I. How did this project come about?
- I took a course at Rare Book School at the University of Virginia last year, “Introduction to the History of Bookbinding,” hoping to improve my understanding of this feature of books.
- Special Collections was given thousands of books by the late David Richardson of Hanover, NH, and Woodstock, VT, over the course of several years. Richardson, who died at the age of 93 two years ago, was a life-long book collector with a great interest in bindings. I knew that his collection had some interesting examples and wanted to understand them better.

II. Why study book bindings?
- Practical reasons: in order to know what we have, how to describe it, and assess its value.
- Part of the answer to the question: what can this book tell us about its maker, its owner, and the times they lived in?

III. Scope of this presentation
- I will show you examples of books from the “hand-press era,” i.e. from the beginning of printing in the 15th century to 1800, when printing presses were powered by hand.
- All of the images have been altered to some degree in order to bring out features I want you to be able to see clearly. Therefore, the color, contrast, and size of the images are distorted.
- I will be showing you slides of a special book that Special Collections recently purchased in memory of Birdie MacLennan, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. We wanted to find a book that reflected Birdie’s interest in Romance languages, and we didn’t have an early edition of Dante, so we looked for something that would serve as a fitting memorial.

IV. Book bindings

Binding refers to two things: the components of a book that hold it together and protect the text block, and more specifically, the material used to cover the boards and spine of a book. I will be talking only about the latter, the covering material, and some of the designs that were common during the hand-press era, with examples from our Rare Book collection.

Until the 19th century, most booksellers did not sell bound books, except in England, where the majority of books were sold in bindings beginning in the late 1600s. In fact, books were usually sold as sheets, and the buyer had to pay a binder to put the book together.
In the hand-press era books were usually bound in small shops or as piece work at home. Decorating a binding was done by a more skilled craftsman called a finisher. Sometimes, wealthy book collectors would hire finishers for an extended time, and all or many of the books in their libraries might have a distinctive style of binding. Almost all of the tasks that went into binding a book were done by hand until the nineteenth century, and thus every binding was, in a sense, unique.4

Binders seldom signed their work, and designs and tools were often shared, so it’s usually impossible to identify the binder. Some features in decorative bindings are distinctively national in character,3 and some can be identified as the style favored by a particular collector. But for the most part, bindings are categorized as belonging generally to a style that was popular in a particular country at a particular time, with a wide variation of designs within that style. Categorizing is much less precise than typography, for instance, in which the designer, manufacturer, and date of creation is known for almost every type font.

Binding note: Blind-stamped calfskin, with a large panel stamp roughly centered on front and back covers. “Blind” means that the impression left by the stamp has not been colored with gold leaf or paint. Stamping (also called embossing) with a single, large, engraved stamp was a common decorative practice in the early 16th century. This binding has been repaired many times, which may account for the panel’s being off-center.
2. Aulus Gellius, Noctium Atticarum... (Leyden, 1706).

Binding note: This is a blind-stamped vellum binding, with a double border and inner frame with corner fleurons and a center stamp. Vellum bindings were common well before printing began, and continued to be used thereafter, but calfskin, sheepskin, and goatskin became more popular beginning in the 16th Century. Most vellum bindings were not decorated.


Binding note: This is a detail from a blind-stamped vellum binding showing the interlacing ribbon pattern associated with earlier Islamic and Coptic designs. Many design features and binding techniques used in Western Europe were borrowed from the Middle East.

Binding note: This is a blind-stamped alum-tawed pigskin binding, with original clasps intact. Alum was used to treat animal skins as an alternative to tanning to produce a tough, durable leather. This is a typical panel-style design—not to be confused with a panel stamp—in which small tools are used to stamp or roll a design in a rectangular pattern. Rolled elements were engraved on a small wheel. This is also an example of “all-over” design, in which the binder filled up most of the available surface.⁶

Binding note: Elaborate blind-tooled calfskin with floral stamps and images of saints in two interior rolled borders. The division of the design into rectangular panels was very common.

Binding note: This is an example of the diaper style, very common in early 15\textsuperscript{th} century bindings, but the only one I have found in our Rare Book collection. The diagonal rolled lines enclose a stamped lozenge pattern. I have found no good explanation for the word “diaper” as the name for this design.

Binding note: Panel design with blind-tooling. Note the fleurs-de-lis stamps, a pretty good indication that the book was bound in France.

Binding note: Blind-tooled calfskin with metal furniture, including corner and center bosses (small protrusions designed to support the book while it is lying flat). Usually bosses are found on very large books, but may also be incorporated purely for design. This Bible is large but probably does not need bosses for support. The panel design with elaborate interlacing and engraved furniture could easily be mistaken for a Quran.

Binding note: This calf skin binding has a simple gold-tooled border with a rolled interior frame that has corner fleurons, and a decorative stamped centerpiece. Gold-tooling, a technique that originated in the Middle East, involved applying glair (a special glue) to the surface of the binding, laying gold leaf on top after the glair has dried, and stamping/rolling with heated tools to melt the glue in the desired areas. Gold-tooling came to Western Europe in the 15th century, though the earliest example found in England is dated 1519.7 [The frontispiece engraved portrait of Stephanus is one of the earliest engravings I’ve seen in our collection].

*Binding note:* Similar binding to the previous example, gold-tooled borders with corner fleurons and a center stamp. Simple lines made with a rolling tool (sometimes double or triple) are referred to as fillets.

Binding note: Gold-tooled calfskin in the semé style. This was a popular style in the late 1500s, especially in France, where you often see fleurs-de-lis instead of “neckties.”

Binding note: Restoration style, gold-tooled red morocco. The design is composed of elaborate patterns made with numerous small tools used over and over to create a symmetrical pattern. This binding is said to be the work of Samuel Mearne, bookbinder to England’s King Charles II.8

Morocco is goatskin, an expensive but very durable skin for binding.

Binding note: Highly-decorated Restoration style binding in gold-tooled red morocco.

Binding note: Red morocco binding in the Harleian style. Named for Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, this is a high-end style that was popular especially from 1720 to 1760 but persisted into the 19th century. Harley didn’t bind books himself, but there are many examples of this style in his library. Typically, a Harleian binding has a relatively narrow border with a centerpiece and subdued cornerpieces.⁹

Binding note: Another example of the Harleian style, this time without center or corner pieces.

Binding note: Calfskin, dyed and blind-tooled. The pattern of light and dark panels was popular in England from the 1690s to the 1740s. ¹⁰

Binding note: Black straight-grained morocco with stylized floral border in gold leaf. All edges gilt, the fore-edge concealing a fore-edge paining of a classical scene. Morocco is more easily dyed than other leathers, and morocco bindings can be found in a wide range of colors.

Binding note: Green morocco with a triple fillet border and corner fleurons. This book, purchased in 2014 in memory of Birdie MacLennan, is the earliest edition of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in our collection.

Title page and illustration of “Inferno,” Book One of the *Divine Comedy*. 

Binding note: Tree calf, made by applying a mild acid on the cover and letting it run across to create a pattern resembling a tree."

Binding note: An unusual acid-washed calfskin binding with a crown insignia.

Binding note: Acid-washed and dyed calfskin with a gold-tooled border.

**NOTES**


5. Foot, 13-6.


9. Bennett, 142.


11. Lock, 81-2.