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# Notes on American Bookbindings

## A JANE AITKEN BINDING

Robert Aitken's daughter Jane was thirty-eight years old when she took over his shop after his death in 1802. She carried on the business in all its aspects—printing, binding, and book-selling—earning herself a high reputation for all three, but especially for printing. She published at least sixty imprints in the ten years from 1802 to 1812, among them C. W. Peale's *Epistle on Health*, a volume of the *Transactions* of the American Philosophical Society, two volumes of the *Memoirs* of the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, even Rebecca Rush's novel *Kelroy*. Her most important publication, the one that gained her Isaiah Thomas's respect, was the four-volume Septuagint Bible of 1808, newly translated by Charles Thomson, secretary to the Continental Congress.

The volume of the Bible illustrated here shows a typical Jane Aitken binding, combining the wide roll on the boards that was used by her father as early as 1793 with the flat spine and the narrow rolls found on much of her own work. The binding, in red morocco with tooling in blind and gilt, is an example of her very best craftsmanship, at the peak of her powers. How regrettable that only a few years later, by 1819 at the latest, she would be bankrupt and gone from Philadelphia, to reappear only once more in 1832, in her obituary as 'Miss Jane Aitken, for many years a printer and bookseller of Philadelphia.'

The first volume of this set is inscribed opposite the title page: 'Presented to John Nicholson Cambell and recommended to his serious perusal by his sincere Welwisher Cha Thomson.' John Nicholson Campbell, whose modest book label adorns each of the four volumes, was Jane Aitken's nephew, born in 1798, the oldest child of her sister Mary Ann Campbell. He

was also Robert Aitken's first grandchild, named for his grandfather's long-time close friend, John Nicholson. The Aitken family's strong Presbyterian faith culminated in John Nicholson Campbell's call to the ministry, an event perhaps signaled by the gift of this Bible, which may well have been Thomson's own copy. The inscription would certainly suggest it, and what better recipient than the devout nephew of the Bible's printer and binder.

Michael Papantonio was understandably interested in the Aitkens, father and daughter, whose joint career spanned almost fifty years of American binding. The Papantonio collection, now at AAS, contains outstanding examples of the work of the Aitken shop, but only the Blair's *Rbetoric*, printed and bound by Robert Aitken, can equal the Septuagint Bible in craftsmanship and provenance from the hands of his daughter Jane.

Willman Spawn

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