

The Rise of Book Publishing in America, 1782 to 1830, by James N. Green, Library Company of Philadelphia¹

I. The Beginnings of the Reprint Trade, 1782-1801.

In the years following the Revolutionary War a vigorous American book publishing enterprise emerged, but paradoxically Great Britain supplied both the initial capital that got the trade off the ground and the texts Americans printed. The war had not changed the basic fact that London was the center of English-language book culture and America was on the periphery. The primary goal of the American book trade was nationalistic: to replace British imports with its own editions of the same texts. This turned out to be a difficult goal to achieve, and progress toward it was fitful.

During the war hardly any large books were printed with the notable exception of the Bible printed in 1782 by the Scot Robert Aitken in Philadelphia. This was the first English Bible with an American imprint. Aitken claimed he was nearly ruined by the venture, because he was paid in worthless paper money and because the advent of peace precipitated an avalanche of cheap imported Bibles. British merchants continued to dump books in America for the rest of the 1780s as the American economy slumped. Several booksellers sent agents with large stocks of books. Some of them returned home as soon as they sold their books for whatever they could get, but others stayed on.

In 1784 Thomas Dobson arrived in Philadelphia from Scotland with large stocks of books. He quickly became major bookseller, but as he sold his books, instead of investing their profit in more books, he embarked on publishing, using his stock as security for additional loans. His first large venture was appropriately the first American edition of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* in 1788. To undersell imports the original London quarto

as well as the pirated Dublin octavo, he reprinted in duodecimo. In 1789 he began reprinting the new edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* as it arrived part by part from Edinburgh, selling it by subscription like a magazine. When completed in 1798 it totaled 18 thick volumes with over 400 engraved plates, by far the largest book ever published in America and a very risky venture requiring large reserves of capital to sustain it through the ups and downs of a turbulent and immature economy. Dobson's success was a mystery until recently when Warren McDougall discovered that his original stock was provided by his erstwhile employer, the Edinburgh bookseller Charles Eliot. Eliot wanted his lavish backing to remain a secret so his protégé would be more easily accepted in America. Dobson sold the stock and put the returns into publishing, but he refused to pay Eliot back despite increasingly desperate appeals. His debt rose to tens of thousands of pounds. Eliot died in 1790 in considerable financial difficulty, in part due to Dobson's default. Thus Eliot indirectly supplied the capital for the largest American publishing venture of the Federal era.²

Another emigrant of 1784 was Mathew Carey of Dublin. He came over penniless, but with references from the likes of Franklin and Lafayette, and he became the publisher of the leading Federalist monthly magazine, *The American Museum*. Between 1792 and 1794 he used his political connections to get the credit necessary to import huge shipments of books from several London booksellers, and from his Dublin associates.³ Much like Dobson, he used his imported books as capital for publishing reprints. In 1794 and 1795 he published a two-volume quarto reprint of William Guthrie's *New System of Modern Geography*, with 45 engraved maps, priced at \$12, in an edition of 2500; and a four-volume octavo reprint of Oliver Goldsmith's *An History of the Earth and Animated Nature*, with 55

plates, priced at \$8, in an edition of 3,000. Taken together, these ventures were even riskier than Dobson's encyclopedia because they were concentrated in one year and because unlike Dobson, Carey had made very little effort to gather subscribers in advance. He was still paying off several British booksellers, and as his publishing expenses mounted, he found it expedient to suspend payments to London -- all the more so because he had split with the Federalists over Jay's Treaty and was now politically opposed to trade with England. To sell these huge editions Carey hired the Rev. Mason Locke Weems, who later became famous as the author of the *Life of Washington*, the book that perpetrated the myth of the cherry tree. Weems was the most successful traveling book salesman of the age. He managed to sell off both books in the South, but his traveling expenses and discounts to middlemen ate up all the profit. Weems's main accomplishment was to divert the Southern book trade from London to Philadelphia.

Isaiah Thomas took another path to publishing, not through bookselling but through printing. During the war he had moved inland from Boston to Worcester, Massachusetts, where his business was much like a colonial printer's. He was proud of his craft, and so in 1784 and 1785 he imported \$9,000 worth of new type from Britain on the credit extended to him by Worcester merchants. He intended to use the type to print original books by American authors, but commissions did not materialize and so he resorted to publishing reprints. Since he had little capital besides his type, he chose the smallest books there were, the children's books published in London by John Newberry. These were fantastically profitable sheet for sheet, and he sold 119 editions in the 1780s, easily paying for the type. By 1789 he felt firm ground under his feet, and he switched from these trifles to the largest

and most serious book of all, the Bible, no edition of which had appeared in American since Aitken's.

Many American printers felt that some protection analogous to the British Bible patent was needed. On January 10, 1789 Hugh Gaine and four other New York printers sent a circular letter⁴ to all the trade calling for a joint petition to Congress for protection or financial support for an American Bible printing company that would share the risk and reward of supplying the nation. This was the first proposal for national cooperation in the book trade, but it had precisely the opposite effect. The letter touched off a chain reaction of Bible proposals. Within days William Young and Mathew Carey, both of Philadelphia, and Isaac Collins of Trenton, New Jersey all announced Bibles, and a group of New Yorkers announced a folio and a quarto, and Gaine himself ordered type for a duodecimo already composed from England, which he proposed to keep standing. Shortly thereafter Thomas announced Bibles in all three formats. Where there had been none, now there were nine Bibles announced as in press.

In 1790 Congress passed a copyright act that protected only books written by American citizens and residents, a step that neatly evaded the Bible problem and set the stage for a non-monopolistic, open-market reprint trade. In the 1790s, an American book was a book manufactured in America by American workers, regardless of the national origin of its text, and these reprints were marketed in strong nationalistic language. By the middle 1790s, most reprint publishers had given up printing in order to concentrate on financing, marketing, and distribution. They began hiring independent master printers to manufacture books for them, a development that marked the end of the domination of the American book trade by printers. In 1810 some Philadelphia printers summed up the state of the book trade:

For many years after the peace of 1783, books could be imported into the United States and sold cheaper than they could be printed here and indeed until 1793 nothing like a competition with English Printers and Booksellers could be maintained. The war then raging in Europe and added duty on paper made some difference but it was not until the union of Ireland and England (in 1801) that a decided advantage was ascertained to exist.⁵

In the absence of customs data, it is difficult to confirm how decided this advantage was.

The importation of Bibles by the book trade collapsed, for example, but general merchants continued to do so. The Union of Ireland and England may have stopped the Irish reprint trade, but Patrick Byrne of Dublin emigrated in 1802 with a stock of books as large as any in America.⁶ Most of them were law books, which continued to be imported as long as American law continued to be shaped by English common law and precedent. Certain other types of books continued to be imported because the demand was too small to justify reprinting: novels by unknown writers, books in foreign languages, professional literature in medicine, theology, and the sciences, luxury books such as fine illustrated books, books in fine bindings, fancy pocket books, and albums. Most large libraries and many private gentlemen continued to order books from London. But by the turn of the century, almost every book that had a good sale or even a good review in England was reprinted in America.

II. Cooperation and Competition in the Early Nineteenth Century Book Trade

As a few printers and booksellers began to take control of the nation's book trade in the 1790s, the risk of competition from British imports began to fade, but the risk from competition with each other grew much greater. The best way to mitigate this risk was for publishers to work cooperatively to limit competition. The nationalist spirit that drove the effort to replace imports became the basis of cooperation in the book trade. Publishers tried various modes of cooperation and self-regulation on both a local and a national level. The

simplest form was an agreement to join together in a publication on an ad hoc basis rather than producing two competing editions. More complex agreements to distribute each other's work soon followed. When publishers from different regions cooperated, each could promise to be the other's sole agent in a given region, and each would stay out of the other's territory. The most widespread kind of cooperation was the effort to keep prices up by refusing to do business with those who discounted too freely. Whenever two publishers cooperated, however, they placed themselves in competition with others who were not cooperating with them. Despite a shared ethic of cooperation and widespread efforts to limit risk, the book trade that was emerging was far more open and decentralized than that of Britain.⁷

The first formal cooperation among this emerging cohort of publishers on the national level took the form of a series of book fairs beginning in 1801. The instigator was Carey and the occasion was another flurry of Bible publishing. In the summer of 1800 Parson Weems talked him into undertaking an edition of the quarto family Bible, the first one in America since the three that had appeared in 1792. When Weems went to New York to gather subscribers, however, he found that several New York publishers were also planning to publish bibles in the same format.⁸ Carey grew fearful and delayed going to press. Since he was an ardent Jeffersonian and had narrowly escaped being prosecuted under the Alien and Sedition Acts, the outcome of the presidential election of 1800 was another important factor in this decision. When it turned out to be a tie between Jefferson and Burr, he decided to abandon the project, but when the balloting in Congress began, he took heart. On February 17, 1801 Jefferson was elected and on February 24 Carey finally decided to publish his Bible.⁹ Another reason the election was so important becomes

apparent when we see that over the next couple of months Carey wrote to every postmaster in the country, asking them to be his agents for the Bible, gathering subscriptions and forwarding payment. They knew their jobs were in danger and most of them agreed to help. This was a far more efficient system than Weems had ever imagined, and a far more national one. Then just as his Bible was coming off the press, he bought a duodecimo Bible in standing type from Hugh Gaine, and he persuaded Isaiah Thomas's firm to agree not to sell their duodecimo edition in Carey's territory.¹⁰ Thus he removed competitors in the other popular Bible format in both New York and New England. Having the type for the Bible permanent set and ready to print was a huge capital investment. He paid nearly \$7,000 for Gaine's type, but it gave him a huge advantage over any potential competitor. He also began to lobby his Jeffersonian friends for a seat on the board of the Bank of Pennsylvania, which in due course gave him almost unlimited access to capital.¹¹

In order to establish a more effective national book distribution system, Carey issued a call in that same eventful fall of 1801 for a national literary fair on the model of the ancient German trade fairs, which would bring wholesale booksellers and publishers together from all over the country to exchange or sell their books to each other in quantity. The fairs were based on the premise that the book trade was still largely local or regional at best, and that the weakness of transportation, communication, and financial links between regions made it difficult for a Philadelphian to sell books in Boston, and even harder for them to reach each others' hinterlands. Carey wanted to break down these regional barriers; and he wanted everyone to help him sell his Bibles.¹²

The fairs convened semi-annually from 1802 to 1806, alternating between Philadelphia and New York. They had the trappings of a typical trade fair, with dinners and

toasts and medals for excellence in printing; but the real business of the fairs was selling to each other at deep discounts and in large quantities, and above all, exchanging books with other publishers. In Europe books were exchanged sheet for sheet, but in the U.S. the exchanges were calculated at retail price equivalent: a hundred dollars worth of your books for a hundred dollars worth of mine. By means of these exchanges, one could get books of other publishers at essentially the cost of production.¹³ Another important activity at the fairs was the circulation and endorsement of promissory notes. Notes and bills of exchange had become the most important way of raising publishing capital *within* the trade, since access to bank capital was still problematic. Thus a publisher could buy paper with a note due in 6 months, which would give him enough time to print a book with it and begin to see a return. He might also sell his books at wholesale for notes due in 90 days, which would help his customer in the same way. But delays in production, distribution, and transmitting funds were endemic, and it was normal for to run on past the due date, often without interest as a trade courtesy. In that case the note had to be endorsed by another member of the trade, who thereby promised to pay the money due if the primary borrower could not. The collateral for these notes and endorsements was the bookseller's stock, usually his only capital. All the booksellers had to endorse each other's notes in order to do business. They were all each other's debtors and all each other's creditors, and because of the universal exchange of books promoted by the fairs, they all sold each others' books. Competition and cooperation were exquisitely and precariously balanced.¹⁴

The fairs represented a peak in the book trade that was not to be topped until about 1820. After 1806 the fairs ceased because (as Carey later wrote) small publishers began bringing "large editions of popular books with half-worn types on inferior paper, with

which, by means of exchanges, they deluged the country."¹⁵ By opening up an unregulated national exchange of books, the fairs exacerbated the inherent tendency of exchange to cheapen books and encourage overproduction. The problem, in short, was a glut of books. Exchanges were not sales, but they created a dangerous illusion of sales. At the fairs whole editions could be seemingly disposed of by exchange in a few hours. Some country printers printed an edition solely in order to have something to exchange, and the larger the edition, the more they had to exchange, so the total number of books printed grew much faster than the number actually sold to readers.

Isaiah Thomas had at this time a dozen or so branch stores run by partners – usually former journeymen -- in towns all over New England, as well as in Albany and Baltimore. His first was in Boston, established in 1788 with his most trusted journeyman, Ebenezer Andrews. Thomas was imitating Benjamin Franklin's system of partnerships, the terms of which he probably learned from Franklin in person on a visit to Philadelphia in 1788. In both systems, the master provided printing equipment and paid some fraction (varying from half to two-thirds) of the costs and expenses of the business. In return he received the same fraction of the income the partner generated for a limited period, usually six years.¹⁶ Franklin's partners were primarily newspaper printers, and only secondarily outlets for the books he published, but as it turned out, Thomas used his partners primarily as book distributors and secondarily as printers of books that he published. After Boston, his next partnership was in Walpole, New Hampshire, established in 1793, when that town was emerging as the gateway to the upper Connecticut River Valley. After 1800, as his inventory grew to worrisome size, he sent to his Walpole store much of the book stock he could not sell in Boston or Worcester. But as the country beyond Walpole began to settle,

the town declined and business was slow, so in 1807 Thomas set up a new store in Windsor Vermont, where he sent the books that would not sell in Walpole, what the partner there called "the poorest and most useless part of our stock, which will neither sell nor exchange."¹⁷ The start-up capital he supplied to Rutland took the form of books valued at their full retail prices; and at those prices they would not sell. By 1811 the book stock of the Walpole store was valued at \$18,000, including many heavy works of law, medicine, and theology, while annual sales averaged only about \$900, mostly school books and chap books--the reading material of the back country – along with stationery, cigars, patent medicines, and notions. The stock lists of the Walpole office foster the illusion of a vital local print culture, which is dispelled by the sales records.¹⁸

Thomas and Andrews quite often had books printed by their country partners in order to help them pay off the debts they owed. They worked for journeymen's wages, far less than a city printer would charge, and they often took payment for printing in books – again valued at retail price. This just saddled them with more books to sell. Several times the partners published books at their own risk, but since they could not sell many of them locally, and since they did not have access to a distribution network of their own, they ended up selling most of them through Thomas or Andrews; and again they were paid partly in books--more books. The capital that financed these publications came ultimately from Thomas or Andrews and the books returned to them for sale. All the country printers supplied was cheap labor.¹⁹

Unable to sell their books, the country partners exchanged them for others more saleable, but failing that they bartered them for paper, bookbinding, or simply for food and fuel. These petty traders in turn offered them for sale, but they were not obliged to sell at

full retail price. This is why one of the Walpole partners complained in 1812 that a local papermaker sold twice as many books as he did.²⁰ There were so many books around that they became a kind of currency, and in the process of endless exchange, the worthless ones drove down the value of Thomas's books, but still he refused to discount or depreciate them.

Thomas's and Andrews' accounting preserved the illusion of the value of their stock, and it also fostered an illusion of profit. Each year they separately added up all their assets, including book stock, printing equipment, real estate, securities, and accounts receivable, which they reckoned was their total worth. In 1804 they were each worth about \$200,000. They never calculated his annual expenditures and receipts to show a balance of profit or loss. Instead, each year they subtracted last year's net worth from this year's and termed the difference, "the profits of the business." For years this annual increase was viewed as a cause for rejoicing, and as an incentive to print yet more books. The more uncollected debts and unsold books they had, the greater their "profit." The partners kept their books the same way, and each year Thomas reckoned his half of their so-called profits as assets, which further swelled his own grand total. The more everyone printed and the less everyone sold, the more everyone's profits appeared to be. In his annual accounting of assets, Thomas did not begin depreciating book stock until 1813, and then only by 10%, by which time some of it was twenty years old.²¹ In the end all his partnerships collapsed under the weight of unsalable books; in 1817 he closed accounts on all of them, sustaining a loss he estimated at \$90,000.²²

This glut which affected all the large publishers in the period after about 1805 was compounded by the depression and waves of bankruptcy that afflicted the whole economy from the Embargo through the end of the War of 1812. Publishers were especially

vulnerable because of the practice of endorsing each other's notes. If one failed, his endorsers were liable for his debts, which sometimes touched off other failures in a domino effect. The onset of the War of 1812 set off a wave of such bankruptcies. By 1815, only 13 of the 64 publishers who went to the book fair in 1803 were still active in business.

Carey survived the crisis better than some others because of his Bible publishing. After reprinting his quarto Bible from freshly set type three or four times, he began leaving part of the type standing after each edition and buying new type for the next, until by 1807 he had the whole text standing.²³ With both the quarto and the duodecimo standing, he never had to pay for composition or for proofreading--a big charge with the Bible where the reputation for an accurate text was essential. This saving allowed him to undersell not only the importers but every other American publisher. Instead of competing with him, the whole trade bought from him. Another advantage of standing type was that he was able to print small editions as often as his sales required, so that he did not have his capital tied up in dead stock. Building on this ability to print short runs, he began to offer both the duodecimo and quarto Bibles on a variety of different paper grades, ranging from coarse to superfine, priced accordingly. He offered the quarto in a variety of bindings as well, from plain calf to red morocco gilt, and with a variety of contents, with and without plates, maps, Apocrypha, concordance, and so forth. These were offered in over 30 different combinations identified by number to make it easier for booksellers to order an assortment, and they ranged in retail price from \$3.50 to \$12.50. No Bible, in fact no book of any kind had ever been offered in such a variety of formats, and the innovation was extremely popular with consumers. His investment in standing type cost tens of thousands of dollars and filled his house, forcing him to buy another (grander) one; but it was the most

productive capital investment he had ever made. It purchased him a virtual monopoly, a de facto copyright nearly as effective as the British Bible patent.²⁴

Books in which some investment had been made to give them a de facto copyright were called "valuable books" in the trade. An atlas was a valuable book because the cost of engraving the plates was so high that it was not economical for others to reprint it. Adding engraved plates to any book made it valuable, since plates could not be copied as easily as text. The publishers of valuable books kept up their value by making them a little scarce in the trade. They were never exchanged for ordinary books and often weren't exchanged at all, only sold for money, and sometimes not even on credit but for cash only. In a period of glut, they were never a drug on the market, and so they were the best investment a publisher could make.

Copyright books were also valuable books by definition, since the investment a publisher made in copyright purchased an absolute legal monopoly. When Thomas and Andrews began buying copyrights in the 1790s, this was not understood, but after 1805 they gradually began to consider copyright books as equal to other valuable books. When one of Andrews's partners wrote to Carey in 1809 proposing an exchange of a copyright book he offered only a few copies "because we do not mean to have this work a glut in the market. The Copy Right cost us too dear, to make the work very common."²⁵ As other parts of his business deteriorated in the early 19th century, Andrews confined himself more and more to selling valuable books and (since he owned so many) copyright books, three-fourths of his business he estimated in 1810.²⁶ For the preceding twenty years being a publisher in America had meant reprinting British books, exchanging, building up a large stock of assorted books of all publishers, and being a complete wholesale and retail bookseller.

What Andrews did was a radical contraction in his business in response to a crisis; but almost accidentally he had discovered a new way of being a publisher, wholesaling only his own copyright books.

III. The Reconfiguration of the book trade in the 1820s

Most of the books American publishers reprinted were not protected by the copyright law, but by 1800 the trade had developed a self-regulating de facto copyright mechanism called “courtesy of the trade.” By this custom, the first printer to announce a book (usually by a newspaper advertisement) had the right to it and no other publisher could “print upon” him. This was an informal version of the English practice of registering titles at Stationers’ Hall; the actual practice seems to have originated in Dublin. In America, with its regional publishing centers and (since 1801 at least) with a fairly brisk trade between them, courtesy of the trade dictated that publishers wait after announcing a book to see if newspapers from other cities brought other announcements. If they did, one of the competitors would back down or they would join forces for a joint edition. This applied not to new books but also to steady-sellers, though when books were in large and constant demand, they tended to be claimed by one printer in each major printing center.

After the War of 1812 the poems of Scott and Byron and later the Waverly novels were so popular in America that each new title was reprinted almost simultaneously in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, often within days of receipt of the first copy or even purloined advance sheets. At this hectic pace, no one could afford to wait and see if someone else had advertised the title, and courtesy of the trade went by the boards.²⁷ At this time the two largest reprinters were Carey & Lea in Philadelphia and the Harper Brothers in New York. The Harpers had got their start after the War of 1812 as book printers, but they

were so entrepreneurial that they started to propose books to the trade instead of waiting for the booksellers to start the ball rolling. They would write to all the booksellers in and sometimes out of New York, saying ‘we propose to reprint such-and-such; how many copies will you take at the cost of paper and print?’ It was a short step from this to publishing. Because they united printing and publishing, which had been mostly separated for a generation, they had an advantage in the race to reprint new books, sometimes printing and putting up in boards 1,000 copies of a new novel over a weekend. They also had an advantage because sailing time to New York was a day or two shorter than to Philadelphia, 50 miles up river, so they almost invariably got copies of the English editions first. Carey had to go to enormous lengths to be the first in these races, and to get his Philadelphia editions into the New York stores before the Harper editions appeared. Sometimes he resorted to buying all the seats on the overnight stage and filling them with books.²⁸

What was at stake in this race was no longer courtesy of the trade, though both pretended it was; more at stake was the prestige of the firm and the city. Whoever got a book out first would get all the first sales, both wholesale and retail, and so their imprint would be in stores all over the country in a matter of days. The runner-up would sell his edition but a bit more slowly, and he would get the leftovers, reorders or orders from more distant places that were slower to come in. Traditionally the Philadelphia trade had supplied the hinterland to the South and West, and Boston had supplied New England, while New York took what was in between. The Harpers destabilised this system every time they filled a bookseller’s order from Worcester or Richmond.

The competition between New York and Philadelphia publishers was widely seen as so disrupting that a new mechanism of national trade cooperation and regulation was

needed, some substitute for the book fairs of the previous generation. The book trade was changing in fundamental ways. Capital was now more often secured from banks, competition with imports was no longer a serious constraint, exchanges were no longer as common among publishers, and trade in general was more open and less protected. Whatever regulating mechanism arose, it would have to be compatible with these new terms.

A venue for such trade regulation emerged almost by accident in 1825 in the first of the so-called trade sales. Public auction sales of books were common, as many as ten a week in Philadelphia, and this in itself was a cause for concern because auctions tended to drive prices down and made it difficult to maintain standard retail prices. To establish a clear distinction between wholesale and retail price levels, and to preserve the very real benefits of auction sales to booksellers (providing a way to move excess stock, get books into distant markets, and raise cash quickly) Henry Charles Carey had the idea of holding a sale open only to the trade, selling only multiple copies of books in sheets. His first trade sale was held in August 1824. He was the only consignor, but at a second sale in September 1825 ten other Philadelphia firms consigned, as well one each from Boston and New York. In the meantime New York had held its first trade sale in June, and by the late 1820s the pattern was set, semiannual fairs in Philadelphia and New York and annual fairs in Boston.

Trade sales were better than the book fairs with their endless exchanges and endorsements, for several reasons. They were actual sales for money, whereas exchanges just left the seller with more books to sell. Furthermore, exchanges were based solely on the retail price set perhaps arbitrarily by the publisher, whereas trade sales established a wholesale price that reflected a book's real value. It was also possible, indeed common for

booksellers to buy at the sales without having consigned anything, whereas to exchange you needed to publish. This helped keep a balance between production and distribution, and over time it created a niche for a new type of bookseller who specialized in distributing to retail bookstores more efficiently than the large publishing houses.²⁹

Trade sales also reflected the changing geography of the books trade. As distribution to the interior improved, publishing capital was increasingly concentrated in the three main Eastern cities. The inland publishing houses that flourished became increasingly specialized: for example, Hartford, Conn. and Exeter, N.H. for high-quality bindings, Brattleboro, Vt. for cheap Bibles, Andover, Mass. for theological books. Country printers continued to print for city publishers, but now seldom published books of their own. The three main cities continued to control most of the trade in their respective regions, but after the Erie Canal reached Buffalo in 1825, the shape of those regions changed, New York began to capture business from the Susquehanna and Ohio Valleys that previously had come to Philadelphia. Cut off from the interior, Boston stagnated as a publishing center. At least until the 1830s Philadelphia and New York battled it out, more or less evenly sharing the honors.

IV. Technology and the cost of books

The reconfiguration of the book trade in the 1820s was mostly a matter of trade organization, but technological changes also played a role. New technology sometimes involved machinery but more often it consisted simply of changes in the division of labor and the materials used. In the 1820s the most important technological innovations were in the realms of plate making, papermaking, and binding.

The greatest concern of publishers was always to sell an edition quickly and get back the money they invested; but the lower price per copy afforded by large editions tempted publishers to over-produce, and so in reality it often took years for an edition to sell out. Even if the publisher did not lose money, his annual capital return would fall below the rate of interest he paid to the bank. During the worst of the book glut in 1813, Mathew Carey was among the first to see that the solution to this problem was small editions, which would ensure smaller initial investment in paper and print and a more rapid turnover, even if it increased the price per copy. In an *Address to the Booksellers* he wrote, "If a shoemaker or a hatter were to manufacture shoes or hats enough to answer the demand for three or four or five years hence, merely because each hat or pair of shoes would now cost a quarter or half a dollar less, than the time when they were likely to be sold, he would be regarded as insane."³⁰

Carey practiced what he preached by printing small editions of the Bible from standing type. In the 1820s the new technology of stereotype replaced standing type and allowed publishers to have it both ways, to print small editions and keep the price per copy down. Stereotypes were thin metal plates cast from regular type. Like standing type it allowed a publisher to print small editions, because once the type was cast into plates, reprints could be struck off with no further expense for composition or proofreading. For subsequent editions the production cost was lower and the cost per copy was the same no matter how many were printed.³¹ However standing type required a massive investment in type, whereas stereotype plates were cheap to cast and used little metal. Stereotype still added to the cost of producing the first edition, but publishers soon got around that problem by the simple expedient of writing off the cost of stereotyping as a capital investment that

would pay off in subsequent editions. Copyright was also viewed as a capital cost that could be depreciated over the life of the copyright. Thus when Carey & Lea calculated the costs of publishing Cooper's *The Prairie*, they added a note "Copyright & plates free of cost." Thus the first edition of a copyright, stereotype book sold for about the same price as if it had been a reprint printed the regular way; but the subsequent editions printed from the plates cost less to produce (and nothing for copyright). Later in the century, publishers would make these subsequent editions fantastically cheap, but at this stage, they sold for the same price as the first edition, and the extra profit was applied to the initial capital cost of copyright and plate making. Thus stereotype did not lower book prices but it reduced the size of the publisher's initial investment and it dramatically increased the profits on steady sellers.

The most expensive item in book production was paper, and here again the effect of technology on prices is hard to assess. The cylinder papermaking machine was introduced in America in 1817, but only in the 1830s did papermaking machinery become common enough to drive down the price of paper.³² Even then hand mills could remain competitive by lowering wages and by using cheaper grades of rags whitened by bleaching, then a relatively new process. Paper was available in different grades and prices, ranging from \$3.00 to \$6.50 per ream in the 1820s. As John Bidwell has shown, as the price of paper began to fall in the 1830s, Carey & Lea kept their retail prices steady and simply began to use better paper.

Binding was next most expensive element in book production costs, and it was by far the most problematic part of the manufacturing process. In this period books were almost always retailed bound, but before the 1820s it was rare for an entire edition to be

bound by the publisher at the time of publication. Instead the publisher would have just as many copies bound as were needed for immediate sales, often by a number of different binders, and the rest were warehoused in sheets or shipped that way to wholesale purchasers, who employed their own binders. This way the publisher avoided tying up capital in binding unnecessarily, and thus an edition could have many different types of binding and many different binders. Unfortunately every one of these binding transactions was another opportunity for problems to arise: plates or even whole sheets omitted or transposed, mismatched binding on sets, shortages of leather, endless misunderstandings and delays just at the critical moment before publication when the printed sheets were being made into books. Publishers might have preferred to have whole editions bound uniformly under their control at the time of publication, but the per copy cost of binding was about the same for an edition of 5,000 as for 500. As long as there were no economies of scale, the publisher had to choose between the obvious economic advantages of binding only as sales were made, and the quality control advantage of having the whole edition bound under close supervision.

Up to the mid-1820s this dilemma was sometimes solved by having the whole edition bound not in leather but in a cheap temporary binding of paper-covered boards. This protected the books as they made their way through the trade from wholesaler to retailer, and it gave publishers more control over the timing of publication and the final appearance of the book. However, boards were flimsy and unattractive. Then in the mid-1820s colored muslin cloth began to be used in place of paper or leather over boards.³³ To make it more attractive, the cloth was soon available in a variety of colors, with dozens of different

machine applied grains, and with free-form decorative designs in stamped blind or gilt. The variety and permutation of design elements suddenly was almost infinite.

Cloth bindings still had to be constructed one at a time by hand, however. Another technological innovation of the 1820s introduced economies of scale into bookbinding for the first time. Traditionally the book block was sewn onto cords, the cords were attached to the boards, and then the covering material was pasted over the whole. The "new technology" involved gluing the boards and spine piece onto the covering material and then pasting this so-called case onto the book block. The difference was simply that the cases could be pre-fabricated in assembly line fashion, while folding and sewing were done by another team, and the actual assembly by another. This division of labor allowed the employment of lower-waged workers in some operations. No new machinery was used, just a new organization of the work flow.

These two innovations, case binding and cloth, were introduced at about the same time and together they utterly transformed the outward appearance of books, and also the way they were sold, read, and preserved. All previous trade bindings had been drab and cheap looking. Now suddenly books were appearing in stores in many colors with decorations stamped by machine in gold and blind. In the past book stores had looked much like libraries, with books arranged on the shelves in drab rows in whatever order suited the owner, who stood behind his counter and fetched what the customer asked for. These new bindings lent themselves to seductive, eye-catching display on counters and in the new bow-front shop windows that were appearing in fashionable shopping streets. It was the greatest innovation in book marketing since the colonial period. Cloth bindings did everything except make books cheaper. It was actually about the same price as boarding,

around 12 cents a volume for Carey and Lea in the 1820s; though it was cheaper than most other permanent bindings.³⁴

Steam-powered printing presses were introduced in America as early as 1821, but they were mainly used for newspaper printing and seldom for quality book work. Carey and Lea had just three books printed on power presses before 1838. Changes in plate making, binding, and papermaking technologies transformed books and the book trade before power presses had a chance to make any impact.

It is generally assumed that technology made books cheaper, but that does not seem to have been the case before 1840. Considering the fact that consumer prices were halved between 1814 and 1840 while book prices remained relatively stable, the real cost of books may have actually gone up.³⁵ Michael Winship's study of Trade Sales may show that actual wholesale prices fluctuated widely, but at the retail level, before 1830, publishers managed to achieve their primary goal of keeping prices high.

¹ This paper is adapted and abridged from a chapter in the second volume of *A History of the Book in America*, to be published by University of North Carolina Press in 2008, for presentation at the Economic History Association in Austin, September 2007. This version is for conference discussion purposes only. Please do not quote, cite, or reproduce it without the author's permission. (Contact jgreen@librarycompany.org)

² Warren McDougall, 'Charles Elliot's book adventure in Philadelphia, and the trouble with Thomas Dobson,' in *Light on the book trade: essays to Peter Isaac*, ed. Barry McKay et al., New Castle: Oak Knoll, 2003, 197-212. McDougall notes that on the same boat with Dobson was Samuel Campbell, who became an important bookseller in New York using the same business methods. His brother Robert Campbell followed him and settled in Philadelphia. Dobson finally settled his debt with Eliot's estate in 1805.

³ Vincent Kinane, "'Literary Food' for the American Market: Patrick Byrne's Exports to Mathew Carey," *Proc. AAS* 104 (1994), 321

⁴ The unique copy of this broadside is in the Library Company.

⁵ *The Evening Star*, Philadelphia, 30 October 1810, quoted in Charles L. Nichols, 'The literary fair in the United States,' *Bibliographical Essays: a tribute to Wilberforce Eames*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924, p.84.

⁶ Byrne's 1802 *Catalogue of the Quire Stock of Books* lists books worth by a conservative estimate \$50,000 at retail. Some of the law books from Byrne's stock were still being sold by his successors in the 1830s.

⁷ Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital*, 55-65

⁸ Skeel, *Mason Locke Weems. 2:139-140*

⁹ Carey to Weems, October 18, 1800 ("I confess I am still undecided"); December 11, 1800 ("Had the project succeeded..."); February 4, 1801 ("I am again deliberating about printing the Bible"); February 24, 1801, Lea and Febiger Collection, HSP.

¹⁰ Andrews to Carey, June 27, 1802, describing their agreement to divide the sales of duodecimo Bibles, "Philadelphia to Mr. Carey, eastward of New York to Thomas & Andrews, New York, Baltimore, and southward of Baltimore, to be neutral ground, to be supplied by both parties." Lea and Febiger Papers, HSP.

¹¹ Hugh Gainie to Mathew Carey, September 7, 1801; Ebenezer T. Andrews to Carey, November 28 and December 12, 1802. Lea and Febiger Collection, HSP. Mathew Carey, *Autobiography*, 48

¹² Mathew Carey, *Address to the Printers and Booksellers throughout the United States* [Philadelphia, 1801].

¹³ Charles L. Nichols. "The Literary Fair in the United States, in *Bibliographic Essays, A Tribute to Wilberforce Eames*, ed. George Parker Winship and Lawrence C. Wroth (Cambridge, Mass., 1924).

¹⁴ Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital*, 115-124.

¹⁵ Carey, *Autobiography*, 50.

¹⁶ Ralph Frasca, Benjamin Franklin's Printing Network: Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006.

¹⁷ Anson Whipple to Isaiah Thomas, Thomas Papers, AAS, March 19, 1813

¹⁸ Account of sales, Walpole, July 25 to November 17, 1809, Thomas papers, Vol. IX, AAS.

¹⁹ Jack Larkin, "The Merriams of Brookfield: Printing in the economy and culture of rural Massachusetts in the early nineteenth century," PAAS 96:1 (April 1986): 39-74.

²⁰ Anson Whipple to Isaiah Thomas, n.d. but with letters of 1812 Thomas Papers, AAS.

²¹ Ebenezer T. Andrews to Isaiah Thomas, May 6, 1804; "Summary account of book stock and other property of Isaiah Thomas taken August 20th 1813:" which has a note reading "as the deductions have always been uniform in their account of stock ... they do not reduce the articles altogether to the standard of present wholesale prices," so a further 10% reduction is made. Volume IX, Isaiah Thomas Papers, AAS.

²² Ebenezer T. Andrews to Isaiah Thomas, January 22, 1802; May 10, 1802; January 1, 1806; May 31, 1810, Thomas Papers, AAS; Shipton, *Isaiah Thomas, 73-73*.

²³ This was ascertained by collating half a dozen editions page by page and side by side.

²⁴ Carey, *Plans and Terms; To the Booksellers throughout the United States. Bible Warehouse* (Philadelphia: June 8, 1814). Some sources say Carey spent \$15,000 on type for the quarto Bible, e.g., *Biographies of successful merchants* (Philadelphia, 1864), 17.

²⁵ Thomas & Whipple, Newburyport to Carey, November 23, 1809, Lea and Febiger Collection, HSP.

²⁶ Andrews to Isaiah Thomas, May 3, 1810, Thomas Papers, AAS.

²⁷ Emily B. Todd, "Transatlantic Context: Walter Scott and Nineteenth-Century American Literary History," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1999; Peter X. Accardo, "Byron in America to 1830," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, NS 9:2 (1998); David Kaser *Messrs. Carey & Lea of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), chapter 6.

²⁸ Eugene Exman, *The Brothers Harper* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), chapter I.

²⁹ For example the Philadelphia booksellers Grigg, Elliott & Co. was said to have been the largest book wholesaling or jobbing business in the country in 1849, specialized in supplying booksellers in the South and West. Edwin T. Freedley, *Leading Pursuits and Leading Men* (Philadelphia, 1856), 77; and *The Manufactories and manufacturers of Pennsylvania in the nineteenth century* (Philadelphia, 1875), 258.

³⁰ Mathew Carey, *Address to the Booksellers of the United States, from the Booksellers' Company of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1813), 10.

³¹ George A. Kubler, *A New History of Stereotyping* (New York: J. Little and Ives Co., 1941); Michael Winship, "Printing with Plates in the Nineteenth century," *Printing History* 5 (1983): 15-27; for an account of the difficulties encountered by early users of stereotype plates, see Rosalind Remer, "Capturing the Bard: an episode in the American publication of Shakespeare's plays, 1822-1851, PBSA 91:3 (1997): 327-338.

³² John Bidwell, "The Brandywine Paper Mill and the Anglo-American Book Trade, 1787-1837," D.Phil. diss., Oxford University, 1992, 309.

³³ Exman claims the first American cloth was on a Harpers book of 1827, but the Library Company of Philadelphia has a copy in brown muslin of Thomas Moore's *Memoirs of the Life of ... Sheridan* (Philadelphia: Carey & Lea, 1825) with an inscription on the front free endpaper (that is on a sheet connected to the binding, not the text block) dated December 1825.

³⁴ In 1825 Carey & Lea typically paid 12 cents for "doing up in cloth" and 11 cents for boarding.

³⁵ John J. McCusker, *How much is that in real money* (Worcester: American Anitquarian Society, 1992), 127. His composite consumer price index doubled from 1788 to 1814 and fell back to the 1788 level in 1840.