

Embossed Materials for the Blind: History, Preservation Concerns and Special Projects

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Slide 2: Contents: This presentation will cover a little bit about the early history of the Perkins School for the Blind, a summary of the types of materials in the archives, a brief introduction to the first embossed book created for the blind and a bit about pre-braille materials. Then I will cover the preservation challenges of embossed materials (problems I encounter, rather than a best practices), and end with a brief overview of our latest digital projects.

Slide 3: The Perkins School for the Blind, formerly Perkins Institution, was incorporated in 1829 as the first school for the blind in the United States. The campus moved from Boston to the banks of the Charles River in Watertown, MA in 1912. Perkins was a pioneer in the education of the blind and the first school to educate a person who was deafblind. We are home to the Braille and Talking Book Library which is a lending library that services all of New England.

The Archives at Perkins are part of the Samuel P. Hayes Research Library which contains one of the largest collections on the non-medical aspects of blindness in the world. The archives not only collect materials related to our institutional history, but to the larger history of blindness and deafblindness. Among our most unique and prized collection is our library of embossed books, especially the collection of pre-braille materials which dates back to the 18th century.

Slide 4: The most popular collections are those related to Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan. Anne Sullivan grew up in an almshouse in Massachusetts, and became a student at Perkins at the age of 14. Sullivan was valedictorian of her class, and was recommended by Michael Anagnos, the Perkins Director, to go to Alabama to work with 7 year-old Helen Keller.

Slide 5: Before I transition to a discussion of embossed books, I want you all to keep in mind that these materials are read with the fingertips and experienced entirely by touch!

Slide 6: The Archives at Perkins is fortunate to have 2 copies of the first embossed book for the blind. This was created by Valentin Haüy in 1786 and printed at the Institute for the Blind in Paris. This book excelled only at raising awareness about the problem of printing books for the blind rather than as a reading system for the blind. The text relief is about as high as a nicely embossed wedding invitation and would have been extremely difficult to read by someone who is blind. This is partly due to the fact that the book was significantly damaged during the binding process where pressure collapsed some of the relief.

Slide 7: By 1817 this problem was much resolved. Rather than utilizing gobs of thick ink, these letters are punched or pressed from the back on heavy stock paper.

Slide 8: Back in America, Samuel Gridley Howe, a physician and war hero, was hired as the first Director of Perkins in 1831. He immediately launched on a tour of the schools for the blind in Europe, where he recruited teachers. He was unsatisfied with the materials available and the need to print his own books was readily apparent. In 1835 he created Boston Line Type, a simpler, more compact system that dropped the unnecessary flourishes found in the books by Haüy and others. Howe hired a printer, Stephen Preston Ruggles, to help him. Howe's first book was published in 1835. Among the first titles were *The Acts of the Apostles* and *The Blind Child's Spelling Book*.

Slide 9: Boston Line Type and other embossed Roman alphabets had a key, fatal flaw. While they were relatively easy to read, and required no extra effort by sighted instructors, it was not a system you could write with. Braille and other dot systems were immediately superior because anyone could write using an inexpensive slate and a stylus. The advent of braille typewriters further solidified this crucial need. The Perkins Brailler, perfected in 1951, is still the most popular and widely used braillewriter.

Slide 10: With that brief introduction, I'll move on to the preservation challenges I encounter with materials for the blind. First and foremost, braille and embossed books are big! Their size and weight make them challenging to house and care for.

Slide 11: Many embossed books have competing needs. Many times the text block wants to be hosed vertically, but the binding and covers desperately want to lie down.

Slide 12: The thick paper and large size results in heavy text blocks that pull and sink over time creating much strain on the binding and damaging the pages at the bottom where the front and back boards fail to hold them up.

Slide 13: Because the pages can't be pressed flat or immobilized, embossed books frequently have extreme warping, crinkling, or bends from the absence of the normal protective pressure in a print book. This also creates an air exchange that may further the embrittlement and discoloration of pages as the acidic lignin in paper requires oxygen to react with. The loose pages also allow dirt and dust to filter in.

Slide 14: It is common to see dark moon shapes along the tops and sides of pages where the dirt and dust have made their way in. Embossed and braille books require more cleaning and could probably benefit more from boxing/housing than print books.

Slide 15: Children's books frequently have 3D objects glued or pasted in to illustrate the text. This creates preservation challenges that archivists frequently encounter with scrapbooks. Foreign and unique materials, glues, and other adhesives create a unique set of needs for each book. The objects also create added and uneven strain on the pages and the bindings.

Slide 16: Embossed and braille books also have a variety of unique tactile graphics to consider.

Slide 17: Geographic materials and tactile maps are common. These can be at greater risk because the embossed areas can be larger and more unstable making them more prone to damage, including sinking or cracking. Text and dots are relatively evenly sized and help stabilize the page.

Slide 18: The history of books and materials for the blind also encompass a great amount of tinkering and invention, including a plethora of varied and experimental materials and systems. One of my favorites is solid dot braille. The dots were made from applied material that was unfortunately prone to loss or damage and easy to pick off with a fingernail. According to Perkins legend, sneaky students would pick dots off choir booklets to form naughty words and sentences!

Slide 19: Some books were printed on paper so thick that the pages don't bend!

Slide 20: I'm less familiar with more recently produced books for the blind, but many rely heavily on thermoform and other plastics, comb binding, and other media with questionable stability. These plastics could result in more detrimental cracking than with paper-based media.

Slide 21: So how can we share these amazing collections? Perkins recently completed an online exhibit titled: Writing Systems for the Blind Used by Helen Keller. Keller was educated and even graduated college before braille became the accepted reading and writing system for the blind in the United States. Keller had to learn Boston Line Type, dot systems including New York Point, English Braille and American Braille, and an abstract system called Moon Type. Can you image how needlessly difficult this must have been?

Slide 22: In a letter written by Helen Keller in 1901 she remarks "There is nothing more absurd, I think, than to have five or six different prints for the blind". Furthermore the proponents of the different systems fought intensely. One principal of a school for the blind commented "The conflict was acrimonious in the extreme. The bitterness can hardly be imagined". The seminal work on the subject is also tellingly titled "The War of the Dots".

Slide 23: Our exhibit in essence is a virtual bookshelf with accompanying textual descriptions of the various systems.

Slide 24: I photographed sample pages from a handful of books printed in each system. The collection is geared toward a sighted audience, but we do include textual descriptions to make the collection more accessible to individuals with visual impairments.

Slide 25: I encourage everyone to look at the exhibit and explore our many digital resources including audio files and oral histories on our Archives website: www.perkinsarchives.org