

Carved in Stone: American Stone Books

by Ian Berke

All books were photographed on a 1" grid for scale.

About eight years ago at a New England antiques show, I saw a small, carved white marble book with “Remembr [sic] the Maine” inscribed on its front cover. The same dealer also had a similar book that featured a profile of William McKinley and seemed to be a memorial to his assassination in 1901. I had never noticed stone books before, much less those with historical connections, and was intrigued, in part because of my background in geology. I had to buy them both, and thus began a search for stone books that has never stopped. In this article, I will discuss American stone books and my attempt to understand this unique form of folk art.

Carved stone books are a fascinating and unusual form of American folk art, which, loosely defined, is traditional artistic expression lavished on common utilitarian objects. Unlike many of the objects now considered folk art, stone books were not intended for any significant practical purpose other than as objects of remembrance. The custom of making objects of remembrance and tokens of love runs deep in the repertoire of traditional craftsmen. Some 19th-century American craftsmen produced so-called whimsies, which are fanciful works done after normal working hours, using their surplus or scrap material. Glassblowers made canes, rolling pins, decorative balls, and other decorative items. Sewer tile workers are recognized today for their small clay animals. Whalers made scrimshaw and knotted figures. These items were labors of love, usually intended as gifts for friends and family.

Stonecutters, many of whom worked in gravestone shops, created whimsies in the form of small carved stone books. Some of these stone books were blank, while others were beautifully embellished and imbued with great feeling, as they were made as gifts and memorials. One of our most powerful impulses is our desire to love, to be loved, and to be remembered. Perhaps a stone book was a way for some stonecutters and others to express their feelings, not intended or used as hand warmers but as heart warmers. It also seems clear that some stonecutters made more than one or two books. I have seen a number of stone books clearly made by the same hand. For instance, two McKinley memorial books in my collection have obviously been made by the same person. Another carver used very distinctive birds within a rope-like border on multiple books.

Skillfully done books would likely have been highly desired as gifts, so it is probable that the cutters sold some of their books to others who gave them as special gifts to friends.

Some notable stone book gifts were mentioned in the press. For example, in 1892, the society gossip column of the *Daily Democrat* of Hamilton, Ohio, states that Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Kuhlman received an “elegant stone book” as one of their wedding gifts.¹ Another story that

describes stone books as gifts was printed in a 1929 issue of an Iowa newspaper: “My father had an employee—a common quarry man—who was an artist to his fingertips. At odd times he would carve beautifully in stone. When my father went west this man made, as a parting gift, a stone Bible of fairy frostlike carving, deeply undercarved, beautiful and perfect. It was in our family a lifetime.”²

Stone books are typically small, averaging about 3" to 5" high. They were nearly always carved in a closed position, often in white marble, with the covers and pages carefully delineated. Stone books have a variety of inscriptions and images. They can be carved with monograms, full names, religious titles (“Holy Bible”), good wishes (“Good Luck,” “Friendship,” etc.), and sometimes the dates of their creation or events. Stone books are also carved with pictorial motifs



Initials in neo-Gothic style.



Heart with initials and “stitched” decoration.

of a religious or secular nature. Crosses, horseshoes, flowers, animals, hearts, and geometric designs are the most common designs seen on stone books. Evidence that professional stonecutters carved books is the high quality of many of the inscriptions and images. Doubtless, not all stone books were carved by stonecutters, as evidenced by a substantial number with much less skilled carving, sometimes awkward. Yet inscriptions and carving are not common; most books are blank. About a third of the personal books (meaning those that are carved for individual gifts, rather than souvenir or advertising books) I have seen have inscriptions or images.

While most stone books were likely intended as gifts, even if not actually carved by the giver, not all stone books are of a personal nature. Some were intended to be sold as tourist souvenirs at popular destinations, such as the Garden of the Gods. These “tourist” books are fairly common. Others were done for business advertising, but these are uncommon. There are also books done by civil prisoners and prisoners of war. These will

be discussed later in this article.

Many types of stone were used in the making of stone books. The most common is white marble, which is logical given its widespread availability throughout the United States as a result of the growth of the railroads by the 1870s. All but the smallest towns would have had a monument maker. Marble is relatively soft (hardness of 3, Mohs scale), and every gravestone maker had scraps. White is also symbolic of purity, therefore an appropriate

Carved stone books are a fascinating and unusual form of American folk art.

choice for making stone books with Christian references.

Ornamental marbles were used occasionally. These include brecciated, red fossil, deep gray, and green Vermont marbles, but these are less common than white marble. Alabaster, an even softer stone, often translucent, is seen as well. Fine-grained limestone and sandstone, sometimes very dark in color, are common, and these are probably from the Midwest, judging from the number found by Midwest dealers. Catlinite, or pipestone, a very soft stone with its characteristic red color resulting from its iron oxide content, was also used. Slate, despite being a common early headstone material, is rarely seen. Soapstone is also rare. Anthracite, fossil coal, and fossil coral were occasionally used, but all are rare. Igneous rocks, such as granite, are very rare in stone book form presumably because they are much harder and so much more difficult to carve. No carver with 19th-century tools could carve granite with the beautiful detail often seen in marble. Agate, although very hard, is sometimes seen in very small books, usually without inscriptions. Some of the tiny agate books were used as fobs.



Low-relief anchor (front); cross (back).



“Remembr [sic] the Maine” in relief letters.

I have attempted an analysis of the 279 stone books currently in my collection, based on the inscriptions, images, and dates. Admittedly this is not an accurate representation of all stone books, as the act of collecting assumes a certain selectivity, which skews a collection toward the unique and best examples. Still, the analysis indicates some interesting trends.

It will not escape any reader's eye that these conclusions are educated guesses, because even after assembling a collection of 279 stone books (as of July 2014), I have yet to find one stone book with a provenance. Two other collections I know of, one of which I have personally seen, each with about 100 books, have only two books with a documented provenance. Most stone books are objects that, sadly, are likely to remain anonymous once they leave their original family. They were trivial in economic value, so they do not show up in death inventories. Further, with the exception of a fairly recent article in *Early American Life*, “Books Never Read” by Winfield Ross,³ nothing has been published about stone books, and most curators are completely unaware of them. I know of only three institutions with examples of stone books in their collections: one book at Historic New England,⁴ three at the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia, and two at Winterthur (likely Italian). Very few stone books give a clue to their geographic origin, other than those with town names, which are typically souvenir objects. The exceptions are the



High-relief floral carving.

of ornamental and dimension stone, so one might expect a tradition of carving stone whimsies, such as books. But several trips to the Dorset area and the Vermont Marble Museum in Proctor did not turn up any examples. Nor have antiques dealers located in Vermont turned up a disproportionate number of stone books in relation to dealers elsewhere. Most antiques dealers in southeastern Pennsylvania had never seen stone books in their area.

Inscriptions

Stone books are decorated with many inscriptions and images that are both incised into the stone and carved in relief. Initials and names are usually singular, but sometimes there are two sets of initials or names, which probably represent the giver and the recipient. The most common inscriptions found on stone books are initials (63 of 279 books), followed by first names (30), full names (21), last names with initials (10), and finally dates (65). Full names are less common than first names, perhaps because these books were intended as gifts from the makers, who surely knew the intended recipient well. Most first names are female. Out of 30 books with first names, 23 are female; but out of 21 full names, only seven are female. It seems logical that more women than men were the recipients of these books, as the makers were likely all men.

Initials and last names with only first initials give no clue as to gender, but a reasonable presumption is that most are male. Several are inscribed with “Mother.” One book has two sets of initials, followed by a third set, underneath, reading “BORN / AP. 6, 1875,” which probably represent the parents’ initials, followed by the newborn. Most of the full names are relatively common, so it has been impossible to connect them with a specific person. However, one book with the unusual name “Sybilla Ruen” was enough information for a friend skilled in genealogical research to identify it as belonging to a housewife in Ottoville, Ohio, who died in 1916. Another book, done by or for a Civil War veteran at a GAR convention in 1912, was also tied to that specific veteran, Captain Sosman, who fought with the 22nd Ohio Volunteer Regiment. Often initials and names are incised, but sometimes they are done in relief. Of course a book



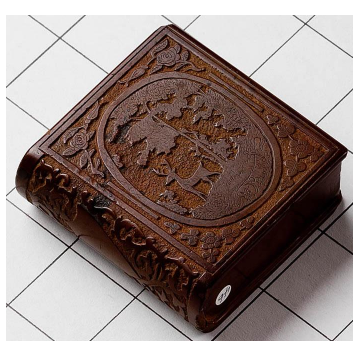
Relief anchor, cross, and heart (“HOPE”).



Relief cross (front); relief knot (back); "Album / 1883" (spine). Note clasp and drilled decoration. Massive book.



"HOLY / BIBLE" with incised gilt letters.



Relief deer in landscape (front); birds in tree (back). Note crisp carving. Catlinite (pipestone).



with a name or initials may also have carved images. These will be discussed later. And some books have two names or two sets of initials, possibly one the maker or giver and the other the recipient.

Religious inscriptions, sometimes accompanied by Christian iconography, are also common. "Holy Bible" is the most common title but usually shortened to "Bible" on very small books. Thirty-five books (of 279) have "Holy Bible" or "Bible" inscribed. Many inscriptions are simple yet powerful. These include "Remember Me," "Forget Me Not," "Friendship," "To Mother," "Good Luck," "In God We Trust," "It Is God's Way," "A Kiss," "To One I Love," "God Is Love," "You and I," and "From a Friend," to name but a few. Books with these inscriptions are reminiscent of gravestones and the knit-work mottoes common to most American homes from the Civil War period through the early 20th century. Since the books are much smaller than gravestones, their titles are abbreviated, yet

Dated personal stone books are uncommon, but those with dates typically show only the year. A precise date is very rare; these denote an important life event, such as an anniversary, birth, or death date. Sixty-five of the 279 books in my collection have inscribed dates, but 18 of those are souvenir books, which are usually dated. The earliest dated personal book in my collection has "1858." The majority of stone books carry dates ranging from 1870 to about 1900. The latest dated book in my collection is from 1939. Most souvenir books are dated between 1900 and 1910.

Imagery

The most common images on stone books are floral (99), usually in the form of stylized vines or branches with or without flowers. Some of these are in extremely high relief and exhibit extraordinary carving skills. The next most common are religious motifs such as crosses (34), anchors (8), and crowns. The meaning of the cross and the crown is obvious, but the depiction of an anchor is usually

photo albums in their decoration; several even have realistically carved clasps.

Many stone books are embellished with a combination of lettering and pictorial motifs, such as initials with floral carving. One of the most beautiful books in the collection has a realistic high-relief carving of a hand holding a pen on a heart, signifying writing on the heart.

Fraternal organizations' initials or symbols are rarely seen. My collection has only nine books with Masonic compass and square motifs or IOOF symbols,⁵ which seems surprising given the large number of fraternal order members in America in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The scarcity of stone books relating to fraternal orders confirms my speculation that they were principally made as gifts to women, since few women were involved in fraternal organizations.

It appears that some soldiers in the Civil War, on both sides, carved small (1" to 2" in height) stone books that they likely carried with them out of piety or for good luck. They are very scarce, crudely carved, with dates (1863 and 1864) scratched in, and sometimes with a place name ("Chattanooga"). The Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia, has three of them, and there are five in my collection. These books, carved during the Civil War, should not be confused with stone books carved much later for veterans' reunions, which were described earlier in this article. The *Dallas Morning News* in 1896, under "Confederate Relics," notes a number of items contributed to the Texas room of the Museum of the Confederacy including a "carved book, done in prison."⁶

Some stone books appear to be memorials. Six books in my collection have tintypes inset into the cover, with a male name under one. "Remember Me" and "Forget Me Not" are uncommon yet striking in their poignancy. Clasped hands, as mentioned, were a popular motif. Three books in my collection are explicit memorials: one to the sinking of the Maine ("Remembr [sic] the Maine") and two to William McKinley's assassination ("It Is God's Way / His Will Be Done..."). Surprisingly, I have never seen any books referring to President Garfield's assassina-

tion (1881), a period when stone books were apparently popular.

An on-line search of digitized old newspapers revealed some surprising items, including three accounts of prisoners carving stone books while in prison. According to an article in the *Decatur Review* in 1910, a prisoner who was convicted of murder made a gift of a stone Bible to the state attorney general.⁷ In another article, in the *Nevada State Journal* in 1882, a prisoner convicted of homicide gave a stone Bible to the sheriff.⁸ A third article, in the *New York Sun*, dated October 12, 1896,



High-relief hand holding a pen and writing on a heart (front); stars, wreath, blossom (back); hearts and male's head in relief (spine). Beautifully carved, sculptural. Note contrast between academic carving of the hand and the folksy back and spine. As good as it gets with books.



describes an account involving a stone Bible: "Finally six of the gang, including Reno, were captured at Jeffersonville, in the southern part of the State. Five were hanged by a mob. Reno made his escape, went to Missouri, was arrested on another charge, and was sent to the penitentiary. He served his time and

then came back into Indiana. Walking into the office of the general manager of the express company, which was then at Cincinnati, he carried in his hand a large package. He made himself known to the official, and then opened his package. 'See this,' said he. 'It is a stone Bible which I cut while in the penitentiary. I bring it to show to you that I have reformed, that I believe in its teachings, and that I will forever in the future be a good man. Will you let me go? If not, I am here to take my medicine.'"⁹

One large, beautifully carved limestone book in my collection is marked "Prison Life in Anamosa," the location of the Iowa State Penitentiary. An older Iowa dealer told me that while he has seen several of these Anamosa books, documented prison books remain rare.

Of the approximately 15 mentions of stone books in various late 19th- and early 20th-century



newspapers, none had explanations of stone books, which suggests that the books were widely distributed and recognized.

As mentioned earlier, some stone books were created as souvenirs for tourists visiting popular sites, such as Garden of the Gods, scenic rock formations near Colorado Springs, and French Lick Springs and West Baden, resorts in southern Indiana. These were turned out in relatively large numbers and are marked with the site name and usually dated in the range of 1900 to 1910. Most souvenir books are small, usually 2" high x 1½", with amateurishly carved inscriptions.

Stone books were made in many countries, and their decorative motifs and inscriptions often give clues to their origin. Although I focus on American stone books, my collection contains some books that clearly were made elsewhere. There are



Relief horseshoe with clover (front); cross (back).



they express profound hopes and wishes.

Two styles of lettering are usually found on stone books, block lettering or a highly decorative Gothic Revival script. The Gothic Revival lettering style was very popular in the second half of the 19th century. It was common to many printed materials, such as the title pages of books, sheet music, advertising, and religious ephemera. The lettering on stone books can be either incised or carved in relief. Block lettering is more commonly seen in relief than the Gothic Revival style, because relief carving is a more difficult technique. In many cases, incised lettering of either style is accentuated and enhanced with bronze paint or gilding.

symbolic of hope, rather than a nautical reference. A few have the word "Hope" on or below the anchor. A heart or hearts (24 in my collection) is another common motif, signifying love or life but sometimes used primarily as a decorative motif. When used in combination with a cross and/or anchor, the heart symbolizes faith. Clasped hands (17) are occasionally seen, usually with one female and one male cuff, and not surprisingly, similarly carved on gravestones as representing the conviction that death is only a temporary separation. Ten books have incised horseshoes, some with an explicit "Good Luck" and others with a clover leaf. Several books are titled "Album." Those are large and thick and resemble



"Album" on scroll in high relief. Massive book.



Neo-Gothic initials (front); "Nov. 17, 07" (back).



Deeply carved clasped hands between curtains (front); cross between curtains (back); "LOVE" (spine).



two books with a beautifully incised maple leaf, and each has a history of Canadian ownership. Two alabaster books with skillfully incised figures (a cowboy) and Spanish wording are likely Mexican. Marble books with colored marble inlays or highly ornamental marble strongly suggest an Italian origin. Other alabaster books have inset photographs. One with a photograph of the Pisa Cathedral is obviously Italian. Marble books with beautifully rendered profiles of American political figures (e.g., Benjamin Franklin) are almost certainly Italian.

I have seen several English books, one of which is identified as English because it was a gift to a member of Parliament with his inscribed name. An Australian book is shown on a University of Newcastle Web site. There is a book with "To my dear wife" written in Hungarian and with a very late date of 1933. Even so, America had large foreign-born communities, especially German, that continued to speak their native languages and read foreign-language newspapers until our entry into World War I. So a German phrase on an American-appearing book may not necessarily mean it was carved overseas. One white marble book with gilding, looking like a typical American stone book, has the German phrase "*Aus Freundschaft*," meaning "to our friendship." My vote is that it was carved on this side of the Atlantic.

Even after looking at more than 600 books over the past eight years, many questions remain. For one, where did the concept of stone books originate? If England or the Continent, you would think that some very early dated books would exist, but I have never seen any. Many folk art traditions originated in Europe. Could stone books have originated in this country? This seems unlikely, given the centuries of stone carving in Europe, but I don't know.

The greatest difficulty in researching stone books is the rarity of a verifiable provenance. Once a book leaves the family, usually all provenance information is lost. Only two books in my collection are marked with the maker's name; one is a small, crude book. It seems astonishing and sad that not a single book had an accompanying note stating who made it, when, and for whom.

An 1899 newspaper article describes an incident of a crowd stoning the house of a Union sympathizer in Richmond, Virginia, in 1860: "Now a lull came, which lasted several minutes, when a heavy object struck the house with tremendous force, but did not break. I stepped forward to pick it up, when the policeman, who had been standing near me, picked it up just in front of me, and after examining it handed it to me. It proved to be a large marble book of exquisite shape and polish. On the back was cut in large letters 'The Holy Bible.' People cried out when they examined it, and expressed themselves in many ways, and many thought it foretold dire disasters to the city, and that something dreadful was about to happen in connection with the then threatening rumbles of the secession movement; and all seemed greatly impressed with the scenes witnessed, particularly with the stone Bible. Not another stone or other missile struck the house, and after waiting an hour or so, the people departed."¹⁰

As with the marble Bible in Richmond, many mysteries remain. These are small time travelers, whose creators, givers, and recipients are now long passed and anonymous. The books are testimony to that universal wish for love and to be remembered. Although carved in stone, once removed from the family, the remembrance ends. Yet their poignant pleas endure and continue to speak to us as voices from the past.

Acknowledgments: Many thanks to Ellen Denker and Mindy Dubansky for their suggestions and editing skills.

I welcome photos of unusual books and, of course, continue to collect. Contact me at <ian@ianberke.com> or (415) 860-2777.

Inscriptions:

The following words or phrases (other than names, initials, and locations) are found on the books in my collection:

Album
Bible
Biography
Born [followed by a date]
Burns Poems
By Papa
Christmas [followed by a year]
Compliment of [name]
Common Prayer
Forget Me Not
Friend
Friendship
Good Luck
Holy Bible
Hope
Made by [name]
Marble Book
Mizpah
Mother
My Son
New Testament
New Year Greeting [followed by a year]
Presented to [name]
A Present from [name]
Prison Life in Anamosa
Puebla
Remember Me
Remembr [sic] the Maine
Rock of Ages
Soldiers Home
Souvenir
The State Fair
Token of Love
To One I Love
Truth
You and I
Xmas [followed by a year]

Notes:

1. The *Daily Democrat*, Hamilton, Ohio, May 30, 1892.
2. The *Hawarden Independent*, Hawarden, Iowa, March 28, 1929.
3. Winfield Ross, "Books Never Read," *Early American Life*, February 2012.
4. Given to Historic New England by Nina Fletcher Little.
5. Independent Order of Odd Fellows.
6. The *Dallas Morning News*, Dallas, Texas, May 15, 1896.
7. *Decatur Review*, Decatur, Illinois, February 12, 1910.
8. The *Nevada State Journal*, Reno, Nevada, September 30, 1882.
9. The *New York Sun*, New York, New York, October 12, 1896.
10. The *National Tribune*, Washington, D.C., July 27, 1899.



"TO THE / ONE I LOVE / 1913" (front); clasped hands with birds (back); "SOUVENIR" (spine); "A KISS" (fore edge).



High-relief floral carving with tiny inset colored stones, rope border. Massive.



Recumbent lamb with cross, in high relief. Obvious reference to Lamb of God.



"FRIEND" (front); "Forget me not" (back); "MAR/ BLE/ BOOK" with eagle (spine).



"Clara Slather" with heart. Pennsylvania Dutch look.



Clasp hands in heart in low relief.

"MIZPAH / NOV. 1, 1886" with initials and clasped hands (front); horseshoe with clover and blossoms (back); "O! Sister love / Tis a jewel / golden set / But no jewel / fair can een / compare With / my sister / Elizabeth" (spine). Very skillful carving with square-cut letters in relief on the cover top and bottom.

