



# PHILATELI-GRAPHICS

Quarterly Publication of the Graphics Philately Association

Volume 45, Number 1 • Whole Number 176 • January 2023

ISBN 9739-6198

## Building a Common Press

*Bernie Vinzani*

I have been teaching courses in the art of the book at the University of Maine, Machias campus for over thirty years through a program I designed with a colleague that combines two concentrations of study, visual arts and creative writing, with core classes in book arts and publishing. Our studios, made possible with grants from the Stephen and Tabitha King Foundation, house letterpress and hand papermaking facilities and laser printing technologies for book production. Our graduates have gone on to careers as teachers, book artists, publishers, and graduate school candidates in book arts, intermedia arts, library science and paper conservation. In addition to making their own books, students work with faculty reviving original texts and republishing them as critical editions under our Early Maine Literature imprint. Students become the workers who design, print, and bind the books that are then sold through various distributors. All of the students who work on those books are listed in the colophon as a member of the production team; the book becomes a strong portfolio component when the students apply for jobs after graduation.

To help students foster an understanding of printing



*The Plain Press built by the author, Bernie Vinzani.*

and paper, I maintain an extensive collection of examples from the 14th century to contemporary fine printing and make it available for study in our archive room. Included within the collection are albums of philatelic material that contain early stampless covers, a range of postage stamps, watermarks on stamps and topical stamps that show graphic techniques and notable historical figures with their presses.

Two U.S. stamps in the archive include the well-known 1939 3¢ stamp (right) commemorating the 300-year



*USA, 1933. 300th anniversary of printing in colonial America. [Sc 857]*

Anniversary of Printing in Colonial America showing an engraving of the Stephen Daye Press, *cont on pg 4.*

## THIS ISSUE

<b>Building a Common Press</b> .....	<b>1 &amp; 4-6</b>
<b>GPA News</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Member Stamp Stories</b> .....	<b>2 &amp; 3</b>
<b>Bosnia-Herzegovina 1906 Landscape Issue</b>	
<b>Production Estimate</b> .....	<b>7-9</b>
<b>New Issues of Graphic Interest</b> .....	<b>10-12</b>



*Top left. The rounce that moves the bed under the platen.*

*Left. The coffin that contains the type and lock-up forms.*

*Above. The wooden press parts in the author's shop being fitted before assembly.*

*cont. from pg1*

and the 1973 8¢ Rise of the Spirit of Independence stamp depicting a flurry of press activity around the printed word. These stamps were shared with my students, and combined with my enthusiasm, started the process of the building of my "Common Press." What also played a role was a suggestion from the head of our campus that I apply for a Trustee Professorship with a proposal that would include integrating our program with town interests, possibly with an historical theme since Machias, Maine was an active participant in the war of independence from Great Britain. The first naval battle of that conflict occurred in its bay in 1775 when residents captured the British warship, the *Margaretta*. The board of Trustees of the University of Maine System granted my proposal, which gave me uninterrupted time away from teaching to build a press that would find a

good home in our program. It was time to get to work.

The challenge during my semester sabbatical was to find the resources needed to research various historical common presses and visit their locations on the east coast. Unfortunately, after contacting numerous resources, the best laid plans for travel were stopped when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. With my travel plans put on hold limiting non-essential travel in-state, and no travel out-of-state, I opted for a systematic analysis of any press I could find via publications and the internet. My experience building equipment, primarily Hollander Beaters for papermaking, gave me a bit of confidence that I could "learn from pictures," and figure out the mechanics of a press. Each press I reviewed prompted various notations about the aging of structural components, the problems that extreme pressure imparted to the wooden members and press joints, and



*Student Grace Moore applies ink using a small ink ball. Photo by Aura Moore.*



*Grace lowers the tympan holding the paper onto the inked type. Photo by Aura Moore.*

the support needed for the platen pressure when applied to the area being printed.

My own requirements for the press I was going to build ruled out traditional furniture making techniques, such as mortise and tenon joints that were used in the old presses, since I wanted to take the press apart on occasion to give demonstrations at various schools. I rationalized that in time the mortise and tenon joints would become weaker if taken apart and reassembled numerous times. My press is bolted together which helps to preserve the wooden structure, and it makes disassembly and on-location assembly easier.

The press is built from a combination of eastern hardwood, maple, birch and oak. The large timbers were made from 4" x 12" maple floor joists taken from a local barn being salvaged, having once housed teams of draft horses used to harvest trees from the Maine woods. A

cabinet maker friend had all of the joists stored for his eventual use and offered to me what I needed for the press. As we discussed the historical aspects of the press, we counted the growth rings of the wood and soon realized the barn, built in the 1840's, used wood that was at least sixty years old, alive when wooden common presses were in use.

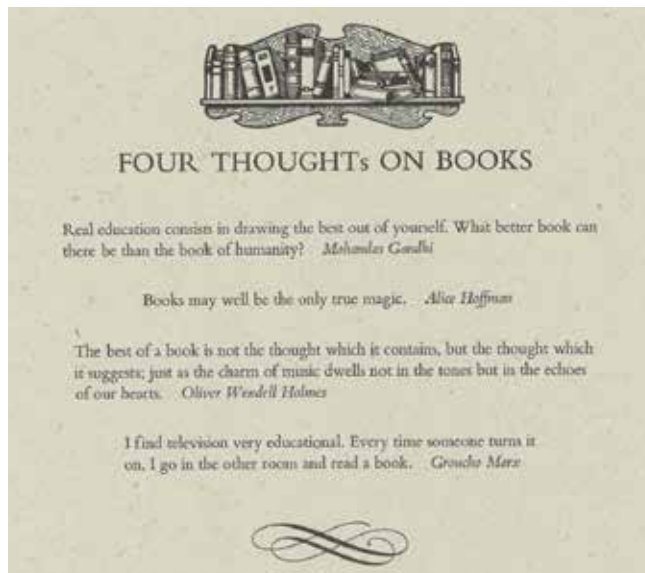
Much of the construction was fault free. Finding a machinist that could cut the screw and nut needed to apply pressure to the type became the only difficulty encountered. After many attempts to find someone interested, and then being told they could not produce the parts needed, I decided to adapt, using an inverted railroad jack I found that had the right thread pitch needed to move the platen downward to the tympan and the type below. The scale of the press was an important consideration in applying *concluded on next page.*



*Grace applies pressure to the tympan thereby printing the paper.  
Photo by Aura Moore.*

even pressure over the printed area. Most wooden presses stretched the platen size to print the largest area between the “cheeks,” the uprights of the press. The force needed was extreme to ensure the entire form was printed. I downsized my platen to keep a more consistent pressure over the smaller form.

After much tweaking with the press, using a variety of handmade inkballs to apply the ink to the type, satisfactory results were produced. Printing on the smaller form worked well. Advanced students in our program had the necessary skills to produce finely printed letterpress work using the two Vandercook proof presses in the studio. From their experience they knew the best impression came from less ink that kissed the surface of the type they printed. They soon found hand inking with an ink ball took a deft touch and keen observation to produce uniformly printed impressions. It also took patience to remember the pattern needed



*The small broadside (cropped) that Grace printed.*



*Student work on display in our “Gallery for the Book.”*

where every printed surface of the form got the same ink coverage. Since I emphasize the craft of fine printing in all of their work, their skill developed, in time, surpassing their initial expectations. We all learned through trial, error and humor.

Students who enter our program are a spirited group of inquisitive knowledge seekers, many from rural Maine where a work ethic exists among their families who have, for generations, made a living in the woods and on the water, where an attitude of learning skills was important and was needed to make good their task at hand. I’m also happy to add that a few students have started their own collections of stamps or refer to the finely printed specimens housed in my archive for creative inspiration.