



Reproduced at 70% of the original size.

Detail from inside front cover.



Notes on American Bookbindings

THE AWARD-WINNING BINDING OF WILLIAM SWAIM

An incomplete set of Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in the Papantonio Collection was not chosen by Mr. Papantonio for inclusion in his widely circulated exhibition catalogue of sixty-two *Early American Bookbindings*, perhaps because he found it of insufficient interest, and because the leather showed considerable signs of wear and tear. It is, however, important from more than one point of view. It bears the name of its binder tooled in gold and, in addition, it won a prize for the best American binding in American leather at the Literary Fair of the American Company of Booksellers held in Newark, New Jersey, in 1805.¹

The photograph herewith shows an exterior that is not spectacular. Sets rarely are. The decoration in gold is tasteful and done in the style of 1805, the year in which the set was published in Philadelphia by William Birch and Abraham Small. Its acid-stained covers are gold tooled as are its spine, board edges, and turn-ins, thus qualifying it as 'extra binding' in all respects except that the page edges are not in the required gold. Inside are green marbled endpapers, green and red worked silk head- and tailbands and book markers of yellow silk. Page edges are sprinkled in green over yellow. One must look sharply to discover the gold-tooled name of *Swaim* inside the cover at the top edge, running vertically to the spine on the leather turn-in. Swaim's signature is unique in its placement and lack of Christian name. The latter appears as *William* in Longworth's New York City directories. In 1805 he was first listed at 100 Reed Street, then at Pearl Street, center of the

¹ Charles L. Nichols, 'The Literary Fair in the United States,' in *Bibliographical Essays: A Tribute to Wilberforce Eames* (Cambridge, Mass., 1924), pp. 88-89.

book trade, and several other locations through 1817. After that his name drops out of the directories.

The Swaim signature in gold makes him the sixth binder before 1820 thus far discovered to have used this method, and the first New York binder of this very select group. The others are John Lightbody and William Potter of Philadelphia, Henry Bilson Legge and John Roulstone of Boston, and Francis M. Wills of Baltimore. All of these signed in a traditional manner, three at the base of the spine and two inside the lower cover. Swaim's unique signature appears as well in four of the six volumes constituting Edmund Burke's *Works*, published in Boston in 1806, a set that is privately owned.

Research in early American binding proceeds slowly. As long ago as 1941 William Swaim was known to have received the 1805 award but no examples of his work had been identified. 'What book he bound and what materials, technique and ornamentation he used can only be conjectured.'² Now we have two signed bindings but know nothing of the man except that he was binding in New York from 1805 until 1818.

Initial research into the Swaim, Swain, or Swaine families has led only to confusion. There were at least three Williams at this time and the only one for whom dates and a biography have been discovered was a painter of portraits and miniatures in New York during the 1830s and 1844-46.³ A doctor named William Swaine whose portrait was engraved by Asher B. Durand was one. What relationship, if any, existed is not known. This confusion caused a false attribution to our binder to be made in one of the super-extra bindings in the Papantonio Collection (Barlow's *Columbiad* [Philadelphia, 1807]). It was unsigned and clearly executed in the 1830s or 1840s if not later. The elegance of its leather doublures, silk flyleaves, and

² Hannah D. French, 'Early American Bookbinding by Hand,' in *Bookbinding in America*, ed. Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt (Portland, Me., 1941), p. 56.

³ William Young, ed., *A Dictionary of American Artists, Sculptors, and Engravers*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1968).

wide gold ornamentation unaccompanied by a gold signature belie the pencil note on the title page, 'Bound by William Swaim.'

All the evidence I have been able to gather convinces me that the Papantonio set of Gibbon was the worthy recipient of the gold medal of the American Company of Booksellers at the Literary Fair, held in Newark, New Jersey, in 1805.

Hannah D. French

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