



The Aldus Society
PO Box 1150
Worthington, OH 43085
Aldussociety.com

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Early Publications Open Book on Columbus' History

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By Bill Eichenberger, Dispatch Book Critic

Publish books and you have all sorts of worries.

You might run out of paper or ink. Maybe Federal Express goes on strike and your books are stranded in a remote warehouse. Maybe your biggest author decides to publish on the Internet.

But no modern publisher is likely to face the obstacle that confronted Scott and Wright, the firm that printed the 11th edition of John Kilbourn's *The Ohio Gazetteer* in 1833.

"About the time designated for the commencement of the work," the publishers of *The Gazetteer* explain in a preface, "the cholera made its appearance in Columbus . . . and during the continuance of its ravages, it was found impracticable to go on with it."

Charles C. Cole Jr. is the author of *A Fragile Capital: Identity and the Early Years of Columbus, Ohio*. In it, he writes of Columbus' publishing history -- the subject of a talk he'll give Thursday to the Aldus Society, A Columbus Book Club.

"The interesting thing about Kilbourn's *Gazetteer*, which was one of the first books published in Columbus, is that it became a best seller," Cole said.

"He published the first edition in July of 1816 and the second edition four months later. He sold 14,000 copies in the first four years, mostly to people who lived out east and were considering coming to live in Ohio."

The nephew of Worthington founder James Kilbourne, John Kilbourn opened a bookstore in the post office on High Street in 1812. Had he been paid by the word, Kilbourn would have become rich on the full title of the *Gazetteer* alone:

The Ohio Gazetteer; or Topographical Dictionary, Containing a Description of Several Counties, Towns, Villages and Settlements, Roads, Rivers, Lakes, Springs, Mines, etc., in the State of Ohio, Alphabetically Arranged ...

And so on.

"Yes, they used a more verbose style than we would in the 21st century," Cole said, laughing. "But one of the things I was most impressed with in Columbus' early books was the quality of the writing. It seems the general population was more interested in schools, libraries and education than was the state legislature. That seems to be a tradition in Columbus."

The earliest books published in Columbus were of the self-improvement variety. "Useful" books were in demand -- and novels weren't deemed useful. (Besides, pirated versions of European novels were available from East Coast publishers cheap, a disincentive for Columbus publishers.)

“Most of the books focused on practical information and were intended to be read by the local residents,” Cole said. “They included books like Margaret Coxe’s *Young Lady’s Companion*, in which she offers friendly hints on how women should behave.”

Ladies, according to Coxe, should develop the following characteristics: “meekness, humility, gentleness, love and purity.” They should also practice “self-renunciation and subjugation of the will.”

Coxe followed up her best seller with *Woman: Her Station Providentially Appointed*, daring proto-feminists to take up the argument for women’s rights with God.

“There was some evidence of feminism in books from the 1840s,” Cole said. “The daughter of (19th-century Columbusite) Alfred Kelley told her minister, ‘Please don’t ask me to obey’ during her wedding ceremony.”

Like many of the books from Columbus’ early years, the various *Gazetteers* are filled with bits of information. To wit: In 1836, Ohio had an estimated 280,562 horses; High Street was 100 feet wide and Broad Street, 120 feet wide; and, Columbus enjoyed the services in 1838 of “12 lawyers, 12 physicians, one dentist and five clergymen.”

Who wouldn’t risk a little cholera to live in a city with only 12 lawyers?

In addition to its physicians, Columbus in 1833 was home to eight or nine “botanical practitioners, or steam doctors” who espoused the medicinal value of plants and the Indian practice of using steam treatments to cure various ailments. “Health books were the most profitable,” Cole said. “Boston steam doctor Samuel Thomson published the third edition of *A New Guide to Health, or Botanic Family Physician* with Columbus publisher Horton Howard and it sold for \$20.”

The cost was well worth it to many of Columbus’ pioneer families:

“The Guide listed what Thomson called ‘vegetable medicines’ for curing or preventing disease and also detailed descriptions of the diseases themselves. If you had six or eight or 10 children, it’s the sort of book you’d get a lot of use out of.”

New editions of popular books were common in Columbus. Warren Jenkins followed in Kilbourn’s footsteps, publishing his own version of the *Gazetteer* in 1837.

“Without boasting, we aver,” Jenkins wrote, “and challenge the world to contradict the assertion, that this great and growing state, possesses more of the essential ingredients of future greatness . . . than any other territory of equal size on the face of the globe.”

The Chamber of Commerce couldn’t have said it better.

As a rule, publishers augmented their income by running hotels or grocery stores and often sold their presses and got out of the business, so that there was great turnover in the profession.

And yet these publishers provided an invaluable service to contemporary scholars and to the merely curious:

“These books give you an understanding of Ohio’s and Columbus’ first settlers; they give you insight into their attitudes and customs and the challenges that they faced,” Cole said.