

THE LEDGER

Analyzing the ledger as object, rather than reading its contents, offers yet another form of fresh evidence in the world of goods. The business partnerships of several people and the sale of goods on credit required careful record keeping. How that record keeping evolved into a particular form tells of technological changes in paper and bindings (makers) and financial practices and institutions (users).

An account book is at its heart simply a blank book. The phrase "blank book" originated in the twelfth-century practice of creating multiple-paged books to house valuable paper. Their owners could use them any way they chose. Out of that simple beginning, specialized book forms evolved, with different sizes, shapes, and bindings created to accommodate precise manners of use and forms of accounting evidence. Blank books came first; bookkeeping followed.

Bound books of blank paper were widely available in the eighteenth century. Colonial printers in Annapolis and Williamsburg printed, bound, and stocked books. In a lengthy 1730 newspaper advertisement for numerous services, books, and book types, printer William Parks noted in passing his supply of "shop-books." When John Dixon joined William Hunter and advertised their stationery supplies and bookbinding services, they also listed "Ledgers, Journals, Day-books, and all Sorts and Sizes of Blank books for Merchants Accounts or Records, Blanks of all kinds for Merchants, County Clerks, etc."

General merchants also stocked blank books in their stores. In 1772, for example, Hook ordered twenty-seven different types of blank books;

fifteen octavo paper books, three folio paper books, one large ledger, and six pocket books. The large ledger cost an extraordinary 28 shillings, almost five times the amount of the folios. Smaller octavo and pocket books could be had for a shilling or so. He stocked small memorandum books to jot notes and other small paper books to list debtors-both could be tucked inconspicuously into a pocket or the corner of a bag. Hook's own surviving account books are common octavo and pocket-sized and either cloth- or paperbound, although some, such as his 1771-72 daybook, have lost their covers completely.

To see whether this moves us closer to discovering a standard size that would help us understand how a person could judge from afar that a closed bag contained account books, it is necessary to assess them physically. Many archives simply catalog all bound volumes with names and numbers as account books so it is hard to generalize from their records. A survey of the contents of two major manuscript collections, however, revealed that middle and late eighteenth-century ledgers generally were greater in length than width than other bound books, with most being slightly less than fifteen inches long and nine inches wide.

The size of an account book was largely a function of paper size -that is, whether the paper was folded in folio, quarto, or octavo sections prior to binding. The octavo size - three times folded into long and thin sections - was well suited to recording the business of merchants, as it allowed for a certain set of data to be particularly arranged: a name could be written in on the top, a date, commodity, and price below that, running debits listed on the left side, and credits listed on the right. Vertical lines guided the writing so that information became standardized into certain

forms. That ledgers continued to be filled with laid paper, a paper produced through a traditional paper technology using frames, when other paper types had evolved may indicate that lines embedded in laid paper lines helped in the demarcation of columns.

That need for order continued well into the nineteenth century: William Birch ended his early nineteenth-century advertisement for his Philadelphia stationery business with the note that he both made and sold an array of books "with or without cross pencillines."

Only a few eighteenth-century ledgers in the repositories examined had embossed labels of "day-book" or "ledger." Most of the bindings were leather and boards, but some were made of paper and some had more extravagant vellum bindings. The shape of the paper in the book in turn drove the evolution of certain financial mechanics - of keeping stock, single-unit pricing, total cost. The page size was such that there was only a limited space in which to write details describing the goods purchased. Late in the eighteenth century American merchants encountered difficulties as states began a decades-long transition to dollar accounting (two-part decimal numbers) and yet simultaneously continued to use the three-part English money designation (pounds, shillings, and pence). The books could not accommodate those both easily.

Even the type of writing used differed with each book type; in a daybook the writing is tightly clustered, sometimes just jotted notations hastily scrawled on a page. The ledger was filled at a more leisurely pace, with the customer's name often at the top of a page, dates of purchases arrayed below, and a greater empty white space left at the bottom of the

page marking the prediction of future sales. Usually a junior member of the firm kept and cross-posted the books. Since the merchant might display these books to his customers, the ability to write well became proof of personal refinement and business regularity. In all these ways, and more, standardization of retail practices enforced ordered conduct among those who kept the books.

Finally, as ledgers increasingly became standardized in quarto size, specialized storage space for them was created. A long thin shelf or drawer, sometimes built vertically, sometimes horizontally, slowly became an element of choice in desk design, and the size of the slot or drawer corresponded with the common ledger dimensions. A future owner could request that a bookcase with two long flat niches to hold ledgers be added to the desk. A merchant probably requested a large number of ledger spaces so he could store a full set of accounts. These forms illustrate the importance of household and commercial accounting stored in bound books by the middle of the eighteenth century.

By the early nineteenth century, the functional combination of a thin central door to hold an account book, side drawers, and pigeonholes became far more common in writing desk interiors.

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