

HIDDEN GEMS

The Michael Zinman Collection of Printing for the Blind

The Library Company of Philadelphia has collected printing for the blind since at least 1838. That year, it acquired the first text printed in raised letters in the United States, the *Gospel According to Saint Mark* (1833) (fig. 1). It was printed by Jacob Snider Jr. for the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind (PIIB), which Julius Friedlander (1803–39) established in

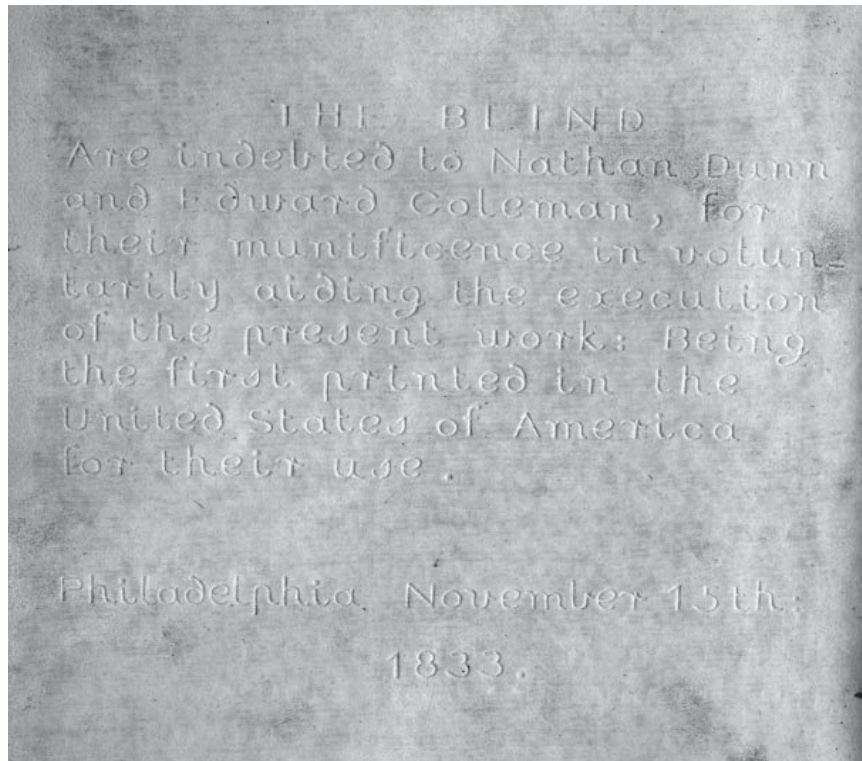


Fig. 1: *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (Philadelphia, 1833), 2. Image courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

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1833. The text appeared in tactile rounded script, one of many reading systems developed in the nineteenth century to educate the visually impaired.¹ In the following decades, more such publications entered the library's holdings. In recent years, this growth took place through the generosity of Library Company trustee emeritus Michael Zinman.

The Michael Zinman Collection of Printing for the Blind contains nearly one hundred of the few hundred titles of raised-print texts published in the country before 1890.² PIIB used line-type texts in its curriculum during most of the nineteenth century.³ Line types (i.e., alphabetical systems) mimicked the Roman alphabet. Developed in Paris in 1784, they were the first successfully printed raised type.⁴ Developers assumed they would be taught by sighted teachers, ensuring the education of the visually impaired conformed to the "manners of the seeing."⁵ Although texts were initially printed at PIIB and its peer institutions, production and distribution proved cost prohibitive. Books printed for the blind lacked a universally accepted reading system or a central publishing house. By mid-century, these texts became educational commodities.⁶

Nineteenth-century books printed for the blind typically exhorted piety in overcoming adversity, with Biblical and popular moral works, such as *The Dairyman's Daughter* (1883), predominating. Primers, geography and music lesson books, and history, science, and literary volumes also feature in the dozens of tactile works in the library's holdings. Many are reprints of popular, ink-

¹ For a concise yet constructive overview of the various methods used in raised printing for the blind during the nineteenth century, see Elizabeth M. Harris, "Inventing Printing for the Blind," *Printing History* 8 (1986): 15–25.

² The Michael Zinman Collection of Printing for the Blind inspired the Library Company's exhibition *Common Touch: The Art of the Senses in the History of the Blind*. This multisensory exhibition exploring the nature of perception was on display from April 4, 2016, until October 21, 2016. Generously funded by the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, the exhibition was curated by artist-in-residence Teresa Jaynes. *Common Touch* combined her own work with items from the collection.

³ The Jacob Snider embossed print was followed circa 1837 by Philadelphia line, a type designed in consultation with Friedlander. The system was based on capital Roman letters. It, in turn, was superseded circa 1867 by combined letter. Developed by blind printer Napoleon B. Kneass, this line type combined Roman capital letters with a version of the angular-shaped letters of Boston line. Boston line was originally developed in 1835 by Samuel G. Howe, principal of the New England Asylum for the Blind (later Perkins Institution for the Blind).

⁴ Valentin Haüy (1745–1822), French linguist, educator, and founder of the first school for the blind, developed the type a year before he established the Royal (later National) Institution for the Young Blind in 1785.

⁵ Julius Friedlander, *An Address to Public at the First Exhibition of the Pupils of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind, at the Musical Fund Hall, Thursday Evening, November 21, 1833* (Philadelphia, 1833), 8.

⁶ According to Kneass, PIIB printed about twenty different titles. N. B. Kneass, "Printing for the Blind," in *The Encyclopaedia of Printing*, ed. Luther Ringwalt (Philadelphia, 1871), 64.

printed texts. A number of the volumes, like Denison Olmsted's *Rudiments of Natural Philosophy* (1845), contain embossed illustrations, maps, or diagrams (fig. 2). The Zinman Collection serves as a compelling resource to examine the Victorian pictorial turn. In this era, society privileged sight in the attainment of knowledge. In the nineteenth century, the blind learned to read immersed in this visually literate culture. The works in the Zinman Collection document both the history of the sociopolitically charged education students received and the popular and visual culture of the visually impaired.

The collection also includes a number of genre firsts, printed in association with PIIB, that provide an alternate perspective on nineteenth-century pedagogical priorities. The school issued the first ever raised-print periodical, *The Students' Magazine* (1838–45), which contained “original compositions by the pupils . . . illustrative of their . . . thinking.” PIIB also published the first tactile *Dictionary of the English Language* (1860), trumpeted as “an invaluable aid in teaching . . . the true meaning of words in daily use.”⁷ A decade later, the combined-letter version of *The Merchant of Venice* (1870) entered the school's library. Printed by the type's designer, Napoleon B. Kneass (1844–98), an instructor and former pupil at the school, the literary classic was touted as the first Shakespeare play published in its entirety in raised print.⁸

By the turn of the twentieth century, alphabetical systems began to fade from the education of the blind, both in Pennsylvania and nationally. The American Printing House for the Blind, in Louisville, Kentucky, became the official, federally funded source of education texts for the visually impaired in 1879. This principal publishing house facilitated the pervasiveness of dot systems by spearheading technological advances in raised printing. Braille and New York Point, most easily read by the fingertip, prevailed. The Zinman Collection contains a number of specimen sheets, some compiled as scrapbooks, demonstrating these codes. The works document the protracted evolution in reading systems for the blind, which for many decades privileged sight over touch. These raised texts provide an unrealized site for exploring a kinesthetic history of Victorian education.

Only a few hundred titles were published in raised systems for the blind before 1890. The Zinman Collection contains a significant number of these texts, which are rich sources for the study of the education of the blind, the history of reading, and the sensory turn in the field of visual

⁷ *Fifth Annual Report of the Managers of Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind* (Philadelphia, 1838), 11; *Twenty-Third Annual Report of the Managers of Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind* (Philadelphia, 1856), 18.

⁸ Kneass, “Printing for the Blind,” 66.

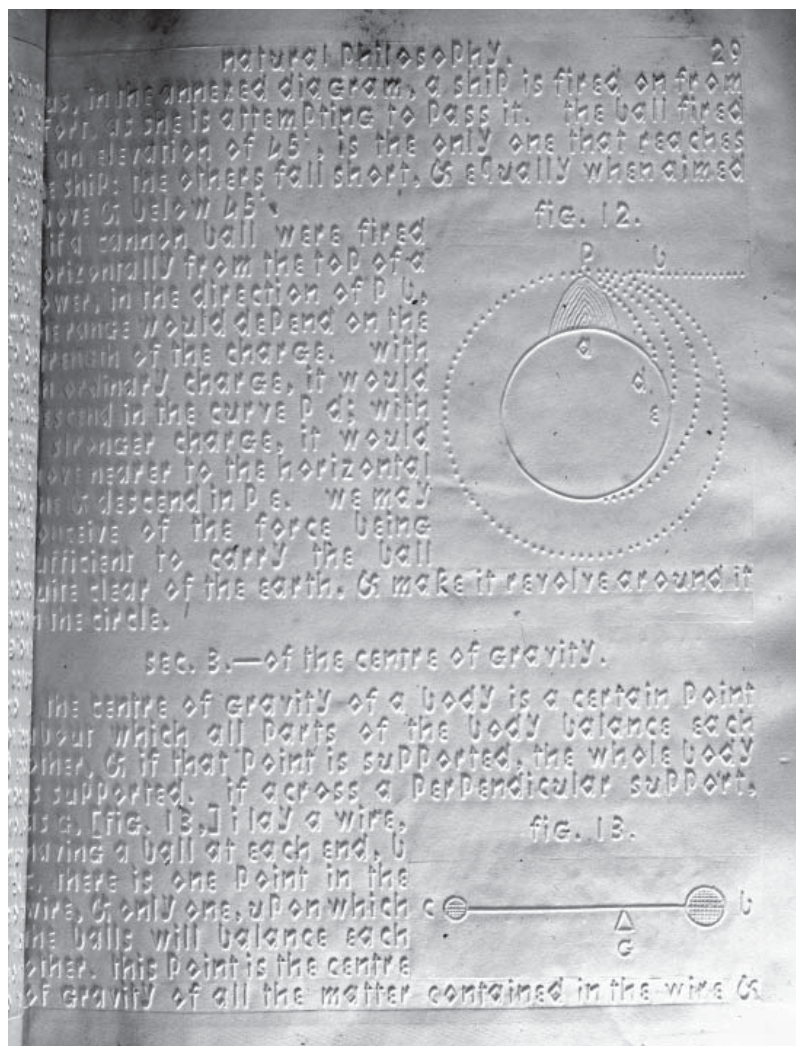


Fig. 2: Denison Olmsted, *The Rudiments of Natural Philosophy* (Boston, 1845), 29. Image courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

culture. For contemporary scholars as for past readers, the works represent commodities. The collection fosters needed challenges to our presumptions about the relationship between sight, reading, and knowledge in the history of education in Pennsylvania.

Library Company of Philadelphia

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