

Provenance: What is it and why do we care?

What is it?

PROVENANCE: “The pedigree of a book’s previous ownership. This may be clearly marked by the owner’s name, arms, bookplate, or evidence in the book itself; or it may have to be pieced together from such outside sources as auction records or booksellers’ catalogues.”

--John Carter, *ABC for Book Collectors* (Oak Knoll Press, 1998)

Why do we care?

“Recorded ownership in a particular book at a particular time can tell us something about both owner and text; it can allow us to make deductions about the tastes, intellectual abilities or financial means of the owner, and it can show the reception of the text at different periods of history. If the book is annotated, we can see further into that world of private relationship between reader and text, and the impact of books in their contemporary contexts.”

--David Pearson, *Books as History* (British Library, 2008)

What are the common types of provenance?

“There are numerous ways in which people have left traces of their ownership in books; they have written their names on the title page, they have pasted in printed bookplates, they have put their names or arms on the binding, they have used codes and mottos.”

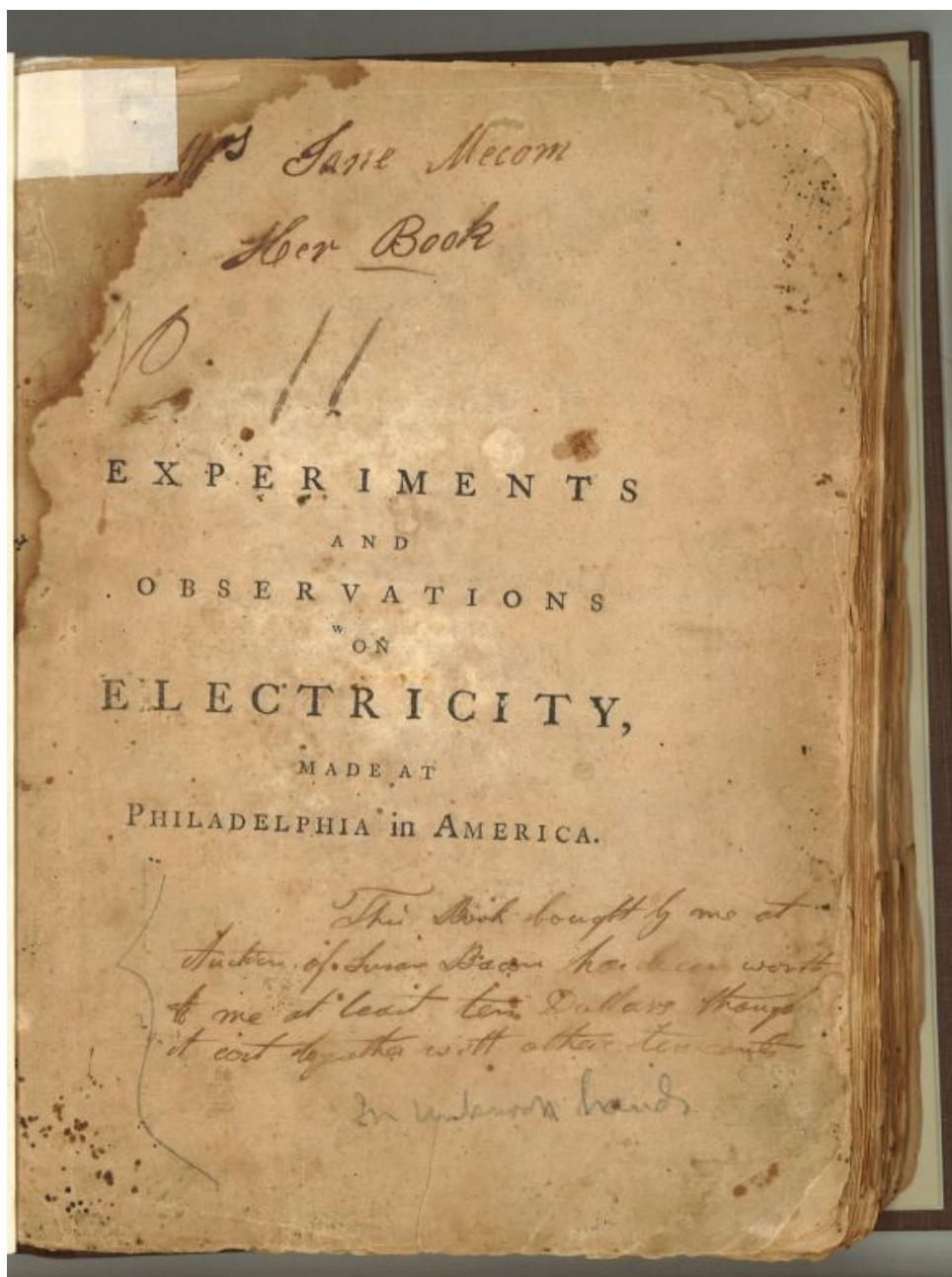
--David Pearson, *Books as History* (British Library, 2008)

How do we explore?

Each copy of a particular title has its own history. If a book, such as Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, is published in 1776, then each surviving individual copy of that work has its own 240-plus year history. By approaching objects as historical detectives, i.e., focusing on the physical evidence presented in the unique copy, we can begin to unravel both the history of the book’s reception and use, as well as the lives of the various owners.

Many aspects of book history, including provenance research, can be explored by thinking of the Five W’s: Who, What, Why, Where, and When?

AN EXAMPLE



DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Who owned this book?

A: “Mrs. Jane Mecom, Her Book No. 11” inscribed in ink at the top of the title page.

There is another inscription in an unknown hand that reads, “This Books bought by me at Auction of Susan Bacon has been worth to me at least ten Dollars though it cost together with others ten cents.”

What is the book?

A: Benjamin Franklin’s *Experiments and Observations of Electricity...* London: Printed for David Henry; and sold by Francis Newberry, MDCCLXIX.

Why would Jane Mecom own a copy of Franklin’s *Experiments and Observations of Electricity*?

A: Jane Mecom is Benjamin Franklin’s sister.

When did she own the book?

A: Between the publication of the book, 1769, and Jane’s death, 1794.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS ABOUT JANE: How and when did Jane get this book? If this is book number 11, what other works did Jane own? Knowing that she had a personal library, how literate was Jane, i.e. did she receive an education? Was she an author like her brother? What is her life story?

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BOOK: Is the binding original? Are there signs of additional ownership? When did Princeton acquire the book? How? Is the book annotated by Jane?

IN CLASS WORKSHEET

Basic facts:

Author:

Title:

Year:

Location:

Type of material (book, manuscript letter, etc.):

Binding:

Is the binding original or contemporary to the period?

Does it offer any unique markings that could be investigated further?

Signatures and inscriptions:

Are there any inscriptions on the front fly leaves or the title page?

Is there a bookplate?

Annotations:

Has the work been annotated?

Are the annotations by one owner or are multiple handwriting examples on display?

Dealer descriptions or additional related information:

Are there dealer or library descriptions included in the book or manuscript collection?

Library acquisition:

Are there markings that suggest how Princeton acquired the material and when?

Supplementary Resource:

Jill Lepore, *Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin* (2013), models the methods and outcomes of provenance research and library reconstruction.