

“Aitken Bible” (1781-1782) by Robert Aitken: A Canonical Book

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Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

Robert Aitken, Aitken Bible, 1781-1782



FIRST EDITION OF AITKEN'S BIBLE, THE FIRST COMPLETE BIBLE PRINTED IN AMERICA, 1781-82, IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN BINDING

First edition of the first complete English Bible printed in the United States—often called "the Bible of the Revolution"—in an attractive, contemporary American binding with contemporary American ownership signatures and family notations. A cornerstone of any Americana collection.

"When the American Revolution cut off the supply of Bibles from England, the Continental Congress authorized their importation from Holland. Further, since American printers were no longer bound by British copyright laws, the Continental Congress encouraged them to produce Bibles. In 1777 Robert Aitken put forth at Philadelphia an edition of the King James New Testament, the first English Scriptures printed in America and bearing an American imprint. Other American printers followed suit, but it was not until 1782 that, with the authorization of Congress, Aitken published the first complete English Bible in America.

Congress had requested that the chaplains of Congress, Dr. William White, Episcopalian, and Mr. George Duffield, Presbyterian, examine the text to see if it was correct; on receiving their positive report the Congress approved its publication and 'recommended this edition of the Bible to the inhabitants of the United States'" (Bible 100 Landmarks 77).

"Now the rarest of all the early American Bibles... This Bible is important because it is a part of our national history, having been the only Bible ever recommended by Congress" (Simms, 127). Because of both Congress' endorsement and the circumstances leading to its production, Aitken's Bible is often called "the Bible of the Revolution."

According to Wright's *Early Bibles of America* (1894), this is "the rarest of all early Bibles printed in America. It can be safely said that at the outside there are not more than 50 copies in existence..." Rumball-Petre, in *America's First Bibles* (1940), located a total of 50 copies in institutions and private collections. He estimated that there may be about 20 additional copies because of previously recorded copies he was unable to trace and unrecorded copies that have appeared on the market.

In the decades since, some private copies have entered institutional collections, where the majority of copies reside. Many extant copies are incomplete or defective and missing leaves. This copy is complete with the title pages to both the Old and New Testaments and the Congressional certification leaf. This is undoubtedly an extraordinarily rare and sought-after item.

Darlow & Moule 928. Herbert 1283. O'Callaghan, 31. Hills 11. Evans 17101, 17473. Sabin 5165. Hildeburn 4126, 4184.

This copy has four pages of annotations by the Shipman family, beginning with the marriage of Paul Shipman and Mary Bond in 1780 and extending through the death of George Shipman in

1846. A note on the rear fly leaf reads: "Paul Shipman's Bible bought of Majr. William Helms in Hacketstown December 23, 1783, price of 6/-. Printed by Robt. Aitken at Pope Head three doors above the Coffey house in Market Street Philadelphia in 1782."

AITKEN, Robert (printer and publisher). The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments... Philadelphia: Robert Aitken, 1781-82. Two parts bound in one volume. 12mo, contemporary full American sheep, complete with the title pages to both the Old and New Testaments, along with the certification leaf from Congress; housed in a custom chemise and half Morocco slipcase.

Light toning and foxing to text, binding rubbed. A very good copy, complete and in a contemporary American binding.