

Ticknor & Fields

In 1833, William Ticknor, a publisher in the New England area, began leasing a building on the corner of Washington and School Streets in Boston named the Older Corner Bookstore. Initially known as Ticknor and Company, William Ticknor's publishing was similar to other printers of the era, with the early business including the production of stationery, calling cards, and self-published books in limited quantities. One of these books was the work *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* by Lydia Maria Child which was published in 1833 at the expense of the author. This work was considered a significant work as an early voice against slavery.¹

The trajectory of the company shifted with the arrival of James T. Fields, who began his association with the Old Corner Bookstore at the age of fourteen, working alongside printers Carter and Hendee, who rented the property before Ticknor. By 1843, his understanding and passion for literature led to a junior partnership with William Ticknor and by 1854, he was a full partner. This partnership represented both the business and the literary aspects of publishing, with Ticknor managing the financial and business elements while Fields focused on literary matters. This period laid the groundwork for the firm's subsequent influence on the American literary landscape.

In 1849, Ticknor and Company formally adopted the name Ticknor & Fields, changing the trajectory of the company to focus more specifically on publishing. The firm created

¹ Vellella, Rob. "The Legacy of Publishers Ticknor and Fields at the Old Corner Bookstore, Part 1." *Historic Boston Inc (HBI)*, November 28, 2017.
<https://historicboston.org/the-legacy-of-publishers-ticknor-and-fields-at-the-old-corner-bookstore-part-1/>.

relationships with a distinguished roster of authors, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. James T. Fields, in particular, played a crucial role in creating these connections, acting not only as a publisher but also as a friend and literary advisor. This dedication to personal relationships and well-being of the author was further evidenced by their early adoption of royalty payments to authors. At the time, royalties were unheard of in the United States.

James Fields was specifically gifted in the way of forming connections to promote materials and authors. Because of the lack of promotional opportunity at the time, Fields utilized his friendships with writers of book review sections of the newspapers to spread word about the published works. Through these connections, books were noticed and reviewed. In order to create positive reviews that would encourage the reader to purchase, the author of the book would ask their friends to write or to place a review in their hometown newspaper where they had influence.

Fields would also publish a section of the upcoming book in periodicals to encourage readers to finish reading the book by purchasing a copy. Additionally, he would also befriend critics in other cities who were initially less well-known. Fields had a talent in understanding and connecting with people who would come to form literary culture in America. While his connections with authors were important, his connections to critics, editors, and reviewers was vital in pushing Ticknor & Fields to become a force in the publishing and literary community.²

From 1830 to the beginning of the Civil War in the 1860s the movement towards a more distinctive and patriotic perspective was named the American Renaissance. Defined by scholar

² Charvat, William. "James T. Fields and the Beginnings of Book Promotion." in *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870: The Papers of William Charvat*. Ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968. Page 172-174.

F.O. Matthiessen, a leading scholar and the creator of the phrase “American Renaissance,” this period was defined as the “literature for our democracy.”³ Fields played a pivotal role in fostering relationships with authors that would evolve into the publication of formative works such as Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Walden* and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. These publications contributed significantly to the development of distinctively American perspectives and literary themes and contributed significantly to the American Renaissance.

Ticknor & Fields demonstrated innovation and business understanding in their approach to the international literary market. They recognized the prevailing cultural and literary focus on Europe in the United States. However, unlike their contemporaneous publishing companies who pirated works from international authors due to the lack of copyright protections, Ticknor & Fields either paid international authors a flat sum for their manuscripts or paid royalties similarly to American authors.⁴ Ticknor & Fields struck a balance between catering to the current tastes of the American readers while nurturing up-and-coming authors with distinctive American voices.

While Ticknor & Fields' was not considered the largest firm at the time, with the publishers Lippincott, the Harpers, and Little and Brown surpassing Ticknor & Fields' in the number of publications. Their influence as quality literary publishers was profound. The reputation of Ticknor & Fields throughout the nation for "good taste, quality paper, printing, and binding" also distinguished them from their contemporaries.⁵ This commitment to quality extended to their design choices. Initially, their publications often featured standard brown

³ Matthiessen, F.O. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1957. Page 15.

⁴ LeGloahec, John. "Turn the Page: Records in the National Register of Historic Places about American Authors." *Text Message* (blog), National Archives, December 20, 2022. Accessed May 6, 2025. <https://text-message.blogs.archives.gov/2022/12/20/turn-the-page-records-in-the-national-register-of-historic-places-about-american-authors/>.

⁵ Tryon, W. S. "Ticknor and Fields' Publications in the Old Northwest, 1840-1860." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 34, no. 4 (1948): 589–610. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1902459>. Page 594.

covers with a consistent spine font, a design aesthetic that conveyed a sense of reliability and recognition to readers, assuring them of the work's quality.

This evolved by the 1850s with the introduction of blue and gold editions, characterized by blue cloth bindings with gilded edges, alongside more affordable pocket editions, which broadened the availability of the books to multiple classes of people. Due to the work of Ticknor & Fields, their location at the Old Corner Bookstore became an epicenter for literary culture and thought for many different types of patrons. From the clergyman and the country doctor to the theologian and the wives of prominent men, all groups frequented the Old Corner Bookstore to update their libraries and remain current with trends.⁶

With the death of William Ticknor in 1864, James T. Fields assumed a more senior leadership role. While Fields' enthusiasm for cultivating relationships with authors sometimes led to financially precarious situations, such as payments without completed manuscripts, his leadership created relationships with multiple prominent writers.

Eventually, Fields relocated the publishing company from the Old Corner Bookstore to Tremont Street and restructured it as Fields, Osgood & Co. after James R. Osgood succeeded Howard Ticknor. Fields also demonstrated a forward-thinking approach by investing in copyrights and periodicals during the mid-1800s. In 1871, Fields retired from the company.

Subsequently, facing financial pressures and the devastating Great Boston Fire of 1872, the company merged with Hurd & Houghton to create Houghton, Osgood & Co. Eventually this company would become the Houghton Mifflin Harcourt publishing house.⁷

⁶ Emblidge, David, "The Old Corner Bookstore: 'Rialto of Current Good Things, Hub of the Hub,'" *The Concord Saunterer*, Vol 16 (2008). Page 107.
https://www-jstor-org.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/stable/pdf/23395089.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3Aafd7265c8f575111d1121715cfc794b9&ab_segments=&initiator=&acceptTC=1

⁷ Boston Landmarks Commission, Office of Historic Preservation, City of Boston. *Old Corner Bookstore & Cunningham House Study Report*. April 17, 2025.
<https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2025/04/181.94%20-%20Old%20Corner%20Bookstore%20and%20Cunningham%20House.pdf>

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<https://historicboston.org/the-legacy-of-publishers-ticknor-and-fields-at-the-old-corner-bookstore-part-1/>.