

**Collecting Early American Imprints:
From Brinley to Zinman
A talk delivered at
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by
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Readers of Edith Wharton will recall that at the beginning of her novel, *The House of Mirth*, there is a discussion of Americana book collecting. The heroine, Lily Bart, is in the apartment of her friend, Selden, and takes advantage of his knowledge of the book world to gather some information which might be useful in her pursuit of marriage to the dull but very rich young Americana collector, Mr. Percy Gryce. Lily says to Selden:

“And Americana – do you collect Americana?”

Selden stared and laughed.

“No, that’s rather out of my line. I’m not really a collector, you see; I simply like to have good editions of the books I’m fond of.”

She made a slight grimace. “And Americana are horribly dull, I suppose?”

“I should fancy so – except to the historian. But your real collector values a thing for its rarity. I don’t suppose the buyers of Americana sit up reading them all night – old Jefferson Gryce certainly didn’t.”

She was listening with keen attention. “And yet they fetch fabulous prices, don’t they? It seems so odd to want to pay a lot for an ugly badly-printed book that one is never going to read! And I suppose most of the owners of Americana are not historians either?”

“No; very few of the historians can afford to buy them. They have to use those in the public libraries or in private collections. It seems to be the mere rarity which attracts the private collector.”

This audience will be relieved to know that Mrs. Wharton, familiar as she was with Rhode Island society, almost certainly had John Nicholas Brown, the son of John Carter Brown, in mind when she wrote this sardonic sneer. She was, of course, neither the first nor the last writer earning a living by the pen to hold book collectors in disrepute as a group more interested in pride of possession than the contents of their books, and there is just enough truth in her barb to make it sting; but in the main I believe Mrs. Wharton was wrong, at least in the field of early American imprints. The resources that exist for scholars today in materials printed in North America prior to 1801 have survived in large part due to the activities of a small number of determined collectors, whose love for these “ugly, badly-printed” products of the first presses saved them from destruction and oblivion.

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The Library Company, as you all know, has just acquired the collection of pre-1801 American imprints formed by Michael Zinman: some 11,000 items. The transfer of this collection to the care of one of the leading institutions in the field is in many ways the last act in a saga of rescue and preservation reaching back to colonial times. The final great private collection in the field, and the only major one to be formed in many decades, has moved from the private to the public domain. This should be a cause for jubilation on Locust Street, but it is also a moment to reflect on the history of the collecting of American imprints, a history intimately entwined with what has survived for modern students and the creation of the institutional collections upon which they depend.

The first systematic collector of American imprints was the Reverend Thomas Prince of Boston’s South Church. Before him, both Increase and Cotton Mather had undoubtedly acquired many Cambridge and Boston imprints, if only because they had written them. The Mather library before its dissolution must

have contained a good deal more than the impressive surviving fragments, but the Mathers were more concerned with theological content than imprint. Prince, on the other hand, specifically pursued American imprints as part of his larger design for what he called a “New England Library.”

Thomas Prince seems to have been a born book collector. One book survives signed and dated by him in 1697, when he was ten, and he describes at length in his *Chronological History* his early reading on the history of Massachusetts, beginning with Morton’s *New-England’s Memorial* and including exclusively American imprints excepting Mather’s *Magnalia*. Prince’s desire to form a book collection became fixed upon his entering Harvard and reading an account of the Cottonian Library, “which excited in me a zeal of laying hold on every Book, Pamphlet, and Paper, both in Print and Manuscript, which are either written by persons who lived here, or that have any Tendency to enlighten our History.” By 1736, when his *Chronological History of New England* was published, he could report “having amassed above a Thousand books, pamphlets, and Papers of this Kind in print.”

When Prince died in 1758, he left the New England Library to the South Church, to be housed in a chamber in the steeple. The collection certainly suffered some loss during the British occupation of Boston in the winter of 1775-76, and books not originally from Prince’s library were added in subsequent moves. It was not until 1866 that the library was placed under the care of the Boston Public Library, and a definitive catalogue was prepared of what was then extant, listing 1528 books in the American section. The better part of these were American imprints predating Prince’s death, including five Bay Psalm Books. Because of the vicissitudes that the Prince collection underwent in the century between his death and their transfer to BPL, including the mayor of Boston making off with one of the Psalm Books, it is impossible to say exactly what may have been subtracted or added in the interim.

The next collector after Prince to amass an important collection of early imprints was Thomas Wallcut of Boston, whose professional life was spent as a clerk in the office of the secretary of state of Massachusetts. This seems to have left him ample time to visit book shops, and attend auctions, and from the Mather Byles sale of 1790, the first great auction dispersal of early imprints, onward, he was a persistent buyer, particularly of pamphlets. In 1834 he gave the great accumulation of his American material, some 10,000 items, to the American Antiquarian Society. Christopher Columbus Baldwin, the Society’s librarian who packed the collection in sweltering summer heat for the trip to Worcester, ultimately tallied 4476 pounds of books. Some remnant of the Wallcut library went to the Massachusetts Historical Society upon his death in 1840.

The Massachusetts Historical Society, begun in 1791, was the first such organization formed in the United States, and Wallcut was among its founders. The society’s real moving force, however, was Rev. Jeremy Belknap, an energetic historian whose *History of New Hampshire* was published in 1784 and 1792. Belknap understood the necessity of gathering historical materials while they were available, and the “preservation of books, pamphlets, manuscripts and records” was foremost in the aims of the society. Having made such a declaration, Belknap was not one to wait idly by for results. As he wrote to Ebenezer Hazard, in what should be a motto for every great library: “There is nothing like have a good repository, and keeping a good lookout, not waiting at home for things to fall into the lap, but prowling around like a wolf for the prey.” A survey of the early imprints at the Society reveals how many of the important pieces were received during the early years of this lupine activity.

The fourth and most important collector of early American imprints to begin in the 18th century was Isaiah Thomas, one of the most successful printers and publishers of the Revolutionary and Federal periods. By 1791 he was buying imprints and newspaper runs, and after 1802 devoted himself mainly to collecting and research, writing the seminal work, *The History of Printing in America* between 1808 and 1810, and founding the American Antiquarian Society in 1812. Thomas gave his historical library to the Society in 1813, and immediately began to supplement it, buying the remainder of the Mather library from Hannah Mather Crocker in the following year for \$800. When the first Antiquarian Hall opened in 1820, the library amounted to seven thousand volumes, mainly American imprints.

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The pioneering collectors were keenly aware that the materials they sought were disappearing almost in front of their eyes. Given the concentration of printed material in cities during colonial times, the toll taken by the inevitable urban fires, starting with the Boston fire of 1711, which destroyed most of the booksellers' shops in the city, must have been severe. The ravages of the Revolution, which saw the occupation and at least partial plundering of Boston, Newport, Philadelphia, and Charleston, and the burning of much of New York, were also considerable. Old paper was actively recycled, and little value was attached to most of the early imprints. Low commercial value contributed to the willingness of individuals to give items to the early institutions, but it also meant that there were few knowledgeable people to rescue material from destruction. Wholesale pulping continued through the Civil War. By the 1870s, especially as the Centennial generated a new sense of national history and a competitive marketplace developed, the rate of loss probably slowed, but more ephemeral and then less valuable material remained, and to some extent still remains, vulnerable.

This history of destruction is important to bear in mind when considering what now survives and the role of collectors in pursuing it. Survival in the 18th and early 19th centuries often depended upon material reaching a safe depository, whether that was the files of the Public Record Office in London, the comparative oblivion of the steeple of Old South Church, or the collections of the newly formed societies. The more ephemeral an item, the more likely its loss outside an institution. The large number of 17th-century broadsides, most of them now unique, that entered the holdings of the Massachusetts Historical Society before 1820, illustrate a segment of the printed record that would have disappeared otherwise. Even the omnivorous assemblers like Prince, Wallcut, Belknap, and Thomas were more interested in books than in single-sheet items, and they were too close to the period to value ephemera like sale posters, any more than we would treasure the photocopied notices that festoon lampposts now. An exception to this latter category is Michael Zinman, who is actively collecting such material right now, but as I'll explain shortly, he's a special case.

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The year 1845 was a pivotal one. In that year, the three individuals who are most closely identified with Americana book collecting in the 19th century – John Carter Brown, James Lenox, and George Brinley – began to seriously develop their collections. Brown and Lenox were primarily collectors of travels, voyages, and early European Americana. Both had some interest in American imprints, but it was overshadowed by other areas of interest and, indeed, their general outlook. They were gentlemen collectors in the English tradition, mixing their Americana with such purely bibliophilic pursuits as editions of the Bible and incunabula. They wished their books to be beautiful physical objects by those standards, as well as interesting rarities; and here, of course, few early American imprints filled the bill unaltered.

George Brinley of Hartford was mainly interested in American imprints. He began in 1845 by purchasing the Native American collection of the Boston bookseller and antiquary, Samuel G. Drake, and quickly expanded his interests to include any early American imprints of local history. Although a man of some means, he was not wealthy on the scale of Brown or Lenox, and in the 1850s he seems to have collected mainly in New England, "going directly to the source in the attic [and] the cellar," as Randolph Adams put it. His children record tales of his posing as a dealer in pots and pans to get into houses, and bribing old ladies with new dresses in exchange for access to private libraries. During the Civil War, when prices for scrap paper reached unprecedented heights, Brinley made arrangements with Hartford paper dealers to allow him to review mounds of scrap paper about to be pulped. He was literally a collector snatching material from the jaws of destruction. Family legend has it that Brinley hauled an Eliot Indian Bible from one of these piles.

The primary agent for Brown and Lenox was the bookseller, Henry Stevens, an American who moved to London permanently in 1845 and quickly became the major dealer in Americana. As time went by, Brinley dealt with Stevens more frequently, and by the Civil War had become his best customer. His status was confirmed by the purchase of a Bay Psalm Book in 1864. He wrote Stevens a memorable letter in

ordering it:

“When I last had the pleasure of seeing you here you said you would sell me your Bay Psalm Book for One thousand dollars (our currency, i.e., Greenbacks). If you are of the same mind now I will pay the money to your order on rec[eip]t of the dirty little book – upon condition that the transaction is strictly private. I do not want my next friend to know that I possess it because the next step in knowledge among Yankees is ‘what did you pay for it?’”

The Bay Psalm Book was a prelude to the purchase in 1868 of a collection of 275 volumes by Increase and Cotton Mather, a group Stevens had amassed over several decades and offered unsuccessfully to both Brown and Lenox. Brinley continued buying American imprints at a brisk pace until his death in 1875. In his last letter to Stevens he wrote, “I am glad to see high prices ruling. Crazy people like to see others are crazier than they are.”

I mentioned earlier the tastes of Brown and Lenox for physically beautiful books, and in this they were joined by most of the collectors of the 19th century, and certainly by booksellers such as Henry Stevens. Since many pieces of Americana and virtually every early imprint were relatively poor examples of typography, generally in plain drab calf bindings, the booksellers and collectors altered their appearance according to their own tastes. Volumes were washed, pressed, and rebound in full morocco. Stevens stripped the original bindings off the two Bay Psalm Books that he handled and replaced them with sumptuous productions by noted English binders such as Riviere and Bedford. Nor did the alteration stop there. The casualness with which books were “sophisticated” is remarkable when considered today. In Brinley’s sale catalogue, one lot contained two imperfect copies of Increase Mather’s *Wo to Drunkards*, with a note to the effect that the fragments and a little facsimile work would make the pieces into one nice copy. John Russell Bartlett, Brown’s librarian, did just that, and the finished product is now in the John Carter Brown Library.

Other repairs called into practice all the ability of the skilled English restorers. Francis Bedford wrote to Brinley at one point:

“I cannot but confess that the more I practice upon these early American printed books, the more I am compelled to consider their dilapidated state and condition. Some are nearly past my art of restoration and repair...they are so perished, dilapidated and grubby they will not yield to cleaning.”

Brinley was saved the trouble of such correspondence in the case of the Stevens Mather collection – every volume had been perfected, washed, and encased in morocco. The moral of this, for bibliographers, is clear: deciphering the physical package left by the preservers of the book may be the most difficult part of describing it accurately. The sophistication of these books was standard practice for almost a century and still goes on – so caveat collector!

The physical alteration of books is not only an issue of collation. One argument for the necessity of using original sources is the notion that the ethos of the original artifact lends an immediacy to our understanding of the text. We handle and observe first-hand the aesthetic of a place and time, and if it is unaltered, it tells us something about that place and time, providing context to text. The 19th- and early 20th-century collectors transformed their books into icons and dressed the modest products of the American press in the trappings of a European bibliophilism. Even a reader who does not share their ideas cannot help but view such an altered artifact differently than a copy in original binding.

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George Brinley remains the greatest collector of early American imprints. His collection was by far the largest extant holding at the time of his death in 1875, and today probably only the American Antiquarian Society and the combined Library Company-Pennsylvania Historical-Zinman holdings exceed it in size and scope. Brinley was able to achieve what he did through dogged persistence over a long collecting

career, ample funds, and omnivorous taste both in the scope of what he wanted, and in the number of copies he was willing to own. Any man who accumulated nine Eliot Indian Bibles was not concerned about duplication. We can measure the very real impact of Brinley's collecting on the survival of material by looking at how much of what we can now locate from the first one hundred years of printing in North America – through 1740 – survives only because it was in the Brinley collection. One must conclude that a significant number of books would simply have not survived without his intervention to rescue them from pulp mills, rag dealers, and outhouses.

It is, perhaps, a little surprising that, having worked so hard to bring his collection together, Brinley decided to disperse it after his death. He did so, according to a draft of his will, because of his fear that the whole might be destroyed by some catastrophe such as a fire, if in a single location, and his conviction that those who most desired the books would buy them at auction. The Brinley auction catalogue, prepared by his closest friend, the bibliographer, J. Hammond Trumbull, immediately became an important reference tool, listing some 40,000 items in 9500 lots. Not all of these were early imprints, of course. Much was local history or post-1801 American material.

If Brinley was not prepared to directly place his collection in an institution, he was willing to subsidize it. In his will he left \$24,500 in credit at the sale to five institutions: \$10,000 to Yale, \$5000 each to the American Antiquarian Society and the Watkinson Library, \$2500 to the New-York Historical Society, and \$2000 to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Some, such as Justin Winsor of Harvard, which did not receive any money, quickly questioned whether "the interests of libraries are advanced by such artificial stimulation of prices." Harvard's may not have been, but the gift institutions responded by dominating the bidding, and by raising considerable sums beyond those provided by Brinley. In the first and second sessions, in 1879 and 1880, where most of the cash value of the whole was realized and the most important early imprints were sold, direct institutional buying accounted for two-thirds of the entire sale. The Brinley sale marked the beginning in the United States of an institutional market for rare books which would compete with private buyers with increasing strength for the next century. The great shift of book assets from private to public hands took a giant step forward, especially in early American imprints.

It is interesting to see how the newly aggressive institutions spent their money. Yale, with the biggest budget, bought the most books. Invariably, its librarians bought the lesser or imperfect copies to save a few cents, or a later edition to save a nickel. The Watkinson Library had the advantage of its librarian, Trumbull, having an intimate knowledge of the collection, and its selections were the most bibliophilic, centering on a small group of choice items. The Antiquarian Society made good use of its funds, building on what was already the largest institutional collection of imprints.

The New-York Historical Society bought well also, but what they did later is another matter. In 1979, I put on an exhibition at The Grolier Club to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the Brinley sale. My plan

was to reassemble one hundred items from the sale illustrating both the collection and the story of the sale, while also showing where the books had ended up. I was greatly aided in doing this by collating several copies of the auction catalogue annotated by participants who noted the buyers. One of the items at New-York Historical that I most wanted to show was Brinley Sale 4188, Oliver Ellsworth's copy of the 1781 collected state constitutions, the first such collection authorized by Congress. Since Ellsworth was a member of the Committee of Detail at the Federal Constitutional Convention in 1787, and extensively annotated his copy of the state constitutions in the process, I thought this was an ideal example of the kind of thing in which Brinley delighted. However, I couldn't find the book in the card catalogue. I finally went to the librarian, a courtly transplanted southerner named Jim Gregory, and asked if he was familiar with the copy. "Oh, yes," he said, and took me back into the stacks, to a small row of books sitting on a windowsill just above a steam radiator. Here sat the Ellsworth constitutions, slowly freezing and cooking, depending on the season. "This is a group of Brinley books we haven't got around to cataloguing yet," Jim told me. Hopefully, the new regime at the New-York Historical is resolving some of these cataloguing issues.

The Historical Society of Pennsylvania rose to the Brinley challenge more effectively than any other institution. The trustees undertook to raise substantial funds to match the bequest, and the Society made an impressive showing in the sections of mid-Atlantic and Philadelphia imprints. Some of its purchases, such as the group of William Bradford imprints from 1692-93 relating to the disputes between George Keith and the Quakers, are items which have literally never again been available on the public market. The Historical Society probably benefitted from the counsel of the first bibliographer of early Philadelphia imprints, Charles Hildeburn, whose *Issues of the Pennsylvania Press 1685-1784* set a new standard for quality in Americana bibliography when it was issued in 1885. I cannot help but repeat Samuel Pennypacker's characterization of Hildeburn, so that you may compare it to modern Americanists of your acquaintance:

"He came out of a drug store and was substantially without education. He was ever on the wire edge of nervous overthrow. He did not chew tobacco, but he ate it. He could not bear stimulants and used them to excess. Violent and domineering, he quarreled with everybody. He worked until four o'clock in the morning and slept with difficulty. But he had unbounded energy and appreciation of imprints, typography and the importance of the book...which amounted almost to genius."

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To a large degree, the leading institutional collections of American imprints were defined by 1900. The accumulated holdings of the older historical societies and public libraries, the libraries of Harvard and Yale, and the institutionalization of the Brown and Lenox collections into the John Carter Brown and the New York Public, respectively, accounted for all of the largest holdings, excepting only the Library of Congress. All of these continued to build on their collections of imprints. The private market for early imprints in the 20th century was selective. Two private collections dispersed in the 1930s, those of Ogden Goelet and Levi Lieter, are good illustrations. Both men began collecting at the Brinley sale and continued into the early 20th century. Both collections then languished until the Depression before being dispersed. Extraordinary imprints are to be found in the Goelet and Lieter catalogues, but neither collected imprints as such. Rather, they had selected high spots and great rarities. Other private collectors tended to specialize, collecting a state or city, a printer such as Franklin, or a genre such as the American Revolution. For most of the 20th century, the broad-based collections of pre-1801 imprints have been developed by institutions along institutional lines.

The institutional stewardship of early imprints has been, frankly, a mixed bag. For the most part, they have protected their collections, and the major bibliographies in the field have been fostered under institutional stewardship. Their chief failings, largely remedied now, have been poor physical care of the books and unwise deaccession. If the 19th-century collectors preferred their books in full morocco, it sometimes seems 20th-century librarians liked theirs in ugly buckram. The effect was the same: to destroy valuable bibliographical evidence in the name of neat shelves. Disposal of supposed duplicates was often carried out without sufficient checking. Some, such as The New York Public Library, even disposed of originals after microfilming – a hazard George Brinley never dreamed of. In the last twenty-five years, library deaccession – mostly from smaller libraries that never had significant holdings – has accounted for an important portion of new material flowing into the marketplace.

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To understand the circumstances in which the Zinman Collection was formed, we must look at the history of rare books in this country over the last century. The greatest single theme has been the gradual, and then after World War II, rapid absorption of rare and scarce material from private hands into institutions. In the 1920s and '30s this was scarcely noticed. There was such a profusion of available material that a leading firm such as Goodspeed's could publish a catalogue such as their number 168 in 1928, which listed over a thousand pre-1801 imprints. None of the libraries buying were well funded, and they tended to stick to the less expensive material unless given a collection. Collectors interested in early American imprints tended to focus on the rarities, high spots, or genres that interested them. For example, the Goelet collection, when sold in 1935, had less than a hundred pre-1801 imprints, but these included such gems as the Brinley copy (one of two known) of the first Philadelphia imprint, the almanac William Bradford printed on his arrival in 1685. (It was bought by Dr. Rosenbach for \$1050 and is now at the Rosenbach Foundation, but happily the

other copy was already in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and is now on deposit at the Library Company.) Another famed Americana collection of the period, that of Herschel V. Jones, dispersed by Rosenbach from 1940 on, contained only 138 pre-1801 American imprints, albeit a selection of staggering quality, including the Williamsburg printing of Washington's Journal of 1754.

The Depression and World War II were slow times for the book world, but the 1950s and '60s brought explosive growth to a broad array of institutional collections. Universities especially poured resources into building their libraries by wholesale means, taking advantage of the glut of scarce and rare books in the marketplace. By the early 1970s many areas of the rare book market had swung from ample supply to scarcity. The degree to which this occurred in any given genre depended, of course, on how much material there was to start with and where it was – in private collections, old lending libraries about to go bankrupt, or big universities – and on who was buying. In small market pools such as rare books and many other areas of antiques or collectibles, the difference between one and three serious collectors can have a radical impact on prices and availability. Rare book dealers, who necessarily have sensitive antennae to this sort of thing, often take an ecological view similar to concern over declining frog populations. Steve Weissman once told me he measured the market in Victorian fiction by how many triple-decker novels he saw in dealer's shops, a commodity that could still be bought practically by the yard in the '60s, but which are increasingly scarce today. Conversely, fields can go through relative droughts of interest, and these provide opportunity for the insightful collector.

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About twenty-four years ago I was crawling around the floor of my booth at the disastrous first Chicago book fair, an event people stayed away from in droves, looking for the key to my exhibition case. (This demonstrates my lack of experience in the book business at the time, because I hadn't yet figured out that all the keys to all the cases are the same, so it is futile to lock them.) I glanced up to see a determined looking man with a red beard demanding in forceful tones to know if I had anything in stock relating to John James Audubon. Thus was my beautiful friendship with Michael Zinman born.

When I first met Michael, his collecting was just mutating from American natural history to Americana. At first his focus was the very early period of voyages, but as he progressed with this collection, his interests turned more and more from the "exterior" or European Americana to the "interior" or internal Americana. On looking over my old invoices to Michael (all of which I am happy to discover have been paid), I find an important milestone in his career as an imprints collector on Jan. 30, 1980, when he bought a set of the Bible of the field, Charles Evans' American Bibliography, describing pre-1801 American imprints; and a set of Thomas J. Holmes' bibliographies of Increase, Cotton, and "lesser Mathers." Thus armed, Michael's invoice trail swerved increasingly to imprints. Less than two years later, he was willing to pay me what then seemed an unspeakable sum for the first book published in New York, George Keith's ringing denunciation of the Philadelphia Quaker establishment, Truth Advanced in the Correction of Many Gross and Hurtful Errors, printed by William Bradford in 1694. By that time he seems to have been hooked.

At that point in time, there seemed to be quite a lot of early American imprints in the marketplace. The ecosystem that Michael and I used as our gauge was the book fair world. At every fair we would count the number of 17th-century imprints available. There were always some – on occasion as many as a dozen. The number of later Evans items was usually beyond estimation even at small fairs. In modern contrast, the only 17th-century American imprint at the last New York book fair was one in my booth, with a handful of material prior to the Revolution scattered around the fair and perhaps a double handful before 1801. An entire class of stuff has largely disappeared from the market.

There is a phenomenon which I have seen more than a few times in the rare book market. A field will be out of favor, without anyone in particular pursuing it. A strong and determined collector will enter the market, which appears full of material, and mop up all of the unsold items floating around. Suddenly the balance will change, and what looked common is revealed to be, in fact, quite scarce. The collector digs

deeper and quarries the nooks and crannies of the trade where books have sat for years. Before very long the perspective of the market is very different.

And Michael did indeed root out those old deposits. One of his favorites was the large garage behind the house of the late veteran dealer, Cedric Robinson, in Windsor, Connecticut, an Aladdin's cave where Cedric, who really had forgotten more than most people will ever know about New England books, had deposited geological layers of a half century of scouting. Other troves have been provided intermittently by various small town libraries in New England deciding to clear their cellars. The so-called "hospitals" of some of the old English firms, where books were sometimes relegated in the old days simply for having a torn page, were another source. Michael's willingness to look at every level of the book market did much to build his collection.

Being a dealer I, of course, remember fondly some of the bargains of that era – although one must remember that they always seemed like a lot of money at the time. One of the most magnificent books in Michael's collection is the immaculate copy of the 1741 South Carolina laws, printed by the French-trained Lewis Timothy. It is one of the most impressive colonial imprints in the quality of its design and printing, and this copy is mint in the original deerskin binding. When it came up for sale at Christie's in 1983, the high estimate of \$3500 seemed like a lot of money for it, but I was bidding for Michael and was determined that we get it. He was sitting next to me, and as we soared past his bid, he started plucking at my sleeve telling me to quit. I told him to shut up and kept on bidding. Sometimes even great collectors don't know what they really want.

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As Michael moved into high gear in his collecting of American imprints, he may not have had the same sources of supply that Brinley had, but he had a number of things in his favor which Brinley lacked. The first of these was a bibliographical structure: the works of Evans, Bristol, Shipton and Mooney, the North American Imprints Project, the many excellent state and city imprint bibliographies now extant, all of which make it far easier to identify and assess material. He also had some excellent brains to pick, and he has never hesitated to pick up the phone and ask questions, as Jim Green will testify. Another advantage was his friends in the antiquarian book trade, a network which ranged through every tier of the business. Whether viewed as stubbornly independent or mulish, the trade has always preferred to sell to passionate collectors. Michael's greatest advantage, though, was his ability to take advantage of the knowledge available to him about the imprints from bibliographies, librarians, and booksellers, and couple it with his own developing understanding gained directly from looking at and handling the material.

From a collector's point of view, this kind of knowledge and ability to make connections is essential in the field, so to speak, when buying material. The modern system of book fairs at every level of the trade provides a hunting ground which requires all of the persistence Brinley brought to piles in the paper mills. Here again, Michael has demonstrated time and again his ability to dig through mounds of dross and come up with gold.

To me, true collecting is a very different thing from simply assembling. Most of what we call collecting is really the latter, and there is nothing wrong with it as a hobby and a pastime. Real collecting comes from experiencing each object as it is acquired, looking at both its content and its format, and relating details of its makeup – its printing, paper, binding, and other features to what has been seen before and what is already in the collection. It is the making of connections, and the understanding of the relationships between objects. The collection constitutes a laboratory where the real collector can continually learn from experiencing the books and then apply that knowledge to seeing more details in the new books they look at. In such a collection, every object acquires more meaning from those next to it.

This is what Michael has done. His most important decision, made early in his career as a collector of early imprints, was to be all-inclusive rather than exclusive. He did not aim to have a tidy shelf of rarities in neat bindings. Everything was grist for the mill: books, pamphlets, chapbooks, broadsides, and printed

forms. His interests in this regard go far beyond the scope of any of the early collectors except Thomas. His curiosity extended to all of the physical forms of the book: bindings, original wrappers, parts issues, examples of American paper, illustrations, type ornaments, marks of ownership, textual annotations, and indeed any evidence that could be found in the printed artifact. Nor did he shy away from imperfect copies, if that was all that could be found. In an number of cases in the Zinman Collection, they have proved to be unique items which have survived in no other form. In fact, if we look at the collections of a size similar to Michael's – the major libraries – we find a the same degree of imperfection.

The fact is that many of these early imprints have always been rare. They existed in no more copies in Brinley's time than they do now. We can only speculate on what percentage of printing done in America before 1801 has survived, but the number of things which exist in only one or two copies – quite a lot – gives us some idea of the rate of loss. Some of the pieces in the Zinman Collection had as tenuous an existence until recently as anything Brinley pulled from a pile in a paper mill. At the same time, the number of previously unknown items identified in the collection gives hope that there is still much to be discovered.

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Michael once called his omnivorous style the "critical mess" theory of collection: build a pile and then see what can be learned from it. It is more complicated than that, because of the informed eye which has guided the building of the pile, but it is true in the sense that he has left preconceptions at the door. It is virtually impossible for a scholar using a library to learn this way. They must have a theory of which books to write call slips for, and can only get a few at a time. But the collector has the extraordinary luxury and opportunity, if they choose to use it, of assembling hundreds, or thousands – or in this case, ten thousand – things in one place and then looking for the relationships between them. Intelligently done, discovery compounds on discovery for the curious collector.

Michael has particularly sought books in original condition. In early American imprints, this is sometimes mint, but often a little battered. What is important is that we have here an unmatched collection for the history of the book in America: evidence of ownership, readership, contemporary binding and publication practices – the whole material culture of the book. I have alluded several times to the kinds of rebindings and restorations made by earlier generations of collectors and librarians, all of which have destroyed evidence we wish we had today. The alteration of these artifacts changes their message, adding a new layer through which an interpreter must look to understand the inextricable link between format and meaning. In this sense, the Zinman Collection is purer, if less shiny, than all the rebound books Brinley bought from Henry Stevens.

What Michael has done is nothing less than amazing. At this point, nothing remotely approaching it could be done again by a private collector, no matter how well funded. The material is no longer out there, and a collection such as this is built as much by passion and an informed eye, as by money. Now it has found a happy home at the Library Company, where it joins the wonderful resources gathered since 1731. There is a saying in Charleston, South Carolina, that Charleston is located where the Ashley and Cooper rivers come together to form the Atlantic Ocean. Locust Street is where the Library Company and Zinman come together to create an equally inspiring vista of the printed heritage of early Americana.