

The APHA Newsletter

January

1986



A Publication of the American Printing History Association

Stephen O. Saxe, Editor

After 346 Years — The Freeman's Oath

25 March 1639

"A printing house was begun in Cambridge by one Daye, at the charge of Mr. Glover who died on sea hitherward. The first thing that was printed was the freeman's oath, the next was an almanack made for New England by Mr. William Peirce, mariner; the next was the Psalms newly turned into metre."

— Governor John Winthrop

These two sentences, the first entry for 1639 in Gov. Winthrop's journal (under the old reckoning the year began on March 25th) announce the beginning of printing in this country. The statement that the first thing to be printed on the first press in North America was the Freeman's Oath is unequivocal and authoritative (although mention of the 1640 Bay Psalm Book indicates a later interpolation by Winthrop.) Although the entry is dated 1639, the exact date of the establishment of the press and the first printing are not given; it may have been late in 1638. In any case, the Freeman's Oath soon vanished as have so many other pieces of ephemeral printing. The only difference in this instance is that it was known to have been printed; it possessed great historical, symbolic, and monetary value; and it has been sought for over 250 years. Now, after three and a half centuries of oblivion, it appears to have been found.

The broadside was bought for \$25 at the Argosy bookshop in New York City, and is now the property of 31-year old Mark Hoffman, the Salt Lake City manuscript dealer who was injured last October in a bomb blast. He was involved in a tangled series of dealings with members of the Mormon Church over rare early Mormon documents. Two of Hoffman's associates in Salt Lake City were killed in bomb blasts in October, and the speculation that followed included the possibility of fraud, forgery, and the sensibilities of the Mormon Church.

Hoffman took the broadside to dealers Justin Schiller and Raymond Wapner in New York, and they compared it to a copy of *The Whole Books of Psalmes* — the first book printed in English America, of which there are now eleven copies extant of the original edition of 1,700 copies. Because the

THE OATH OF A FREEMAN.

I • A B • being (by Gods providence) an Inhabitant, and Freeman, within the iurisdiction of this Common-wealth, doe freely acknowledge my selfe to bee subject to the governement thereof; and therefore doe heere sweare, by the great & dreadfull name of the Everliving-God, that I will be true & faithfull to the same, & will accordingly yield assistance & support therunto, with my person & estate, as in equity I am bound: and will also truely indeavour to maintaine and preserve all the libertyes & priviledges thereof; submitting my selfe to the wholesome lawes, & ordres made & stablished by the same; and further, that I will not plot, nor practice any evill against it, nor consent to any that shall soe do, butt will timely discover, & reveall the same to lawefull authoritee nowe here stablished, for the speedie preventing thereof. Moreover, I doe solemnly binde my selfe, in the sight of God, that when I shalbe called, to give my voyce touching any such matter of this state, (in which freemen are to deale) I will give my vote & suffrage as I shall judge in myne owne conscience may best conduce & tend to the publick weale of the body, without respect of personnes, or favour of any man. Soe help mee God in the Lord Iesus Christ.

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The recently discovered broadside, actual size.

oath and the psalm book matched well, Schiller and Wapner agreed to represent Hoffman in the sale of the oath, and sent it to the conservation laboratory at the Library of Congress for testing. There the basic elements of the broadside — ink, paper, and text — all appeared correct. Although the Library has been very reticent on the matter, in an October statement to the press it stated that "in its examination of the document, the Library of Congress found nothing inconsistent with a mid-seventeenth century attribution, though additional tests remain to be conducted."

In April 1985 the LC entered into discussions with Schiller-Wapner Galleries, Inc., which, in the LC's words "did not lead to an agreement on a formal offer." The asking price was reportedly \$1,500,000. The Library returned the broadside to Schiller-Wapner in June. At the time of the discussions LC did not know the name of the owner. James Gilreath, American history specialist at the Library of Congress, has stated that "questions of title, provenance, and price made us decide to return it."

The oath then went to the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Mass., the leading repository of early American imprints and another likely purchaser. Marcus McCorison, director of the AAS, also stated that he could find nothing wrong with it. "We first thought it was too good to be true, and then came around to maybe it is true." The AAS was reportedly interested in purchasing the document, but at a price considerably less than \$1.5 million. Dr. McCorison also suggested additional testing, such as the cyclotron analysis of ink composition done at the University of California at Davis (reported in *APHA Letter* 53, 1983.) Another proposed test would be the computer comparison of type images being done at the University of New Mexico.

There is little doubt that the document presents a prospective purchaser with problems. It is, after all, a 4" x 6" piece of unwatermarked paper, printed on one side with no date or place of printing; it has no provenance; and the owner has found himself in the midst of a scene of violence and intrigue that is unsettling to august institutions. In fact, the situation has all the elements of an overblown "biblio-mystery." Suggestions of possible forgery have been made about the Mormon documents, and the question of a possible fake in the case of the Freeman's Oath must also be addressed. Could it be done? On this question we would be interested in hearing comments from any reader with expert knowledge. Our own feeling is that it could be done, but it would not be easy. On the other hand the reward would be great.

Thomas Prince (1687-1758), a friend of Cotton Mather and the first great American book collector, realizing the importance of the earliest American imprints, accumulated no less than five copies of the Bay Psalm Book for his own library. It seems a safe presumption that he also searched for copies of the Freeman's Oath and the New England Almanack mentioned in Gov. Winthrop's journal, but without success. So the search has been in progress since the middle of the eighteenth century. In 1897 the great bibliographer Charles Evans found the following reference in an 1887 entry in the *Catalogue* of the British Museum:

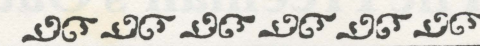
The Oath of a Freeman. B.L. [Black Letter]
(London, 1645?) s. sh. [single sheet] 120. 1626.aa (1,2)

A quarter of a century later, when Evans got to London to examine the document, the collection in which it was contained had been dispersed and it could not be found. However, the fact that the British Museum sheet was printed in black letter makes it incompatible with the present copy of the oath.

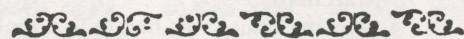
The oath is printed in what appears to be the same type as the Bay Psalm Book, described by Isaiah Thomas as "Roman, of the size of small bodied English, entirely new, and may be called a good letter." The illustration on this page compares similar settings from each work, taken from a photostat supplied by Schiller-Wapner Galleries, Inc. in

the case of the oath, and from the facsimile edition of the Bay Psalm Book issued in 1956 by the University of Chicago Press. Both reproductions are actual size, and in each 20 lines of the type = 93mm. The fleurons used to form the border of the oath are smaller than those of the title page of the Bay Psalm Book, but match those used to introduce the separate Books of the Psalms. Only a single pair of fleurons in the psalm book exactly match the way the pairs were made up to form the border of the oath; the rest show other configurations. The matching pair are in the opening of the Fourth Book of the psalms.

Oath



Psalm Book



Oath

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Psalm Book

therefore liberty publick

therefore publick

Oath

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Psalm Book

indeavour maintainance

Comparison of fleurons and word settings from the Freeman's Oath and the Bay Psalm Book.

The text of the *Oath of a Freeman* has always been known; it was reprinted in *New Englands Jonas Cast Up at London*, printed in London in 1647. In addition to its importance as the first printing in this country, it also has great significance as the foundation of our country's understanding of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. We do not know how many copies were printed by Stephen Daye at the press in Cambridge; at that time there were about ten thousand inhabitants of the Bay Colony. 1700 copies of the psalm book were printed, (approximately one for each household), of which only eleven have survived. We could expect an even greater rate of attrition for the fragile single leaf.

It will be interesting to see if other copies of the oath surface after this copy. It has always been considered possible that one might be found in London, in the papers of the London connections of the Bay Colony. Or, as suggested by Lawrence C. Wroth in *The Colonial Printer*, "Some day, perhaps, the eyes of a worthy bibliophile will bulge with wild surmise when he soaks the boards that cover an early Cambridge book and sees emerging some thirty or forty copies of 'The Oath of a Freeman,' shut off from human sight these three hundred years." — S.O.S.

Further Reading

- Haraszti, Zoltan. *The Enigma of the Bay Psalm Book*.
(With accompanying facsimile volume.) Chicago, 1956
- Winship, George Parker. *The Cambridge Press 1638-1692*.
Philadelphia, 1945.
- Wroth, Lawrence C. *The Colonial Printer*. New York, 1931.
Revised 1938; reprinted Charlottesville, 1964

EDITOR'S NOTE

When a nineteenth century newspaper was given a complete change of type throughout, it was said to have "a new dress." *The APHA Letter* has now acquired "a new dress," one that differs greatly from the old, but which we hope will please. *The APHA Letter* (which we will henceforth call *The APHA Newsletter*) has also acquired a new editor. After eleven years of dedicated effort, Cathy Brody has passed the editorship on to Stephen O. Saxe. All of us owe her our thanks for these many years of work and accomplishment, which have done much to preserve and strengthen this organization. Thanks is also due to Philip Sperling, who has ably assisted Prof. Brody in recent years.

Photocomposition will enable us to put more words into less space, at the same time improving readability and allowing greater possibilities for illustration. We would like to acknowledge the fine example set for us by Hugh Williamson, editor of the Printing Historical Society *Bulletin*, which made a similar transition under his guidance from typewriter to typesetting in 1980. The result has been very worthwhile, and we hope that our changeover will be equally successful.

Readers are encouraged to send items of interest, news, queries, short articles – anything related to printing history. Please send them directly to the editor at the address given in the masthead box.

DOUBLE ENGLISH.



"Alice" wood engravings discovered. The original boxwood engravings cut by the Dalziel brothers from Sir John Tenniel's illustrations for *Alice in Wonderland* came to light recently. They had been stored in the vault of the Covent Garden branch of the National Westminster Bank, stored in two metal boxes, one of them labeled "Alice." The blocks, obviously of great value, had disappeared many years ago and were presumed lost.

In 1867 Charles Dodgson had written Alexander Macmillan, his publisher, "By the way, who has the wood blocks? I can hardly doubt that they're being carefully kept, but, considering the sum I had to pay for them, I shall be glad to be certain that they're safe from all possibility of damage." The blocks had been stored at the bank since before 1930, and perhaps even since soon after the publication of *Alice in Wonderland*, in 1865.

Each block was individually wrapped in paper and tagged. They had been cut from Tenniel's pencil drawings by the Dalziel brothers, the leading commercial wood engravers of the day. The blocks were used to make copper electrotypes by means of wax moulds; the original blocks were never subjected to the stresses of printing the many editions of *Alice*.

In London, Macmillan is exploring the possibility of using the engravings to produce a limited edition next year. In the meantime, the blocks are back in the bank vault.

The *APHA Newsletter* is published six times yearly by the American Printing History Association. All letters, news items and other material for the *Newsletter* should be sent directly to the Editor: Stephen O. Saxe, 1100 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10028. Subscriptions are through membership in APHA, and include all publications. Personal memberships for the calendar year are \$15; \$20 for U.S. institutions. Membership and other correspondence should be sent to APHA, P.O. Box 4922, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163. Copyright © 1986 by the American Printing History Association. All rights reserved.

Phillips Type Collection to Bowne. The Frederic Nelson Phillips collection of 19th century metal type was purchased in November by Bowne & Co., Stationers, at the South Street Seaport Museum in New York City. The collection includes approximately 1,200 fonts of early metal type, most of it ornate Victorian designs. The collection was gathered by Frederic Nelson Phillips and his son in the 1930s, and was used from the late 1940s to make reproduction proofs of the old-fashioned type for use by advertisers and publishers through Phillips' typography shop in New York. The collection is shown in *Phillips' Old-Fashioned Type Book* (NY, 1945) and in *Olde Type Faces at Tri-Arts Press, Inc.* (NY, n.d.) published by the successor firm to Phillips. When Tri-Arts Inc. went out of business, the antique type was kept in storage (occupying seven cubic yards) until the recent purchase by Bowne. The acquisition of this type makes the Bowne collection total of 1,350 fonts of 19th century type the third largest in the country – the first two are the Morgan collection now at the Smithsonian, and the T.J. Lyons collection in Boston, Mass., each containing about 2,000 fonts. Bowne & Co., Stationers is a careful re-creation of a mid-19th century letterpress printing office.

No. 397—Romanesque

36 pt.

And PRECEDE

Specimen of type from the Philips collection

The World's Smallest Book. The last issue of this newsletter mentioned the world's smallest book, the Japanese book *The Ant*, which is 1.4 millimeters square, bound in red leather, published in 1980. *The Ant* has now become no more than an unwieldy oversize tome in comparison with the new record-holder, the 1 millimeter square edition of *Old King Cole* published by Ian Macdonald of Paisley, Scotland. Macdonald, who had held the record before *The Ant* snatched it in 1980, has been planning the new book since then. The book required specially-made rice paper and is printed by offset. At present only two copies exist – one in the offices of the *Guinness Book of Records* and the other in an American private collection; orders for another 50 copies have been received, at £100 each. The total edition will be 85 copies, and the publisher expects the record to stand for another 10 years.

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