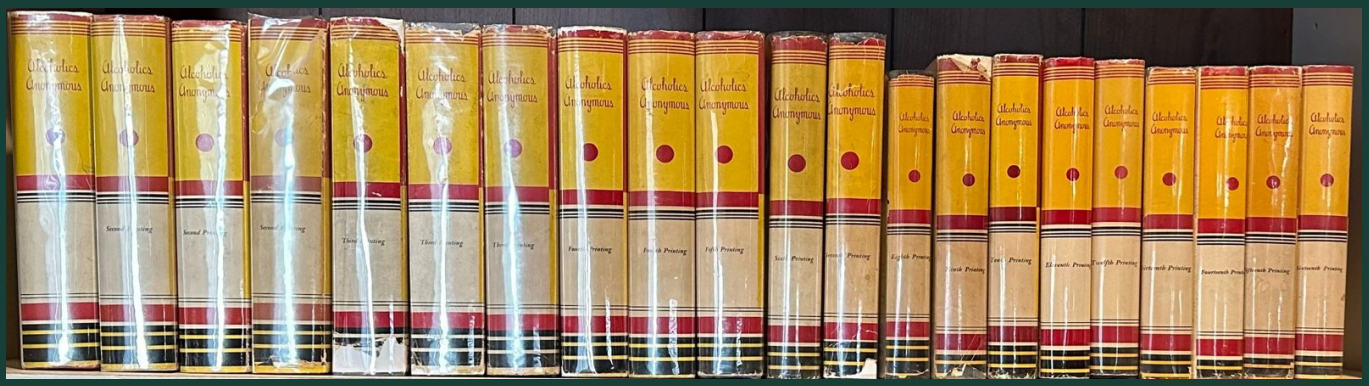
RECOVERY COLLECTIBLES

The Collector’s Guide to First Edition Big Books

A printing-by-printing history, 1939-1954



SIXTEEN PRINTINGS / TWENTY-ONE BINDING VARIANTS

The books, the details, and the history they preserve.

RECOVERY COLLECTIBLES • NOVEMBER 2026

READ • IDENTIFY • COLLECT

Inside the guide

A familiar book. Sixteen stages in its history. Twenty-one binding variants to recognize.

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THE FIRST EDITION LIBRARY

Introduction

Why the first edition matters

A First Edition Big Book carries two histories: the recovery message on its pages and the life of the physical copy in your hands. Cloth, paper, printing statements, jackets and inscriptions connect that copy to a particular moment in the Fellowship's growth.

When the book first appeared in April 1939, Alcoholics Anonymous numbered only a little more than one hundred men and women. By the final First Edition printing in 1954, A.A. had become an established and rapidly expanding fellowship. The sixteen printings preserve that transformation through changes in wording, membership statements, cloth colors, paper, size, publisher names, and dust-jacket details.

For a collector, "First Edition" describes a family of books rather than a single object. Sixteen printings and twenty-one recognized binding variants turn small physical differences into a readable timeline of early A.A. history.

The purpose of this guide

This guide is a concise educational reference for collectors, historians, A.A. members, and anyone interested in the physical history of the Big Book. It is not intended as a price catalog or sales brochure. Its purpose is to explain what changed, why those changes matter, and how the surviving books can be examined responsibly.

The information draws upon direct comparison of surviving copies, published A.A. records, historical research, and collector experience. Where documentation is incomplete or commonly repeated figures remain uncertain, that uncertainty is stated rather than hidden.

Part One

Understanding the first edition era

Begin with three ideas: an edition can contain several printings; a printing can appear in more than one binding; and no single visual clue should stand in for an examination of the whole book.

What “first edition” means

In everyday conversation, “first edition” is often used to mean the very first printing of a book. In bibliography, however, an edition includes all printings produced from substantially the same setting of type until the text is extensively revised or reset.

Alcoholics Anonymous was first published in April 1939. Over the next fifteen years, it was printed sixteen times. Although corrections, membership updates, appendices, and several important wording changes appeared along the way, the basic book remained the First Edition. A substantially revised Second Edition - with a new selection of personal stories and a new publishing era - was introduced in 1955.

For that reason, a collector may correctly describe any of the sixteen printings issued from 1939 through 1954 as a First Edition Big Book. The April 1939 volume is more precisely the First Printing of the First Edition.

Why there are sixteen printings

The sixteen printings reflect the growth of Alcoholics Anonymous. The earliest runs were modest because the Fellowship was small, short of money, and uncertain whether the book would sell. As A.A. expanded and demand increased, additional printings were ordered in progressively larger quantities.

Each printing is therefore more than a production event. Taken together, the books create a physical record of A.A.’s development - from a little more than one hundred members in 1939 to a widespread Fellowship requiring tens of thousands of copies at a time.

Some changes were editorial: a printing error was corrected, Appendix II was added, and language was revised to reflect a larger and more diverse Fellowship. Other changes were physical: different cloth colors were used, thinner paper reduced the book’s bulk, wartime production produced the smallest First Edition, and later printings settled into a consistent size and navy-blue binding.

The individual printing chapters that follow focus on the details that make each stage identifiable and historically meaningful.

How sixteen printings become twenty-one variants

A complete printing-number collection contains sixteen books - one example of each printing. A complete binding-variant collection contains twenty-one books because several early printings were issued in more than one cloth color.

- First Printing: red cloth
- Second Printing: light blue, navy blue, and rare red cloth
- Third Printing: light blue, navy blue, and olive green cloth
- Fourth Printing: olive green and navy blue cloth

- Fifth Printing: light blue cloth
- Sixth through Sixteenth Printings: navy blue cloth

These colors do not represent separate editions or different texts. They are binding variants produced within the same printing. Early A.A. had very little money and used economical materials available through the printer. The resulting cloth variations were practical production choices, but they have become an important part of the books' collecting history.

Color alone should never be used to identify a printing. Cloth can fade, darken, stain, or appear different under changing light. The copyright page, physical format, textual points, and jacket statement must be considered together.

Works publishing and the early book project

The Big Book began as an ambitious project undertaken by a Fellowship with few members and limited resources. Bill Wilson and Hank Parkhurst spearheaded the publishing effort, while Ruth Hock carried much of the secretarial, organizational, and correspondence work required to turn the developing manuscript into a printed book.

Works Publishing Company was created to manage the project and raise the funds needed to publish it. The first printing was produced by Cornwall Press in 1939. An order of 5,000 copies was planned, although commonly cited figures for the number completed vary slightly. The safest description is that roughly 4,700 copies were produced.

The publishing venture was financially risky. A.A. did not yet have a national office, a large membership, or a proven market. The book had to explain the program clearly enough to help alcoholics who might never meet an established member in person. Its survival - and the need for fifteen additional printings - became evidence that the written message could travel far beyond the original groups.

The publisher name later changed as A.A.'s service and publishing structure developed. The Fourteenth Printing was the final printing under Works Publishing, Inc. The Fifteenth and Sixteenth Printings were published by Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing, Inc., the organization that preceded today's Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.

Why it became known as the "big book"

The original book sold for $3.50, a substantial price in 1939. Bill Wilson and Hank Parkhurst wanted buyers to feel that they were receiving a book of real substance. Thick, inexpensive paper and wide margins made the volume unusually bulky and visually impressive.

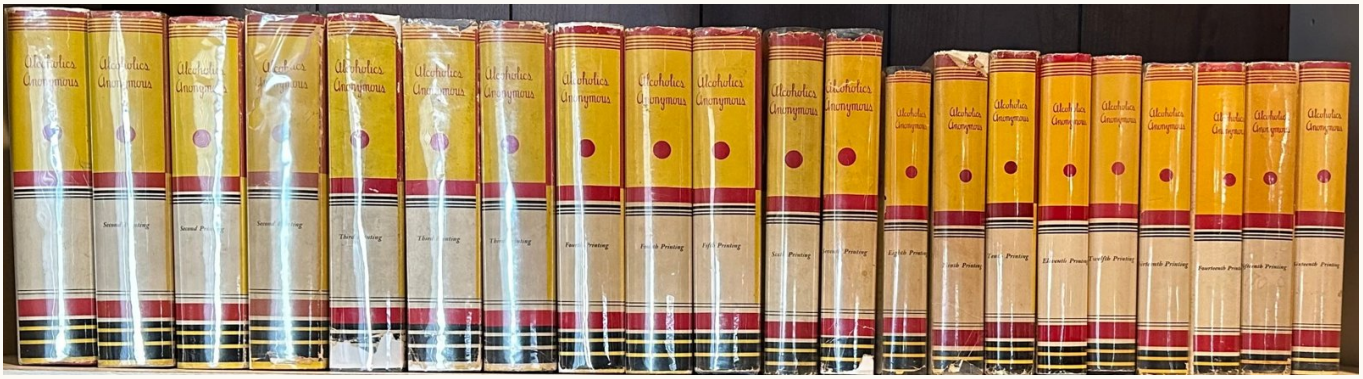
That physical presence led members to call it the "Big Book." The nickname endured even after thinner paper and smaller formats reduced the book's size. It eventually became so familiar that it outlived the production choices that created it.

Printings One through Five use the same page size and thick paper. The Sixth and Seventh retain the same height and width but use thinner paper. The Eighth Printing is the smallest First Edition. The Ninth through Sixteenth Printings are slightly larger than the Eighth and share the final general format of the First Edition era.

Part Two

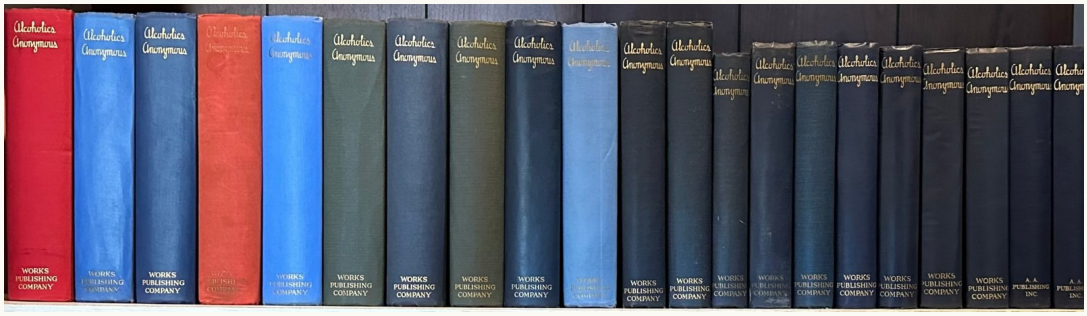
A printing-by-printing history: 1939-1954

Read these profiles in sequence for the story of the First Edition era, or turn directly to a printing when examining a copy. Each profile brings together its historical setting, identifying features and a collector's perspective.



One book, a changing Fellowship

The sequence begins with red cloth and thick paper, passes through early color variants and wartime changes, and settles into the familiar navy bindings of the later First Edition era. Use the profiles to connect those visible changes with the story each printing preserves.



PRINTING 01 / 16

First Printing - April 1939

The Beginning of the Big Book



Printing	First Printing of the First Edition
Publication date	April 10, 1939
Publisher	Works Publishing Company, New York City
Printer	Cornwall Press
Approximate quantity	Roughly 4,700 copies; commonly cited figures are 4,650 and 4,730
Binding	Red cloth with gold lettering on the front board and spine
Format	Original large, thick-paper format shared by Printings One through Five
Key points	Twelfth Step states “Spiritual Experience”; Page 234 repeated-line error; “Lone Endeavor”; The Doctor’s Opinion begins on page 1

Why it matters

Published when A.A. was still small, financially uncertain, and largely unknown, the First Printing was created to carry the program beyond direct personal contact. Bill Wilson and Hank Parkhurst led the publishing effort, with Ruth Hock handling much of the essential secretarial and correspondence work.

The $3.50 book was made physically substantial with thick, inexpensive paper and wide margins. That imposing format helped give Alcoholics Anonymous its enduring nickname: the Big Book.

Identifying features

- All known copies are bound in red cloth. A red binding alone is not conclusive, because rare red Second Printings also exist.
- The Doctor’s Opinion begins on numbered page 1, as it does in every First Edition printing.
- The Twelfth Step uses the phrase “spiritual experience,” and the book does not yet contain Appendix II, “Spiritual Experience.”
- Page 234 contains a repeated line near the bottom; the error was corrected in the Second Printing.
- “Lone Endeavor” appears only in this printing.
- The original appendix explains the Alcoholic Foundation, its trustees, and how readers could contact the young Fellowship.
- The First Printing jacket uses the familiar red-and-yellow “circus” design but does not state a printing number on its spine or flap.

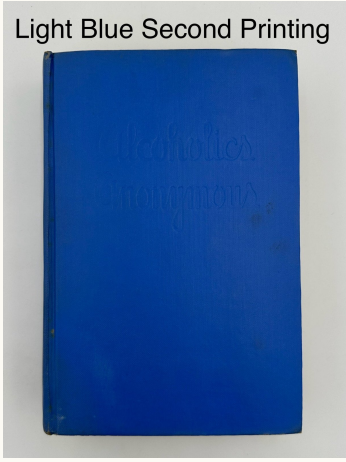
Collector’s note

The First Printing is the foundational artifact of Big Book collecting. Jacket status, restoration, completeness, provenance, signatures, and association can matter as much as general condition. Even a worn jacketless copy remains historically significant; an unrestored original-jacket example belongs in a much scarcer category.

PRINTING 02 / 16

Second Printing - March 1941

The Big Book Begins to Change



Publication date	March 1941
Publisher	Works Publishing Company, New York City
Quantity	5,000 copies
Bindings	Light blue, navy blue, and rare red cloth
Format	Same height, width, and thick-paper format as Printings One through Five
Key points	Revised Foreword; “spiritual awakening”; Appendix II; corrected page 234; “Now We Are Two Thousand”

Why it matters

The Second Printing appeared as A.A. was moving into national awareness, in the same month that Jack Alexander’s article appeared in The Saturday Evening Post. The Fellowship had grown from a little more than one hundred members to more than two thousand.

It was the first opportunity to correct errors and clarify ideas after two years of practical experience with the book.

Identifying features

- The Foreword was updated from “more than one hundred” to “more than two thousand men and women.”
- In the Twelfth Step, “spiritual experience” became “spiritual awakening,” with an asterisk leading to the newly added Appendix II, “Spiritual Experience.”
- The page 234 repeated-line error was corrected, and “Lone Endeavor” was replaced by “Now We Are Two Thousand” on page 391.
- Three bindings are known. Light blue is most common, navy blue is less common, and red is exceptionally scarce. Collector experience suggests that roughly 300 may have been bound in red, possibly using cloth left from the First Printing order, but no exact number was published.
- The red Second Printing retains gold title lettering on the front board. The blue variants do not; all retain gold lettering on the spine.

Collector’s note

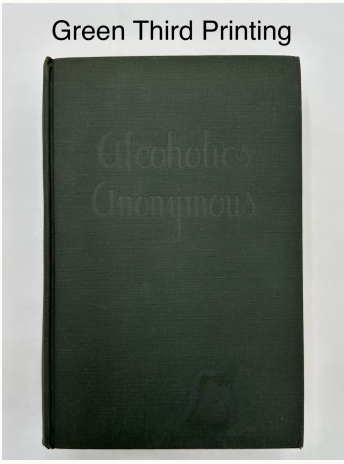
The Second Printing combines major textual revisions with the most varied binding group after the Third Printing. The red-cloth variant is especially important, but its estimated quantity should always be described as collector knowledge rather than a documented production figure.

Twelfth Step Spiritual Awakening * and Appendix II

PRINTING 03 / 16

Third Printing - June 1942

Three Colors in a Time of Growth



Publication date	June 1942
Publisher	Works Publishing Company, New York City
Quantity	5,000 copies
Bindings	Light blue, navy blue, and olive green cloth
Format	Same large, thick-paper format as Printings One through Five
Key points	Page 27: “hundreds of men who were once”; page 391: “Now We Are Six Thousand”

Why it matters

By June 1942, the Fellowship had grown to roughly six thousand members. The Third Printing records that expansion while preserving the same large physical format as the first two printings.

Identifying features

- Page 27 changes from “one hundred men who were once” to “hundreds of men who were once.”
- Page 391 is titled “Now We Are Six Thousand.”
- The printing is known in light blue, navy blue, and olive green cloth. The text is identical in all three.
- Based on collecting experience, olive green is the rarest Third Printing binding, though more common than the red Second Printing.
- The color variations reflect A.A.’s effort to use inexpensive materials available through the printer, not separate textual editions.

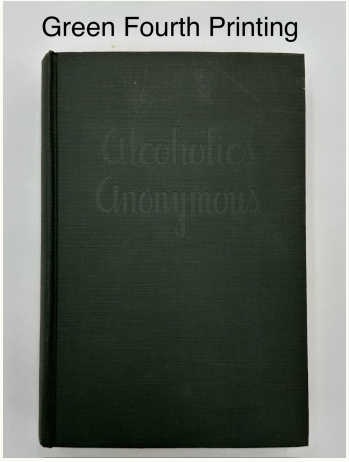
Collector’s note

The three bindings make the Third Printing one of the most appealing variant groups. A collector may choose one representative copy or pursue all three colors as part of the twenty-one-volume binding-variant set.

PRINTING 04 / 16

Fourth Printing - March 1943

Two Bindings, Eight Thousand Members



Publication date	March 1943
Publisher	Works Publishing Company, New York City
Quantity	5,000 copies
Bindings	Olive green and navy blue cloth
Format	Same large, thick-paper format as Printings One through Five
Key points	Page 27: “thousands of men and women who were once”; page 391: “Now We Are Eight Thousand”

Why it matters

The Fourth Printing shows A.A. continuing to expand rapidly, with the closing page now reporting eight thousand members. It remains physically close to the earliest Big Books while moving toward the navy binding that would later become standard.

Identifying features

- Page 27 changes again, from “hundreds of men who were once” to “thousands of men and women who were once.”
- Page 391 is titled “Now We Are Eight Thousand.”
- Olive green and navy blue bindings are known. No reliable production split should be stated without documentation.
- Both bindings have gold spine lettering and plain front boards.

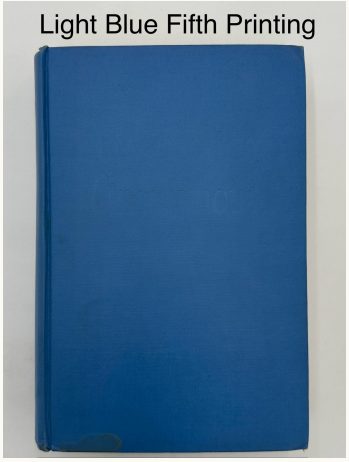
Collector’s note

The Fourth Printing is valued for its two binding variants and for the page 27 revision that explicitly includes both men and women. Seeking both colors expands a sixteen-printing set toward the full twenty-one-variant collection.

PRINTING 05 / 16

Fifth Printing - January 1944

The Last of the Thick-Paper Big Books



Publication date	January 1944
Publisher	Works Publishing Company, New York City
Quantity	5,000 copies
Binding	Light blue cloth only
Format	Final printing in the original thick-paper format
Key point	Page 391: “Now We Are Ten Thousand”

Why it matters

The Fifth Printing is the closing chapter of the original thick-paper format. Its substantial feel still recalls the book that appeared in 1939, while the words “Now We Are Ten Thousand” record a Fellowship far larger than the one that first put its experience into print. The light blue binding, commonly called “baby blue” by collectors, gives this final thick-paper printing a recognizable place in the sequence.

Identifying features

- Printings One through Five share the same height, width, paper size, and substantial thickness.
- Page 391 is titled “Now We Are Ten Thousand.”
- The binding is light blue only, commonly nicknamed “baby blue” by collectors.
- No major additional textual change has been identified.

PRINTING 06 / 16

Sixth Printing - June 1944

The First Change in Thickness



Publication date	June 1944
Publisher	Works Publishing Company, New York City
Quantity	5,000 copies
Binding	Navy blue cloth only
Format	Same height and width as Printings One through Five, but thinner paper
Key point	First reduction in thickness; navy binding becomes standard through the Sixteenth Printing

Why it matters

Set a Sixth Printing beside an earlier copy and the first difference is one you can feel: the book is thinner. Its height and width remain the same, but thinner paper changes its profile. This begins a new physical stage in the First Edition's history. The navy cloth also establishes the color that continues through every remaining printing, making the Sixth a useful bridge between the varied early books and the more uniform later sequence.

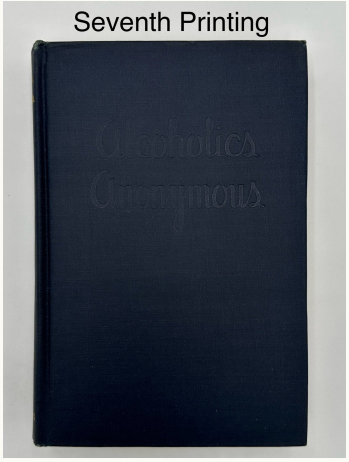
Identifying features

- It is the same dimensions and thickness as the Seventh Printing.
- The navy blue cloth used here continues through every remaining First Edition printing.
- Gold lettering remains on the spine; the front board is plain.
- No major textual revision has been identified.

PRINTING 07 / 16

Seventh Printing - January 1945

The Unresolved Transitional Printing



Publication date	January 1945
Publisher	Works Publishing Company, New York City
Official quantity	A.A. documentation lists 5,000 copies
Collector estimate	Possibly only 300-500 completed or released
Binding	Navy blue cloth only
Format	Same exact size and thinner-paper format as the Sixth Printing
Key points	Wartime “Important Notice”; page 391: “Now We Are Fourteen Thousand. January 1945”

Why it matters

The Seventh Printing is one of the most debated production questions of the First Edition era. It contains an “Important Notice” announcing that the book was being reduced in size to conserve materials, yet the physical reduction did not occur in this printing.

A.A. records list 5,000 copies, but surviving examples are extraordinarily scarce and the fully reduced Eighth Printing followed only one month later. Collectors therefore suspect that only a small portion of the planned run - perhaps 300 to 500 copies - was completed or released.

Identifying features

- The book is physically identical in size to the Sixth Printing.
- The wartime notice appears even though the announced size change was not implemented.
- Page 391 reads “Now We Are Fourteen Thousand. January 1945.”
- Only a very small number of original-jacket examples are known, though no exact surviving count should be claimed.

Collector’s note

The Seventh Printing is scarce not because of a color or textual variant, but because the surviving population appears far smaller than the official 5,000-copy record suggests. The distinction between documented quantity and collector interpretation must remain explicit.

PRINTING 08 / 16

Eighth Printing - February 1945

The Smallest First Edition Big Book



Publication date	February 1945
Publisher	Works Publishing Company, New York City
Quantity	20,000 copies
Binding	Navy blue cloth only
Format	Smallest of all sixteen First Edition printings
Key points	Wartime “Important Notice”; page 391 unchanged from the Seventh; resized circus jacket

Why it matters

Issued only one month after the Seventh, the Eighth Printing finally implemented the wartime size reduction announced in the “Important Notice.” Its 20,000-copy run also marked a sharp increase in production.

Identifying features

- It is the smallest First Edition Big Book.
- The wartime notice remains in the book.
- Page 391 still reads “Now We Are Fourteen Thousand. January 1945.”
- The dust jacket was reduced to fit the smaller book while retaining the same circus design.
- No other major textual change has been identified.

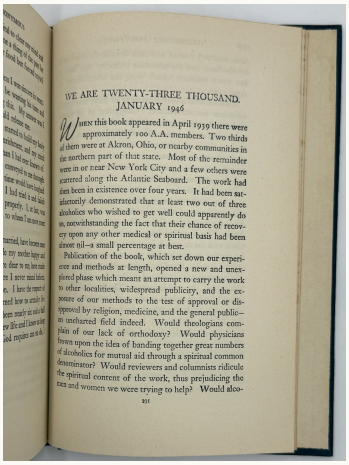
Collector’s note

The Eighth is immediately recognizable when placed beside any other First Edition printing. It is a particularly effective teaching copy because the physical result of wartime conservation can be seen at a glance.

PRINTING 09 / 16

Ninth Printing - January 1946

The Final First Edition Format Emerges



WE ARE TWENTY-THREE THOUSAND
JANUARY 1946

When this book appeared in April 1939 there were approximately 100 A.A. members. Two thirds of them were at Akron, Ohio, or nearby communities in the northern part of that state. Most of the remainder were in or near New York City and a few others were scattered along the Atlantic Seaboard. The work had then been in existence over four years. It had been satisfactorily demonstrated that at least two out of three alcoholics who wished to get well could apparently do so, notwithstanding the fact that their chance of recovery upon any other medical or spiritual basis had been almost nil—a small percentage at best.

Publication of the book, which set down our experience and methods at length, opened a new and unexplored phase which meant an attempt to carry the work to other localities, widespread publicity, and the exposure of our methods to the test of approval or disapproval by religion, medicine, and the general public—an unchartered field indeed. Would theologians complain of our lack of orthodoxy? Would physicians frown upon the idea of banding together great numbers of alcoholics for mutual aid through a spiritual common denominator? Would reviewers and columnists ridicule the spiritual content of the work, thus prejudicing the men and women we were trying to help? Would alco-

391

Publication date	January 1946
Publisher	Works Publishing Company, New York City
Quantity	20,000 copies
Binding	Navy blue cloth only
Format	Slightly larger than the Eighth; general size used through the Sixteenth
Key points	Wartime notice removed; page 391: “Now We Are Twenty-Three Thousand”

Why it matters

The Ninth Printing brings the book out of its compact wartime format. Slightly larger than the Eighth, it establishes the general size used through the remainder of the First Edition era. The wartime notice disappears, and “Now We Are Twenty-Three Thousand” takes its place among the volume’s identifying details. Seen in sequence, the change in size turns a production detail into a visible marker between wartime conservation and the book’s later presentation.

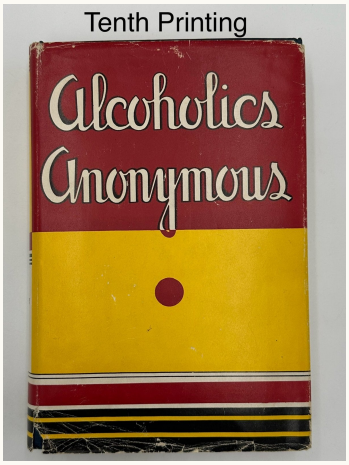
Identifying features

- The wartime “Important Notice” was removed.
- Page 391 is titled “Now We Are Twenty-Three Thousand.”
- No other major textual change has been identified.

PRINTING 10 / 16

Tenth Printing - August 1946

“Now We Are Thousands”



Publication date	August 1946
Publisher	Works Publishing Company, New York City
Quantity	25,000 copies
Binding	Navy blue cloth only
Format	Same general format used through the Sixteenth Printing
Key point	Page 391 changes to “Now We Are Thousands”

Why it matters

For several printings, the closing story’s title kept pace with the Fellowship through precise membership totals. In August 1946, that wording becomes “Now We Are Thousands.” It is a small change on the page, but an engaging one to follow through a collection: a numbered account of growth gives way to a phrase broad enough to remain through the Sixteenth Printing. The established navy binding and late First Edition format continue.

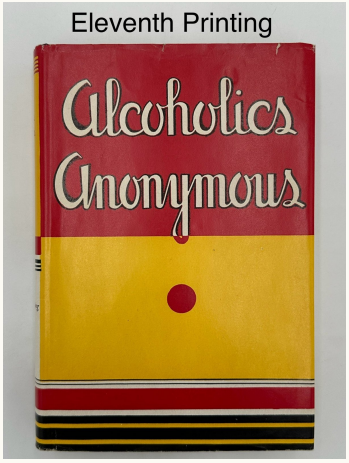
Identifying features

- Page 391 is titled “Now We Are Thousands.”
- The established navy binding and late First Edition format continue.
- No additional major textual revision has been identified.

PRINTING 11 / 16

Eleventh Printing - June 1947

A Stable Book for a Growing Fellowship



Publication date	June 1947
Publisher	Works Publishing Company, New York City
Quantity	25,000 copies
Binding	Navy blue cloth only
Format	Same as the Tenth Printing
Key point	“Now We Are Thousands”; no major textual or physical change

Why it matters

Not every important printing announces itself through a new color or a revised passage. The Eleventh belongs to a period in which the book’s familiar form had settled: navy binding, the established physical format and the circus-jacket design. Its significance is continuity. The same recovery text continued to reach a growing Fellowship, and a surviving 1947 copy places that familiar message in a particular year of the book’s expanding life.

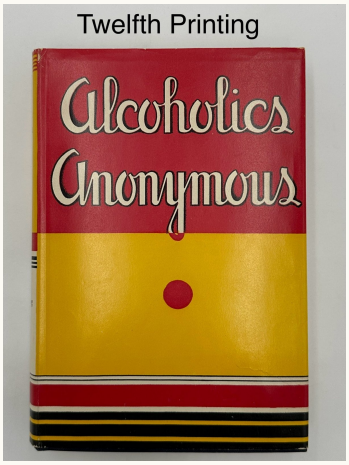
Identifying features

- Page 391 retains “Now We Are Thousands.”
- The navy binding, physical format, and circus-jacket design continue unchanged.
- No major textual change has been identified for this printing.

PRINTING 12 / 16

Twelfth Printing - October 1948

Production Expands



Publication date	October 1948
Publisher	Works Publishing Company, New York City
Quantity	42,350 copies
Binding	Navy blue cloth only
Format	Same as the Tenth and Eleventh Printings
Key point	Large increase in production; “Now We Are Thousands”

Why it matters

The Twelfth Printing makes the growth of demand visible in a production figure: 42,350 copies, compared with 25,000 for the Eleventh. The book itself keeps the familiar navy binding and late First Edition format. That contrast is part of its interest. A volume that looks much like its predecessor represents a substantially larger publishing commitment as A.A. expanded after the war. The copyright page and printing date give this otherwise familiar-looking book its place in the story.

Identifying features

- Page 391 retains “Now We Are Thousands.”
- The established navy binding and late First Edition format continue.
- No major textual change has been identified for this printing.

PRINTING 13 / 16

Thirteenth Printing - February 1950

The Largest First Edition Print Run



Publication date	February 1950
Publisher	Works Publishing Company, New York City
Quantity	50,000 copies
Binding	Navy blue cloth only
Format	Established late First Edition format
Key point	Largest print run of the First Edition

Why it matters

The Thirteenth Printing carries the largest single production figure in the First Edition sequence: 50,000 copies. Place that number beside the modest and uncertain beginnings of 1939, and the scale of the change becomes clear. The volume does not need a new binding color or a dramatic textual revision to be historically interesting. Its date, printing statement and production scale tell the story of a recovery book that had found a far wider readership.

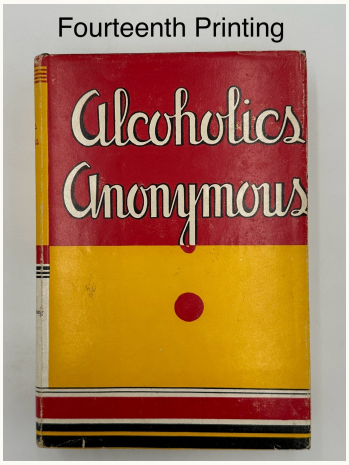
Identifying features

- Page 391 retains “Now We Are Thousands.”
- No major textual or physical change distinguishes this printing.
- The printing is distinguished chiefly by its date, copyright page, and production scale.

PRINTING 14 / 16

Fourteenth Printing - July 1951

The Final Works Publishing Printing



Publication date	July 1951
Publisher	Works Publishing, Inc.
Quantity	49,800 copies
Binding	Navy blue cloth only
Format	Established late First Edition format
Key point	Final First Edition printing under Works Publishing, Inc.

Why it matters

The Fourteenth Printing looks familiar, but its publisher statement marks an ending. Issued in July 1951, it was the final First Edition printing under Works Publishing, Inc., while continuing the high production level reached by the Thirteenth. For a collector following the publishing history, this is an especially useful reminder to look beyond the boards and jacket. A quiet line on the title or copyright page can distinguish one chapter of the book's history from the next.

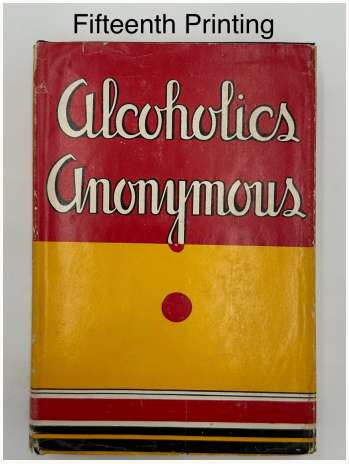
Identifying features

- Page 391 retains "Now We Are Thousands."
- No major textual or physical change distinguishes this printing.
- The publisher statement is the key historical distinction.

PRINTING 15 / 16

Fifteenth Printing - January 1954

A New Publisher and an Expected Ending



Publication date	January 1954
Publisher	Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing, Inc.
Quantity	16,242 copies
Binding	Navy blue cloth only
Format	Established late First Edition format
Key points	First printing under the new publisher; expected to be the final First Edition printing

Why it matters

The Fifteenth Printing begins 1954 with a changed publisher line: Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing, Inc. The book otherwise continues the established late First Edition presentation. It was expected to supply the Fellowship until the planned Second Edition arrived in 1955, but demand proved stronger than anticipated. That makes the Fifteenth a transitional volume in a very particular sense: a book intended to carry an era toward its close, followed by one final First Edition printing.

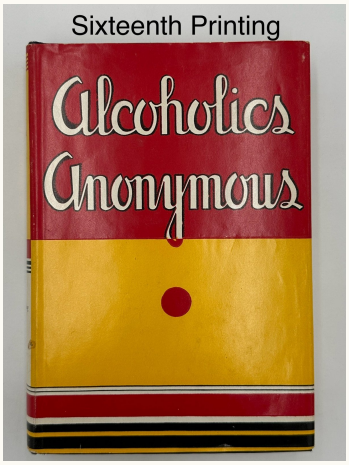
Identifying features

- Page 391 retains “Now We Are Thousands.”
- The publisher line changes from Works Publishing, Inc. to Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing, Inc.
- No major textual or physical change distinguishes this printing.

PRINTING 16 / 16

Sixteenth Printing - August 1954

The Final First Edition Printing



Publication date	August 1954
Publisher	Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing, Inc.
Quantity	15,700 copies
Binding	Navy blue cloth only
Format	Established late First Edition format
Key point	Final printing of the First Edition before the 1955 Second Edition

Why it matters

The First Edition story ends with a printing that had not originally been expected to be needed. The Fifteenth sold faster than anticipated, and more copies were required before the Second Edition was ready. Issued in August 1954, the Sixteenth closes the fifteen-year sequence that began in April 1939. Its familiar navy binding and circus jacket make a fitting final comparison with the much larger red book at the beginning of the collection.

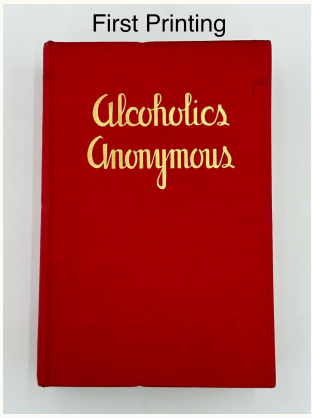
Identifying features

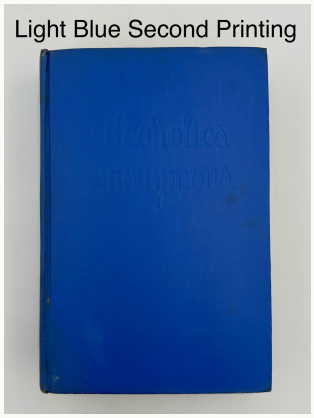
- Page 391 retains “Now We Are Thousands.”
- The navy binding, late First Edition format, and circus-jacket design continue.
- No major textual change has been identified for this printing.

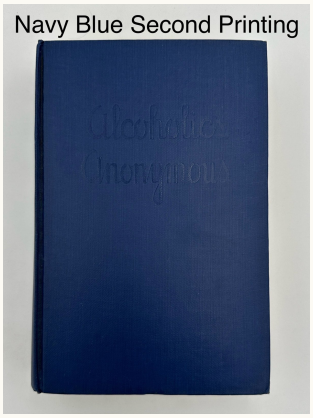
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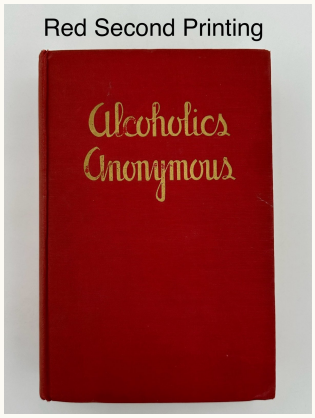
The early binding variants

The cloth colors are easiest to understand side by side. These photographs are retained from the original guide; their embedded labels identify the examples shown.

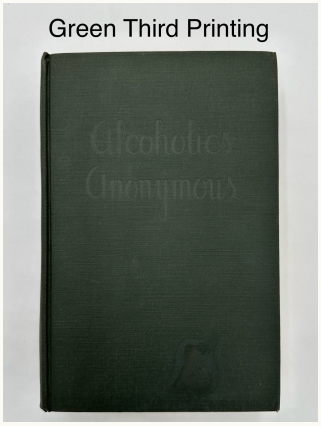


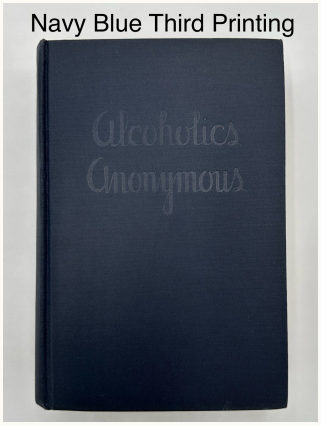


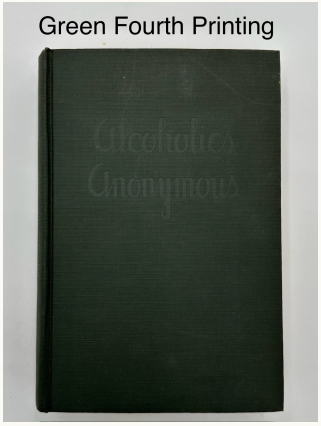


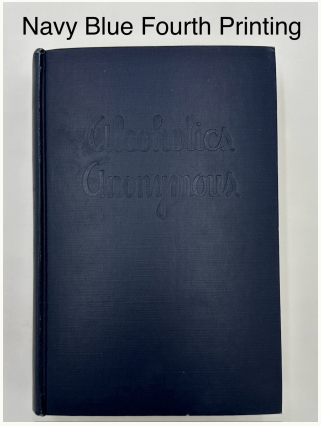


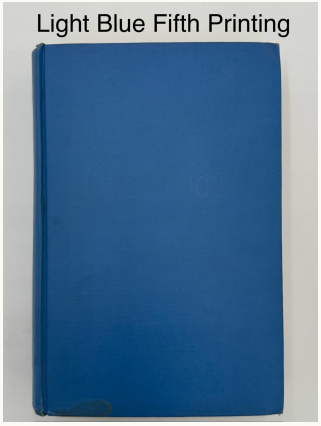






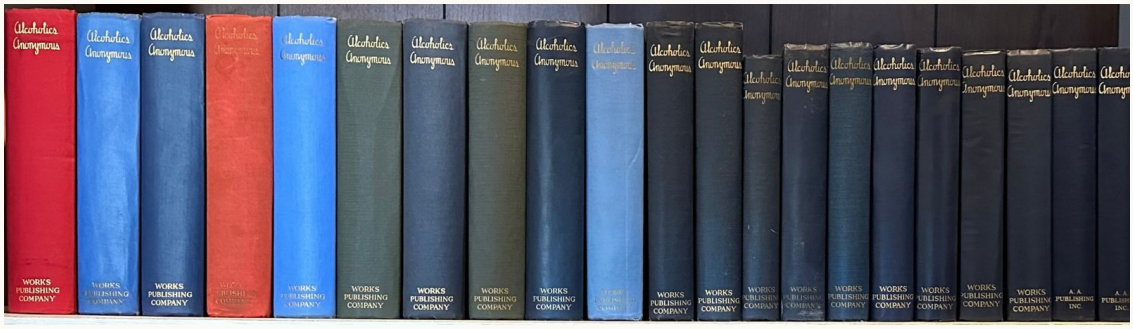






PHOTOGRAPHIC REFERENCE

Format, paper and the text





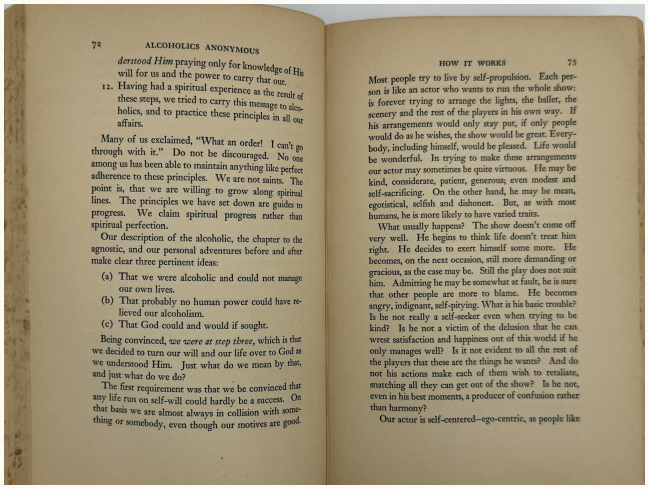


Comparison photographs from the source guide. Read them alongside the physical-format chart and the individual printing profiles.

PHOTOGRAPHIC REFERENCE

Reading the early pages

Source-guide photographs of pages, bindings and jackets. Labels within the original photographs are retained. These are reference examples, not condition standards for every surviving copy.



72 ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

derstood Him praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. Having had a spiritual experience as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Many of us exclaimed, "What an order! I can't go through with it." Do not be discouraged. No one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles. We are not saints. The point is, that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines. The principles we have set down are guides to progress. We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection.

Our description of the alcoholic, the chapter to the agnostic, and our personal adventures before and after make clear three pertinent ideas:

(a) That we were alcoholic and could not manage our own lives.

(b) That probably no human power could have relieved our alcoholism.

(c) That God could and would if sought.

Being convinced, *we were at step three*, which is that we decided to turn our will and our life over to God as we understood Him. Just what do we mean by that, and just what do we do?

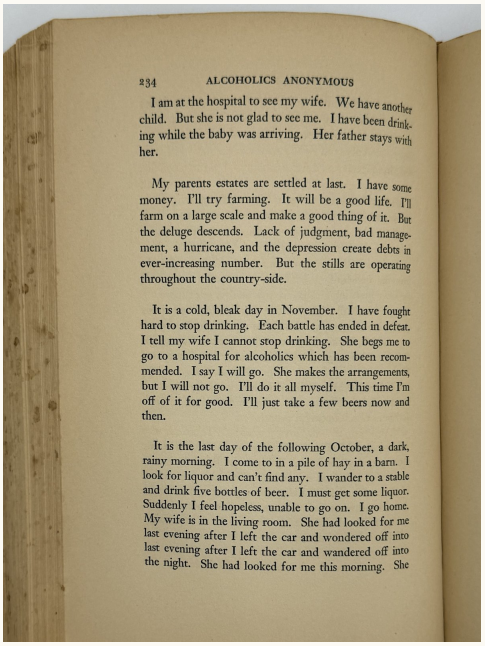
The first requirement was that we be convinced that any life run on self-will could hardly be a success. On that basis we are almost always in collision with something or somebody, even though our motives are good.

HOW IT WORKS 73

Most people try to live by self-propulsion. Each person is like an actor who wants to run the whole show: is forever trying to arrange the lights, the baller, the scenery and the rest of the players in his own way. If his arrangements would only stay put, if only people would do as he wishes, the show would be great. Everybody, including himself, would be pleased. Life would be wonderful. In trying to make these arrangements our actor may sometimes be quite virtuous. He may be kind, considerate, patient, generous, even modest and self-sacrificing. On the other hand, he may be mean, egotistical, selfish and dishonest. But, as with most humans, he is more likely to have varied traits.

What usually happens? The show doesn't come off very well. He begins to think life doesn't treat him right. He decides to exert himself some more. He becomes, on the next occasion, still more demanding or gracious, as the case may be. Still the play does not suit him. Admitting he may be somewhat at fault, he is sure that other people are more to blame. He becomes angry, indignant, self-pitying. What is his basic trouble? Is he not really a self-seeker even when trying to be kind? Is he not a victim of the delusion that he can wrest satisfaction and happiness out of this world if he only manages well? Is it not evident to all the rest of the players that these are the things he wants? And do not his actions make each of them wish to retaliate, snatching all they can get out of the show? Is he not, even in his best moments, a producer of confusion rather than harmony?

Our actor is self-centered—ego-centric, as people like



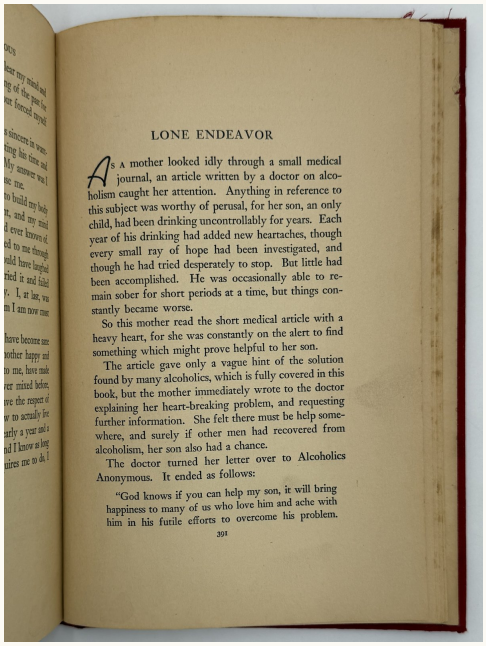
234 ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

I am at the hospital to see my wife. We have another child. But she is not glad to see me. I have been drinking while the baby was arriving. Her father stays with her.

My parents estates are settled at last. I have some money. I'll try farming. It will be a good life. I'll farm on a large scale and make a good thing of it. But the deluge descends. Lack of judgment, bad management, a hurricane, and the depression create debts in ever-increasing number. But the stills are operating throughout the country-side.

It is a cold, bleak day in November. I have fought hard to stop drinking. Each battle has ended in defeat. I tell my wife I cannot stop drinking. She begs me to go to a hospital for alcoholics which has been recommended. I say I will go. She makes the arrangements, but I will not go. I'll do it all myself. This time I'm off of it for good. I'll just take a few beers now and then.

It is the last day of the following October, a dark, rainy morning. I come to in a pile of hay in a barn. I look for liquor and can't find any. I wander to a stable and drink five bottles of beer. I must get some liquor. Suddenly I feel hopeless, unable to go on. I go home. My wife is in the living room. She had looked for me last evening after I left the car and wondered off into last evening after I left the car and wandered off into the night. She had looked for me this morning. She



LONE ENDEAVOR

As a mother looked idly through a small medical journal, an article written by a doctor on alcoholism caught her attention. Anything in reference to this subject was worthy of perusal, for her son, an only child, had been drinking uncontrollably for years. Each year of his drinking had added new heartaches, though every small ray of hope had been investigated, and though he had tried desperately to stop. But little had been accomplished. He was occasionally able to remain sober for short periods at a time, but things constantly became worse.

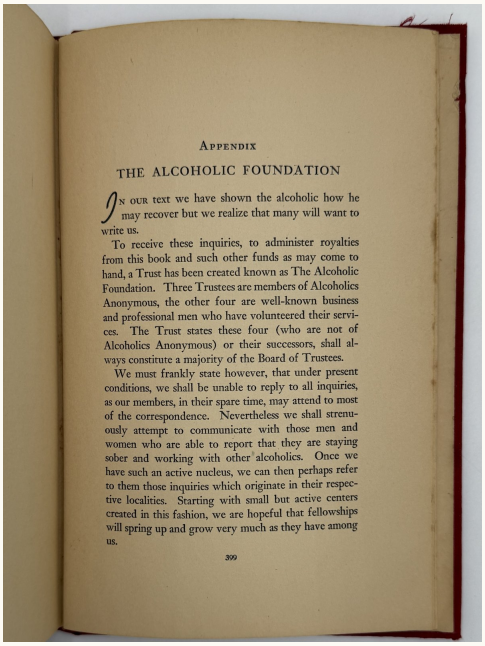
So this mother read the short medical article with a heavy heart, for she was constantly on the alert to find something which might prove helpful to her son.

The article gave only a vague hint of the solution found by many alcoholics, which is fully covered in this book, but the mother immediately wrote to the doctor explaining her heart-breaking problem, and requesting further information. She felt there must be help somewhere, and surely if other men had recovered from alcoholism, her son also had a chance.

The doctor turned her letter over to Alcoholics Anonymous. It ended as follows:

"God knows if you can help my son, it will bring happiness to many of us who love him and ache with him in his futile efforts to overcome his problem.

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APPENDIX

THE ALCOHOLIC FOUNDATION

In our text we have shown the alcoholic how he may recover but we realize that many will want to write us.

To receive these inquiries, to administer royalties from this book and such other funds as may come to hand, a Trust has been created known as The Alcoholic Foundation. Three Trustees are members of Alcoholics Anonymous, the other four are well-known business and professional men who have volunteered their services. The Trust states these four (who are not of Alcoholics Anonymous) or their successors, shall always constitute a majority of the Board of Trustees.

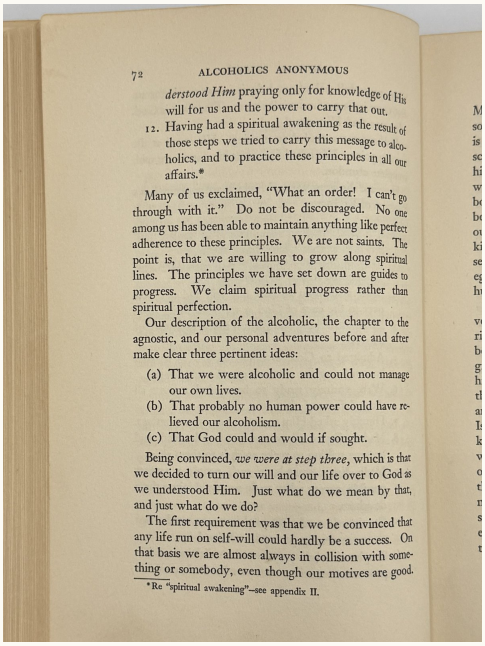
We must frankly state however, that under present conditions, we shall be unable to reply to all inquiries, as our members, in their spare time, may attend to most of the correspondence. Nevertheless we shall strenuously attempt to communicate with those men and women who are able to report that they are staying sober and working with other alcoholics. Once we have such an active nucleus, we can then perhaps refer to them those inquiries which originate in their respective localities. Starting with small but active centers created in this fashion, we are hopeful that fellowships will spring up and grow very much as they have among us.

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PHOTOGRAPHIC REFERENCE

Words, paper and construction

Source-guide photographs of pages, bindings and jackets. Labels within the original photographs are retained. These are reference examples, not condition standards for every surviving copy.



72 ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

derstood Him praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of those steps we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.*

Many of us exclaimed, "What an order! I can't go through with it." Do not be discouraged. No one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles. We are not saints. The point is, that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines. The principles we have set down are guides to progress. We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection.

Our description of the alcoholic, the chapter to the agnostic, and our personal adventures before and after make clear three pertinent ideas:

(a) That we were alcoholic and could not manage our own lives.

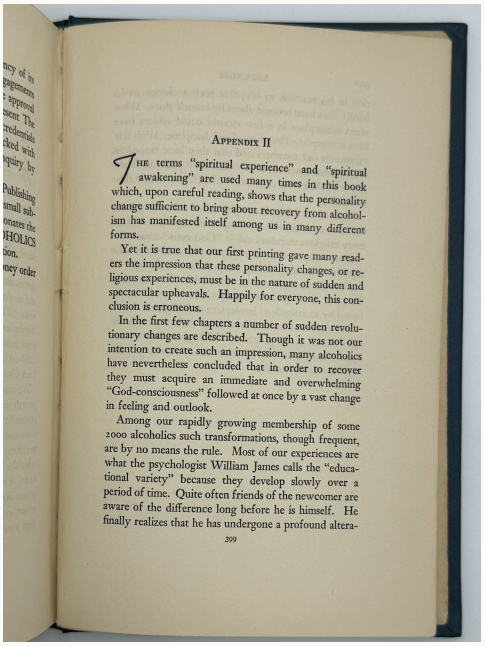
(b) That probably no human power could have relieved our alcoholism.

(c) That God could and would if sought.

Being convinced, *we were at step three*, which is that we decided to turn our will and our life over to God as we understood Him. Just what do we mean by that, and just what do we do?

The first requirement was that we be convinced that any life run on self-will could hardly be a success. On that basis we are almost always in collision with something or somebody, even though our motives are good.

*Re "spiritual awakening"—see appendix II.



APPENDIX II

THE terms "spiritual experience" and "spiritual awakening" are used many times in this book which, upon careful reading, shows that the personality change sufficient to bring about recovery from alcoholism has manifested itself among us in many different forms.

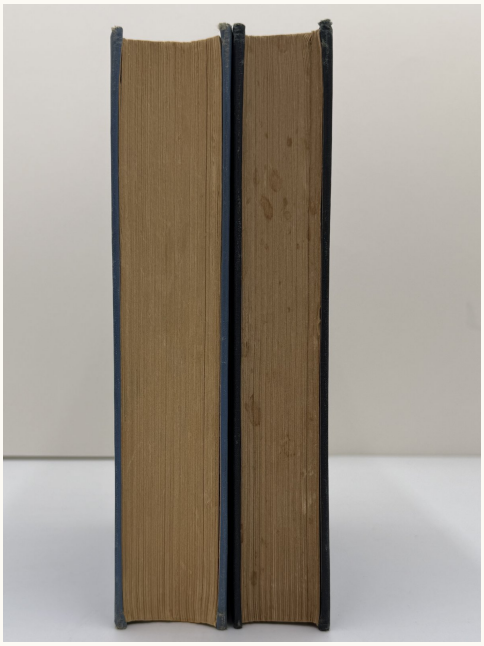
Yet it is true that our first printing gave many readers the impression that these personality changes, or religious experiences, must be in the nature of sudden and spectacular upheavals. Happily for everyone, this conclusion is erroneous.

In the first few chapters a number of sudden revolutionary changes are described. Though it was not our intention to create such an impression, many alcoholics have nevertheless concluded that in order to recover they must acquire an immediate and overwhelming "God-consciousness" followed at once by a vast change in feeling and outlook.

Among our rapidly growing membership of some 2000 alcoholics such transformations, though frequent, are by no means the rule. Most of our experiences are what the psychologist William James calls the "educational variety" because they develop slowly over a period of time. Quite often friends of the newcomer are aware of the difference long before he is himself. He finally realizes that he has undergone a profound altera-

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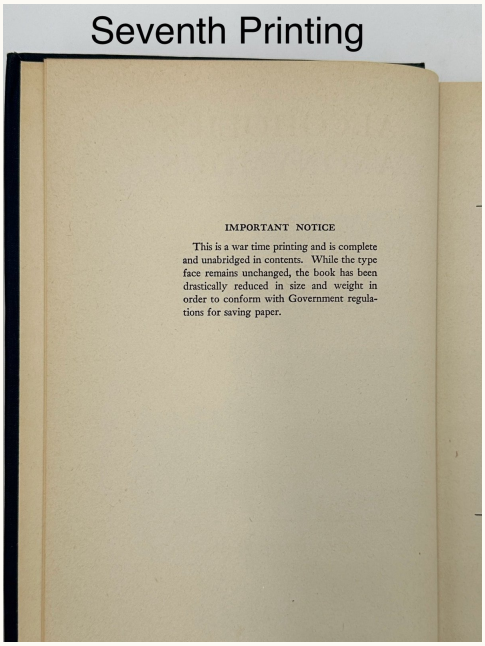


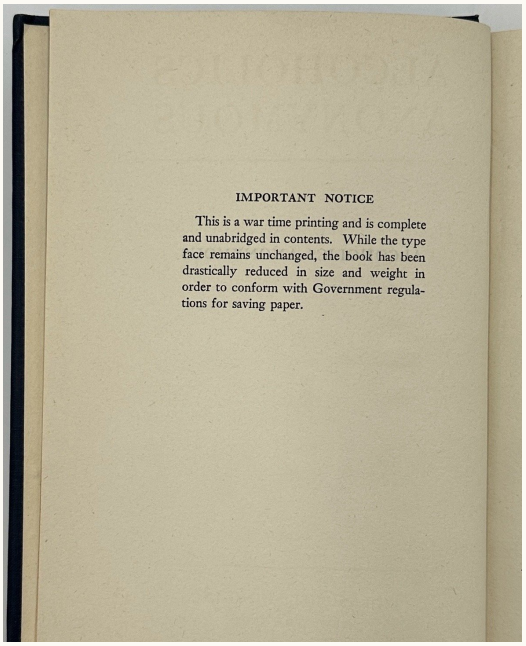


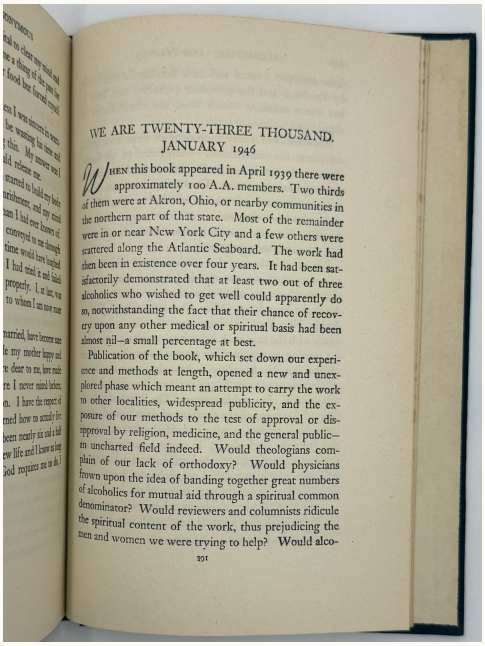
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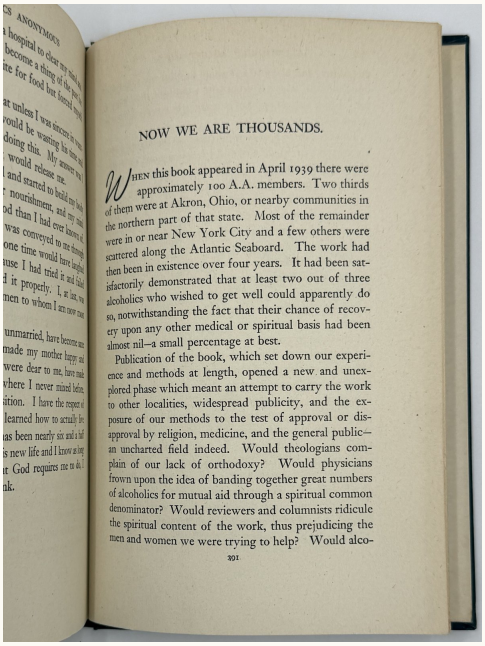
Wartime notices and membership pages

Source-guide photographs of pages, bindings and jackets. Labels within the original photographs are retained. These are reference examples, not condition standards for every surviving copy.





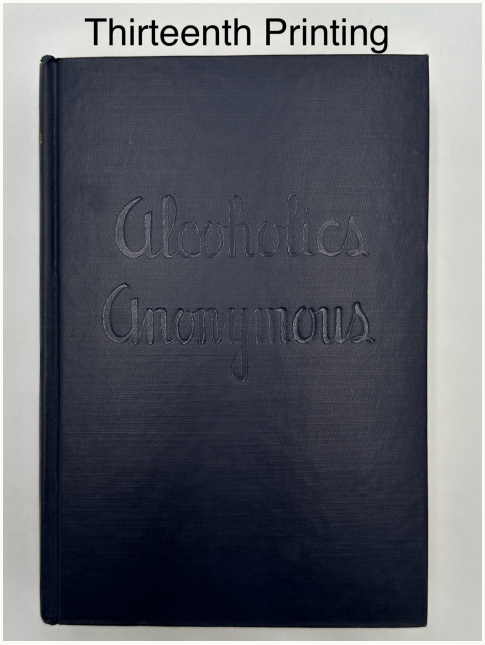


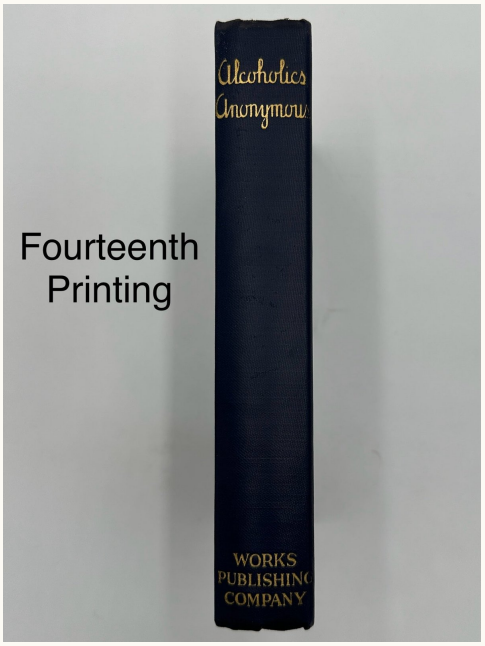


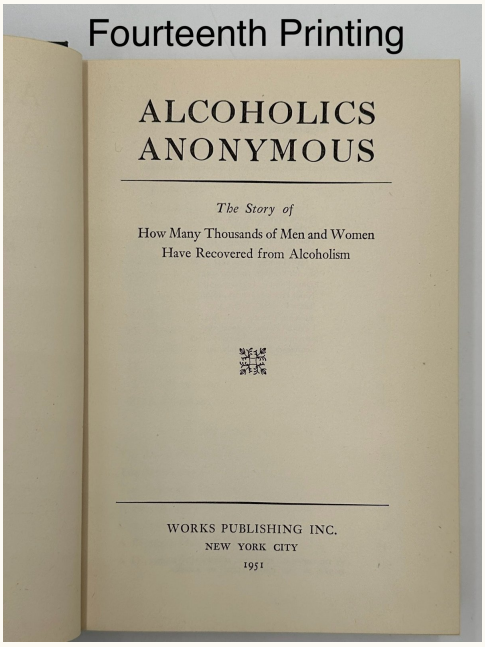
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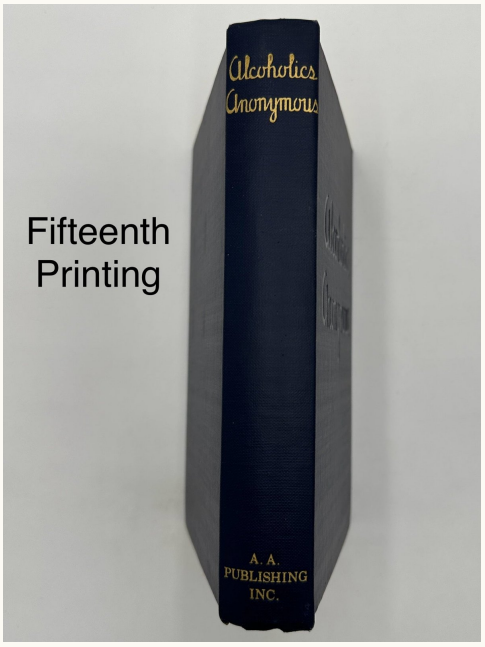
Bindings and publisher statements

Source-guide photographs of pages, bindings and jackets. Labels within the original photographs are retained. These are reference examples, not condition standards for every surviving copy.





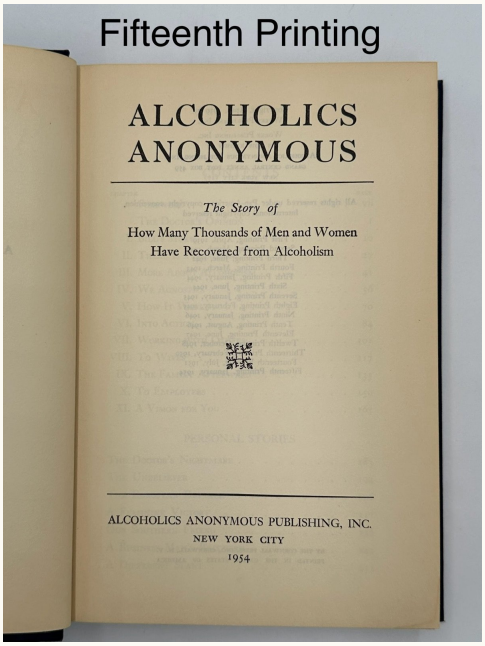


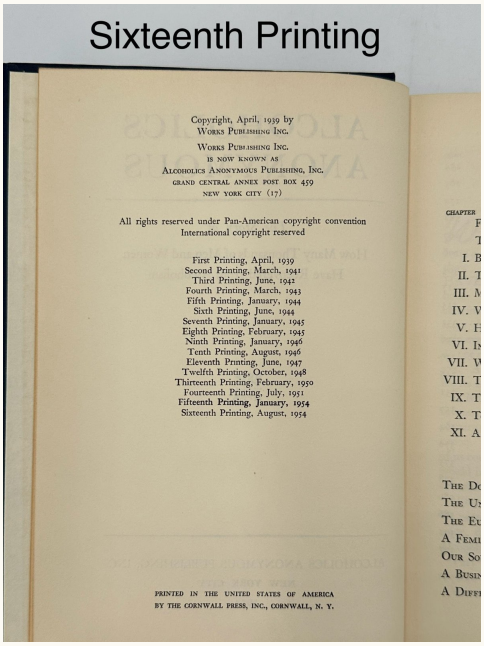


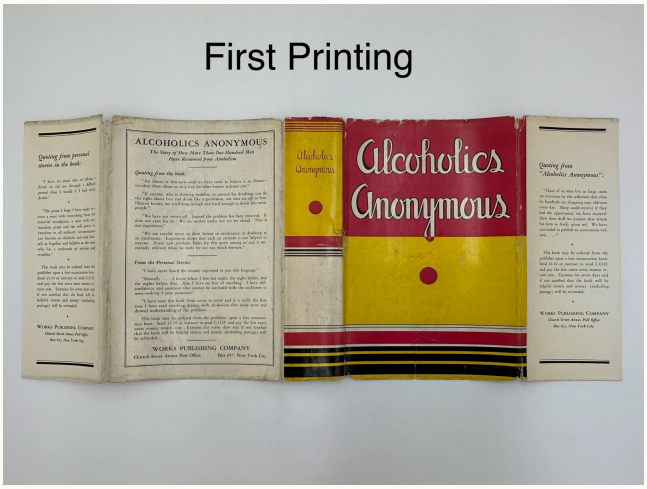
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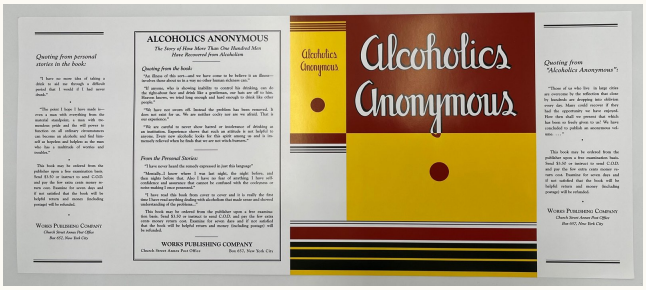
Late printings and jacket design

Source-guide photographs of pages, bindings and jackets. Labels within the original photographs are retained. These are reference examples, not condition standards for every surviving copy.









Part Three

Visual Guide to the First Edition Era

A compact comparison of the changes described in the printing-by-printing chapters

This section is designed for quick reference. Rather than retelling the history of each printing, it places the most important physical and textual changes side by side so readers can compare the entire First Edition era at a glance.

The “now we are…” timeline

Printing	Page 391 title	Why it matters
1st - Apr. 1939	“Lone Endeavor”	The original closing story before the membership updates began
2nd - Mar. 1941	“Now We Are Two Thousand”	First membership-based closing page
3rd - June 1942	“Now We Are Six Thousand”	Records rapid national growth
4th - Mar. 1943	“Now We Are Eight Thousand”	Continues the printing-by-printing growth record
5th - Jan. 1944	“Now We Are Ten Thousand”	Final title in the original thick-paper format
6th - June 1944	“Now We Are Ten Thousand”	Same title retained
7th - Jan. 1945	“Now We Are Fourteen Thousand. January 1945”	Appears with the wartime Important Notice
8th - Feb. 1945	“Now We Are Fourteen Thousand. January 1945”	Same title in the smallest First Edition format
9th - Jan. 1946	“Now We Are Twenty-Three Thousand”	Final numbered membership title
10th-16th - 1946-1954	“Now We Are Thousands”	Stable title for the remainder of the First Edition era

Four physical formats

Printings	Physical stage	Identification summary
Printings 1-5	Original large format	Same height and width; thick paper creates the substantial early “Big Book” profile
Printings 6-7	Same page dimensions, thinner text block	Thinner paper reduces the book’s thickness without changing height or width
Printing 8	Smallest First Edition	Wartime size reduction finally implemented; jacket resized to match
Printings 9-16	Final standard First Edition format	Slightly larger than the Eighth; same general size retained through 1954

The twenty-one recognized binding variants

Printing	Known cloth color(s)	Books in a complete variant set
1st	Red	1
2nd	Light blue · Navy blue · Rare red	3
3rd	Light blue · Navy blue · Olive green	3
4th	Olive green · Navy blue	2
5th	Light blue	1
6th-16th	Navy blue	11
TOTAL	Sixteen printings represented by twenty-one binding variants	21

Color identifies a binding variant, not a separate edition or text. Fading, staining, and photography can alter the apparent shade, so cloth color should always be considered alongside the copyright page and other printing points.

Major textual and identification changes

Printing(s)	Primary change or identification point
1st	Twelfth Step states “Spiritual Experience”; Page 234 repeated-line error; “Lone Endeavor”
2nd	Foreword updated to more than two thousand; “spiritual experience” changed to “spiritual awakening”; Appendix II added; page 234 corrected; “Lone Endeavor” removed
3rd	Page 27 changed from “one hundred men who were once” to “hundreds of men who were once”
4th	Page 27 changed to “thousands of men and women who were once”
5th-9th	Core text largely stable; page 391 and physical production changes become the principal distinctions
10th-16th	“Now We Are Thousands” remains stable; later printings are identified mainly by copyright page, publisher, jacket statement, and print quantity

Constant throughout the First Edition: The Doctor’s Opinion begins on numbered page 1 in all sixteen printings. It moved into the Roman-numeral front matter only with the First Printing of the Second Edition in 1955.

Publisher and dust-jacket timeline

Printing(s)	Publisher	Dust-jacket identification
1st Printing	Works Publishing Company	Circus design; no printing number stated on jacket
2nd-13th Printings	Works Publishing Company / Works Publishing, Inc. as stated in the books	Same circus design; printing number stated on spine and flap
14th Printing	Works Publishing, Inc.	Final First Edition printing under Works Publishing
15th-16th Printings	Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing, Inc.	Same circus design; new publisher era reflected in the book
8th Printing note	-	Jacket physically reduced to fit the smallest First Edition while retaining the same design

Because the basic circus design remained consistent, the jacket spine and flap are essential identification points. Original, supplied original, restored, and reproduction jackets should always be described separately.

Part Four

Dust Jackets, Authenticity, and Restoration

A practical guide to understanding what survives around the book - not just the book itself.

Why the dust jacket matters

The dust jacket was created to protect the book, advertise it, and identify the printing. It was also the part most likely to be torn, discarded, taped, trimmed, or lost. As a result, original First Edition jackets survive in far smaller numbers than the books they once covered.

For collectors, the jacket should always be evaluated separately from the book. A strong book can have a poor jacket, and a worn book can be paired with a much better supplied jacket. Neither circumstance is automatically improper, but the relationship should be described honestly.

The presence of an original jacket can greatly affect desirability, but it does not replace the need to identify the book itself. Printing number, cloth color, copyright page, format, and textual points must still agree.

Four terms every collector should know

Term	Meaning
Original dust jacket	A genuine period jacket produced for that printing. The term does not by itself prove that the jacket has remained with the same copy since publication.
Supplied original jacket	A genuine period jacket later paired with a different copy of the same printing. It remains original, but the later pairing should be disclosed.
Reproduction or facsimile jacket	A modern copy made for display or protection. It may be attractive and useful, but it is not an original component of the book.
Restored original jacket	A genuine period jacket that has received repairs or cosmetic treatment, such as tissue reinforcement, paper infill, color touch, or replacement of missing material.

These terms describe different conditions, not a simple ladder from “good” to “bad.” A supplied original jacket may be preferable to no jacket, and careful restoration may stabilize a fragile survivor. The essential requirement is accurate disclosure.

Original First Printing Dust JacketReproduction First Printing Dust Jacket

The circus jacket across the first edition era

Every printing of the First Edition used the same basic red-and-yellow “circus” jacket design. The design remained visually consistent from 1939 through 1954, but the jacket was not identical in every printing.

The First Printing jacket does not state a printing number. Beginning with the Second Printing, the printing designation appears on the jacket spine and flap. The Eighth Printing jacket was physically reduced to fit the smallest First Edition book, and later jackets were resized again for the format used from the Ninth through Sixteenth Printings.

Because the front panel remained so familiar, the spine, flaps, dimensions, and fit are often more useful than the front image when identifying a jacket.

What to examine on a dust jacket

- Printing statement: Confirm the printing number on the spine and flap. Remember that the First Printing jacket carries no printing-number designation.
- Fit and dimensions: The jacket should correspond to the physical size of the printing. A jacket that is too tall, short, loose, or tight may belong to another printing or may be a reproduction.
- Trimming: Check whether the top or bottom edge has been cut down. Trimming may remove printed information, alter proportions, or hide earlier damage.
- Spine fading: The jacket spine is frequently lighter than the front and back panels because of exposure to light. Uneven fading is common and not automatically evidence of reproduction.
- Folds and edges: Examine flap folds, spine folds, corners, and spine ends for splitting, chipping, tears, and reinforcement.
- Repairs: Look for pressure-sensitive tape, archival tape, tissue backing, glue, paper fills, or reinforced folds.
- Color touch and added material: Missing color or lettering may have been repainted. Examine suspiciously uniform areas, especially around chips and folds.
- Paper and printing quality: Modern facsimiles can differ in paper texture, gloss, ink density, sharpness, and aging. Comparison with a verified original is more reliable than judging from color alone.
- Flaps and price: Inspect both flaps for completeness, printing statements, clipping, and signs that material has been removed.
- Provenance of the pairing: Ask whether the jacket is believed to have remained with the book, was supplied later, or has an uncertain history.

Restoration: preservation versus disguise

Restoration is not automatically negative. A fragile jacket may require careful stabilization to prevent further loss. Problems arise when restoration is hidden, overstated, or used to make a heavily altered jacket appear untouched.

Common treatments include mending tears, reinforcing folds, flattening creases, removing tape, filling missing paper, adding color, rebuilding spine ends, and lining the jacket with thin archival tissue. Some work is easily visible; expert restoration may require close examination or professional assessment.

This guide does not attempt to teach readers how to perform restoration. Its purpose is to help collectors recognize that treatment may be present and encourage clear disclosure of the work performed.

Binding authentication

The binding should be identified independently from the jacket. Cloth, gilt, hinges, endpapers, and structural repairs should all be examined before a copy is described as original or unrestored. Here, the essential point is that a convincing jacket cannot authenticate an incorrectly identified or altered book.

Feature	What to examine
Cloth color	Compare under neutral, consistent lighting and, when possible, beside a verified example.
Front-board gilt	The red First Printing and rare red Second Printing have gold title lettering on the front board. Later First Edition bindings do not.
Spine gilt	All First Edition printings have gold lettering on the spine, although wear and fading may reduce its visibility.
Rebacking	Look for replaced spine cloth, new hinges, mismatched cloth, lifted original labels, or unusually fresh material.
Recasing	A text block may have been removed and placed back into its case - or into a different case. Check endpapers, hinges, sewing, and alignment.
Cleaning or recoloring	Cloth may have been cleaned, dyed, or touched up. Uneven texture, transferred color, or unnatural uniformity can be warning signs.
Book-jacket agreement	The printing, physical size, and jacket statement should correspond. A genuine book and genuine jacket can still be an incorrect match.

Responsible disclosure

A trustworthy description should make clear what is known, what is believed, and what remains uncertain. It should not use the word “original” to conceal a supplied jacket, significant restoration, or replaced components.

At minimum, a responsible description should address:

- Whether the jacket is original, supplied original, reproduction, or uncertain
- Any restoration, tape, tissue reinforcement, paper replacement, or color touch
- Clipping or trimming of the jacket flaps or edges
- Rebacking, recasing, hinge repair, or replaced endpapers
- Missing pages, plates, leaves, or other components
- Writing, stamps, library markings, or ownership inscriptions
- The basis for any claim of provenance, association, rarity, or known survival

When documentation is incomplete, qualified language is better than certainty. Phrases such as “believed to be,” “appears to be,” and “provenance not established” are more useful than unsupported claims.

A practical photograph checklist

A complete photographic record should allow another collector to evaluate the book without relying only on a front-cover image. Include:

Front, back, spine, and both flaps of the jacket

Closeups of the jacket spine ends, corners, folds, chips, tears, and repairs

Front board, rear board, and spine with the jacket removed

Copyright page and printing statement

Top and bottom edges of the book and jacket

Front and rear hinges and endpapers

Any writing, stamps, inscriptions, restoration, or replaced material

A side-by-side comparison when cloth color or jacket size is an identification point

Original, supplied, reproduced, and restored jackets can all have a legitimate place in a collection. Their status should be identified clearly, their condition described honestly, and uncertainty left as uncertainty.

Part Five

Building and preserving a collection

A First Edition collection can begin with one meaningful book or grow into a complete run of sixteen printings and twenty-one recognized binding variants. There is no single correct path. The strongest collections are built with clear purpose, careful documentation, and respect for the physical books themselves.

This section is not a price guide. It is intended to help collectors decide what they want to preserve, make thoughtful choices, and care for the books so that their history remains available to future readers.

Different ways to build a collection

A collection becomes more satisfying when its purpose is defined before the search begins. Some collectors are drawn to completeness, while others prefer a smaller group of books connected by a particular historical or personal theme.

Collecting approach	What it preserves
One representative First Edition	A single copy chosen for its condition, history, printing, or personal meaning. A later printing can be an excellent and accessible introduction to the First Edition era.
A chronological run of sixteen printings	One copy of every printing from April 1939 through August 1954. This approach follows the development of the book and the growth of A.A. over fifteen years.
The twenty-one binding variants	The sixteen printings plus every recognized cloth-color variation: one First, three Seconds, three Thirds, two Fourths, and one copy of each remaining printing.
A format or transition collection	Books selected to illustrate physical changes, such as a thick-paper Fifth, thinner Sixth, transitional Seventh, smallest-format Eighth, and later-format Ninth.
A text-and-history collection	Printings chosen for important changes: the page 234 error, Appendix II, the evolving page 27 language, the “Now We Are…” pages, and the publisher transition.
Association, signed, or provenance collection	Copies connected to early members, groups, institutions, families, or documented events. Historical association may matter more than ordinary condition.

The categories can overlap. A chronological collection may also include meaningful inscriptions, while a one-book collection may contain a copy with exceptional provenance. The goal is not to follow someone else’s checklist but to understand what gives the collection coherence.

Where to begin

New collectors often assume that they must begin with the earliest or rarest printing. In practice, a sound later printing can be a better starting point. It allows the collector to study the binding, jacket, typography, and structure of a First Edition without making the most expensive decision first.

A useful first purchase should satisfy three questions:

- Why does this particular copy interest me?
- Can I identify and describe it confidently?
- Is its condition, restoration, and jacket status fully disclosed?

Condition, scarcity, and budget rarely align perfectly. A collector may choose a later printing with a strong original jacket, an earlier printing without a jacket, or a worn association copy whose history is more compelling than its appearance. None of these choices is automatically superior. The best decision is the one that matches the purpose of the collection.

Building slowly and upgrading over time

A complete run does not need to be assembled at once. Many experienced collectors begin with sound, complete copies and improve individual positions as better opportunities appear.

A practical upgrading strategy may include:

- Beginning with complete jacketless or reproduction-jacket copies of difficult printings
- Replacing a worn copy with one having stronger cloth, hinges, or interior condition
- Upgrading from a reproduction jacket to a supplied original jacket, with the change fully documented
- Replacing a supplied jacket with a copy believed to retain its original jacket
- Adding binding variants only after the sixteen-printing sequence is established
- Keeping the earlier copy until the replacement has been authenticated and compared directly

Every upgrade should be recorded. Retain purchase receipts, prior descriptions, photographs, correspondence, and notes about why the replacement was made. These records help preserve provenance and prevent important information from being lost when a copy leaves the collection.

A Note on Completeness

A “complete” collection can mean different things. One collector may mean all sixteen printings; another may mean the twenty-one recognized cloth variants; another may include every jacket state, signed copy, or association example encountered. State the scope clearly rather than treating one definition as universal.

Storage and preservation

First Edition Big Books were made to be used, and many surviving copies already show decades of handling. Good preservation does not attempt to make an old book look new. It slows further deterioration while retaining the evidence of the book’s history.

Shelving

- Store books upright on a stable shelf, supported so that they do not lean.
- Use smooth, appropriately sized bookends when the shelf is not full.
- Do not pack books so tightly that the boards or jackets are damaged during removal.
- Avoid placing heavy oversized volumes on top of smaller books.
- If a binding is too fragile to stand safely, consult a conservator about an archival enclosure rather than improvising a tight box.

Light, temperature, and moisture

- Keep books away from direct sunlight and strong display lighting. Cloth and jacket colors can fade permanently.
- A stable indoor environment is generally safer than locations with repeated swings in temperature or humidity.

- Avoid attics, garages, damp basements, exterior storage units, and shelves against persistently damp walls.
- Keep books away from plumbing, windows that leak, fireplaces, radiators, and air vents.
- If a book becomes wet or develops active mold, isolate it from the collection and seek qualified conservation advice promptly.

Dust-jacket protection

Original jackets should be placed in properly fitted, archival-quality polyester protectors. The protector should support the jacket without forcing it, folding it incorrectly, or adhering to the paper. Do not laminate, glue, or tape a jacket into a cover.

A reproduction jacket may be placed over or beneath an original only when the arrangement does not create abrasion, pressure, or confusion about what is original. Keep clear written documentation of every supplied or reproduction component.

Archival enclosures and materials

- Use acid-free, lignin-free folders or boxes when an enclosure is needed.
- Avoid ordinary cardboard, newspaper, pressure-sensitive tape, rubber bands, and self-adhesive plastic coverings.
- Do not insert acidic clippings, notes, or photographs between the pages for long-term storage.
- Preserve important loose provenance material separately in an archival folder, with a clear reference linking it to the book.

Handling and display

Careful handling is simple and makes a meaningful difference over time.

- Wash and dry hands before handling; clean, dry hands usually provide better control than cotton gloves.
- Remove a book by grasping both sides of the binding, not by pulling on the top of the spine.
- Support the boards and text block when opening the book, especially if the hinges are weak.
- Do not force the book to open flat for photography or display.
- Keep food, drinks, pens, adhesive notes, and cleaning products away from the work area.
- When displaying a copy open, use a supportive cradle and change the displayed opening periodically.
- Limit long-term exhibition of original jackets, especially under bright or ultraviolet-rich light.

A book does not need to remain untouched to be preserved. It should be handled deliberately, with attention to the condition of that particular copy.

Insurance and documentation

As a collection grows, the records surrounding it become nearly as important as the books. Documentation supports identification, insurance, provenance, estate planning, and any future transfer of ownership.

Maintain a collection record containing:

- Printing, publication date, binding color, and jacket status

- Full condition description for the book and jacket separately
- Photographs of the boards, spine, copyright page, jacket, inscriptions, and defects
- Purchase date, seller, purchase price, receipts, and correspondence
- Known repairs, restoration, supplied components, or prior rebinding
- Provenance, signatures, and the evidence supporting any association claim
- Current location and any identifying inventory number used by the collector

Keep a backup of the records away from the physical collection. For insurance, ask the insurer how books and collectibles are covered, what documentation is required, whether individual items must be scheduled, and how values should be updated. Coverage varies, so assumptions about a standard homeowner's or renter's policy should be avoided.

A qualified appraisal may be appropriate for rare, signed, association, or original-jacket copies. An appraisal should identify the exact object being valued and disclose the date and purpose of the valuation.

Collecting with purpose

The most rewarding First Edition collections are not simply accumulations of scarce books. They preserve a sequence of physical evidence: changing membership numbers, revised language, shifting publishers, cost-saving materials, wartime production decisions, and books that were read and used by people searching for recovery.

A worn copy with an early ownership inscription may reveal more human history than a cleaner copy without context. A complete run can show the development of the Fellowship at a glance. A single carefully chosen book can connect its owner to a particular moment in A.A. history.

Collectors serve as temporary stewards. Good stewardship means learning what the books are, describing them honestly, avoiding unnecessary alteration, preserving their records, and passing both the objects and their histories forward.

THE FIRST EDITION LIBRARY

Conclusion

Sixteen Stages in the Life of One Book

The First Edition of Alcoholics Anonymous is often spoken of as though it were a single book. In reality, it is a sequence of sixteen printings produced during fifteen formative years - from the uncertain launch of 1939 to the final printing issued only months before the Second Edition appeared in 1955.

Seen together, those printings preserve the early growth of Alcoholics Anonymous in physical form. The changing “Now We Are…” pages record a fellowship expanding from little more than one hundred members into the tens of thousands. Changes in cloth color, paper, thickness, size, publisher, and dust-jacket details reveal the practical decisions made by an organization that began with limited money and no assurance that its book - or the fellowship behind it - would survive.

Each copy also carries a history of use. Many were read closely, passed from one alcoholic to another, marked, inscribed, repaired, placed in libraries, or kept by families for decades. Wear is not always evidence that a book was neglected. Sometimes it is evidence that the book fulfilled the purpose for which it was created.

For collectors, the goal may be one meaningful copy, a complete run of sixteen printings, all twenty-one recognized binding variants, or a collection shaped by signatures, provenance, and personal connection. Whatever form the collection takes, careful identification and honest description matter. Original jackets, supplied components, restoration, inscriptions, and uncertain claims should be recorded clearly so that the history of the object is not separated from the object itself.

These books are more than milestones in publishing history and more than scarce collectibles. They are surviving witnesses to the years when A.A. was learning how to carry its message beyond personal contact. Preserving them responsibly allows future readers to see that history not only in dates and membership figures, but in paper, cloth, ink, handwriting, wear, and the evidence of lives touched along the way.

No collector owns that history permanently. Each of us is only a temporary caretaker. The best collection is therefore not simply the rarest or most valuable one, but the one that is understood, documented, preserved, and eventually passed forward with its story intact.

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Reference Pages

The language of rare-book collecting can be precise. The following terms are used throughout this guide to describe editions, bindings, dust jackets, condition, restoration, and provenance. Clear terminology helps collectors compare copies and disclose their condition honestly.

Association copy. A copy that can be connected to a specific person, group, institution, or historical event through inscription, documentation, or a reliable chain of custody. The strength of an association depends entirely on the quality of the evidence supporting it.

Binding variant. A distinct binding form produced within the same printing, most commonly a difference in cloth color. The sixteen First Edition printings are represented by twenty-one recognized cloth-binding forms.

Boards. The front and rear covers of a hardbound book, typically made of cardboard covered in cloth. Also called "covers."

Casing. The outer cover assembly - boards, spine, and cloth - that houses the text block. When a text block is removed from its original casing and placed in a new or repaired one, the book is said to have been "recased."

Circus jacket. The informal name used by collectors for the red-and-yellow dust jacket design used on all sixteen First Edition printings. The design remained visually consistent from 1939 through 1954, though the dimensions and printing statements changed across the era.

Cloth. The fabric covering applied to the boards and spine of a hardbound book. First Edition Big Books use various colors of cloth, and the cloth color is one of the primary identification and variant markers.

Condition grade. A shorthand description of a book's physical state. The book and its dust jacket should always be graded separately. Standard grades from highest to lowest are: Fine, Near Fine, Very Good, Good, Fair, and Poor. A grade without a specific description of defects is incomplete.

Copyright page. The page, typically on the reverse of the title page, that states the printing number, publication date, publisher name, and copyright information. For First Edition Big Books, the copyright page is the primary identification document.

Dust jacket (DJ). The printed paper wrapper originally placed around the cloth binding to protect it and advertise the book. Also called a "dust wrapper" or simply "jacket." Original First Edition jackets survive in far smaller numbers than the books they once covered.

Edition. A version of a text that differs substantially from another version. The text of Alcoholics Anonymous was not significantly revised until 1955. Every printing from April 1939 through 1954 is therefore a First Edition.

Endpapers. The leaves of paper pasted to the inside of the front and rear boards and folded to form the first and last pages of the book's interior. Replaced endpapers are a common form of restoration.

Fine. The highest standard condition grade. A Fine copy shows no defects and appears as new. Genuinely Fine First Edition Big Books are extremely rare given their age and history of use.

Foxing. Brown or reddish-brown spots on paper caused by oxidation, mold, or a combination of factors. Common in books stored in humid conditions.

Gilt. Gold lettering or decoration applied to the spine or boards of a book. First Edition Big Books have gold lettering on the spine. Only the red First Printing and the rare red Second Printing have gold title lettering on the front board as well.

REFERENCE LIBRARY

Collector terms, continued

Gutter. The interior margin where facing pages meet near the binding.

Hinge. The interior joint where the board meets the text block, visible when the cover is opened. A cracked or broken hinge indicates structural weakness. Hinge repair is one of the most common forms of restoration.

Joint. The exterior hinge or groove where the spine meets the front or rear board. A split joint is a common condition issue in heavily used copies.

Mull. The open-weave fabric used to attach the text block to the case. Visible mull at the hinges usually indicates a cracked or loose binding.

ODJ - Original Dust Jacket. A genuine period dust jacket produced for that printing. The term identifies the jacket as authentic but does not, by itself, prove that it has remained with the same book since publication. A genuine jacket added later should be described as a supplied original jacket.

Printing. A single production run of a book from a given setting of type or plates. All sixteen printings of the First Edition Big Book share the same basic text but differ in copyright page, binding color, physical format, dust-jacket printing statement, and certain textual details.

Provenance. The documented history of ownership of a specific copy. Strong provenance includes receipts, correspondence, photographs, institutional records, or a reliable chain of custody. A compelling story is not the same as documentation.

RDJ / Facsimile jacket. A reproduction dust jacket printed to replicate the appearance of an original. Reproduction jackets should always be identified and disclosed separately from original and supplied original jackets.

Rebacking. The replacement of the spine cloth while retaining the original boards. A rebound book has had both the spine and boards replaced.

Recasing. The process of removing the original text block from a damaged or deteriorated case and resetting it into a repaired or replacement case.

Supplied original jacket (SOJ). An original dust jacket from the correct printing that was not with the book when acquired but has been paired with it later. A supplied jacket is not a reproduction, but the pairing should be disclosed.

Text block. The sewn or glued assembly of all the printed pages of a book, separate from the binding case.

Variant. A copy that differs from the standard example of its printing in a measurable physical feature, most commonly cloth color. The term should not be used to describe ordinary condition differences.

Very Good (VG). A condition grade indicating a copy that shows signs of use but remains complete, structurally sound, and presentable. Specific defects should be listed alongside the grade.

Works Publishing Company. The publisher name used on the earliest First Edition Big Books. Created specifically by early A.A. members who financed the book. The name changed to Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing, Inc. beginning with the Fifteenth Printing (January 1954).

COLLECTOR INVENTORY

Sixteen-Printing Checklist

Use this checklist to track one representative copy of each First Edition printing. Binding color, jacket status, condition, and provenance may be recorded as the collection develops. Collectors pursuing every recognized cloth variation should also use the separate Twenty-One-Variant Checklist.

Record jacket status as ODJ, supplied ODJ, RDJ/facsimile, or no jacket. Grade the book and jacket separately; use the notes field for provenance, restoration, signatures, or planned upgrades.

Done	Printing / date	Binding	Jacket	Condition / notes
[ ]	1st April 1939	Red		
[ ]	2nd March 1941	Light blue, navy blue, or rare red		
[ ]	3rd June 1942	Light blue, navy blue, or olive green		
[ ]	4th March 1943	Olive green or navy blue		
[ ]	5th January 1944	Light blue		
[ ]	6th June 1944	Navy blue		
[ ]	7th January 1945	Navy blue		
[ ]	8th February 1945	Navy blue		
[ ]	9th January 1946	Navy blue		
[ ]	10th August 1946	Navy blue		
[ ]	11th June 1947	Navy blue		
[ ]	12th October 1948	Navy blue		
[ ]	13th February 1950	Navy blue		
[ ]	14th July 1951	Navy blue		
[ ]	15th January 1954	Navy blue		
[ ]	16th August 1954	Navy blue		

COLLECTOR INVENTORY

Twenty-One-Variant Checklist

Use this checklist to track every recognized cloth-binding variation of the sixteen First Edition printings. A sixteen-printing set requires one copy of each printing; a twenty-one-variant set includes the additional binding colors found in the Second, Third, and Fourth Printings.

Record jacket status as ODJ, supplied ODJ, RDJ/facsimile, or no jacket. Grade the book and jacket separately, and use the notes column for provenance, restoration, inscriptions, or other distinguishing details.

Done	Printing / date	Binding variant	Jacket	Condition / notes
[ ]	1st - Apr. 1939	Red		
[ ]	2nd - Mar. 1941	Light blue		
[ ]	2nd - Mar. 1941	Navy blue		
[ ]	2nd - Mar. 1941	Red		
[ ]	3rd - June 1942	Light blue		
[ ]	3rd - June 1942	Navy blue		
[ ]	3rd - June 1942	Olive green		
[ ]	4th - Mar. 1943	Olive green		
[ ]	4th - Mar. 1943	Navy blue		
[ ]	5th - Jan. 1944	Light blue		
[ ]	6th - June 1944	Navy blue		
[ ]	7th - Jan. 1945	Navy blue		
[ ]	8th - Feb. 1945	Navy blue		
[ ]	9th - Jan. 1946	Navy blue		
[ ]	10th - Aug. 1946	Navy blue		
[ ]	11th - June 1947	Navy blue		
[ ]	12th - Oct. 1948	Navy blue		
[ ]	13th - Feb. 1950	Navy blue		
[ ]	14th - July 1951	Navy blue		
[ ]	15th - Jan. 1954	Navy blue		
[ ]	16th - Aug. 1954	Navy blue		

Completion note: A twenty-one-variant set refers to binding colors, not twenty-one different textual printings. The Second, Third, and Fourth Printings account for the five additional volumes beyond the standard sixteen-printing run.

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Sources And Acknowledgments

How This Guide Was Built

This guide was assembled from direct examination of First Edition Big Books, comparison of printing-specific features, published A.A. histories, institutional material, and the accumulated observations of collectors who have handled these books over many years. The purpose of this section is to make that foundation visible and to distinguish documented evidence from informed collector interpretation.

Source hierarchy

When sources conflict, this guide gives preference in the following order:

- The physical book itself: copyright page, binding, paper, dimensions, textual points, appendices, membership pages, and dust-jacket statements.
- Contemporary documents and official publishing records created during the First Edition era.
- Official A.A. publications, archival material, and later institutional histories.
- Published specialist research that identifies its sources and can be checked against surviving copies.
- Collector observation and long-standing tradition, clearly labeled when no primary documentation has been located.

This hierarchy does not mean that collector knowledge is unimportant. Many rare variants and production details first become visible through careful comparison of surviving books. It does mean that estimates and theories should be described honestly rather than presented as settled fact.

Physical copies and primary evidence

The central evidence for this guide comes from surviving First Edition books and dust jackets, including copies handled, photographed, or documented through Recovery Collectibles and private collections. Particular attention was given to:

- Copyright pages and publisher statements for all sixteen printings.
- Binding colors, front-board gilt, spine gilt, paper thickness, and changes in physical format.
- The changing “Now We Are…” pages and other printing-specific textual points.
- The wartime “Important Notice” in the Seventh and Eighth Printings.
- Original dust-jacket spines, flaps, dimensions, printing statements, repairs, and supplied components.
- Ownership inscriptions, association evidence, restoration, and signs of ordinary use.
- Photographs and direct examination of actual copies provide the principal evidence for the identification points presented in this guide.

Published and institutional references

The following works and source groups informed the historical framework of this guide:

- Alcoholics Anonymous, First Edition printings, 1939-1954 - especially the Foreword, copyright pages, appendices, personal stories, and “Now We Are…” pages.
- Alcoholics Anonymous, First Printing of the Second Edition, 1955 - for comparison of the revised organization, new stories, and movement of The Doctor’s Opinion into the Roman-numeral front matter.
- Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age - for the Fellowship’s early publishing history and institutional development.
- Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached the World - for Bill Wilson, the book project, and the growth of early A.A.
- Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers - for early Akron history and the people surrounding the original groups.
- Official A.A. archival, copyright, publishing, and historical material made available by Alcoholics Anonymous World Services and related institutional collections.
- Jack Alexander, “Alcoholics Anonymous,” The Saturday Evening Post, March 1, 1941 - for the national publicity that accompanied the Second Printing era.
- Recovery Collectibles research files, product documentation, and the article “The First Edition Big Book: A Printing-by-Printing History, 1939-1954.”

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Periodical Sources

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- Recovery Collectibles. Product documentation, examination records, and photographic archive of First Edition Big Books and dust jackets, 2015-present.

Archival and Institutional Sources

Published and publicly available archival and historical material from Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. Print-run figures, binding-variant counts, and production details in this guide are drawn from copyright pages, physical examination of surviving copies, official A.A. institutional histories, and long-standing collector observation. Where primary documentation has not been located, the uncertainty is stated explicitly in the text. Readers who locate additional primary records are encouraged to share them so that future editions of this guide can be updated accordingly.

A Note on Sources

Collector knowledge and unresolved questions

Several details remain important but are not fully resolved by surviving documentation. They are retained in this guide only when the uncertainty itself is explained. Examples include:

- The competing First Printing production figures of approximately 4,650 and 4,730 completed copies.
- The Seventh Printing: A.A. documentation records 5,000 copies, while surviving rarity and the immediate February 1945 Eighth Printing suggest that perhaps only 300-500 were completed or released.
- The red Second Printing: approximately 300 copies are suspected, possibly using red cloth remaining from the First Printing order, but no exact production record has been located.
- The original production split among certain binding colors, including the green and navy Fourth Printings.
- Exact surviving-copy counts for scarce original dust jackets and rare binding variants.

These questions should remain open unless stronger records emerge. The guide should be updated when new evidence is found rather than protecting an older claim simply because it has been repeated for many years.

Acknowledgments

This project depends on the work of many people who preserved the books before they reached the present generation: early A.A. members who bought and used them, families who kept them, librarians and archivists who protected institutional copies, collectors who compared variants, and historians who preserved the stories surrounding the text.

Recovery Collectibles also acknowledges the collectors, researchers, booksellers, and members of the recovery-history community who have shared photographs, provenance, observations, and questions. Their willingness to compare copies and challenge assumptions has helped make the field more accurate and transparent.

Editorial and affiliation note

This is an independent educational guide produced by Recovery Collectibles. It is not published, approved, or endorsed by Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., the General Service Office, or any A.A. service entity. “Alcoholics Anonymous,” “A.A.,” and the titles of A.A. publications are used here solely for historical, bibliographical, and educational identification.

The guide intentionally avoids functioning as a current price catalog. Rarity, condition, provenance, originality, restoration, and market timing can affect value substantially. Historical and bibliographical statements should be corrected whenever better evidence becomes available.

THE FIRST EDITION LIBRARY

About Recovery Collectibles

Preserving the printed history of recovery

Recovery Collectibles is an independent bookseller and historical resource devoted to preserving and sharing the printed history of Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, the Oxford Group, and the broader recovery movement.

Our work centers on locating, examining, documenting, and responsibly placing books and archival materials that might otherwise be lost. The collection ranges from early Big Books and original dust jackets to pamphlets, magazines, signed material, photographs, and publications that influenced the development of the Twelve Step movement.

This guide grew from direct examination of First Edition Big Books, years of cataloging individual copies, and ongoing conversations with collectors and recovery historians. It was created as an educational tool - not as a price list - to help readers understand what changed across the sixteen printings and why those physical differences matter.

Recovery Collectibles believes that careful description is part of preservation. Originality, restoration, supplied components, ownership history, and unresolved questions should be disclosed plainly. The goal is not merely to identify rare books, but to preserve the evidence they carry and make that history easier for the next generation to understand.

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