A Brief Timeline of the Hornbook

By Anne O’Dell

Hornbook law, as defined by Law.com, is “a fundamental and well-accepted legal principle that does not require any further explanation, since a hornbook is a primer of basics.”

Today, most law students recognize the hornbook as a comprehensive, plain-prose supplement to lengthy casebooks and an invaluable study tool. Hornbooks are useful resources when confusion sets in or when a professor is playing “hide the ball” with test information.

Used famously by Scott Turow during his first year at Harvard Law, hornbooks have become the indispensable supplement when reading, re-reading, note-taking; and countless hours of study still leave the law student in a swarm of confusion.

However, the first hornbooks centered on a subject much more elementary than torts or contracts; they aimed merely to teach small children the alphabet and did so for almost four centuries in educational history.

Originally small, one-page primers for children, hornbooks were shaped like small paddles and were constructed of wood, ivory, leather, or even a metal such as silver. Over this frame, a craftsman placed a single page of rudimentary information shielded by a thin, transparent layer of cow or ox horn. Held together with small nails or studs, the hornbook had a short handle with a small hole for a carrying strap.

Because these were first used during a time when paper was very expensive, hornbooks were significant as the first books children were allowed to handle for themselves. Much like the soft plastic or cloth books given to modern-day infants, the hornbooks were practically indestructible, and they gave children their first exposure to the world of literature.

According to George Plimpton’s The Hornbook and Its Use in America, the first known reference to a hornbook was a doodle in the margins of an arithmetic text by Sacrobosco. Apparently, the monk whose job included transcribing this manuscript wanted a little distraction, so he sketched a schoolroom scene, wherein a young student is given a hornbook containing Arabic numerals. This drawing dates back to circa 1400.

By the 1500s, hornbooks were omnipresent as educational tools for the very young. The format was simple and consistent.

Because the hornbook was the primary method for the instruction of young children, each page began with a cross and proceeded through the alphabet. Usually, this would be followed by an invocation of the Trinity and, finally, the Lord’s Prayer.

Sometimes, the primer would contain numbers; Roman numerals; diphthongs; or simple, two-letter syllables for children to sound out. Some hornbooks even contained small abacuses on the top edge or the opposite side.

Many 17th-century illustrations indicate that hornbooks were used in children’s leisure activities as well as in the classroom. The Library of Congress’ website says that because hornbooks were “often attached by string to the owner’s belt, [they] were readily available to serve as a bat during play.”

One of the more interesting specimens of hornbooks was constructed entirely of gingerbread, which the young pupils were allowed to eat after correctly reciting each letter. In the late 1600s, Matthew Prior wrote:

To Master John, the English Maid
A hornbook gives of gingerbread.
And that the child may learn the better,
All he can name, he eats the letter.

Depending on the particular family’s economic status, the children’s hornbooks could be simple, almost crude wooden affairs or beautifully engraved and decorated in the same way a lady’s hand mirror would have been.
The hornbooks were sold by chapmen, itinerant peddlers who were generally regarded as roguish outcasts and sold pamphlets of poetry and all kinds of small goods to the poorer literate classes.

Hornbooks were used throughout the 18th century in every home with literate children. Not until the late 18th century were they replaced by the battledore—a section of stiff, wallet-folded paper containing a print and script alphabet, illustrations, and mnemonic devices. The battledore was the precursor to the more familiar and more complex primer.

As educational theory and publishing techniques advanced, primers gave way to flashcards, manipulative learning tools, and the whole genre of children’s literature.

Still, the old hornbook’s dictum to “read and be wise” is as applicable to law students today as it was to four- and five-year-old children 400 years ago.

Now considered to be an authoritative yet concise reference guide, the hornbook is a necessary “primer of basics” for any student of law. It can explain, analyze, critique, and summarize legal topics in simple language and help guide students from cursory and tentative understanding toward a complete grasp of legal theory, history, and rationale.

According to Cornell Law’s library website, modern hornbooks provide “presentations of ‘black letter law’... They condense an area of law into a single volume and give a clear overview of the law’s evolution, a discussion of courts’ interpretation of the law and an explanation of the application of the law today.”

Now, if only we could find Prosser and Keeton on Torts in gingerbread.

EmploymentCrossing is the largest collection of active jobs in the world.

We continuously monitor the hiring needs of more than 250,000 employers, including virtually every corporation and organization in the United States. We do not charge employers to post their jobs and we aggressively contact and investigate thousands of employers each day to learn of new positions. No one works harder than EmploymentCrossing.

Let EmploymentCrossing go to work for you.