

AMERICAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

Charles Town, West Virginia

Colonial Bibles, Imprint on America: an impress of print and communication

Submitted by

John DiCesare

Hist520: Graduate Seminar in U.S. History

January 18, 2020

Submitted to the Department of History

Print media has transformed over the millennia from stone to clay tablets, vellum, paper, and now digital, but its purpose remains the same, communication. For the 13 colonies to nationalize, America needed a broader means of conversation. The first two significant physical aspects of this connection were the establishment of the U.S. Postal system (1775), and its first communication technology produced in America, printed medium, which included the printing of the English Bible (1782) by Robert Aitken, printer of congressional Journals. Later, the Government Printing Office was established in 1861.¹ With the printing of the Bible, it helped solidify this prose.² The conventional means of communication, the English language, was consolidated through media with the publication of Bibles, national documents, and dictionaries (lexicons). The solidification of the English language provided for the pivotal aspect that enabled the colonies to progress into a nation as other national styles that mixed in or faded out of vulgarity. The printing of the English *Authorized King James Holy Bible* helped solidify a common language with which America would continue as its prose, while the aid of other new communication technologies also facilitated multiple revolutions that inspired impulses for the American colonies to transition into a nation.

Since the inception of the New World, Germanic, Latin, and various native speaking languages adorned broader America, but with the dominance of the British among the 13 eastern colonies, there established a prevailing English language. Ostensibly, there exist a plethora of

¹ John Algeo, et al., *The Cambridge History of The English Language, Vol. VI: English in North America*, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 347.

² "Library of Congress Bibles Collection: The First English Language Bible Published in North America," Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/bibles/interactives/more/other14.html>; Robert Aitken, "The Holy Bible," (Philadelphia: Robert Aitken, 1782), <http://archive.org/details/1782RobertAitkenKJVBible>

hand-written letters like the one from Puritan governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony John Winthrop. Embroiled in hardship, he writes to his spouse Margaret in the Motherland: "I praise the good Lord, though we see much mortality, sickness, and trouble, yet (such is His mercy) myself and most of my family, are yet living, and in health, and enjoy prosperity enough."³

Of great significance was the mass importation of the English translation of the Geneva *Holy Bible* throughout the 1600s.⁴ Imported from Europe, it was printed in easy to read Roman type, rather than Gothic, and was broken down into chapters and verses that contained side notes highlighting passages of liberty later referred to as the bible of the Reformation.⁵ Likewise, documents like the *Declaration of Independence* (1776), without doubt, established this precedence that provided a common means of communication or recording and transmission of information and social interaction among the eastern colonies.⁶ What followed was the handwritten documents such as the National Constitution (September 17, 1787) manuscript, then first printed on September 19, 1787, in *The Pennsylvania Packet, and Daily Advertiser*.⁷

If one considers the question as to what documents helped solidify a common language in America, it would include these early national manuscripts and printings. Although, it was the

³ Kathryn Burke, "Letter Writing in America," Smithsonian National Postal Museum, <http://postalmuseum.si.edu/letterwriting/lw01.html>

⁴ *The 1599 Geneva Bible: Patriot's Edition*, (White Hall, WV: Tolle Lege Press, 2010), xv, xvi, xvii, <http://www.apuritansmind.com/wp-content/uploads/PDF/GenevaBiblePatriotEdition.pdf>; "The American Revolution: The Bible in British America and the Early Republic," The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, <http://www.ouramericanrevolution.org/index.cfm/page/view/p0161>

⁵ Ibid.,

⁶ "Engrossed Declaration of Independence," National Archives Catalog, <http://catalog.archives.gov/id/1419123>

⁷ "The Pennsylvania Packet, and Daily Advertiser." Digital image by National Constitution. *Dunlap & Claypoole* No. 2690, (September 19, 1787), http://constitutioncenter.org/media/files/PA_Packet1.jpg

publication of Aitken's Bible (1782), derived from the King James Bible (1611), and print of the first compendious American dictionary by Samuel Johnson Jr. in New Haven Connecticut by Edward O'Brien in 1798 that had further effects on the solidification of an everyday English language in which the nation would administrate and operate communicatively. These publications were followed by Noah Webster's printing of *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* (1806).⁸

The printing revolution in America took hold with people like Benjamin Franklin known for publishing *Poor Richard's Almanack* (1732), and William Bradford, then some of the other great printers of the 1700s enabling local information to be transmitted to the masses. Mass distribution of print mediums was a key component of communication in the forms of magazines, pamphlets, newspapers, books, Bibles, and cartography. As the industrialization of the 1790s with Samuel Slater took hold, so too, print mediums were well quantitated and qualified by improved printing presses and paper production. The mediums consisted of typography, illustrations, and cartoons often for news and political purposes but laid the foundation for the English language to solidify in the young republic.

In 1638 a printing press was established in Cambridge, Massachusetts Colony, by Stephen Daye (Day) with his first book to be printed was the Bay Psalm Book (a book of the Bible). Bible hymnals progressed the English language in churches in the form of a Psalter or hymnal, where multitudes would gather to sing worship in English. Three years later Mrs.

⁸ John Algeo, et al., *The Cambridge History of The English Language, Vol. VI: English in North America*, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 344.; Noah Webster, "A Compendious Dictionary for the English Language," Library of Congress, (New-Haven: Stoney's Press, 1806), <https://www.loc.gov/item/2006680048/>

Glover, owner of the printing press, married Henry Dunster (Harvard president), thus, by affluence and influence, enjoyed the freedom of the press (media), whereby also was printed an English speller and catechism in the first decade of operation but challenges to this freedom would follow.⁹

Before this, English printed material and Bibles came from Europe and many English versions of the Bible existed in print before American printing, but it was the *King James Bible* that would have been “Authorized” by the prior Monarchy in the New World that many subsequent political figures would have followed in tradition in a religiously affectionate society. With the new-found independence of America came the freedom to print Bibles and that they did, and the zeal for spreading the Gospel message intensified. The Bible had permeated society, as no less than 21 American printers and Bible societies published hundreds of thousands of editions from 1777 through the 1800s. But it was the full text of the bible printed by Aitkin, having gained the support of the U.S. Congress that would take on new and pivotal roles. It would unify the nation on the English translation religiously and linguistically.

The mass production of the *King James Bible* and its variants set the stage for religious fervor to take root that climaxed in four Great Awakenings.¹⁰ The communication and printing of the *King James Bible* impacted language linguistically, as it was used in public schools and was a core curriculum textbook as literature, but it would also affect the Great Awakenings, temperance, manifest destiny, and moral considerations of slavery by its instruction in religion

⁹ "Harvard College Sponsored First Printing Press Set Up in U. S. A.," *The Harvard Crimson*, 1928, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1928/11/30/harvard-college-sponsored-first-printing-press/>

¹⁰ Robert William Fogel, "The Phases of the Four Great Awakenings," University of Chicago, <https://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/256626.html>

and righteousness.¹¹ Whereas the establishment of a common language laid a foundation for nationalism in a unifying way. The Aitken Bible that carried significant societal roles linguistically and was utilized as educational litterateur in the newly nationalized United States of America.¹² No less than 38 extra-biblical texts were printed in America and used extensively as curriculum, including titles like *Beauties of the Bible* (1806), *Right of the Bible in Our Public Schools* (1859), *The Bible in Schools* (1870), and *Bible Readings for Schools* (1897). In the January 1844 journal (No. 1 Vol. 1), *The Quarterly Review of the American Protestant Association* Rev. Rufus W. Griswold writes an article titled “The Bible in Public Schools.” There may be many applications to the infamous exclamative question of Numbers 23:23 “What hath God wrought!” but it is only appropriate that fledgling national America acknowledged that it included the Bible.¹³

Written and printed communication mediums played a significant role in the solidification of the English language that amalgamated as American prose. Philology reveals there came the point when the spelling of English words had developed unique American

¹¹ John Algeo, et al., *The Cambridge History of The English Language, Vol. VI: English in North America*, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 341; Judy Gelbrich, "American Education," Oregon State University, <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/ed416/ae1.html>; Paul D. Hanson, *A Political History of the Bible in America*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 27, 54-57, accessed November 24, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/reader.action?docID=3446605&ppg=1>

¹² John Algeo, et al., *The Cambridge History of The English Language, Vol. VI: English in North America*, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 341; "The Aitken Bible and Congress," Wallbuilders, <http://wallbuilders.com/aitken-bible-congress/>; Note: Wallbuilders is a historical site and has no association to President Trump or building of national wall (see wallbuilders.com/about-us).

¹³ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought the Transformation of America, 1815-1848*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2, 3, 7, 182, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/detail.action?docID=430958>

orthography, ones that were written and printed in America, distinct from British texts.¹⁴ As such, there is historical significance to consider the influential writings that morphed etymologies of varying English dialects in early America. One such that this work examines is the Congressional document of support for Aitken's printing of the Bible titled "Journals of Congress," dated Friday, September 1782, page 459 that can be viewed on the following website (<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/vc006473.jpg>).¹⁵ Herein, the congressional document was written by a prominent Congressman James Duane (1782), co-authored and signed by Congressional Chaplains Rev. William White and Rev. George Duffield, communicated the following quote,

Whereupon, Resolved, That the United States in Congress assembled highly approve the pious and laudable undertaking of Mr. Aitkin, as subservient to the interest of religion as well as an influence of the progress of arts in this country and being satisfied from the above report (by the congressional chaplains), they recommend this edition of the bible to the inhabitants of the United States and hereby authorize him to publish this recommendation.¹⁶

By this, congress "recommended, approved, and authorized" Robert Aitken's subsequent publication of the *Holy Bible* (1782) that included over 10,000 copies printed in Philadelphia that

¹⁴ John Algeo, et al., *The Cambridge History of The English Language, Vol. VI: English in North America*, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 340, 341, 344.

¹⁵ James Duane, "Journals of Congress," Library of Congress, (Washington DC: Congress, Thursday, September 12, 1782), 469, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/vc006473.jpg>

¹⁶ "Duane, James, (1733-1797)," Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=D000508>; James Duane, "Journals of Congress," Library of Congress, (Washington DC: Congress, Thursday, September 12, 1782), 469, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/vc006473.jpg>; "The Aitken Bible and Congress," Wallbuilders, <http://wallbuilders.com/aitken-bible-congress/>

can be viewed on the following website

(<http://loc.gov/exhibits/bibles/interactives/more/other14.html>).¹⁷ With this inaugural printing of a revised King James Bible, there subsequently developed a revolution of Bible printing that continued through the eighteen, nineteen, and twentieth centuries with illustration, color, and reference material of all sorts and sizes. Britain's ban on exporting Bibles to America during the Revolutionary War led to a scarcity of Bibles, hence prompted the Congressional influence for the Aitken printing, further, also acknowledged its value to American society writing, "unless timely care be used to prevent it, we shall not have Bibles *for our schools* and families and for the public worship of God in our churches."¹⁸

Upon examining the first few pages of the Aitken Bible, it reflects the effort for and *Americanized* King James Version: "Newly translated ["an American edition"] out of the ORIGINAL TONGUES [English language]; And with the *former* TRANSLATIONS [of English, Greek, Hebrew, and Latin,] Diligently compared and revifed [revised]."¹⁹ Aitken uses an all-caps font on the words "ORIGINAL TONGUES" and capitalizes "TRANSLATIONS" suggesting a unique emphasis to these words in contrast to the King James.²⁰ Then, by comparing just the

¹⁷ "Aitken Bible," Wallbuilders, <http://wallbuilders.com/aitken-bible/>; "Library of Congress Bibles Collection: The First English Language Bible Published in North America," Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/bibles/interactives/more/other14.html>; Robert Aitken, "The Holy Bible," (Philadelphia: Robert Aitken, 1782), <http://archive.org/details/1782RobertAitkenKJVBible>; "The Aitken Bible and Congress," Wallbuilders, <http://wallbuilders.com/aitken-bible-congress/>

¹⁸ "The Aitken Bible and Congress," Wallbuilders, <http://wallbuilders.com/aitken-bible-congress/>

¹⁹ Robert Aitken, "The Holy Bible," (Philadelphia: Robert Aitken, 1782), <http://archive.org/details/1782RobertAitkenKJVBible>

²⁰ Ibid.,

first three verses of Genesis, it is evident that he updated the spelling of words accordingly. On the second page, Aitken cites Congress's confirmation that relates it as "an American edition."²¹

Daniel Dreisbach is a Professor for the Department of Justice, Law, and Criminology at American University in Washington, DC. He has earned his Juris Doctorate at the University of Virginia, Doctor of Philosophy at Oxford University, and Bachelor of Arts at the University of South Carolina. Dreisbach is credited with authoring or editing ten books and wrote numerous articles in scholarly journals. As faculty, he was awarded the Scholar/Teacher of the Year at American University. His area of expertise includes Constitutional law, church and state, free speech, religion and society, the religious right, criminal procedure, and American legal culture. Two related books to this research that he has written are titled, *Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers* (Oxford University Press, 2017) and *The Forgotten Founders on Religion and Public Life* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

In his journal article by Daniel Dreisbach titled "The Bible in the Political Rhetoric of the American Founding," he synthesizes the Bible and how it was used in political rhetoric.²² This article provides a concise perspective on the interplay of the Bible and political rhetoric.

Dreisbach discusses in detail the connections and correlations the Bible played in political discourse by "examining the founders' diverse uses of the Bible" in politics. He addresses elements such as: "The Diverse uses of the Bible, To Enrich a Common Language, To Enhance the Power and Weight of Rhetoric, To Identify and Define Standards, To Illuminate the Role of

²¹ Robert Aitken, "The Holy Bible," (Philadelphia: Robert Aitken, 1782), <http://archive.org/details/1782RobertAitkenKJVBible>

²² Daniel L. Dreisbach, "The Bible in the Political Rhetoric of the American Founding," *Politics & Religion* 4, no. 3 (12, 2011): 401-427. <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/docview/2210973642?accountid=8289>

Providence in the Affairs of Men and Nations, and To Reveal the Character and Ways of God.”²³

Concerning the enrichment of a common language, he writes:

A ubiquitous literary text, the Bible provided a distinct and familiar language recognized and respected by virtually all Americans in the founding era. The founders frequently quoted from and made allusions to the Bible because it was the most authoritative, accessible, and familiar literary text in America. It was the source of a common cultural vocabulary. Historian, Gordon S. Wood (1977), said of Thomas Paine, the most successful polemicist of his age, that, in an effort to connect with the common man, “he counted on his audience being familiar with only one literary source — the Bible” (Wood 1977, 111). Simply put, Paine appealed to Scripture so frequently because he knew the Bible-reading proclivities of his audience. In a sense, the English of the King James Bible was the lingua franca of late-eighteenth-century America, and effective mass communicators, especially politicians and polemicists, adeptly used this language to reach their audiences.²⁴

In a demonstration of his assertion, Dreisbach recounts George Washington’s incorporation of the Bible in his rhetoric of “private expressions and public pronouncements” and emphasized this was commonplace among the founding fathers.

Significant revolutions advanced as communication progressed, such as the American revolutionary war (1765), politics established with its first Congressional or political meeting

²³ Daniel L. Dreisbach, "The Bible in the Political Rhetoric of the American Founding," *Politics & Religion* 4, no. 3 (12, 2011): 401-427. <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/docview/2210973642?accountid=8289>

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 405.

(1789), and the Market revolution for its economy.²⁵ After printing, communication accelerated with the following electronic technologies: development of the camera (1826), telegraph (1844), telephone (1876), phonograph (1877), motion picture camera (1892), and radio (1895).²⁶ For 192 years, the masses were communicating with a printed material method in America.

The printing of the Bible in English was a unique event, a first of its kind in America. Until newer technologies that followed, the printed paper medium was the “social media” of the day only in a more collective sense. Transportation, in its many forms like- horse, carriage, roads and bridges, canals, boats, and later trains, facilitated communication.²⁷ As a result, transportation accelerated communication, and the cycle of progress, a reflection of historiographic principles, ensued with much reciprocal interaction and intrinsic connections that would progress freedom.²⁸ Effects of significant societal movements like Great Awakenings, temperance, manifest destiny, and anti-slavery continued to transform America.²⁹ Interwoven were other revolutions and technologies like machinery and the steam engine that enabled for industrialization and mechanization of transportation. Thus, the increased social interaction and connection (communication) was a paramount foundation for the American nationalization transition politically, socially, and societally.

If one is to ask, what were the more significant and long term Christian religious implications in America? This author conjectures that great nations and empires either have

²⁵ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought the Transformation of America, 1815-1848*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 194, 226, 231, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/detail.action?docID=430958>

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2-7, 694-6,

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 49, 255, 691,

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 226, 242,

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 399.

been built upon, climaxed, or culminated with the interplay of the Bible and Gospel message of Jesus Christ; this was no exception for the people of America. As such, one can draw societal interactions that have transpired throughout America. If printed communication brought societal cohesiveness to nationalize by a common language and belief, what brought disunity and civil war in 1861? Since language is only the vehicle for communication, one must look deeper and ask what did the Bible, and Gospel message bring to society and then what was removed? America's early foundation of Christianity laid a sense and knowledge of righteousness and standard of truth with an interplay of brotherly love that translated into unity.

What broke down cohesiveness today that existed in colonial America? In considering this, there has been the recognition for the human wrongs of slavery, federal vs. state power struggle, and avarice. Just maybe, there was something right about invoking the divine in the American pledge, "one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all," and official motto, "In God we trust" or was there something more significant?³⁰ The emergence of secularism from the prominence of Christianity is evident in various societies like the Mediterranean, Russia, Europe, England, and America. As the centrality of Jesus Christ is diminished, so does brotherly love and unity to the point of division and incivility as well as the subsequent co-existence of secularism and Christianity. As one can surmise that as language barriers could impede communication, likewise, loss of Biblical truths diminished, newer communication technologies emerged, there resulted in misinterpretations and misapplications

³⁰ "Celebrating America's Freedoms: The Pledge of Allegiance," U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, <http://www.va.gov/opa/publications/celebrate/pledge.pdf>; "President Eisenhower signs 'In God We Trust' into law," History- A&E Television Networks, LLC., <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/president-eisenhower-signs-in-god-we-trust-into-la>

where Christian cults emerged, and moral decay occurred from lack of the knowledge of righteousness.

Has the removal of the foundational truths of Biblical righteousness and principle of love from America's culture fostered societal hate and bloodshed evident in scenarios like the civil war, and now school shootings? Is the willful decision of elites to eliminate these religious factors (love and righteousness) a root to today's degradation and breakdown of society, or has secularism blundered at the removal of these societal values? It is evident in this research that the beginning stages of American communication included the mass printing of the Bible and distribution of the Gospel message that helped establish English as the vulgar language; this was evident as seen in its 1) schools, by way of linguistics and extra-biblical literature, and 2) politics, through rhetorical discourse. Sequentially, these elements initiated religious Great Awakenings that instilled righteous movements like temperance, freedom from slavery and thereby influenced a unification of the nation.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Aitken, Robert. "The Holy Bible." (Philadelphia: Robert Aitken, 1782).
<http://archive.org/details/1782RobertAitkenKJVBible>

Duane, James. "Journals of Congress." Library of Congress. (Washington DC: Congress, Thursday, September 12, 1782). <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/vc006473.jpg>

"Library of Congress Bibles Collection: The First English Language Bible Published in North America." Library of Congress.
<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/bibles/interactives/more/other14.html>

Secondary Sources

"Aitken Bible." Wallbuilders. <http://wallbuilders.com/aitken-bible/>

Algeo, John, et al. *The Cambridge History of the English Language, Vol. VI: English in North America*. (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Burke, Kathryn. "Letter Writing in America." Smithsonian National Postal Museum.
<http://postalmuseum.si.edu/letterwriting/lw01.html>

"Celebrating America's Freedoms: The Pledge of Allegiance." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. <http://www.va.gov/opa/publications/celebrate/pledge.pdf>

Dreisbach, Daniel L. "The Bible in the Political Rhetoric of the American Founding." *Politics & Religion* 4, no. 3 (12, 2011): 401-427. DOI:
<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy2.apus.edu/10.1017/S1755048311000423>. <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/docview/2210973642?accountid=8289>.

"Duane, James, (1733-1797)." Biographical Directory of the United States Congress.
<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=D000508>

"Engrossed Declaration of Independence." National Archives Catalog.
<http://catalog.archives.gov/id/1419123>

Fogel, Robert William. "The Phases of the Four Great Awakenings." The University of Chicago.
<https://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/256626.html>

Gelbrich, Judy. "American Education." Oregon State University.
<http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/ed416/ae1.html>

Hanson, Paul D. *A Political History of the Bible in America*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015). Accessed November 24, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central.

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/reader.action?docID=3446605&ppg=1>

"Harvard College Sponsored First Printing Press Set Up in U. S. A." *The Harvard Crimson*. 1928. <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1928/11/30/harvard-college-sponsored-first-printing-press/>

Howe, Daniel Walker. *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/detail.action?docID=430958>

"President Eisenhower signs 'In God We Trust' into law." History- A&E Television Networks, LLC. <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/president-eisenhower-signs-in-god-we-trust-into-la>

The 1599 Geneva Bible: Patriot's Edition. (White Hall, WV: Tolle Lege Press, 2010).

<http://www.apuritansmind.com/wp-content/uploads/PDF/GenevaBiblePatriotEdition.pdf>

"The Aitken Bible and Congress." Wallbuilders. <http://wallbuilders.com/aitken-bible-congress/>

"The American Revolution: The Bible in British America and the Early Republic." The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

<http://www.ouramericanrevolution.org/index.cfm/page/view/p0161>

"The Pennsylvania Packet, and Daily Advertiser." Digital image by National Constitution Center. *Dunlap & Claypoole* No. 2690, (September 19, 1787).

http://constitutioncenter.org/media/files/PA_Packet1.jpg

Webster, Noah. "A Compendious Dictionary for the English Language." Library of Congress. (New-Haven: Stoney's Press, 1806). <https://www.loc.gov/item/2006680048/>