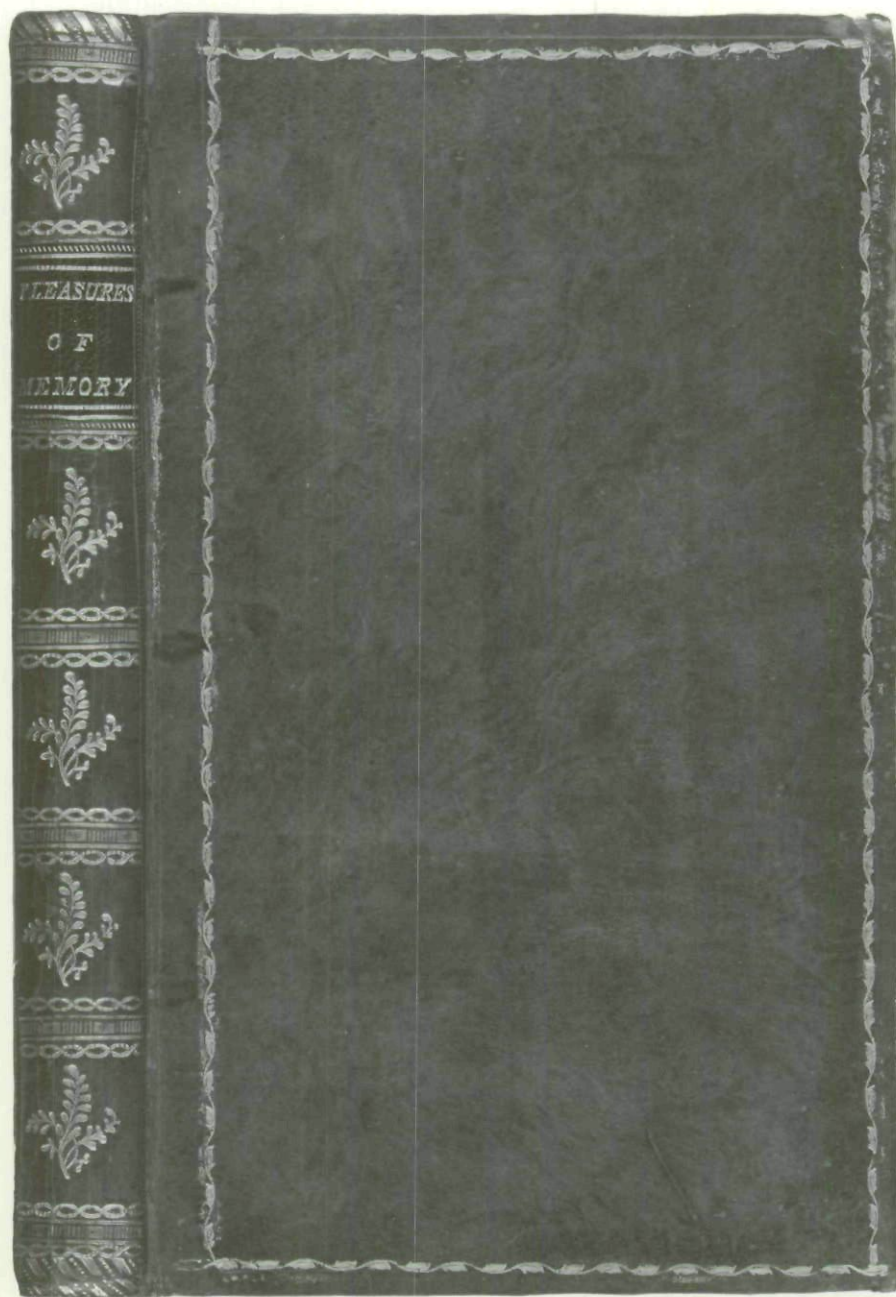
² Hannah D. French, 'Bound in Boston by Henry B. Legg,' *Studies in Bibliography, Papers of the Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia* 17 (1964): plate opp. p. 135.

³ *Catalogue of Ornamental Leather Bookbindings Executed in America Prior to 1850*, Exhibited at The Grolier Club, November 7 to 30, 1907 (New York, 1907), p. 101.



Detail from spine of the Isaiah Thomas folio Bible, reproduced full size.

Spine of the Isaiah Thomas folio Bible, reproduced at 46% of the original size.



Spine and front cover of Samuel Rogers's *Pleasures of Memory*, reproduced full size.

the public notice and might have employed him either in Worcester or by sending books to New York. Greenleaf died of yellow fever in 1798, aged forty-two. That very year Legge appeared in Boston.

Henry Bilson Legge died in Boston on November 10, 1804, leaving behind him a legacy of distinguished bookbindings commissioned by Isaiah Thomas, George Washington, the Bowdoin family, and Caleb Bingham, among others. Fifty or more bindings of superior workmanship have now been identified as Legge's, about half of them to be found in the Society's library, where the search began. The mystery of our binder's name, identical with that of the third Earl of Dartmouth of the country whence he came, remains unsolved.

Hannah D. French

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