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A Founder's Book

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A Founder's Book

Abstract

Short essay about a recently acquired book belonging to James Willson (1742-1798) and its history.

Keywords

James Wilson, Book History, Callimachus

Disciplines

History

Comments

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A Founder's Book

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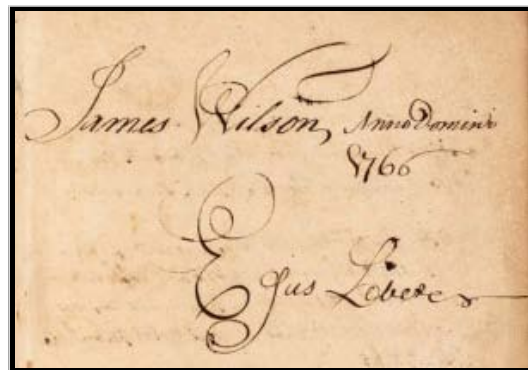
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Two weeks ago, the Penn Libraries hosted the annual [Rosenbach Lectures in Bibliography](#) featuring the book history scholar Ann Blair who has done fantastic work on the history of annotation and reading practices. Inspired by Blair's lectures I thought I would share a new acquisition here at the Kislak Center. My colleagues and I spotted this item at auction recently and we were able to acquire it in January. A [1532](#)

[Froben edition of the Greek poet Callimachus](#), our interest was primarily based on the prior owner of the book, [James Wilson](#), a signer of the Declaration of Independence and founder of the Penn Law School. Wilson (1742-1798) was born in Scotland and moved to Pennsylvania in 1765 when he was 23. He went on to become a successful lawyer, inaugural law instructor at the fledgling University of Pennsylvania, early American patriot, and one of the first justices of the new United States Supreme Court. For all of Wilson's importance and his role at Penn, until acquiring this volume we held no books identified as being in his library [\[1\]](#).



— Initial Z from Kallimachou Kyrenaïou Hymnoi. [UPenn Call# PA3945 .A2 1532](#)



WELCOME

Welcome to Unique at Penn, part of the family of University of Pennsylvania Libraries blogs. Every week this space will feature descriptions and contextualization of items from the collections of the University of Pennsylvania Libraries. The site focuses on those materials held by Penn which are in some sense "unique" - drawn from both our special and circulating collections, whether a one-of-a-kind medieval manuscript or a twentieth-century popular novel with generations of student notes penciled inside.

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- James Wilson’s ownership inscription in *Kallimachou Kyrenaiou Hymnoi*. [UPenn](#)
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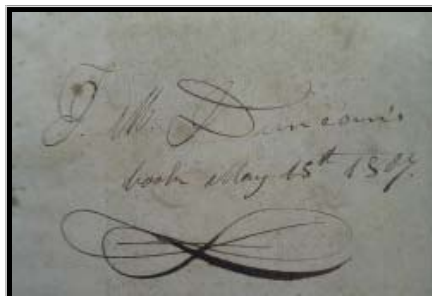
Wilson came to the North American colonies in the fall of 1765 and quickly became a tutor in classics at Penn. This volume is of special interest then as it dates from the first year of his time in Philadelphia. I have to especially thank our brilliant cataloger Liz Broadwell for her insight into Wilson’s inscription. What I had assumed was some corruption of “Ejus Liber” (his book) she masterfully read instead as “Ejus Lebetes” referring to a kind of Greek pot often presented as a prize (also a quote from the Vulgate Leviticus 27:3). This kind of classicist pedantry is just the kind of complicated allusion that would appeal to a young Greek instructor struggling to teach his students the ins and outs of a 4th century BC poet. After his time at Penn Wilson of course became one of the first U.S. Supreme Court justices but the last few years of his life were difficult ones and he died a debtor in 1798. In the course of settling his estate Wilson’s administrators sold his possessions to the highest bidder. Last week I went to look through this rather sad list of sales in the records of the Philadelphia register of wills [2]. Among the lists of old linens, and a judicial robe sold to [Samuel Chase](#) is an inventory of Wilson’s books. Unfortunately the Callimachus described here is not on the list, perhaps sold earlier or retained by a family member, indeed the list of books sold consists almost entirely of legal works.



- Entry for \$17 received by the Wilson estate for his judicial robe (Philadelphia Administrations 1799-66).

After the volume left Wilson’s hands it went to a J.M. Duncan whose inscription is dated 1807. This is perhaps John Mason Duncan who had graduated from Penn two years prior [3]. It then ended up in the collection of the

businessman and collector [John Gribbel \(1858-1936\)](#) and was sold in the massive auction of his library in the 1940s [4]. Though there are a few eighteenth-century notes taken on the preliminary leaves of the volume, perhaps in Wilson’s hand,



- Signature of J.M. Duncan dated May 15, 1807

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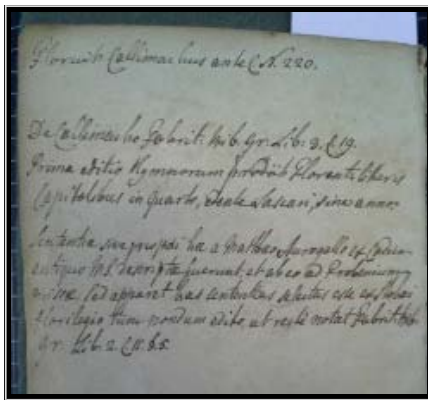
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□ **LATEST FROM PENNRARE**

- Leonard B. Meyer papers,

he and later readers appear to have added little in the way of marginalia. However, looking through the text I found my eyes drawn to the faint but voluminous traces of an earlier reader. These copious transliterations and notes taken between lines in the Greek text and in the margins are typical of early modern instructional practice. They suggest perhaps an early schoolboy reader, especially as the annotations exist only for certain portions of the text, indicative of lessons on particular chapters or poems. Though nearly impossible to photograph in natural light, under blacklight they come to life and overwhelm the page. I can't say for sure, but I think it's entirely possible



— Annotations on flyleaf of
Kallimachou Kyrenaïou Hymnoi.
UPenn Call# PA3945 .A2 1532

given the state of the annotations that they were intentionally washed by a later owner or book dealer, perhaps in the 19th century. Whereas in its original state, and indeed to Wilson in 1766, the book had value primarily as an excellent Greek teaching text, by the 19th and 20th centuries its value shifted to its association with Wilson and a new focus and **fetishization of the signers of the Declaration of**

Independence. It's truly exciting to have this volume and its many layers of use in the collection and I hope it will inspire interest for generations of students to come.

[1] Thanks to the work of Jeremy Dibbell and others with the **early American Libraries project** we know of a few other books with his provenance that have appeared in the trade. In addition both the Kislak Center and the Biddle Law Library at Penn hold manuscript material relating to Wilson. See **here** for Kislak mss., see also **Biddle Ms 016**

[2] Papers related to Wilson's estate are available at Philadelphia City Hall as *Administrations 1799-66 (James Wilson)*. They are in extremely poor condition and covered with black mold. Photostatic and later photocopy surrogates are also available in the file. I have made a **preliminary transcription** of Wilson's books from this inventory available.

1935-2008 May 6, 2014

■ The Joseph G. Rosengarten collection April 30, 2014

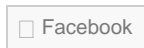
■ Old Friends Reunited April 24, 2014

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[3] For a brief biography of Duncan see [Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit* \(1869\)](#), pp. 145-6.

[4] *Autograph letters, manuscripts and rare books, the entire collection of the late John Gribbel, Philadelphia* (New York: Parke-Bernet Galleries, 1940-45).



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About Mitch Fraas

[Mitch Fraas](#) is the Scholar in Residence at the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries. He is also the interim director of the Penn digital humanities forum. At Penn, Mitch works on a variety of projects cutting across general and special collections, with a special focus on digital humanities. He holds doctoral and master's degrees in history from Duke University and earned his bachelor's degree at Boston College. His doctoral dissertation examined the legal culture of British India in the 17th and 18th centuries, arguing for the existence of a unified early modern British imperial legal culture whether in Philadelphia, Bombay, or London.

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