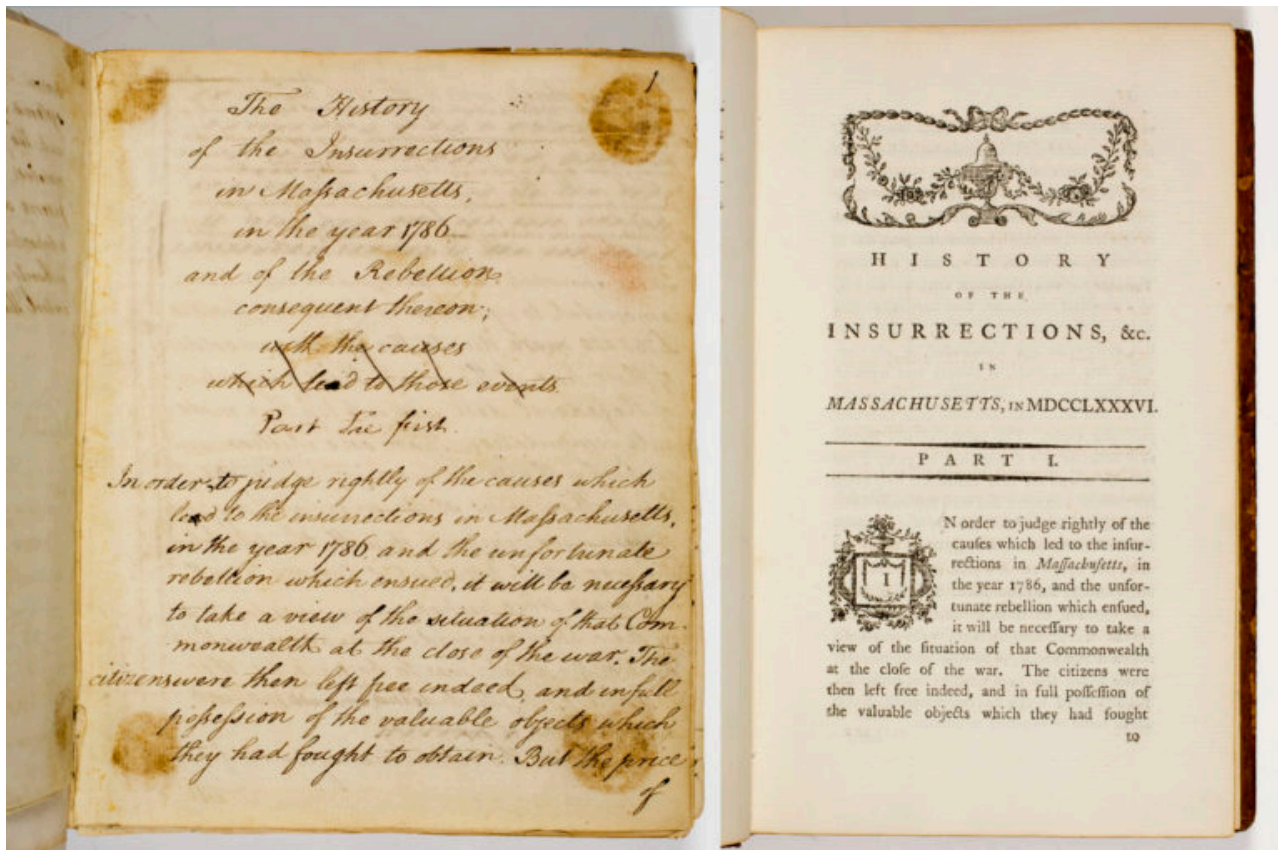


# The Business of Building Books



The roots of the field of book history lie primarily in the tradition of textual studies—the examination of how a particular written text took the material form of a book, and what changes were wrought in that transformation. Much of the early work in what eventually became a distinct field was done by literary scholars, particularly those involved in studying the publication history of Shakespeare's plays. As such, book historians and bibliographers have always concerned themselves with the transformation of *words* into *things*—how those things were produced, how they moved around in the world, and what people did with them.

In a similar way, much contemporary writing about the future of books focuses on their physical nature, their qualities as *things*. Writers who lament the decline of book culture detail the distinctive smell of bookstores and libraries, the comforting heft of a book in the hand, the tactile pleasure of the page between a reader's fingers. These material qualities are typically compared with the evanescent, immaterial characteristics of digital texts—all those ones and zeros zooming around in the ether. This argument is a straw man, of course. Digital texts are read on physical screens attached to physical objects that have their own physical qualities. Each has its own weight and distinctive texture; they give off light and heat. These electronic devices are just as much *things* as are books. But lovers of books (and particularly scholars who work with old books) often tend to grant books a sort of mystical

power, and treat them as a different category of object. New scholarship in book history, however, is beginning to treat books as things that have their own material histories and are used for purposes other than reading (just think of how many toddlers have sat on phone books or dictionaries to be elevated to table height at family dinners). By thinking of books as things that exist not only to be read, but as objects that have to be assembled, moved, sold or exchanged, and disposed of, we can come closer to understanding the way that the “world of books” is made up of individual objects in the world.

Scholars are accustomed to thinking of books as material artifacts, but these artifacts are primarily of interest to historians and literary critics because they have words printed on their pages. One such material object that is generally considered of interest for what it says more than what it *is* is pictured in figure 1. George Richards Minot’s *History of Shay’s Rebellion* was printed in Worcester in 1788 by Isaiah Thomas, one of early America’s most successful printers (and the man who, in 1812, would found the American Antiquarian Society).

If we’re lucky, we can sometimes find an artifact like that in figure 2—Minot’s own bound manuscript version of his “History” (this is one of perhaps only two eighteenth-century texts for which the Antiquarian Society holds both the full manuscript and the printed copy). Artifacts such as this, that contain abundant evidence of the author’s hand—strike-throughs, marginalia, passages added on tipped-in pages—offer great insight into the history of specific texts (fig. 3). By studying them we can learn how handwritten words on paper become a physical object that is the product of numerous mechanical processes (making paper, casting type, printing) (fig 4). Scholars can discover how the book’s preface (fig. 5), which appears to have been written after the rest of the manuscript, takes printed form. We can also study the material changes that took place in the transformation from humble paper-bound notebook to Isaiah Thomas’ own copy of the *History*, handsomely bound in calf with a gilt-stamped spine (fig. 6). And book historians from the bibliographical branch of the field’s family tree can study the book’s presswork, its imposition, and its typesetting in Thomas’s print shop. In short, through studying physical objects such as Minot’s *History*, we can learn a great deal about the history of this specific book—how it took material form and made its way to readers.

This is the work of traditional book history, but it is also in line with the new focus in the field on “material textuality.” Yet when scholars talk about “material textuality,” the focus is still usually on the “textual” part—about how one text (like Minot’s manuscript) turns into a printed physical book, what labor processes are involved, what decisions the pressman makes that influence the final appearance of the book. Once the book is printed, scholars explore how those decisions affect how the book is received, and how the material form the book takes also serves to convey meaning. Literary scholars tend to become interested in the history of books because of the history of a *specific* book, and we are interested in that specific book because of what it says, or who wrote it, or what impact its words had on those who read it. And many other

branches of scholarship that focus on the lives of books are primarily concerned with the contents of the books, rather than their material form. Books get censored because of what they say, not what they're made of. Systems of intellectual property such as copyright apply to the ideas and words contained in books, not to books as manufactured objects. But there are books—physical things, made out of cotton and glue and twine and leather—that do something else, something that helps me think about early American literature in a different way, a way in which considerations of authors and readers hold much less sway, and where the materials that go into books take center stage.

In the early 1790s, Isaiah Thomas was one of the most successful printers in North America. In his various shops in Worcester, Massachusetts, he employed almost 150 workers, and was a partner in printing, publishing, and book-selling enterprises in Boston; Walpole, New Hampshire; Brookfield, Massachusetts; Baltimore; and Albany. In January 1793, frustrated with the difficulty of obtaining enough paper from paper mills outside Boston, Thomas purchased land just southwest of Worcester to build his own paper mill. In his 1810 *History of Printing in America*, Thomas wrote (about himself, in the third person): “At Worcester, he also erected a paper mill, and set up a bindery; and was thus enabled to go through the whole process of manufacturing books.” It is this comment of Thomas’s—his reference to “the whole process of manufacturing books”—that led me to look at the object in figure 7: the account book of payments made to the workmen in Thomas’s paper mill and bindery from 1794 to 1796.

The page in figure 8 is the first of several showing payments to John Salter, the mill’s foreman. Salter was clearly a skilled workman—he made paper moulds used in the mill—and he was relatively well paid. But it is the pattern of payments that is most interesting. He was paid in cash; in 2 bushels of wheat in May 1794; in 2 barrels of cider the following month; and in corn sent to him by a third party, Willard Parker, in August. These forms of payment-in-kind were quite common in eighteenth-century North America, particularly outside of the larger cities, where hard money was often scarce; indeed, Thomas often accepted payment in corn, wheat, butter, and other agricultural products from his rural customers. But in addition to being paid in goods that could have been used to feed his family, Salter was also paid in paper and, more notably, in books. He received a copy of Perry’s *Dictionary* in payment on Jan. 12, 1795; a quarto Bible on April 6; and Isaac Watts’s *Psalms* on August 14. He also received a large number of copies of Webster’s spelling books in payment, perhaps for resale.

The variety in the forms of compensation that Salter received for his work in Thomas’ paper mill was not exceptional. Patrick Gilmore (fig. 9), a journeyman paper maker, was paid in cash, in linen, in an order on a local merchant, and in copies of the *Young Man’s Companion* and the famous sex manual [\*Aristotle’s Master-piece\*](#). Other workers were paid in extra boards, binding materials, Morocco leather, and gold leaf, indicating that they might be manufacturing

books on their own.

The page in figure 10 shows payments to “Pitman, Whittemore, and Cunningham, lads in the binding room.” Over the course of 1795 they received payments in cash, “small books” (which most likely meant chapbooks for children), and paper—in very small amounts (one of them received six cents’ worth of marbled paper on Sept. 9). But they also were paid in more expensive books, receiving a Hieroglyphic (illustrated) Bible on Jan. 28, 1796, and a copy of *Pamela* several months later. In contrast (fig. 11), during his brief employment at the mill, Moses Adams, another “one of the lads,” was paid in cash, and in a pair of shoes made by a Worcester cobbler.

It is this use of books as fungible assets—as payments to workers who labored on their manufacture, equivalent with a barrel of cider or a pair of shoes—that I find productive in reorienting how we think about early American literature. With the Atlantic turn in early American studies, there has been a wave of interest in transatlantic book history. But this transatlantic study is still often focused on texts, looking at how either finished books made their way from Dublin or London to Boston or Philadelphia, or at how particular texts by specific authors were reprinted in North America, examining issues such as copyright and piracy that inhere in specific texts, or addressing how radical ideas from England crossed the ocean on the pages of pamphlets and helped fuel the Revolution. What Thomas’s business records help us see, though, is that books were the result of, as he put it, “a whole process of manufacturing.” That is, they were manufactured goods that drew on the Atlantic world trade in raw materials (figs. 12, 13), such as the rags Thomas bought for his mill, gold, and leather, and in tools, such as composing sticks and type, which represented Thomas’s single biggest capital asset. Thinking about books as objects that were processed, stored, and packaged by industrialists (I use the term advisedly, instead of “printer”) like Isaiah Thomas helps re-orient the way we think about literature in early America.

Another Thomas account book from 1794 helps us see this distinction even more clearly. This inventory of his business’s stock in books, paper, type, and ink lists all of his assets, by location in his many buildings in Worcester (James Green has written that in 1794 Thomas had \$35,000 worth of books in his warehouses—he continually plowed all of his available capital back into books) (fig. 14). There is a list of “American Books in Warehouse—Bound—Room No. 1,” sorted by trunk. His “European Publications in the Store” are listed by shelf, and then by subject (fig. 15). “Books folded, Room No. 2, Upper Warehouse,” in figure 16, lists items that have been folded into gatherings but not yet bound, a common practice for printers of the day, while figure 17 features a list of “Books in Sheets, in the Loft” that inventories books whose sheets have not yet been folded. This way of viewing a set of books not as specific texts by particular authors, or as collections of texts that are related by subject matter, but based on their point of origin (which affected their sale price), their state of completion, and their storage location helps us see that book history looks very different from the perspective of the maker of books than

from that of the reader. Scholars may say that they study a particular author, and librarians may arrange books in their collections chronologically, or by subject, or by publisher. But the “List of Books: European Editions. Trunk No. 12, Upper Warehouse, Room No. 2” shown in figure 18 includes a motley assortment of titles, from Frances Burney’s *Cecilia* to Samuel Butler’s *Hudibras* to issues of the *Tatler* and *Spectator* to stocks of Greek grammars and William Smellie’s treatise on midwifery. They have nothing in common as texts, other than their origin and where they are stored. There is no authorial thread that connects them, and they would not have found the same readership. Yet, for Thomas—a producer and seller of manufactured items that just happen to be books—these titles represented a coherent category of goods, objects that were in meaningful ways somehow the same. To the librarian and the scholar, these account books are manuscript texts, but they are also *things* that provide a map for where to find other *things*, and also contain a record of paying the workers who produced these *things* in the raw materials necessary to make more of these *things*. Examining objects such as these account books, and taking seriously their status as *objects*, can help reorient our view of American literature away from that of the writer (and the reader), and even away from that of the editor or printer, to that of the manufacturer and the laborer—those for whom the book exists purely as a fungible, interchangeable object, one among many—not as a specific set of words like George Minot’s “History,” labored over by the author’s hand, but as a thing stored in Trunk No. 12 in Room No. 2 of the Upper Warehouse, taking up space, waiting to be sold.

## Further reading

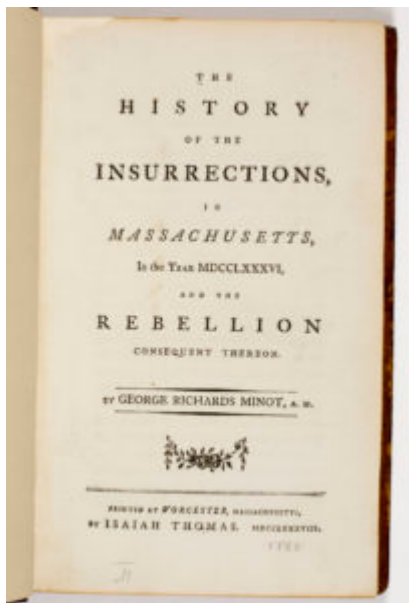
There are two groups of book professionals—conservators and library curators—who are uniquely attentive to the physical qualities of books and to the materials that are used to make them. Anybody interested in the materiality of books of any sort should consult these incredibly knowledgeable resources first—nobody knows more about how old books were made than those who are responsible for their care.

Numerous scholars in recent years have explored the history of individual commodities in early America and their impact on the material objects of which they became a part, as well as the implications of those goods’ production and trade. See in particular Jennifer Anderson, *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012); Zara Anishanslin, *Portrait of a Woman in Silk: Hidden Histories of the British Atlantic World* (New Haven, 2016); and Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, 2015).

One of the most notable examples of the “new materiality” approach to book history scholarship is Leah Price’s *How to Do Things With Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton, N.J., 2012), although its focus is still primarily on books being used as objects in literary works, rather than in actual practice. Jonathan Senchyne’s work on the materiality of paper and early American

literature is particularly useful for readers interested in this relationship. See in particular "Paper Nationalism: Material Textuality and Communal Affiliation in Early America," *Book History* 19 (2016) and "Vibrant Material Textuality: New Materialism, Book History, and the Archive in Paper," *Studies in Romanticism* (forthcoming, spring 2018). For a more theoretical approach to some of the issues involved in this materialist turn, see *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (Durham, N.C., 2005) and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C., 2010).

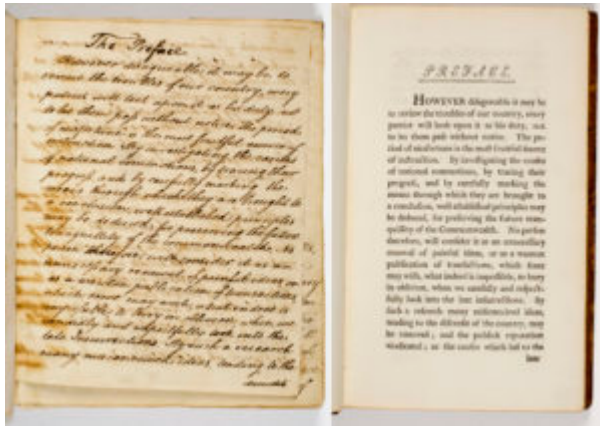
The most useful brief introduction to book production in early America is James N. Green, "The Rise of Book Publishing," in *A History of the Book in America, Volume 2: An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2010). For Isaiah Thomas's account of his own firm's development, as well as wonderful contemporary observations of the early American book trade, see Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America, with a Biography of Printers & and Account of Newspapers*, edited by Marcus A. McCorison from the Second Edition (Barre, Mass., 1970). For more on Isaiah Thomas's career, see Clifford Shipton, *Isaiah Thomas, Printer, Patriot and Philanthropist, 1749-1831* (Rochester, N.Y., 1948).



1. Title page of George Richards Minot's *The History of the Insurrections in Massachusetts, in the year 1786, and of the Rebellion Consequent Thereon*, copy 1 (Worcester, Mass., 1788). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.







5. Interior pages of George Richards Minot's *History of the Insurrections in Massachusetts*, copy 1 (Worcester, Mass., 1788), with corresponding pages in octavo manuscript. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.



6. Spine of octavo manuscript (volume 1) of George Richards Minot's "History of the Insurrections in Massachusetts" (Worcester, Mass., 1788), and spine of bound volume of Minot's *History of the Insurrection*. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.





7. Cover of Isaiah Thomas's paper mill account book from 1794-96, "Book of Workmen's Accounts at the Mill. April 1794," from the Isaiah Thomas Manuscript Collection (octavo volume 20). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Date	Description	Amount
1794	John Salter	
Apr 12	To amount from last 4 papers	12 94
12	To last paper your order	1 2
20	To 1/2	12 2
May 7	To 1/2	6
10	To your order Paid Gilman	12 1/2
20	To last from your order of 1/2	6
24	To Capt. Will. Capt. Will. order	10 6
27	To Capt. Will. Capt. Will. order	11
	To Capt. Will. Capt. Will. order	12
June 6	To 1/2	12
	To last from 1/2	6
14	To last from 1/2	6
18	To last from 1/2	1
20	To 1/2	16
	To order on Chandler	2
27	To last from 1/2	10 2
July 3	To 1/2	12
8	To 1/2	2
	To order on Chandler	1
10	To 1/2	2
18	To 1/2	2
27	To last from 1/2	12
Total		3 11

8. Page 21 of Isaiah Thomas's paper mill account book, showing payments to John Salter, foreman of the mill. Isaiah Thomas Manuscript Collection (octavo volume 20). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.











*Books in Sheets, in the Loft*

7 Blackstone's Commentaries	4.18.0
13 D. B. ...	1.19
344 S. ...	170.16.0
58 P. ...	8.14.0
23 D. ...	2.11.9
656 ...	147.12.0
1250 Josephus ...	556.1.9
	870.0.0
	1206.1.9

25 per

17. Page 61 of Isaiah Thomas's Account of Stock, "Books in Sheets, in the Loft," October 1794. Isaiah Thomas Manuscript Collection (box 8, volume 1). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

*List of Books: European Editions*

Trunk No. 12, Upper Warehouse, Room No. 2.

374 D. B. ...	12.4.0
30 ...	7.12.0
4 ...	2.11.7
35 ...	3.10.0
53 ...	9.12.6
3 ...	0.10.9
40 ...	7.10.0
3 ...	11.5.0
3 ...	7.10.0
3 ...	2.10.0
3 ...	1.10.0
1 ...	1.4.0
3 ...	0.11.0
1 ...	12.12.12.0
1 ...	1.13.0
2 ...	4.10.0
2 ...	0.11.0
	177.12.0

18. Page 1 of Isaiah Thomas's Account of Stock, "List of Books: European Editions. Trunk No. 12, Upper Warehouse, Room No. 2," October 1794. Isaiah Thomas Manuscript Collection (box 8, volume 1). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.



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