Carved in Stone: American Stone Books

by Ian Berke

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

A bout eight years ago at a New England antique show, I saw a small, carved white marble book with “[sic]...ing gifts.” It was inscribed on its front cover. The same dealer also had a similar book in his regular window display. William McKinley and seemed to be a memorial to his assassina-
tion, which was printed in a 1929 issue of
a 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, as a parting gift, a stone Bible of froal fleshlike carving, deeply undecorated, beautiful and perfect. It was in our family a lifetime."

Carved 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”), which are sometimes the dates of their creation or events. Stone books are also carved with pictorial motifs by making choice for making books with Christian references. Ornamental marbles were used occasionally. These include brecciated, red fossil, deep gray, and green Vermont marbles, which are common, but these are less common than white marble. Abalaster, an even softer stone, with a fine, sunny yellow color is often seen as well. Fine-grained lime-
stone and sandstone, sometimes very dark in color, are common, and these are probably from the Midwest, judging from the num-
ber 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. Anhacite, fossil coal, and fossil coral were occasionally used, but all are rare. Igneous rocks, such as granite, are very rare in stone book form probably because they are much harder and so much more difficult to carve. No carver with stone book form pre-
sumably because they are much harder and so much more difficult to carve. No carver with 19th-century tools could carve granite, with its very sharp and hard surface. They were often seen in marble. Agate, although very hard, is sometimes used, but the surfaces were often veined, and often without inscriptions. Some of the tiny agate books were used as foils.

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

Stonecutters, many of whom were immigrants, created whimsies in the form of small carved stone books. Some of these stone books were created by professional stoneworkers, while others were beautifully embellished and imbued with glyphs and symbols, perhaps as gifts and memorials. One of our most powerful summations of one is that stone book is a love story, to be remembered.

Perhaps a stone book was a way for some stonecutters and oth-
ers to express their feelings, not intended or used as hand warm-
ers but as heart warmers. It also seems clear that some stone-
cutters made more than one or two books. I have seen a number of stone books clearly made by the same person. For example, William McKinley memorial books in my collection have obviously been made by the same person. Another carver used very dis-
tinctive birds within a rope-like border with multiple legs.

Skilfully done books would likely have been highly desired as gifts for gardeners. Not every stone,

some stonecutters sold some of their books to others who gave them as spec-
ial presents.

Some notable stone book gifts were mentioned in the press. Frank E. Shufeldt, an Ohio society
gossip columnist of the Daily Democrat in Hamilton, Ohio, stated that Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Kuhman received an “elegant stone book” as one of their wed-
ing 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, as a parting gift, a stone Bible of froal fleshlike carving, deeply undecorated, beautiful and perfect. It was in our family a lifetime.”

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Heart with initials and “stitched” decoration.

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

What does a carved book symbolize? Type of stone varies. A stone book in America in the 19th cen-
tury was the Bible. And a carved book may have a religious ring to it. The most common stone books were carved in a closed position rather than open. The customary practice of making stone books prob-
ably because it is easier to carve and engrave and more compact and open. A closed book in marble is perhaps symbolic of the belief that only God can know the future, hence a closed book.

stone books, since the stone is quarried in Minnesota, and the other tourist books inscribed with the site names. It seems safe to assume that stone books were carved throughout the United States, but they are most commonly found today in the Midwest and New England. One might expect a tra-
sition of carved stone books in two regions where stone carving and folk art are prevalent. Ver-
amo and southeastern Pennsylvania; and in midwest-
ern New England and the Midwest. Stone books are typically small, averaging about 3" to 5" high. They are 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”), which are sometimes the dates of their creation or events. Stone books are also carved with pictorial motifs by making choice for making books with Christian references. Ornamental marbles were used occasionally. These include brecciated, red fossil, deep gray, and green Vermont marbles, which are common, but these are less common than white marble. Abalaster, an even softer stone, with a fine, sunny yellow color is often seen as well. Fine-grained lime-
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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, and most of these books were intended as gifts from the maker, who surely knew the intended recipient well. Most first names are female. Out of 30 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.

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Massive book. Neo-Gothic initials (front); “Nov. 17, 07” (back). Deeply carved clasped hands between curtains (front); cross between “Album” on scroll in high relief.

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


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 knick-knack mottos 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 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 accented and enhanced with bronze paint or gilding.

“HOLY / BIBLE” with incised gilt letters.

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 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 stone books 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 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 ROOF symbols. The books bear dates (1863 and 1864) scratched in, 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 the 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.”

Some stone books appear to be memorials. Six books in my collection have tintsies 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 (“Remember [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 assassination.

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

“Hunt” (front), “Holy Bible” (back); “The Sun” (spine) (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. Another article, in the Nevada State Journal in 1882, a prisoner convicted of homicide gave a stone Bible to the sheriff. A third article, in the New York Sun, dated October 12, 1886, describes an account involving a stone Bible: “Finally six of the gang, including Reno, 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,’ he said. ‘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.’”

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 amateurrishly 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.

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

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 folky back and spine. As good as it gets with books.

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FEATURE
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, the remembrance ends. Although carved in stone, even after being handed it to me. It proved to be a large stone 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.

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