

About the 1798 Bible

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When I headed off to the Andover-Harvard Library I didn't expect to find any information about the 1798 Bible. The Bible was given to the church in 1817, and I had originally hoped to go to the church's records for that year and see what was said about it. But then I learned that the archives don't contain any records of church meetings between 1805 and 1838. I went anyway, but it seemed like a long shot.

I had assumed that the records were simply lost to time, or perhaps in some other location, but now I wonder whether the church had meetings during those years. In 1828 a special committee recommended that "the Church have an annual church meeting ... for the purpose of choosing a Church Committee to look after the affairs of the Church ... and a Clerk whose duty it shall be to record all the proceedings of the Church." The members commented that they had not been able to find "any record of the Church to direct us except a few minutes which were kept by the Rev. Mr. Cooke and our present pastor the Rev. Thaddeus Fiske." So perhaps there never were any general church records from those years.

They were, indeed, difficult years. The Baptists had started to leave First Parish and form their own church during the 1790s. Some years later they sued First Parish because the church (as a faithful constituent of the Standing Order) regularly taxed every member of the town for the support of the church. The Baptists, in contrast, believed in voluntary support of a voluntarily gathered church. This battle of money and theology was played out, in various ways, throughout New England. In West Cambridge, as the town was then known, it turned into a legal dispute that lasted for years and resulted in the courts finding against First Parish. The church was required to return to its Baptist neighbors the tax proceeds that the courts deemed it had wrongfully collected.

The next group of dissenters were the Universalists. As Charles Grady pointed out in his history of First Parish (but who remembers everything they read?) a group calling itself the Universal Society of West Cambridge came into existence by 1822. They were still part of First Parish, but often a dissatisfied part. The then-minister, Rev. Thaddeus Fiske, was a Calvinist of the old school, and by most accounts a boring preacher as well.

Unitarian ideas were also beginning to percolate through New England, especially among its more educated families. Indeed, in 1828 First Parish would call the young Frederic Henry Hedge, who was something of an academic prodigy and definitely a Unitarian.

Women were getting uppity too. Throughout New England women were beginning to think of themselves as having a sphere of their own, a realm of home and children and motherhood where they – more than their husbands – had expertise and authority. Calvinist theology was softening for many reasons, but one reason was many women's deeply-felt belief that children, especially infants, were innocent and could not be damned to Hell by a just God. Many newborns and babies and toddlers died in those years, and their mothers were increasingly insistent that these young lives continued in Heaven. Many women clung to the hope, even the expectation, that they would eventually re-join their

children and other loved ones in Heaven. Orthodox pastors, such as Rev. Fiske, continued to preach about original sin, but that doctrine gave little solace to a grieving mother.

In the eighteenth century, men were primarily responsible for educating children. All school-teachers were men, certainly. But within each family, as well, education was considered a father's responsibility, not a mother's, and fathers were expected to give personal attention to their children's education.

This association of education with masculinity and fatherhood shifted during the nineteenth century. Public education expanded in the first half of the century, partly because of the agitation of Unitarians and Evangelicals. Towns discovered that they could save money by hiring female teachers, who they typically paid between a fifth and a third of what they paid male teachers. Men's work, meanwhile, became more professionalized and occupied more of men's time. An ideal eighteenth-century man was engaged in many activities, including earning a living and civic leadership and raising his children. An ideal nineteenth-century man poured more of his time and attention into his career and left most of child-rearing to his wife. Women, therefore, became primarily responsible for the moral, religious, and elementary academic education of children.

This played out in West Cambridge in a power struggle between Rev. Fiske and two women in his congregation, Liza Bradshaw and Liza Tufts. Fiske was the town's schoolmaster, which supplemented his small salary from First Parish, and he had given the parish's children what he considered adequate religious as well as secular instruction. Bradshaw and Tufts did not agree that the children were receiving sufficient religious education, and they wanted to start a Sunday School class. Fiske did not like their plans, or presumably their implied criticism, so he denied them the use of the main room of the meeting house, which was his right as pastor. So on Sunday mornings Bradshaw and Tufts gathered the children in the meeting house's vestibule, a space over which, by tradition, Fiske had no jurisdiction.

By 1828 the congregation was in trouble. Fiske had been the preacher for forty years, and many people were dissatisfied with his performance. The membership was shrinking and many people thought Fiske should retire. The congregation was, however, divided on this issue. A letter was circulated asking Fiske to stay, but Fiske was apparently surprised that several people he considered firm friends and supporters did not choose to sign this letter.

Fiske therefore submitted his letter of resignation on April 20, 1828. "Be assured," he told his readers, "it is not arisen from any disaffection to the people of my charge, but rather from their falling off, from me, which I have noticed with deep sorrow and regret." He mentioned his hope that retirement would enable him to "enjoy more peace + tranquility than I have for twelve years past." (Twelve years!) "Considering all circumstances," he concluded, "it has become expedient for my health and comfort as well as for your union, peace and welfare for me to resign my office – you will lay this communication before the parish as soon as may be, for their acceptance + for them to give such testimonial as shall render the separation honorable to themselves + to me their faithful + affectionate Pastor and friend Thaddeus Fiske."

The parish did indeed provide the requested positive testimonial. Fiske's only son, Horatio, died a little more than a year later, leaving him even more heart-broken. He remained in West Cambridge, however, and made life somewhat difficult for his successors, who never persuaded him that Unitarianism was anything better than heresy. He lived for twenty-seven years after retiring ostensibly for the sake of his health.

On the same day that Fiske submitted his letter of resignation – April 20, 1828 – the Parish Committee, which then consisted of three men, submitted a remarkable report (apparently hand-written, though the original has probably been lost) to the membership of First Parish. The writers, the report explains, were “appointed a committee to examine the affairs and situation of the Church.” “[I]f any after hearing the report should think we have exceeded our duty, we would ask of them and hope they will throw a veil of charity over our imperfections and impute the error to a defect of the head and not of the heart.”

The report began with a short survey of the history of the church and ended with a series of suggestions, including the aforementioned practice of holding an annual meeting. In between it listed the assets of the church:

“The Committee then proceeded to look after the funds and found them as follows – Two black-tin flagons of about 1 gallon each. Three do [?] tankards of about 1 quart each. One silver tankard of about a quart given by Mr. Jonathan Butterfield 1769. Two do [?] of about a pint each which contain the wine on communion days. There are 4 pewter chargers or platters for the bread one of which was given by Rebeckah Whittemore 1739. One christening basin given by William Brattle Esq. Four diaper napkins two do [?] tablecloths. Two large Bibles one in a single volume which was given by Andrew Boardman. And the other in two volumes which was procured by subscription at the dedication of the Meeting house or near that time. One stuffed hair bottomed chair procured by subscription. A small quantity of old pewter also an old cushion which belonged to the old Meeting house. These seem to be all that the Committee can find of furniture belonging to the Church at present.”

So the church in 1828 owned two Bibles, one of which was in two volumes. The committee went out of its way to list all objects owned by the church. Surely this is the Bible we now have?

Well, maybe, but maybe not.

Each volume of the Bible contains the following inscription:

Presented by the Ladies of West Cambridge to this
Church of Christ

October 24th, Anno Domini 1817

The second meeting house – the one standing in 1828 – was built in 1804. So according to the inscriptions, the Bible was presented to the church thirteen years after the meeting house was built. From the point of view of just eleven years later, that is a significant difference.

In addition, the phrase “procured by subscription” usually implied something similar to a modern pledge process. The minister and leaders of the congregation decided that some purchase was desirable, various people signed up to contribute money, and if enough money was raised then the purchase was made. This process was organized by the institution that wanted the subscription.

“Presented by” is more likely to imply a gift organized by the givers on their own initiative. In this case, it suggests that the Ladies of West Cambridge came together as a group of women (or refined

ladies, as they preferred to think of themselves), decided to buy a Bible as a gift to the Church, and organized the process themselves.

This was a somewhat remarkable thing for a group of women to do in the 1810s. In the colonial period women did not organize themselves as women – that would have been seen as unacceptably presumptuous. Some women’s groups coalesced socially during the Revolutionary War to support the war effort through womanly tasks, such as making homespun or bandages, but these groups were informal and disappeared at the end of the war. By the 1830s women were beginning to organize mothers’ clubs and ladies’ auxiliaries to various men’s organization. But in the 1810s the idea that women might have the initiative and organizational ability to create and conduct and lead their own organizations was not yet on the cultural horizon.

And here were the Ladies of West Cambridge, giving their church a Bible.

In 1817. Which turns out to be the same year that Liza Bradshaw and Liza Tufts challenged Rev. Thaddeus Fiske’s authority by starting a Sunday School in the vestibule of the meeting house.

So my guess – which I certainly can’t prove, but it’s my guess – is that two-volume Bible mentioned in the 1828 report from the newly formed Parish Committee is the same two-volume Bible that the Ladies of West Cambridge gave to the church in 1817. But my guess is that Rev. Fiske was not thrilled with this gift. He associated it with rebellious women, women who did not know their place, women who wanted to teach children themselves, women who challenged his authority and maybe his capability. He didn’t dispose of the Bible – it was too precious for that. But he did downplay it. Indeed, the Bible looks barely used – even when it was brand new it was not much read. And he and the other (male) leaders of the congregation gradually came to tell (and believe?) a story that the Bible had been around as long as the current meeting house, “or near that time.”

Note that Fiske suggested that his ministry had been lacking in “peace + tranquility” for the last twelve years before his retirement. 1817 was eleven years before his retirement.

According to Charles Grady, this Bible was used as a pulpit bible in the short-lived third meeting house, which was built in 1840 to accommodate the expanded congregation attracted by the eloquent Rev. David Damon and burned to the ground on New Years’ Day of 1856 after a late-night service to see in the New Year. “Some intrepid men,” Grady explained in his description of the fire, “had dared to enter the building to save what could be saved: a chair, a sofa, and the two great pulpit Bibles— volumes one and two of a notable edition printed in Philadelphia in 1817 and presented to the Parish by the Women’s Society” (p. 95).

Grady was correct that this Bible was a notable edition printed in Philadelphia, but his other facts were off in three ways. The front plate of the Bible indicates that it was printed in 1798, not 1817. It was presented to the Church, not the Parish, at a time when those words meant very different things. And no Women’s Society existed in 1817. In this town, according to Grady, the Universalist women first organized themselves into a formal association in 1847 and the Unitarian women first organized themselves in 1849. The Ladies who gave the Bible in 1817 were an informal coalition – they identified themselves as female, certainly, and they worked together on this one project and perhaps other projects, but they were not audacious enough to declare themselves a women’s group.

So what is this Bible? It is a large folio edition, two volumes, bound in beautifully tooled red leather. On the inside of the covers is marbled paper that is now black, gray, and pink but may once

have been black, gray, and red. It was published in Philadelphia in 1798 by John Thompson and Abraham Small.

The Thompson Bible was one of the first English-language Bibles printed in North America. I believe (but I would want to find a more authoritative source for this belief before I'm sure of it) that no English-language Bibles were printed in the British colonies because the Crown held the copyright to the King James Version and wanted to preserve the profits from printing the KJV for printers in England. The first English-language Bible printed in the United States was, I believe, the Robert Aiken edition, which was authorized by Congress in 1782 and printed in 1783. The Aiken Bible was part of the young country's declaration of intellectual, religious, and financial independence from England.

The Thompson Bible is considered especially notable because it was the first Bible printed in the United States using John Baskerville's then-new "hot press" process, which produced type that was more clear and legible and paper that was more smooth than had been possible using previous printing processes. Comments I have seen on the web include "The Thompson Hot-Press Bible remains an extremely rare collectors' item" and "With its uncluttered typography, this considered one of the handsomest Bibles of the period."

In 1988 the Philadelphia Consortium of Special Collections Libraries published a book titled *Legacies of Genius* celebrating what the Consortium considered the most notable books, manuscripts, and works of art in Philadelphia area libraries. *Legacies of Genius* includes a description and photo of Bryn Mawr's copy of the Thompson Bible, which is bound in red leather like ours but has a different pattern on its binding.

The binding of the Bryn Mawr copy – and quite possibly of ours – was done in the shop of Robert Aiken, about which *Legacies of Genius* has this to say:

"The bindings that came from the shop of Robert Aiken were the finest produced in America in the eighteenth century. ... Binding executed there was highly praised by an historian of American printers: "There was no better finished binding ever done than some of the books executed in his shop." As Aiken aged, his daughter Jane took over the family shop. The bindings on the two folio volumes of the 1798 Bible are in brilliant red morocco – "turkey" it was then called – with some of Aiken's most exotic tools, among them a wyvern at the angle of the corners, a peacock, and a running stag. According to William and Carol Spawn, experts on work done in the Aiken shop, these bindings reflect the design and execution of Jane.

The Bible was the first substantial publication in America to use Baskerville's hot-pressed technique in its printing. It was issued in forty numbers at half a dollar apiece, and as book production is worthy of the rich bindings that encase it."

So the Ladies of West Cambridge may have, presumably unknowingly, given their church a Bible bound by a woman.

So let me propose a time-line for the Bible. Some of this is speculative, but I suspect the general gist is correct.

- 1798 The Bible was printed in Philadelphia by John Thompson and Abraham Small. This edition was originally published in forty pieces that were sold for half a dollar each. At some point our copy was bound into two folio volumes covered with tooled red leather. It may have been bound in the Philadelphia shop of Robert Aiken and Jane Aiken.
- 1817 The Bible was purchased by a group of women affiliated with the First Parish and Church of Christ in West Cambridge. It was one of the biggest, most beautiful, and most expensive Bibles available. They called themselves the Ladies of West Cambridge and gave the Bible to “this Church of Christ.” Rev. Thaddeus Fiske probably used, however, a single-volume Bible that was given to the church by Andrew Boardman. This was the same year that Fiske had an open conflict with two ladies of the church, Liza Bradshaw and Liza Tufts, over whether a Sunday School class should be established and whether his religious instruction of the church’s children was adequate. Bradshaw and Tufts got their Sunday School class.
- 1828 The Bible was mentioned in an inventory of the church’s assets prepared by a three-person Parish Committee appointed to review the situation of the struggling congregation and pastor. They described it, incorrectly, as “procured by subscription at the dedication of the Meeting house or near that time.”
- 1840 The refreshed and expanding congregation built a new, third, meeting house and started to use the most impressive of their Bibles as the pulpit Bible.
- 1856 The third meeting house burned to the ground. The Bible was saved from the building before it was touched by the flames. The Bible given by Andrew Boardman may well have been lost at this time.
- 1857 A new, fourth meeting house was dedicated. In a spirit of renewal, the congregation purchased a new pulpit Bible.
- 1975 The Bible was in storage somewhere in the Bailey Wing when the fourth meeting house burned to the ground. The pulpit Bible purchased in 1857 was rescued, but it was badly damaged by the fire.
- 2000 Rev. Charles Grady mentioned the Bible in his *Arlington’s First Parish*, p. 95. He described it, incorrectly, as “printed in Philadelphia in 1817 and presented to the Parish by the Women’s Society.” He added in a footnote that at the time of his writing it was in the display cabinet in the narthex of the fifth meeting house and could be seen by readers there.
- 2007 The Bible was noticed in the fan room during a tour of the church organized by Rebecca Benefiel Bijur and Jonathan Markowitz Bijur as part of a summer service.