

The Dr. Gene Scott Bible Collection

STATION 47:

THE AITKEN BIBLE

The "Bible of the American Revolution"

*The First English
Bible Printed in
America*



Because the monopoly for printing the Bible in English was held by England no Bibles in English were allowed to be printed while America remained a collection

of Colonies. Though Bibles were printed prior to 1776 in both indigenous Indian and modern European languages (for example, the Eliot Indian Bible featured at [Station 46](#), and the Saur German Bibles, shown at [Station 53](#)), a Bible in English had to wait for the American Revolution.

One man, Robert Aitken, took the initiative of producing this Bible, just when it was most sorely needed. Aitken had come to America from his native Scotland in 1769. A Quaker, he settled in Philadelphia and went into business as a bookseller and publisher, under the sign of the "Pope's Head" in Market Street, just three doors away from the Coffee House which was the unofficial nerve center of the town (and later, of the budding Revolutionaries).

Aitken, with Richard Bache, published the "Philadelphia Magazine." Thomas Paine, the Revolutionary pamphleteer, was a frequent contributor (having been introduced to Aitken by Bache, who happened to be Ben Franklin's son-in-law). In this milieu of Paine, Franklin, and Bache, Robert Aitken was one of the avowed patriots who were ready to risk death, imprisonment and financial ruin in the cause of Freedom.

When Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence" turned up the heat, and the first Congress of the States sat in Philadelphia, that body naturally turned to Aitken to publish the "Journals of Congress." Aitken narrowly escaped arrest and imprisonment by the British; otherwise, he would have sat out the revolution on the British prison ship in New York harbor. Instead, he remained at large, and was able to produce the "Bible of the American Revolution."

The Revolutionary War had stopped the import of English Bibles from Britain. At first, it was thought that no American printer could gather together enough type and enough paper to produce a home-grown edition. Indeed, in September 1777, Congress passed (by only one vote) a resolution to import 20,000 Bibles in English **"from Holland,**

Scotland, or
elsewhere..."

Because of the narrow vote, nothing of this came to pass. In 1780, a fresh Resolution for the printing of Bibles was introduced, but languished in committee.

Robert Aitken was not a man to wait for the wheels of government to grind. On his own initiative, in 1777, he managed to obtain both type and paper and produced a New Testament (subsequent editions came out in 1778, 1779 and 1781). In January 1781, with his Testaments filling an important need, he asked Congress for both sanction and support for his ongoing project of producing a complete Bible.

A committee including the Chaplains of Congress went to investigate Aitken's accuracy and performance to date, while the work was in process; they were favorably impressed, so a Resolution of Congress was forthcoming:

***"WHEREUPON
RESOLVED:
That the United
States in
Congress
assembled highly
approve the
pious and
laudable
undertaking of
Mr. Aitken, as
subservient to
the interest of
religion, as
well as an
instance of the
progress of arts
in this country,
and being
satisfied from
the above report
of his care and
accuracy in the
execution of the
work, they
recommend this
edition of the
Bible to the
inhabitants of
the United
States, and
hereby authorize
him to publish
this
recommendation
in the manner he
shall think
proper.***

**CHA. THOMSON,
Secy."**

Thus the Aitken Bible was printed **with the approval of Congress** - the first and last time such an effort had that formal blessing! The Aitken Bible was a wholly American production; the type was that used for the previous Aitken Testaments; the paper, tough and hard, was made in Pennsylvania. Aitken's product in its size and lack of ornamentation reflected the poverty-stricken fledgling Republic, yet even with minimal resources his work was judged to show consummate good taste, from type-setting to title pages, and Isaiah Thomas, the important printer from the turn of the 19th century, and historian of early printing in America, pronounced Aitken's work "neat and accurate" - high praise indeed from a taciturn New Englander!

Though 10,000 copies of Aitken's Bible were printed, it is definite, however, that today **fewer copies are known than copies of the Gutenberg Bible!** Furthermore, most of the known copies are locked forever in institutional holdings, from the British Library and the Library of Congress to religious and educational institutions. It is possible that fewer than 10, and maybe fewer than five, remain in private hands. Ross Perot has one, enshrined under glass just outside his personal office, and he refers to it as his proudest possession. The Dr. Gene Scott Collection contains **two complete examples**, and a number of individual leaves as well.

Take heed, as you look upon this book, that it was the product of one man's burning desire to have God's Word in the hands of the American people. After all, Revolutionary America without Bibles was an impossible situation; in no other country on earth was the Bible so relied on, or was faith in Divine Providence so necessary to all patriots in the struggle for Liberty against the mightiest nation on earth at the time, Great Britain.

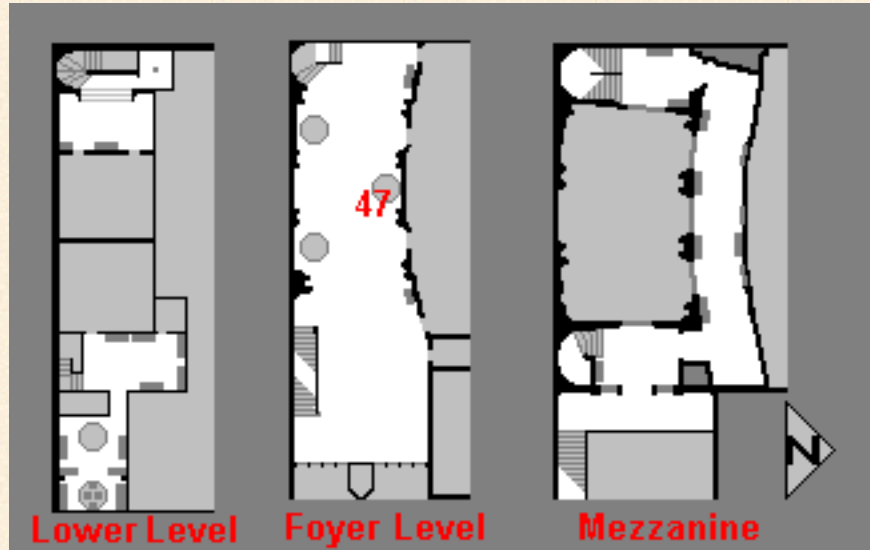
It was thanks to the courage, initiative, resources and resourcefulness of men like Aitken that our freedom was won, including the freedom to read our Bibles free of interference from government - as long as we remain vigilant!

Also shown at this Station:

1783 - Aitken's "Psalms of David in Metre" - one of about 10 surviving examples of Aitken's companion to his "Bible of the American Revolution."

STATION LOCATION MAP

Below is a floor plan map of the Cathedral in 3 sections, one for each level. The first section is the Lower Level, the second is the Foyer Level, and the third is the Mezzanine Level. This station is located in the central Octagon on the Foyer Level at the red #47.



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