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THE STORY OF THE AITKEN BIBLE

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The Department of History of the Presbyterian Church has recently acquired one of the most desirable of the early issues of the American press—an *Aitken Bible*. The particular copy that has come into its possession belonged to Charles Collins in the year 1787, and has been in the hands of his family ever since. What makes this edition unique is the fact that it is the first edition of the Bible in English to be printed in America,¹ as well as the first and only edition of the Bible to be authorized by the Congress of the United States.

PROPOSAL TO PRINT AN AMERICAN BIBLE

The story of the Aitken Bible properly begins with Dr. Francis Alison, Vice-Provost of the College and Academy of Philadelphia, and pastor of the First Presbyterian Church. With the outbreak of the American Revolution, the importation of Bibles abruptly ceased, and the prophecy of Amos of “a famine of the word of God” gave promise of fulfilment on this continent. At this juncture, Dr. Alison drew up a petition to the Continental Congress, the original manuscript of which can still be seen in the Library of Congress. It is signed by Dr. Alison, by his colleague, Dr. John Ewing, and by the Rev.

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William Marshall, pastor of the Scots Presbyterian Church, of which Mr. Robert Aitken, the printer, was an Elder.

To the honourable Continental Congress of the
United States of North America now sitting in
Philadelphia.

Honoured Gentlemen.

We the Ministers of the Gospel of Christ in the City of Philadelphia, whose names are underwritten, taking into our Serious consideration that in our present Circumstances, Books in General, & in particular ye holy scriptures contained in the old and new Testaments are growing so scarce & dear, that we greatly fear that unless timely care be used to prevent it, we shall not have bibles for our schools & families, & for the publick worship of God in our churches.

We therefore think it our duty to our Country & to the churches of Christ to lay this danger before this honourable house, humbly requesting that under your care, & by your encouragement, a copy of the holy Bible may be printed, so as to be sold nearly as cheap as the common Bibles, formerly imported from Britain & Ireland were sold.

The number of purchasers is so great, that we doubt not but a large impression would soon be sold; But unless the sale of the whole Edition belong to the Printer, & he be bound under sufficient Penalties, that no copy be sold by him, nor by any Retailer under him, at a higher price than that allowed by this honourable house, we fear that ye whole impression would soon be bought up, & sold again at an exorbitant price, which would frustrate your pious endeavours & fill ye Country with Just complaints.

We are persuaded that your care & seasonable interposition will remove the anxious fears of many pious & well disposed persons; would prevent the murmurs of the discontented; would save much money to the United States; would be the means of promoting Christian knowledge in our Churches, & would transmit your names with additional honour to ye latest posterity.

Our sincere prayers shall ever be for your Welfare & Prosperity, & we beg leave with the greatest respect to subscribe our selves Honoured Gentlemen.

Your most obedient humble servants,

Francis Alison,
John Ewing,
William Marshall.²

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In the *Journals of the Continental Congress*, under date of Monday, July 7, 1777, occurs the following record:

A petition from the Rev. F. Alison, J. Ewing, and W. Marshall, was read: Ordered That it be referred to a committee of three: The members chosen, Mr. [Daniel] Roberdeau, Mr. J[ohn] Adams, and Mr. J[onathan] B[ayard] Smith.³

The next reference to this matter occurs in the Minutes for Thursday, September 11, 1777:

The committee appointed to consider the memorial of the Rev. Dr. Alison and others, report, "That they have conferred fully with the printers, &c. in this city, and are of opinion, that the proper types for printing the Bible are not to be had in this country, and that the paper cannot be procured, but with such difficulties and subject to such casualties, as render any dependance on it altogether improper: that to import types for the purpose of setting up an entire edition of the bible, and to strike off 30,000 copies, with paper, binding, &c. will cost £10,272 10, which must be advanced by Congress, to be reimbursed by the sale of the books.

That your committee are of opinion, considerable difficulties will attend the procuring the types and paper; that afterwards, the risque of importing them will considerably enhance the cost, and that the calculations are subject to such uncertainty in the present state of affairs, that Congress cannot much rely on them; that the use of the Bible is so universal, and its importance so great, that your committee refer the above to the consideration of Congress, and if Congress shall think it expedient to order the importation of types and paper, your committee recommend that Congress will order the Committee of Commerce to import 20,000 Bibles from Holland, Scotland, or elsewhere, into the different parts of the states in the Union."

Whereupon the Congress was moved to order the Committee of Commerce to import twenty thousand copies of the Bible; The question being put, the house was divided: . . . so it was resolved in the affirmative.⁴

The very day that Congress took this action the Battle of the Brandywine was being fought, and a fortnight later, September 26th to be exact, the British under General Howe took possession of the city of Philadelphia. The Continental Congress fled to York, and Dr. Alison and the Rev. Messrs. Ewing

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and Marshall likewise became fugitives and their churches were closed during the period of the occupation.

Before this catastrophe had occurred, however, Robert Aitken had printed an edition of the New Testament. We find it first advertised in the *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, for August 28, 1777, as follows:

Just printed (bound and ready for sale) by R. Aitken, printer and bookseller, opposite the London Coffee-house, Frontstreet, a neat edition of THE NEW TESTAMENT for the use of schools, where may be had writing paper of different kinds, particularly letter paper of the first quality, and several hundreds of excellent quills.

From his manuscript *Waste Book* (Day Book),⁵ which is preserved in the Library Company of Philadelphia, we learn that he had already made sales on August 23rd, of a total of twenty copies to three different booksellers; but then the entries cease, and do not again begin until after the evacuation by the British, which occurred on the 18th of June, 1778. Then, in the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* for July 8th, less than three weeks later we find him advertising: ". . . Books and stationary sold as usual at the above store. Just published, and well bound, a neat edition of the NEW TESTAMENT." And now the entries in the "Waste Book" begin to bear witness to the need for such a work: "18 Sept. Mr. John Creigh, To 12 New Testaments at 18/; 20 Oct. Mr. Samuel Loudon, To 100 Testaments bound at 18/; 29 Oct. Mr. John Donald, To 12 New Testaments at 18/; 2 Nov. William Pritchard, Bookseller, Baltimore, To 12 New Testaments qrs. at 14/; &c., &c."

It was not until two years later, however, that the matter was again brought to the attention of the Continental Congress, in the Journals of which, under date of Thursday, October 26, 1780, is recorded the following:

A motion was made by Mr. [James] McLene, seconded by Mr. [John] Hanson, respecting the printing of the Old and New Testament:

Resolved, That it be recommended to such of the States who may think it convenient for them that they Take proper measures to procure one or more new and correct editions of

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the old and new Testament to be printed and that such states regulate their printers by law so as to secure effectually the said books from being misprinted.

Ordered, That it be referred to a committee of three: The Members chose, Mr. [James] McLene, Mr. [Thomas] McKean and Mr. [James] Duane.⁶

THE AITKEN MEMORIAL

Nothing seems to have been done about the matter, however, until Robert Aitken presented his *Memorial*, dated 21 Jan. 1781:

To the Honourable The Congress of the United States of
America
The Memorial of Robert Aitken
of the City of Philadelphia
Printer
Humbly Sheweth

That in every well regulated Government in Christendom The Sacred Books of the Old and New Testament, commonly called the Holy Bible, are printed and published under the Authority of the Sovereign Powers, in order to prevent the fatal confusion that would arise, and the alarming Injuries the Christian Faith might suffer from the spurious and erroneous Editions of Divine Revelation. That your Memorialist has no doubt but this work is an Object worthy the attention of the Congress of the United States of America, who will not neglect spiritual security, while they are virtuously contending for temporal blessings. Under this persuasion your Memorialist begs leave to inform your Honours That he both begun and made considerable progress in a neat Edition of the Holy Scriptures for the use of schools, But being cautious of suffering his copy of the Bible to Issue forth without the sanction of Congress, Humbly prays that your Honors would take this important matter into serious consideration & would be pleased to appoint one Member or Members of your Honourable Body to inspect his work so that the same may be published under the Authority of Congress. And further, your Memorialist prays, that he may be commissioned or otherwise appointed & Authorized to print and vend Editions of the Sacred Scriptures, in such manner and form as may best suit the wants and demands of the good people of these States, provided the same be in all things perfectly consonant to the Scriptures as heretofore Established and received amongst us,

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And as in Duty bound your Memorialist shall ever pray
Robt. Aitken.

Philada. 21 Jany.
1781.⁷

On January 26th, Congress acted upon this Memorial, and "Ordered, That it be referred to the Committee on the motion for printing the old and new Testament," and "That Mr. [John] Witherspoon be added to the said committee, in the room of Mr. [James] McLene."⁸

GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF PENNSYLVANIA

In the meantime, while waiting upon the action of Congress, and in accordance with their Resolution to recommend the measure "to such of the States who may think it convenient," Aitken petitioned the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, soliciting assistance. For the sake of the record the references to this matter in the Journals of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania are extracted in full:⁹

Saturday, September 29, 1781, A. M.

A petition from *Robert Aitken*, of the city of *Philadelphia*, printer, was read, representing, that in well regulated governments, the sacred books of the old and new testament are generally printed and published under the authority of the foreign power; that impressed with this idea, he hath begun, and made considerable progress in a neat and correct edition of the holy scriptures, for private families, but cannot proceed in the important work without assistance; and praying that a sum of money may be advanced to him for *that purpose*; *Ordered* to lie on the table.

Monday, *October 1*, 1781. A. M.

A motion was made and seconded, That the petition of *Robert Aitken*, presented the 29th ult, be read the second time; and the question being put thereupon, the yeas and nays were required by Mr. *Dixon* and Mr. *Boyd*.

Yeas.	Yeas.	Yeas.
1. Joseph M'Cleane,	8. William Mitchell,	15. Robert Lattimer,
2. Joseph Savage,	9. Stephen Duncan,	16. Peter Rhoads,
3. William Scott,	10. William Brown,	17. Joseph Powell,
4. David Thomas,	11. Jonathan Hoge,	18. William Montgomery,
5. James Boyd,	12. John Harris,	19. David M'Kinney,
6. John Culbertson,	13. Thomas Mifflin,	20. John Kelly,
7. James Dixon,	14. William M'Farren,	21. Samuel Sloan.

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Nays.	Nays.	Nays.
1. Sharp Delany,	10. William Harris,	19. James Smith,
2. John Steinmetz,	11. Joseph Parke,	20. James Ramsay,
3. George Gray,	12. Patrick Anderson,	21. Thomas Lilley,
4. Daniel Hiester,	13. John Whitehill,	22. John Allison,
5. Matthew Holgate,	14. Emanuel Carpenter,	23. George Ege,
6. George Smith,	15. James Anderson,	24. John Patton,
7. Benjamin Fell,	16. Philip Greenawalt,	25. Baltzer Gheer,
8. James Morgan,	17. Adam Reigart,	26. Mark Bird,
9. Henry Hayes,	18. James Jacks,	27. John Burd.

So it was carried in the negative.

Saturday, *November 17, 1781*

On motion made and seconded, to take the sense of the House whether the petition of *Robert Aitken* presented to the last House of Assembly, should be taken up, the previous question, viz. whether the same was disposed of by the last Assembly? was put, and carried in the affirmative.

Tuesday, *November 27, 1781*

A Petition from *Robert Aitken*, praying the assistance of the House, in ordering him such a sum of money as to them shall seem meet and fitting, for the purpose of completing his *American Edition* of the Holy Scriptures, was read, and
Ordered to lie on the table.

Friday, *November 30, 1781*

The Petition from *Robert Aitken*, presented the 27th instant, was read the second time:

Ordered, That it be referred to a Committee of three, to confer with the Petitioner thereupon. The Members appointed, were Mr. *Wynkoop*, Mr. *Jacks*, and Mr. *James M'Lene*.

Thursday, *December 6, 1781*

The Committee, to whom the Petition of *Robert Aitken* was referred, made a Report, which was read, and

Ordered to lie on the table.

On motion, The Report of the Committee on the Petition of *Robert Aitken*, was read a second time, and after debate,

Ordered, That the same be re-committed, and that Mr. *Dougherty* and Mr. *M'Pherson* be added to the Committee.

Tuesday, *March 5, 1782*

The committee to whom the petition from *Robert Aitken* was referred, made their report, which was read and

Ordered to lie on the table.

Friday, *March 15, 1782*

On motion, The report of the committee on the petition of Robert Aitken, was read the second time; whereupon

Resolved, That the sum of one hundred and fifty pounds, be given on loan, to the said Robert Aitken, in small sums, and at such times as will be most convenient for paying the same, free of interest, for the space of one year, from the date of the receipt of such sum or sums as he may receive.

AN AUTHORIZED AMERICAN VERSION

Early in the course of the consideration of Mr. Aitken's Petition by the Pennsylvania Assembly occurred an important event, the Surrender of Cornwallis (October 19, 1781). No further action was taken by Congress, however, until the fall of the following year; but on September 1, 1782, the Committee requested the Chaplains of Congress to examine the text of Aitken's Bible and to report their judgment of the same. On the 9th inst. Mr. Aitken addressed the President of Congress as follows:

Sir,

An Edition of the Bible having justly engaged the attention of Congress as a desirable and important Object, I take the Liberty of so far intruding upon your Excellency as to inform you that I have at Length compleated one, which I flatter myself will reflect Honor on the United States; More especially when it is considered that such a work, which peace never produced in America, has been accomplished in the midst of the Confusion and the Distresses of War.

Permit me to request, Sir, that the information may be communicated to Congress, with a Wish for not only the Public Countenance, but such assistance also as is most essential to a Man in Trade.

It need not be suggested to the Wisdom of that Honorable Body, that the Monarchs of Europe have hitherto deemed the Sacred Scriptures particularly worthy of the Royal Patronage; nor that a Work of such Magnitude must nearly crush an individual unless assisted by exterior Aid in supporting so great a Weight; nor will I presume to prescribe the mode in which such Aid may be afforded; but I beg leave to intimate, that as I apprehend my greatest risque arises from the near approach of Peace, my utmost Wishes would be accomplished if Congress will purchase a proportion of the Edition on Accot. of the United States. One Fourth of it will Amount to 200 Bibles for

⁶ *Journals of the Continental Congress*, Vol. XVIII, pp. 979-980.

⁷ *Papers of the Continental Congress*, No. 41, I, folio 63.

⁸ *Journals of the Continental Congress*, Vol. XIX, p. 91.

⁹ *Journals of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, Phila., John Dunlap, 1782, pp. 695, 696; *Minutes of the General Assembly of Pennsylvania, 1781-1784*; Vol. II, p. 512; *Minutes of the First Session, of the Sixth General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, pp. 526, 530, 534; *Second Session*, pp. 586, 593.

¹⁰ *Papers of the Continental Congress*, No. 78, Vol. I, f. 421.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, No. 78, Vol. I, f. 425.

¹² *The Freeman's Journal*, September 25, 1782.

¹³ *Belknap Papers*, I, p. 159. Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Vol. II, Fifth Series.

¹⁴ *The Freeman's Journal*, Nov. 20, 1782. Numb. LXXXIII.

¹⁵ *Memoirs of the Rev. John Rodgers, D.D.*, by Samuel Miller, New York, 1813, p. 230 ff.

¹⁶ *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, &c.*, Philadelphia, 1904, p. 500.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 503.

¹⁸ "Waste Book of Robert Aitken," p. 396.

¹⁹ *Records, &c.*, p. 506.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 538.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 462.

²² Simms, *The Bible in America*, p. 127.

²³ Acknowledgment is made to Mr. Harrold E. Gillingham, Mr. R. L. Brunhouse and Mr. Guy S. Klett for valuable assistance in the location of source material.

especially those on the frontiers, has, by some means, been greatly neglected, do again renew the said recommendation, and earnestly request the respective Presbyteries that have not attended thereto, to pay a special attention to this matter, and to send the money that may be collected to the committee formerly appointed, and to make a report at our next meeting.¹⁹

The account of Mr. Robert Aitken for Bibles was given in to the Synod, and it appearing that there was a balance due to him of eight pounds, ten shillings, and seven pence, Synod ordered their treasurer, the Rev. Dr. John Witherspoon, to pay said balance.²⁰

Once more Aitken's Ledger contains the evidence of the Synod's interest in the distribution of the Scriptures, in the following entry:²¹

1787. 19 July

Synod of N: York & Philada. Cr.

By Cash from Mr. Rodgers Congregation	10	=	9
By Cash from Mr. Sprouts Congregation	19	8	11
By Cash from Mr. Tennents Congreg ⁿ	5	10	
By Cash from Dr. Ewings Congregation	24	=	=
By Cash from Dr. Duffields Congr ⁿ	17	7	3
	£ 76	6	11

This brings the history to a close. In the year 1789, to be sure, Mr. Aitken appealed to Congress to grant him a patent, giving him the exclusive right to print Bibles in America for fourteen years, but his request was denied.²² Indeed, the time had passed when any one might expect to secure a monopoly, and editions of the Bible printed in America multiplied rapidly, editions being published by Carey, Stewart, and Co., Philadelphia, 1790; W. Young, Philadelphia, 1790; Isaiah Thomas, Worcester, 1791; Isaac Collins, Trenton, 1791; Hodge and Campbell, New York, 1792; &c., &c.²³

¹ Isaac Thomas, *The History of Printing in America*, I, p. 107 f., speaks of an earlier edition, but no copy of it has ever been identified.

² *Papers of the Continental Congress*, No. 42, I, folio 35.

³ *Journals of the Continental Congress*, Vol. VIII, p. 536.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. VIII, pp. 733-735.

⁵ "Waste Book of Robert Aitken Printer & Bookseller of Philada. Front Street opposite to London Coffee House. 1771 to 1802." Mss. in possession of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

each State; and as I am anxious merely to *secure the sale* of the Books, it will not be inconsistent with my views to allow a Moderate Credit.

I beg the favor of your Excellency's Influence, and have the Honor to be

Your Excellency's Most Obedient
& humble Servt.

Robt. Aitken.

Philada. 9th Sept. 1782.¹⁰

The reply of the Chaplains to the Committee is dated September 10th, and on the 12th of the same month Congress passed a resolution giving the work its unqualified approval. The report of the Committee, including the correspondence, with the exception of Aitken's letter, was printed on a separate leaf of the Bible following the title page, and is as follows:

By the United States in Congress assembled,
September 12, 1782.

The Committee to whom was referred a Memorial of Robert Aitken, Printer, dated, the 21st of January, 1781, respecting an edition of the Holy Scriptures, Report,

That Mr. Aitken has, at a great expence, now finished an American edition of the Holy Scriptures in English; that the Committee have from time to time, attended to his progress in the work; that they also recommend it to the two chaplains of Congress; to examine and give their opinion of the execution, who have accordingly reported thereon; the recommendation and report being as follows:

Philadelphia, 1st September, 1782.

Reverend Gentlemen,

Our knowledge of your piety and public spirit leads us without apology to recommend to your particular attention the edition of the Holy Scriptures publishing by Mr. Aitken. He undertook this expensive work at a time when, from the circumstances of the war, an English edition of the Bible could not be imported, nor any opinion formed how long the obstruction might continue. On this account particularly he deserves applause and encouragement. We therefore wish you, Reverend gentlemen, to examine the execution of this work, and if ap-

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proved, to give it the sanction of your judgment, and the weight of your recommendation.

We are with very great respect

Your most obedient humble servant,

James Duane, Chairman in behalf of a

Committee of Congress on Mr. Aitken's Memorial.

Rev. Dr. White and Rev. Mr. Duffield, Chaplains
of the United States, in Congress assembled.

Report

Gentlemen,

Agreeable to your desire, we have paid attention to Mr. Robert Aitken's impression of the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. Having selected and examined a variety of passages throughout the work, we are of opinion that it is executed with great accuracy as to the sense, and with as few grammatical and typographical errors as could be expected in an undertaking of such magnitude. Being ourselves witnesses for the demand of this invaluable book, we rejoice in the present prospect of a supply; hoping that it will prove as advantageous as it is honourable to the gentleman who has exerted himself to furnish it, at the evident risque of private fortune.

We are, Gentlemen,

Your very respectful and humble servants,

William White,

George Duffield.

Philad. Sept. 10, 1782.

Hon. James Duane, Esq; Chairman, and the other

Hon. Gentlemen of the Committee of Congress on
Mr. Aitken's Memorial.

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.

Charles Thompson, Secretary.¹¹

THE BIBLE APPEARS

The Resolution of Congress was passed upon the 12th of September, and on the 25th, about a fortnight later, Aitken

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people under their care, who, through the indigence of their circumstances are not able to purchase Bibles, and are in danger of perishing for lack of knowledge:

Ordered, That every member of this body shall use his utmost influence in the congregation under his inspection, and in vacancies contiguous to them, to raise contributions for the purchasing of Bibles, to be distributed among such poor persons; and that Dr. Sproat and Ewing, and Mr. Duffield, be a committee to receive such contributions, to purchase Bibles therewith, and send them to the several members of this Synod, who, in conjunction with their respective sessions, shall distribute them. And as Mr. Aitken, from laudable motives, and with great expense, hath undertaken and executed an elegant impression of the Holy Scriptures, which, on account of the importation of Bibles from Europe, will be very injurious to his temporal circumstances: Synod further agree, that the above committee shall purchase Bibles of the said impression and no other, and earnestly recommend it to all, to purchase such in preference to any other.¹⁶

The following year (May, 1784), the Synod renewed its recommendation:

Whereas, the Synod last year recommended it to their members to make collections for the purpose of buying Bibles of Mr. Aitken's impression, to be distributed among the poor: And as it appears that that recommendation has not been fully executed, the Synod now renew the order, and earnestly recommend it to those who have yet done nothing in that business, to do every thing in their power to promote so good a design, either by purchase in the said impression, or any other way they may prefer. The Synod further order the several Presbyteries to pay special attention to this matter, and that the clerk write to the Presbyteries that are not represented in the Synod, on the same subject.¹⁷

Evidence that the Resolution of the Synod resulted in action appears in the following entry in Robert Aitken's Waste Book: "1784—May 28. Dr. Ewing for Church. Dr. To 166 Bibles @ 10 £ 83 0 0."¹⁸

Further action by the Synod appears in the Minutes of 1785 and again in 1787:

The Synod observing with great regret, that the recommendation of the year before last, and renewed last year, respecting a collection to provide a supply of Bibles for the poor,

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connection with the publication of the Aitken Bible which has been preserved in Dr. Miller's Life of Dr. John Rodgers, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of New York.¹⁵ It seems that Dr. Rodgers had suggested to certain benevolent persons the propriety of presenting a copy of the Bible to each soldier on retiring from service. Among those whom he endeavored to interest was the Commander-in-Chief himself, congratulating him on the restoration of peace, from whom he received the following letter in reply:

Head Quarters, 11th June, 1783.

Dear Sir,

I accept with much pleasure, your kind congratulations on the happy event of Peace, with the establishment of our Liberties and Independence.

Glorious indeed has been our contest: glorious, if we consider the prize for which we have contended, and glorious in its issue. But in the midst of our joys, I hope we shall not forget, that to Divine Providence is to be ascribed the glory and the praise.

Your proposition respecting Mr. Aitken's Bible, would have been particularly noticed by me, had it been suggested in season. But the late resolution of Congress for discharging part of the army taking off near two thirds of our numbers, it is now too late to make the attempt. It would have pleased me well, if Congress had been pleased to make such an important present to the brave fellows who have done so much for the security of their country's rights and establishment.

I hope it will not be long before you will be able to go quietly to New York. Some patience, however, will yet be necessary. But patience is a noble virtue, and, when rightly exercised, does not fail of its reward.

With much regard and esteem, I am, dear
Doctor, Your most obedient servant,
Go. Washington.

. . . . Rev. Dr. Rodgers.

THE PRESBYTERIAN SYNOD

The following extracts from the Minutes of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia bring to a close the documentary history of the Aitken Bible. The first action was taken by the Synod at its meeting in Philadelphia, May 24, 1783:

The Synod taking into consideration the situation of many

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addressed the following letter to "His Excellency, John Hanson, Esqr. President of Congress":

I beg your Excellency to present my warm Acknowledgements to Congress for the favor done me by their recommendation of my Edition of the Bible, and to request their Acceptance (for the use of Congress) of one of the first copies, as a specimen of the work they have honored with their Patronage.

I have the Honor to be,
Very Respectfully

Your Excellency's Most Obedient humble Servt.
Robt. Aitken.

Philada. 25 Sept^r. 1782.

The very same day his advertisement appears in *The Freeman's Journal*.¹²

ROBERT AITKEN

Printer, Bookseller, Bookbinder and Stationer, at Pope's Head, in Market-street, near the Coffee-House, has just finished, and has now ready for sale, a new and very correct edition of

The Holy Bible;

with which Booksellers, Store keepers and others, in town and country, may be supplied by wholesale and retail on the most reasonable terms the times will permit.

The serious Christian will be pleased to find, that the scarcity of Bibles, of which he has so long had reason to complain, is now removed; and the patriot will rejoice at the advance in the arts, which has at length produced *The First Edition of the Holy Scriptures, in the English language, ever printed in America*; each of these will allow the merit due to so capital an undertaking; and the trader will find his interest in affording his patronage and encouragement to this work, as several circumstances, particularly the largeness of the type, and the remarkable good quality of the paper, render this edition superior to any of the same size imported from Europe.

N. B. The Bible will be sold either bound or in sheets, and a suitable discount allowed to those who purchase large quantities.

Likewise large FAMILY BIBLES.

The first recorded sale in the *Waste Book* occurs under date of October 2d: "Mr. William Hutchison. To 242 Bibles @ 14/6 . . . £175 9 0." A letter of the same date from Ebe-

nezer Hazard to Jeremy Belknap informs him that "Aitken's Bible sells well here [Philadelphia]. He can hardly bind them fast enough to supply his own shop."¹³ And in the issue of *The Freeman's Journal* for Wednesday, Nov. 20, 1782, appears the following interesting communication:¹⁴

To the Printer.

More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey, and the honey comb.

Psalms xix. 10.

No mention shall be made of coral, or of pearls: for the price of wisdom is above rubies.

Job xxviii. 18.

Sentiments of satisfaction must naturally arise in the breast of every man, who is a friend to his country, when any service is rendered to the public by an individual which can, even in the smallest degree, reflect honour upon, or serve the purpose of morality and religion. In this view of things I can hardly express the feelings I experienced when I found that a complete edition of the Holy Scriptures in our own vernacular tongue, had been printed amongst us. The circumstances attending this arduous attempt are so extraordinary that the faithful historian cannot fail to rank it, both in its design and execution, amongst the most remarkable civil events of the present revolution. One hundred and ninety-seven years have elapsed since the first English colony was planted in America, and the Bible, in the English tongue, has never been printed on this continent before, notwithstanding all the advantages which many years of peace and the flourishing state of these *then* colonies, have afforded.—This it is that renders it more peculiarly worthy of notice.

What may we not expect in the future from the abilities of this country in respect to literary undertakings, when we consider that this design has been executed in the midst, as it were, of conflagration, murder, brutality and a general destruction of the works of nature and art?

This Edition of the Holy Scriptures is the only one that was ever undertaken in America at the expence of an individual, unless we except the German Bible, printed here some years ago by Mr. Sower, at a time when this country enjoyed a profound peace, and agriculture and commerce were in a flourishing condition. As to Mr. Elliot's Indian Bible printed many years ago in New England, it is well known that the whole impression was made at the expence of the corporation for promoting the Gospel in New England. How greatly then are the public indebted to Mr. Aitken, who, at the most imminent

risque of his private fortune, with very little support and patronage, and actuated by a generous zeal for the advancement of the moral interests of mankind, engaged solely in this very expensive and laborious task! Any one in the least acquainted with matters of this kind will readily conceive the difficulties attending the prosecution of the design to have been almost insurmountable: and amongst these the late fluctuating state of our currency was surely not the least; yet he resolutely persevered, and has at length brought it to a successful conclusion, at a period when this invaluable book had become uncommonly scarce; thereby contributing in no contemptible degree to spread the word and knowledge of the divine truth to the remotest boundaries of these rising states!

What discouraging prospect for the completion of his work must the edition have had from time to time in the course of this cruel and desolating war!—More than twenty towns and villages of note have been made fuel for the flames which British inhumanity has kindled; the avarice of our enemies has plundered a much greater number: our foreign trade has been almost annihilated, and no less than nine capital cities of these states have been in the possession of the enemy: amongst them was Philadelphia, and yet, under all these disadvantages, a complete, an accurate, and elegant edition of the Bible was published in this very city, in four years from the time of the evacuation by the British.

The very paper that has received the impression of these sacred books was manufactured in Pennsylvania; the whole book is, therefore, purely American, and has risen, like the fabled Phoenix, from the ashes of that pile in which our enemies supposed they had consumed the liberties of America.

With what pleasure will each patriotic mind reflect on this event, and how will our enemies be chagrined when they find us making such rapid improvements in the arts of peace, even in the midst of war. How cheerfully shall each individual amongst us encourage so laudable an undertaking, and by purchasing this edition of Mr. Aitken's in preference to all others, stimulate our enterprising fellow citizen to future laudable attempts: he has clearly shewn that difficulties, instead of abating, serve but to increase his exertions; and by perseverance has led us to hope for such exhibitions in his branch of business as will greatly tend to the perfection of the useful arts amongst us, and do honour to our rising empire.

Catholicus.

WASHINGTON AND THE AITKEN BIBLE

At this point it may be of interest to mention an incident in