

January 1988

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Recommended Citation

Hubener, Hal, "Short Subjects: Sunshine State Showpieces: Alligator-Skin Bindings in the Florida Archives," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 6 no. 2 (1988).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol6/iss2/5>

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Sunshine State Showpieces: Alligator-Skin Bindings in the Florida Archives

Hal Hubener

Archivists are primarily concerned with the informational value of records. Sometimes, however, that emphasis on information is so great that other properties, such as intrinsic value, are ignored. Materials have intrinsic value if they possess qualities that make their original form the only archivally acceptable one for preservation.¹ These qualities may be physical or intellectual; that is, they may relate to the material object itself or to the information contained in it. Books, for example, can have intrinsic value because of several unique or curious features: paper, imprints, watermarks, illustrations, or bindings.

In the Florida State Archives forty folio-size² record books partially bound in alligator skin recently have been identified. The

¹ *Intrinsic Value in Archival Material: Staff Information Paper 21.* (Washington: National Archives And Records Service, General Services Administration, 1982), 1.

² Folio size is thirty-three to forty-eight centimeters in length.

skins, rectangular or squarish³, and in shades of black or brown, are found on the front and back covers as inlays and are bordered by durable calf. The volumes themselves have stiff spines with raised bands and, except for the inlays, are of a type manufactured by many binderies throughout the nation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The inlays are easily recognized by their network of scales and roughness of touch. Generally they are well preserved.⁴ Given the poor environmental conditions in which the books were stored for several decades, the lack of wear indicates the skin is a suitable binding medium. Yet because of the rectangular design, centered location, and front-and-back symmetry, the skin's purpose is more decorative than functional.

Represented in this collection are both state and local government records. Of the former there are twelve record groups, eighteen series, and thirty-six volumes. Of the latter there are two record groups and four volumes, including one City of Daytona tax book and three Pasco County dockets. The tax book has the earliest entries--from 1885. The Treasury Daybook, Volume 17, and the Department of Education Official Minutes have entries that begin in 1911. Assuming the first entries were made soon after the books' manufacture, then the alligator leather was used roughly over a twenty-five year period.

³ One book is half leather: the spine and corners are in calf and the inlays in alligator skin.

⁴ The spines, in contrast, are detached from several volumes--an indication of weakness in the binding or the result of heat and humidity. Before their transfer to the state archives, these books were kept for several decades in state offices that had no climate controls.

Several binderies produced these books. Identifiable ones are the Drew Company⁵ and the Times-Union Bindery,⁶ both of Jacksonville, and the state printer I.B. Hilson.⁷ Another volume has a handwritten note on the inside cover indicating delivery in 1910 by a Cap Publishing Company of Tallahassee. The company is not listed in the State Library's 1911 city directory, though there is a firm, Daily Capital Bookbinding, listed in the 1904 directory.⁸

Many volumes name the binder on the spine; some are missing spines, however. So other means must be used to shake secrets from these silent volumes. Fortunately they have sufficient

⁵ Horace Drew was born in 1854. In 1876 he purchased the bindery business from his father Columbus Drew, who had founded it in 1855. The business itself was actually the outgrowth of the *The Florida Republican*, a newspaper Columbus had established in 1848. In 1886 Horace's brother William joined the firm. Horace died in 1926 and his son Hodson became president in 1932. In 1938 the Drew Company employed over 160 people. When the bindery folded in 1971 it was arguably the oldest business establishment in East Florida. Information on the Drews can be found in the following sources: Junius Elmore Dovell, *Florida: Historic, Dramatic, Contemporary*, Vol. IV (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., [1952]), 844; William Thomas Cash, *The Story of Florida* (New York: American Historical Society, Inc., 1938), 738; *The Florida Times-Union*, 14 May 1971, B-10; and Harry Gardner Cutler, *History of Florida*, Vol. 2, 38.

⁶ The Times-Union Bindery was affiliated with Jacksonville's *Times-Union* newspaper, which was founded in 1864. The Jacksonville fire of 1901 and a later flood destroyed most of the printing and publishing records.

⁷ Irving B. Hilson was born in 1863, graduated from Harvard College, and went to Florida. He was publisher of the *West Florida Post* from 1913 to 1923 and was identified with the *Pensacola News*. He died circa 1933. A brief biography of Hilson can be found in Harry Gardner Cutler, *History of Florida: Past and Present*, Vol. III (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1923), 83.

⁸ Several locations were checked for Tallahassee city directories, but none has them in the early twentieth century.

individual characteristics, in most cases, to identify the bindery. The spine-labeled Hilson volumes, for example, have black, rectangular inlays and average about thirty-two-by-sixteen centimeters. Gold-tooled designs are similar and the marbled-pattern endpapers have small nonpareil motifs.⁹ All beginning entries date from 1903 to 1905.

Drew-bound books have endpapers with either the Drew logo or a marbeled Stormont¹⁰ or nonpareil pattern of varying size. The inlays are rectangular or squarish and may be as large as thirty-two-by-forty-two centimeters. Frequently bordered on three sides, they are black or brown. Identifiable Drew volumes have the spine label or more frequently a binder's ticket pasted to the inside of the front cover. This ticket cites the Drew Company's Frey binding patent. The spines read either H. Drew and Bro. or H. and W.B. Drew Co. Beginning entries in Drew books have a broad range of 1885 to 1910.

There are two books bound by the Times-Union: Volume 6 of the Division of Treasury Daybooks, and Volume 4 of the Division of Treasury Registers of Warrants. Both volumes have brown inlays; one uses marbled-pattern endpapers of the Spanish¹¹ design, and the other nonpareil.

Attention needs to be paid not only to the physical features of these volumes, but also to their scarcity. Forty books are bound in alligator skins, as mentioned previously, but the series themselves number hundreds of volumes. In the Pasco County records,

⁹ Nonpareil is a widely used combed pattern that is easily recognized by its horizontal lines. For examples of marbled patterns see G. Thomas Tanselle, "Bibliographical Description of Patterns," *Studies in Bibliography*, 23 (1970): 71-102.

¹⁰ Stormont is a thin-veined pattern that uses dots to create a lacy effect.

¹¹ Spanish is a "smooth-body" pattern, that is with veins of medium thickness and a body color not mottled with rings or dots. Traversing this pattern are diagonal streaks.

Local Records 43, there are over two hundred volumes but only three with alligator skin. In the Articles of Incorporation, Series 186, there are also more than two hundred, but only one in alligator. One reason for their scarcity is that some binderies at that time probably used whatever leather they had on hand. In the state archives, at any rate, there are not only alligator inlays, but also calfskins of varying textures, non-leather covers (for example, buckram) and even one volume with either a beige calf or vellum inlay.¹² The inlay is in a formée (or Romanesque) cross pattern.¹³

Another reason for the variation in binding materials is that volumes in most series were purchased from more than one bindery. Record books in these series were purchased from establishments in New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Savannah, and Jacksonville, to name only a few cities. Entries were made in some volumes over a period of many years. By the time an agency needed a new book, the style could have changed or the bindery gone out of business.

What may be surprising, considering the history of the alligator industry, is that the Florida State Archives has so many volumes with the skin. The hunting of these reptiles became a profitable business in the mid 1850s after France discovered that alligator skins could be turned into durable products. The Civil War adversely affected the industry, but it had recovered by 1870. The 1880s saw unrestricted slaughter of alligators. During this decade tanneries processed some two-and-a-half million hides,

¹² See Volume 3, Series 252. Vellum is a fine-grained calfskin or lambskin, not tanned but prepared with lime, and used for writing on or binding.

¹³ A formée or Romanesque cross is an ancient heraldic pattern having the arms narrow at the center and expanding toward the ends.

which were used primarily for shoes and handbags.¹⁴ By the turn of the century it was estimated that the alligator populations in both Florida and Louisiana were only one-fifth what they had been twenty years earlier.¹⁵

Since increasing demands would have meant higher costs, much use of alligator skin after 1900 would not be expected. Yet eighty percent of the volumes have beginning entries from 1900 or later--a curious development unless these books were manufactured much earlier than their initial entry dates. At any rate, the fact that no volumes are found with beginning entries after 1915 was not, as might be thought, because of Florida laws restricting the hunting of alligators. Despite the reduction in the alligator population, hunting of the animals continued. It was not until 1965 that the sale, possession, or transportation of alligator skins was made illegal, and not until 1970 that poaching was banned.

An important question is whether these books are also found in city halls, county courthouses, and other state agencies of Florida, and in other archives.¹⁶ Several southern archives and Florida agencies have been contacted but none has indicated having any alligator-skin record books. Thus they are probably unique to Florida and, moreover, found only in the Florida State Archives.

The intrinsic factors that make the volumes worth preserving in the original format are the artistic use of the skin, gold tooling, and marbled-pattern paper; evidence of technological development; age; and exhibit value. These factors also provide the basis for research into a wealth of subjects: history, binding

¹⁴ This information is taken from: Sonnie M. Toops, *The Alligator: Monarch of the Everglades* (Homestead: The Everglades National History Association, Inc., 1979), 45.

¹⁵ Dick Bothwell, *The Great Outdoors Book of Alligators* (St. Petersburg: Great Outdoors Publishing Co., 1962), 23.

¹⁶ Alligators were found in ten other southern states in the 1880s.

technology, art, economics, foreign trade, and conservation and preservation. To those who handle and observe these books and consider their values, they afford a palpable pleasure that miniaturized technology cannot match.¹⁷ As originals they retain those intrinsic qualities that make them, indeed, showpieces.

Hal Hubener is Special Collections Librarian at the Lakeland Public Library, Lakeland, Florida. He worked with alligator-skin bindings while Archivist I in the reference section at the Florida State Archives.

¹⁷ Ironically it may be necessary to convert the printed information in these books to microfilm or optical disk because of their fragile condition. Researchers interested only in the information content could then work from reproductions, and the original volumes would be available only to those researching their intrinsic value. The *NARS Staff Information Paper 21* (4) advises copying fragile, significant, or rare works.