

CASE #28

Studying the Physical Book across Collections

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES ENGAGED FROM [GUIDELINES FOR PRIMARY SOURCE LITERACY](#) BY THIS CASE STUDY

- 1.C. Draw on primary sources to generate and refine research questions.
- 1.D. Understand that research is an iterative process and that as primary sources are found and analyzed the research question(s) may change.
- 2.A. Identify the possible locations of primary sources.
- 2.D. Understand that historical records may never have existed, may not have survived, or may not be collected and/or publicly accessible. Existing records may have been shaped by the selectivity and mediation of individuals such as collectors, archivists, librarians, donors, and/or publishers, potentially limiting the sources available for research.
- 4.E. Factor physical and material elements into the interpretation of primary sources including the relationship between containers.

4.F. Demonstrate historical empathy, curiosity about the past, and appreciation for historical sources and historical actors.

CASE STUDY LOCATION Louisiana State University
 Baton Rouge, Louisiana
 <https://www.lib.lsu.edu>

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Introduction and Institutional Context

Louisiana State University (LSU) is the flagship public research university for the state of Louisiana. Located in the capital of Baton Rouge, the institution has grown from its founding in 1860 to serve over 35,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The LSU Library system includes the four-story, open-stacks main library, as well as Special Collections, housed in the historic Hill Memorial Library. Together the two libraries have four million volumes. Special Collections houses roughly 5000 different manuscript collections. Teaching in the main library is handled by a team of fifteen Research and Instruction Librarians, each with their own specialty. Most of the teaching in Special Collections is handled by the Head of Instruction, together with a team of four others with part-time responsibilities.

Humanities & Social Sciences Librarian Brittany O’Neill, Curator of Books and Head of Instruction John David Miles, and Associate Professor of English Lauren Coats started planning in Fall 2019 for a course first offered in Spring 2020. The idea for partnering had its germination in 2018 when Andrew Stauffer, an English professor at the University of Virginia, reached out to LSU Libraries’ Dean Stanley Wilder about potentially participating in his Book Traces project, a “large-scale project to find and record historical readers’ interventions in the circulating collections of the University of Virginia Library, focusing on volumes published before 1923.” These interventions include “unique evidentiary or artifactual value due to characteristics including marginalia, inscriptions, artwork, and inserted objects such as photographs and correspondence.” Coats, Miles, and O’Neill partnered to participate in the project, through which they had access to the project support provided by Stauffer and project manager Kristin Jensen. The LSU team created an assignment for the LSU course that capitalized on the Book Trace’s platform and the project. Coats, Miles, and O’Neill worked to integrate the Book Traces project into a scaffolded introduction for undergraduate students to study the book as a material artifact. The LSU Team collaborated to create a series of assignments for the literature course, which course was offered a second time in Fall 2021 and will be taught again in Fall 2024. The partnership of these three made it possible to connect the main library and the special collections library to the curricular space, opening up learning opportunities for everyone involved.

The assignment series was embedded in a course on “America’s Bestsellers,” a lower-level literature course that fulfills the university’s General Education humanities requirement. Students completed three linked exercises in which they examined books in the special collections library, in their regular classroom, and in the main library’s open stacks. For each location an assignment asked students to study a different aspect of the book as an object. These three linked assignments helped students build a larger skill set for analyzing books. Moving across different library collections and university spaces helped students analyze the course’s leading question – how books, or a particular book, are valued and used – by connecting the physical space of library collections to the physical form of the book. This case study shows how building a series of assignments can help students gain skills in analyzing the book-as-object while also learning about the kinds of collections their institution has, and why the collections are different. These activities show how an emphasis on material form and institutional history can augment students’ understanding of the work of literature.

Narrative

We are librarians and English teachers who developed a series of class assignments that introduced students to the vast literary output of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but without actually reading it. This may seem counterintuitive, but by asking students to *not* read we open up the possibilities for other ways of studying and learning from books. While other parts of the class asked students to do more traditional literary analysis – to read – in this assignment series our goal was instead to help students think about books as things, material objects that people and institutions value and use in a variety of ways. While never a substitute for reading, by studying how and why books end up in different spaces in the university, as well as attending to the book as a physical artifact, students gained a deeper understanding of how books tell stories beyond those contained in their text.

Using special collections to highlight books' physical form

The first exercise took place in LSU's Special Collections library, where book curator John Miles assembled a selection of books that highlighted various aspects of bookish materiality. These examples used the diverse resources of LSU's special collections to dramatize the physical nature of books: miniature books, designed for portability or show, juxtaposed with large folios for public or ceremonial use; finely bound prayer books and elaborate artists' books; and books that had been personalized by readers in a number of ways, from fore-edge paintings, to elaborate marginalia, to flowers pressed in between pages. For students who all-too-often interact with texts through an electronic screen, it was a day of wonder, meant to show them that texts convey information through their physical form. The examples chosen were purposefully fantastic. Doing so helped students think of the books they encountered as something other than ordinary, everyday objects. Instead, by using examples of bookish materiality that were stunning, unique, intricate, or intimate, students were put in a position of looking at the book as something extraordinary. Students were invited to engage their curiosity about the choices that past historical actors had made about how to present or treat the book. What prompted someone to paint an intricate fore-edge painting on a volume of poetry? Which person carried a miniature bible in their pocket? Who left the flowers in the pages?

After an introduction to special collections and some examples of books whose material form draws attention to itself, the students were broken into small groups and given a pair of texts to look at themselves. Each group had a different pair of objects chosen to illustrate fine bindings, readerly interventions, spectacular illustrations, or some other physical aspect. This session thus introduced methods and terminology for studying books' materiality through hands-on inquiry. Students were tasked with figuring out what their assigned two texts had in common. Miles developed a worksheet to guide students through the process of examining the pair of texts to discern what it was that made each pair distinct, and in turn how that feature then impacted the readers' experience and meaning-making. One example is of two different works each of which had decorative text blocks: one had a fore-edge painting and the other had gaufered edges. Another set featured unique, decorative bindings, while yet another was distinguished by copious marginalia. To aid in their solving of the mystery of what the pair of texts assigned had in common, students had a list of book terms, and were able to ask questions and discuss with Miles. Each student group spent about 20 minutes investigating their paired items, talking with each other and

Miles to try to discern what the two items had in common and why this trait was significant. Students then presented their findings to the class. This use of dramatic examples engaged students' interest as they became familiar with a range of material concerns and were also introduced to the special collections libraries and the breadth of the libraries' collections.

Using students' own book to highlight books' physical form

While the students—and the team members—enjoyed the riches of Hill Memorial Library, part of the overall project was to encourage students to see all books as conveying meaning through their material form, even the seemingly most mundane books. The second exercise took place in the more mundane confines of students' regular classroom. Lauren Coats, the course's instructor of record, asked students to bring in a book of their own that was important to them. It could be any book: a favorite novel, a family heirloom, a textbook from a course they'd taken, or any other book on their shelves. Coats then asked the students to use the same analytical skills for interpreting the book form that they had developed in the special collections library visit and apply them to their chosen book. Students completed a worksheet on their selected book that asked the same questions and used the same terms as the special collections visit. Students provided bibliographic information about their selected book, and described the binding, cover, paper, internal organization, illustrations, decorations, and marginalia. The worksheet format provided a checklist and reminder of the kinds of features that students can analyze.

These two exercises' similarity was intentional, as it both allowed students to practice their new skills in and terminology for analyzing books as objects, and let them see that they could unpack the materiality of books that are "ordinary" as well as those found in the rare book department. The students then used their worksheet as the basis for a short paper in which they chose two features from the many on the worksheet, and analyzed what those features tell them about the book. Students completed the worksheets and papers outside of class. In class, students shared their chosen examples. The classroom discussion let students share their passion for the books they chose, and also let students talk about the similarities and differences between the examples they analyzed in the special collections library and their own books. The conversation emphasized the portability of the skill in analyzing the book as an object, and the individual connection that a person can form to a book or the unique meaning it can hold. In focusing on why each individual student valued a particular book, the class as a whole was able to compare what makes a book "special" for an individual versus a special collections library. The stories shared by students were wide ranging and heartfelt. The images shared here showcase several, each of which evidences how the material book bears traces of the value that book had for its owner.

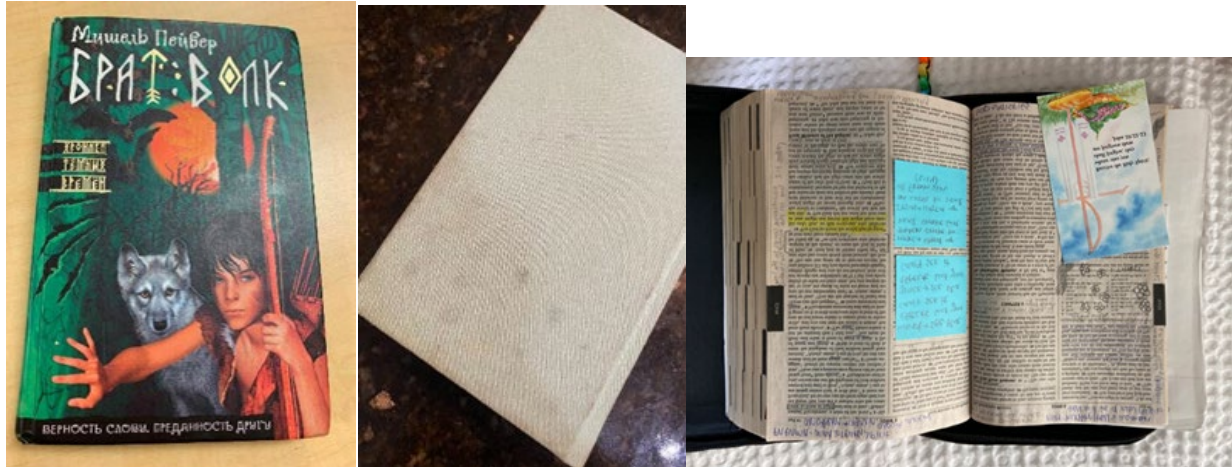


Figure 1: Images of books selected by students. L to R: a book cover whose language reminds a student of their home country and move to the United States; a footprint on the back of their favorite book that evidences the student bringing the book everywhere; a student book with notes, inserts, and highlighting signaling its frequent use.

In the Stacks

It is this attention to the different ways that individuals and institutions can value books that segued into the third assignment. In this phase, students participated in the Book Traces project. As the project website describes,

Thousands of old library books bear fascinating traces of the past. Readers wrote in their books, and left pictures, letters, flowers, locks of hair, and other things between their pages. We need your help identifying them in the stacks of academic libraries. Together we can find out more about what books were and how they were used by their original owners.

LSU students surveyed books in the open stacks of LSU’s Main Library that have exactly these kinds of individual “interventions.” This term, as used by Book Traces, emphasizes that people from the past didn’t just passively read books and that they sometimes left their mark on the books they read. In the present, we can discover these marks of how individuals used—read, loved, argued with, gifted, used as a safe place to stash papers, or otherwise—books.



Alex Waugh
August. 1921.

Brande Essay Prize
founded A D 1857, by Edward Augustus Brande Esq
formerly Apothecary to their late Majesties King
George the Third, the Queen Charlotte, and King
William the Fourth
adjudged the 17th day of July 1862,
Charles F. Gate.

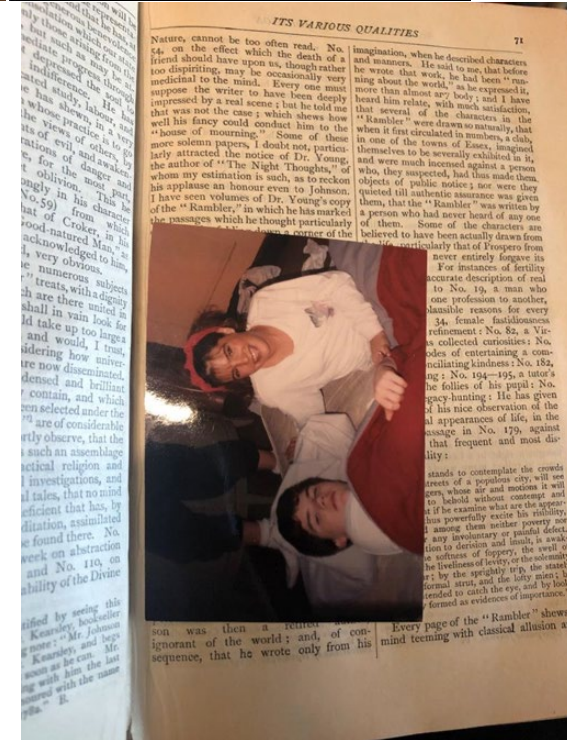
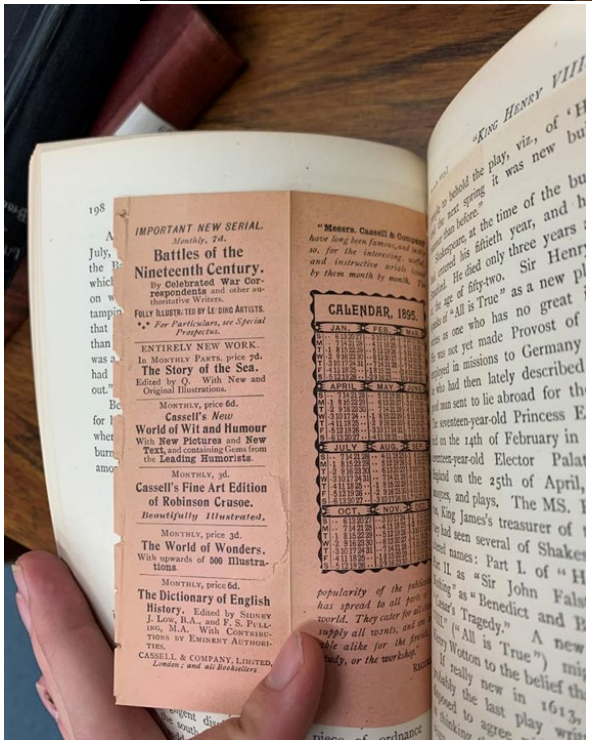
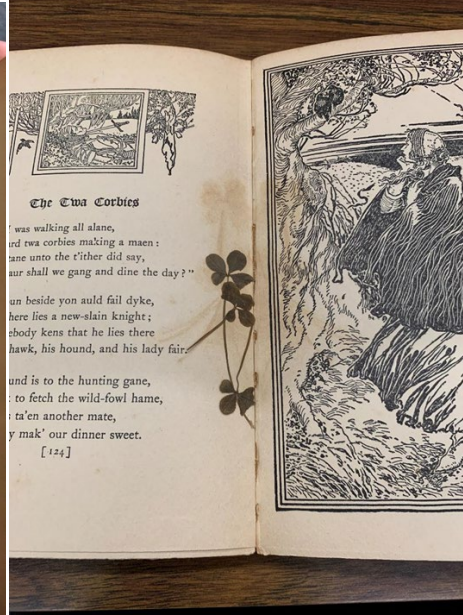
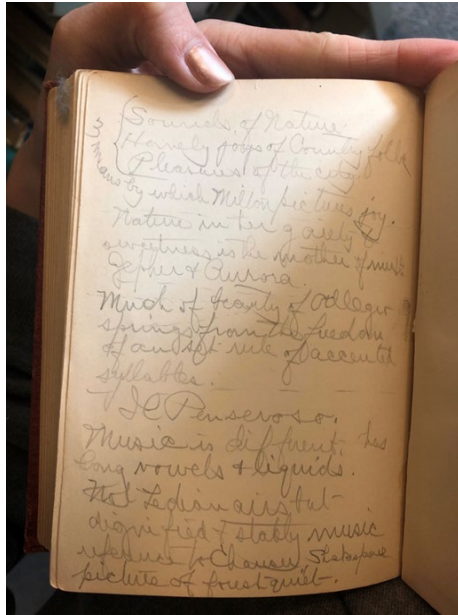


Figure 2: Examples of “interventions” LSU students found. From top to bottom: bookplate, inscription, content notes, plants, advertisement sheet, and photograph.

The first step was to identify the books that students would examine. O’Neill worked with Dana Taylor, LSU Libraries’ Director of Collection Services, to pull titles of all pre-1923 books in the open stacks in LSU’s Main Library, a total of 73,707 books. From that set, Book Traces project manager Jensen randomly selected about 2000 titles to use for the class project, pulling from books in American Literature (Library of Congress classification PS), American History (E), British Literature (PR), World History (D-DX), and Christianity, Theology and the Bible (BR-BX). This selection fit well

with the humanities-oriented literature course. From this set of 2000, each student was assigned 50 books to locate in the open stacks and to examine for interventions. Students recorded their findings using a customized app made by Jensen for Book Traces on the Google Appsheet platform. This user-friendly platform meant that students could use their phones to check off their assigned books, describe the intervention, and add up to three photos per book of any intervention.

This third assignment began with an orientation and introduction held in the LSU Main Library. The first time the course was taught, Jensen was able to attend the session, along with Coats and O'Neill. In the second iteration of the course, O'Neill and Coats held it themselves. In the orientation students were introduced to the app and the process of finding books in the stacks. While not the primary goal, the exercise taught students how to understand call numbers and find books in the stacks. In the orientation, students found one or two books each, and brought them back to the group so the class could discuss together what constituted an "intervention," a concept Jensen introduced through examples. Students had two weeks to complete their assigned samples. The results were shared via Google Drive, which allowed students to see a spreadsheet of all the works (with call number, title, author, year of publication, barcode or item id, shelving location), along with all of the images created by students in the class. While students were at first daunted by the prospect of searching for 50 books, they found it went quickly, usually about 2-3 hours total per student.

Since two previous assignments had built student skills in paying attention to the book-as-object, students were already familiar with looking for and analyzing special features of books. For this phase, students focused on interventions made by readers: signatures, things left in books, marginalia, and the like. The question the class posed was: what can we learn about how individuals responded to a particular book? What can we learn from the book itself about how everyday readers, whose names may not have made it into official histories or records, used and valued books?

Students found that not all books had interventions. This lack of result was an important lesson in the research process, as students discovered that research involves eureka moments and fascinating finds as well as dead ends and a lack of results. O'Neill calculated that about 15% of the books had an intervention. Each student was then asked to write a paper based on a readerly mark in one book, or small set of books. Most students picked an intervention that they had found themselves, but students could pick an intervention found by any student since all results were shared in the app via Google Drive. They were then tasked with figuring out what they could learn from studying their chosen intervention.

Answering this open question about what they could learn introduced the iterative nature of research, as students had to figure out what questions they could ask about the interventions and which ones could be researched or addressed. For instance, a student might be interested in finding out who a particular individual was who wrote their name in a book, but that information was not always available. Students had to figure out what historical information about individuals and individual books has been studied and recorded, and what aspects lie beyond scholarly reach. One student was fascinated by an inscription in a book that was given as a Christmas gift. The student realized they could not figure out why that particular book was given by that particular person, since the historical record does not include information about that person. Interestingly, students

became more rather than less interested in individuals who could not be identified precisely because they are “unknown.” Why are some individuals known, or have records in archives, or make the history books? Class discussions and the research process allowed us to recognize these absences and ask these questions. At the same time, students worked what they can research and study. In this case, for example, the student pivoted to studying gift books as a phenomenon.

Several books contained interventions indicating that they were owned by Anna Ely, the young daughter of famed late-19th and early-20th-century economist Richard Ely. Anna’s books came to the university when the LSU purchased her father’s library, most of which stayed in the special collection & archives library. Some volumes, however, were relegated to the open stacks: including the books read by Anne Ely, whose childish signature adorns multiple volumes. While none of the students knew Richard Ely, discussing why some of his collection ended up in LSU archives & special collections while those with his daughter’s signature ended up in the circulating collection underscored that “existing records ... have been shaped by the selectivity and mediation of individuals,” and that even the location of volumes in LSU’s collections provide insight into the institution’s valuation of the books.

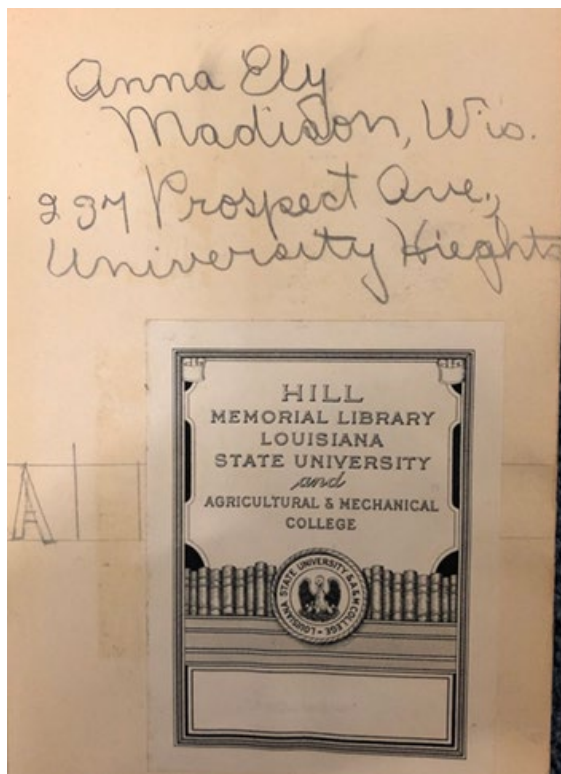


Figure 3: Anna Ely’s signature from a book in LSU’s circulating collection.

Inscriptions and ownership signatures were frequent objects of study and opened students’ minds to who gets remembered and what gets saved. In some cases, individuals could be uncovered. In

each case, students had to figure out what resources can be used to develop their research into a particular mark. Miles and O'Neill, as well as Coats, answered questions from students during their research process; Miles helped multiple students with the Ely papers and books, and O'Neill fielded questions about appropriate library resources and databases. One student learned about their state's literary heritage by uncovering the signature of Grace King, a Louisiana author the student did not know, in several volumes. Researching King required that the student learn which databases had information about the author, such as the Dictionary of Literary Biography. A student interested in a name that was difficult to read due to the intricacy and design of the signature learned to go to the special collections librarians for paleographical help.

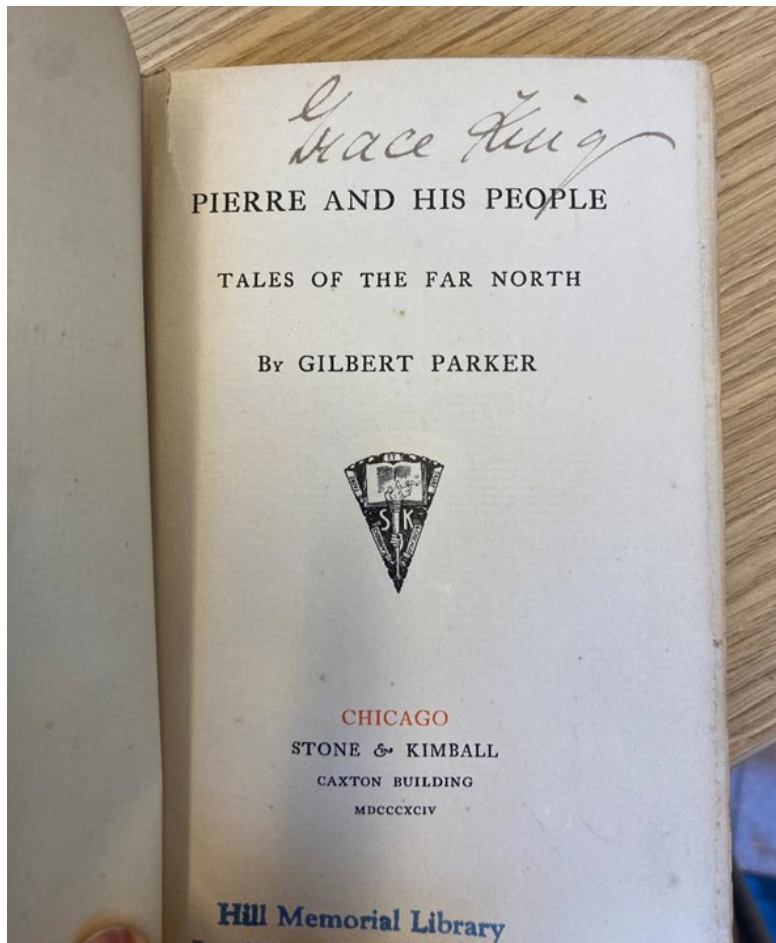


Figure 4: Grace King's signature in a book from LSU's circulating collection.

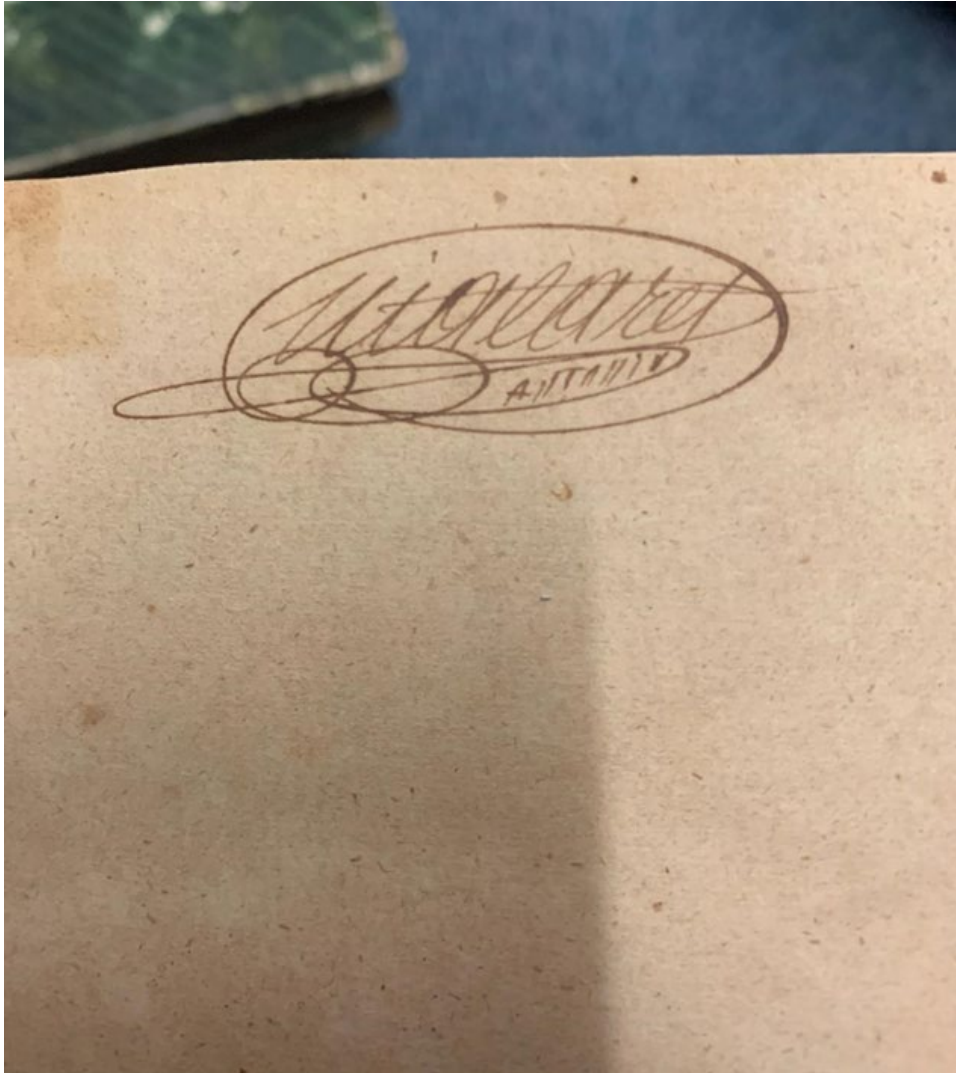


Figure 5: A signature that required librarian-aided deciphering.

In investigating these names and histories, students learned that they could return to special collections and the open stacks to investigate issues that interested them, and that they could access the expertise of library and departmental faculty in their research quest. These three assignments thus built analytical and research skills: students acquired skills and terms for analyzing the book-as-object, learned how to find books in the open stacks, were introduced to special collections, realized that books carry meaning in individual and institutional contexts, and were oriented to the research process. Most of all, students learned that books carry marks of value, and are valuable, in different ways for different people, and that not all values make the same imprint on the scholarly record or in library collections. In researching their selected interventions, students made an affective and intellectual connection to a book owned by a person whose name we may, or may not, remember.

Results

The effectiveness of the assignment series was primarily determined by the quality of the student work produced, especially the two papers. Students demonstrated their ability to identify and analyze features of the book as a physical artifact, to locate primary sources in LSU's Main and Hill Memorial Libraries, to recognize the different valuations of books by individuals and institutions, and to develop a research question based on a primary source's material features. As suggested in the narrative above, students' papers broached a wide range of topics, showcasing their engagement with the materials and the research process. That most students wrote their Book Traces research project based on interventions they found themselves is a sign of the affective connection students made to the materials; Coats found this sense of ownership and connection repeated in class discussions.

Lessons Learned

Developing assignments that were both independent and interlocking was important. We wanted students to build skills that could be developed across all three assignments, but that wouldn't preclude a student who missed an assignment or didn't do as well from participating fully in the next assignment. The pedagogical value of and reason for this scaffolding also helped build the collaborative team of Coats, Miles, and O'Neill. Collaboration across units and collections, that is, was generative for library and departmental faculty as well as students.

The high-quality work students produced ended up having a small audience: the class itself. In future versions of the course, the LSU Team would like to explore ways to share student work beyond the classroom. There are multiple ways of doing so, including student participation in LSU's undergraduate research program, a library-based exhibit, and/or a public presentation. Doing so would extend the collaboration to include the libraries as place and the collaborating librarians in the final phase of the research project.

Students were excited to do original research into items they selected. It helped students participate in the culture of undergraduate research that LSU fosters. The data-driven approach of collecting information about a set of texts in the Main Library appealed to humanities and non-humanities majors. The ease of use of the application, too, ensured that students enjoyed collecting data.

Appendix 1: Worksheet used by students to analyze a book selected from their own shelves

Part I. Describing the Book

A. Bibliographic information

Title	Publisher and/or Printer
Author	Date(s)
Editor	Volume(s)
Edition	

B. Description of physical object

Binding & Cover (condition, description, material, design or illustration)	Paper (condition, description, material)
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<p>Overall book</p> <p>(condition, description, size)</p>

C. Organization and Description of Contents

<p>Language</p>	<p>Division of materials</p> <p>(e.g., by chapter, date, unit)</p>
<p>Images/Illustration/Decorations</p> <p>(number, color, kind, description...)</p>	<p>Source/provenance of material</p>
<p>Table of Contents</p> <p>Index</p> <p>Dedication</p> <p>Preface</p> <p>Other front matter</p> <p>Other back matter</p> <p>Additional materials</p>	

D. Unique Physical Characteristics

Interesting binding, paper, or other material in making the book	Marginalia (printed or hand written)
Other (e.g., signature of owner, library stamps, etc.)	
What you find most interesting about the book as an object	