

# Lancaster Book Plates.

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Many years ago a friendly book-binder gave me several engraved labels which he had taken from the cast-off covers of ancient books. They were too pretty, he said, to be thrown away, but he did not know what to do with them. Most of these labels, besides the name of some former owner, bore a shield or emblem, or possibly a verse or motto. As I have always been fond of the antique, I preserved them, and it was not long until I discovered that there were others besides myself who regarded them with considerable interest. I was informed that such labels are known as book-plates, or ex-libris, and that the British Museum contained a collection of upwards of twenty thousand specimens. A series of book-plates, as I soon discovered, not only illustrates the history of art, but casts brilliant side-lights on biography and history.

Book-plates, or ex-libris, are engraved or printed labels, which are ordinarily attached to the inside of the cover of a book to denote ownership. The term ex-libris is derived from a Latin phrase, which appears on most of them—literally signifying “from the books”—and is intended to indicate that the volume to which the plate is attached belongs to the library of the person whose name immediately follows.

There can be no doubt that the book-plate is of humble origin. Schoolboys of all ages have decorated their text-books with rude drawings, not to speak of verses and mottoes, generally referring to the terrible consequences of the crime of

stealing. Most common is a representation of a criminal swinging from a gallows, with the familiar lines:

"Steal not this book, my honest friend,  
For fear the gallows will be your end."

More modern is a drawing of a foot and bent leg, with the inscription:

"If this book gets off the track,  
Give it a kick and send it back."

Soon after the invention of the art of printing it must have occurred to some one that it would be better to attach a label to a book than to deface it by careless scribbling. Some of the earliest engravers and printers prepared such labels for their friends, and soon found that here there was an abundant opportunity for the exercise of taste and fancy. In most instances, perhaps, the earliest ex-libris bear a representation of a family coat-of-arms, but there are also emblematic pictures, and occasionally we find on them the portrait of the man whose name they bear. In later years book-plates became numerous, and in a properly arranged collection the whole history of modern art is abundantly illustrated.

In the early history of Lancaster, book-plates were not numerous. The pioneers were too busy with the ordinary cares of subsistence to devote much time to the collection of books; and I know no Lancaster book-plates that antedate the period of the Revolution. There are several book-plates of Colonial Governors—among others that of Sir William Keith—but these can hardly be regarded as pertaining specially to Lancaster. We believe there are several plates belonging to the Hamilton family, but, though this family owned much property in Lancaster county, they never resided within its limits.

Among the early book-plates which certainly belong to Lancaster, I think

I should give the preference to that of Judge William Augustus Atlee. It bears the family arms and is engraved in the Chippendale style, by which we mean that it is ornamented with vines and flowers, like Chippendale furniture. There is no date, but the plate was probably engraved in 1777, when Mr. Atlee became a Judge of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania.

Stephen Chambers was a very distinguished lawyer of Lancaster. He used a printed book-label, surrounded by a border of typographical ornaments, and bearing the simple inscription: "Stephen Chambers' Property." Mr. Chambers was killed in 1789, in a duel, by Dr. Rieger.

Dr. George Thomas was a physician who flourished in Lancaster during the latter part of the eighteenth century. We have seen but a single specimen of his book-plate, which is dated 1798. In his book on American Book-plates, Chas. Dexter Allen describes this plate in the following playful manner:

"The frame is somewhat of the old Jacobean style, having a large pediment, upon which rests a circular frame, enclosing a little sketch of a bee-hive, with the swarm about it, a mortar as large as the bee-hive standing beside it, with the pestle in it, and an awkward branch of a rose-bush, with two huge blossoms upon it, bending over the mortar. Oak branches ascend on either side of the frame, and what looks as much like a plum pudding as anything else blazes away in place of a crest."

The plate hardly deserves such sharp criticism, and, if the work of an amateur, is deserving of praise.

Other interesting, though simple, labels, belonging to an early period, are those of Judge John Joseph Henry, Redmond Conyngham, Casper Shaffner, Henry Shaffner and Dr. F. S. Burrowes, of Strasburg.

Whether the Juliana Library ever had a book-plate has been a disputed question. The fact seems to be that a plate was once ordered by the Trustees, but, as not a single copy can be found, it is probable that the resolution was never carried out.

The early German book-plates of Lancaster county are rarely armorial or ornamental, but are not, on that account, uninteresting. There are in my possession two printed labels which are certainly of extreme rarity. Though they bear no proper name, it is evident that they were once the property of John Peter Miller, Prior of the Convent of Seventh Day Baptists at Ephrata.

The first of these is a mere fragment, though enough remains to determine the inscription. It bears Miller's monastic name, as follows:

BRUDER JAEBEZ,  
EPHRATA, 178-.

The name is in German characters and the place in Roman.

The second of the Miller plates is also entirely destitute of ornament, and is in the unmistakable style of the Ephrata press. The name is printed in large Roman and the stanzas in German characters. It reads as follows:

PETRUS-HEREMIT.

Voll Kreuz und Truebsal ist der Weg  
Darauf ich hier muss gehen,  
Und leiden viel geheime Schlaeg,  
Das macht oft bittre Wehen;  
Doch wann zu end der lange Kampf  
und Streit,  
So geh ich ein zur stillen Ewigkeit.  
1791.

The above stanza I translate:

The path I journey here below  
Is full of grief and sorrow;  
I suffer many a secret blow,  
And grievous pains I borrow;  
But when the war and conflict's o'er,  
I'll rest in peace for evermore.

John Peter Miller was born in the Palatinate in 1710, and died at Ephrata in 1796. He came to this country as a missionary to the Reformed churches, but was persuaded by Conrad Beissel to become a member of the Brotherhood at Ephrata. After the death of Beissel, Miller became the head of the society. It was he who on this occasion called himself Peter the Hermit.

Many of the early Lutheran and Reformed ministers had book-plates which bore Latin mottoes. Most of these were, however, printed before their owners came to this country, and therefore hardly come within the limits of our theme. There is an anonymous plate which appears from internal evidence to have belonged to some member of the Muhlenberg family. It is extremely rare, and it is now believed that it belonged to the Hon. Frederick A. Muhlenberg, the first Speaker of the National House of Representatives, and, therefore, belongs to Philadelphia rather than to Lancaster. During the first half of the nineteenth century the number of Lancaster book-plates is very small. Very interesting in their way are the labels of the literary societies and circulating libraries which have flourished in Lancaster. To mention only a few of those which happen to be at hand, we have the Franklin Library, connected with old Franklin College; the Franklin Circulating Library, of which W. V. Davis was proprietor; the Lancaster Society of Literature and Science; the Conservatory of Arts and Sciences; the Columbia, Pennsylvania, Library Company; Miss Jordan's Circulating Library; the Juvenile Society's Library; the Athenaeum; and the plates of the Mechanics' Library Association, and other still existing institutions. Then,

we have also the numerous plates of Franklin and Marshall College and of the State Normal School at Millersville, as well as those of the literary societies connected with several other educational institutions. An accurate history of the public libraries and of the literary societies of Lancaster is certainly a desideratum.

At the middle of the nineteenth century ornamental book-plates once more began to appear. Mr. John C. Keffer had a plate bearing a representation of Commerce seated on a rock, with agricultural implements around her. There were also interesting labels, bearing the names of Anthony E. Roberts, George M. Steinman, E. B. Gardette, Jacob Stauffer, E. M. Allen and other prominent citizens.

About the year 1880 there was a great revival in the use of book-plates in Lancaster. This was due in great measure to the artistic taste and skill of Dr. D. McN. Stauffer, now residing in Yonkers, N. Y. Mr. Stauffer possessed extraordinary skill in designing appropriate book-plates, and was certainly one of the first in this country to develop a style which may be called emblematic or allegorical. It is to Mr. Stauffer that many friends in Lancaster owe their designs for beautiful ex-libris. We do not know whether we possess a complete set of all the Lancaster book-plates designed by Dr. Stauffer, but the following are in our collection: Samuel Auxer, B. F. Brene-man, Donegal Chapter, D. A. R., J. H. Dubbs (two plates), Simon P. Eby, Franklin and Marshall College, J. Hiestand Hartman, E. Hensel, W. P. King, Lancaster County Historical Society, Reformed Church Historical Society, S. M. Sener (two plates), D. McN. Stauffer (five plates), George Steinman, S. H. Zahm (two plates).

Besides those designed by Dr. Stauf-

fer, a number of book-plates designed by other artists are used in Lancaster. Of course, we have not seen them all, and it is best, perhaps, not to attempt their enumeration. We may, however, venture to say that there is none more beautiful and appropriate than that of Mr. James D. Law, a member of this society.

One of the chief purposes of the book-plate, as we have seen, is to preserve books from forgetful borrowers. On an old plate, which we feel sure belongs to Lancaster, though the name is erased, appear the following verses, which are not original, but are none the less significant:

“If thou art borrowed by a friend,  
Right welcome shall he be,  
To read, to study, not to lend,  
But to return to me.

“Not that imparted knowledge doth  
Diminish learning’s store;  
But books, I find, if often lent,  
Return to me no more.

N. B. Read slowly, pause frequently, think seriously, keep cleanly, return duly, with the corners of the leaves not turned down.”

A gentleman who is at present prominently engaged in educational work in this city has a book-plate bearing the following passage of Scripture:

“The wicked man borroweth and payeth not again.”—Psalms 37:21.

That is a text on which a sermon might be preached, but on this occasion our introduction has been so long that we cannot venture to proceed with the body of the discourse.

Author: Dubbs, J. H. (Joseph Henry), 1838-1910.

Title: Lancaster book plates / by Joseph H. Dubbs, D.D.

Primary Material: Book

Subject(s): Bookplates, American--Pennsylvania--Lancaster.  
Lancaster County (Pa.)--Biography.

Publisher: Lancaster, Pa. : Lancaster County Historical Society,  
1903/1904

Description: [29]-35 p. ; 23 cm.

Series: Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society ; v. 8,  
no. 2

Call Number: 974.9 L245 v.8

Location: LCHSJL -- Journal Article (reading room)

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