Collecting American Type Foundry Specimen Books

In 1976 I began collecting the specimen books issued by American type foundries. After twelve years of dedicated, and sometimes obsessive searching, the collection now stands at 211 specimens from 43 different foundries. An indifferent success, perhaps; but it must be viewed against this backdrop: there seems to be a grand total of only about 685 specimens known. Henry Bullen, the pioneer collector of these specimens, amassed about 400 of them in the early years of the century, by using the resources of the American Type Founders' Company to gather in the libraries of the 23 foundries that joined in 1892 to form ATF. So I don’t feel I’m doing so badly after all.

It all began with Maurice Annenberg’s Type Foundries of America and their Catalogs, published in 1975. (Mr. Annenberg won the APHA Annual Award in 1979 for this groundbreaking bibliography.) When it came out I could hardly have been less interested, since I was more involved in classic typography than in the 19th century, had no type specimens to speak of, and little interest in type foundry. In fact, it was only a year after publication that I bought a copy (for $30; they now go in the antiquarian book market for well over $200, since only 500 copies were issued.) The bibliography included a listing of the specimen books Mr. Annenberg had been able to identify, along with locations in the libraries of institutions and individuals. But, mostly to give the book more substance and interest, he had compiled two-to four-page histories of the type foundries and added occasional wood engravings of the buildings or facsimiles of their advertisements.

It was the histories that got me. True, Maurice Annenberg was not a trained scholar, and had included no impedimenta such as footnotes, attributions, or even clues as to where the information had come from. The book didn’t even have an index. But what fascinating stories of the early days of the industry, of eccentric typefounders, of skullduggery and mischief!

Commercial typefoundry began in the United States with Binny & Ronaldson of Philadelphia, who went into business in 1796. The firm prospered, and after several changes of ownership, in 1887 it became MacKellar Smiths & Jordan, the largest American foundry. The MacKellar pica was based on that of Binny and Ronaldson, who had purchased the typefoundry tools Ben Franklin had bought for his grandson when he set him up in the typefoundry business. These tools had come from the Didot foundry in France.

Since, ultimately, MacKellar Smiths & Jordan’s pica was adopted by the industry in the United States and remains in effect today, we may say that today’s typesetting computers are using point measurements passed down by Franklin and based on the typefoundry of the mid-eighteenth century.

Binny and Ronaldson issued their first type specimen book in 1812, and seven copies are known. Soon after there were competitors: David and George Bruce (New York, 1813); Elihu White (New York, 1812); the Boston Type Foundry (Boston, 1820) and others. The earliest specimen books are usually thin booklets without boards; they are not very prepossessing, but are very scarce and very expensive. As the foundries added types to their stock, their specimen books became thicker. The first Binny & Ronaldson type specimen of 1812 had only 41 leaves; in 1868 their successor, MacKellar Smiths & Jordan, issued a 600-leaf tome as large as a family Bible, weighing 13 pounds.

Pre-Civil War specimen books are the hardest to find. Of my 211 specimens, only 15 date from this period. After the war, there was a boom in industry that carried typefoundry along with it, and many typefoundry companies were started. The invention of the Bruce typcasting machine in 1838 and of electrotyped matrices in 1845 meant much easier production of new faces. Many of the new firms consisted of only one or two principals, and many were undercapitalized and did not last long. The great bulk of American type specimen books were issued in the 1880s, before the Linotype and before the amalgamation of the leading foundries into the American Type Founders’ Co. in 1892. In those pre-ATF days there was fierce competition for the printer’s favor, and type specimens were part of the sales package.

After 1892, with one giant foundry supplanting 23 individual ones, there were far fewer specimen books issued. ATF issued one or more for most years beginning in 1895, and there were a few independent foundries (such as Keystone, Philadelphia; Inland, St. Louis; Barnhart Brothers & Spindler, Chicago) issuing specimens. From a collector’s point of view, these specimens are unexciting compared to the earlier ones.

The history of printing technology is clearly visible in the printing equipment catalogue sections that were part of most specimen books from the 1860s on. Important information about the change from iron hand presses to platen jobbers and cylinder presses can be deduced from the changing catalogues. Those who collect and preserve printing equipment of the last century have to be familiar with these catalogue sections. There is no place else to find the information they present.

The text of some type specimens can be informative or even entertaining. Many of the major specimens of the Bruce
foundry in New York from the 1860s on were written and edited by Theodore deVinne, and his scholarship is usually apparent in abbreviated form. The great Bruce specimen of 1882 (called by Bullen “the most notable type specimen book ever issued, anywhere”) is a thick folio volume completely filled with material by deVinne about the history of printing and related crafts; one section contains the entire text of his The Invention of Printing set as a type specimen. It is not the easiest way to read that enduringly important text, as the type sizes change from page to page.

The texts used to display the types of MacKellar Smiths & Jordan were written – it is said in the composing stick – by the head of the firm, the great Thomas MacKellar. He had an unfailing supply of whimsical phrases and ideas, many of which are as charming to the reader today as in his lifetime.

Only a few specimens showed full alphabets of any font. Some of the earliest did, like my 1820 Boston Type Foundry (its first specimen.) An 1851 specimen of the New England Type Foundry did show full alphabets. Looking at them, I have often wondered about the technical feasibility of creating cast type using these images as the starting point. That will be for others to solve. I have been able to fill in missing letters in a font of nineteenth-century type by mounting zinc cuts, made from images in a type specimen book, on the ends of quads; it is difficult and not recommended except in desperate situations.

Maurice Annenberg’s listing ended with the last casebound ATF specimen of 1945, and that is also the cutoff date for my collection. Like many other collectors of these books, I corresponded regularly with him. In 1983 (several years after Mr. Annenberg’s death) I was asked by another publisher to revise and bring up to date Annenberg’s listings, and I got in touch with all 37 institutions and individuals. From these, and with the addition of my own collection and those in the New York Public Library (which had not been part of the original compilation) I found an additional 26 specimens which had not been known to Annenberg. Of these, 14 were in my own collection or the NYPL; seven were reported by the American Antiquarian Society, and the remaining five were reported by others. (The revised edition was never published, and my feeling now is that important changes in the listings are called for.)

In this very specialized field of collecting one soon gets to know all the players. I am happy to say that most of the individuals who collect American type specimens are friends and acquaintances. Although there is some rivalry, there are few people with whom a collector of these books can discuss them in detail, and this unusual common interest has led to a genuine camaraderie.

The institutional libraries have personalities as well as the individual collectors; it has been my privilege to examine the holdings of many of each. The greatest collection of all is at Columbia, where the great “Library and Museum of the American Type Founders’ Company” came to rest in the 1940s. This is one of the greatest collections of typographic history in the Western Hemisphere, and rivals St. Bride’s in London. It was entirely the work of one man, Henry Bullen; he deserves much praise for his single-mindedness and foresight. There will be more about him in a future issue.

Second to Columbia’s holdings of type specimens are those of Harvard (about 140 American specimens), many of which were acquired through the influence of the late Philip Hofer and of William Bentinck-Smith. Other institutions with major holdings are the American Antiquarian Society, the Newberry Library, the Smithsonian Institution, the California Historical Society, and the Huntington Library.

How does one collect American type specimens? There are as many different approaches as there are collectors. I have made my wants known to as many dealers as I could find, have bought collections from individuals and estates; have swapped desiderata with other collectors; have traded type for specimens; and have stumbled on some by pure dumb luck and/or persistence. I would say that persistence is the chief factor. Adding a single specimen to a collection may not be a great achievement, but over the course of time these accretions become significant.

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The literature of collecting American type specimens is meager. I have appended here a bibliography of the few items I know of.

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