

Spring 2016

Heritage and Identity: The Cockayne Family Bible

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Recommended Citation

James, Elizabeth. "Heritage and Identity: The Cockayne Family Bible." *The Upper Ohio Valley Historical Review*, Wheeling, WV, Spring 2016.

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Upper Ohio Valley

HISTORICAL REVIEW

Winter 2015

THE HOLY
B I B L E,
CONTAINING
The Old and New Testaments;

TRANSLATED OUT OF THE
ORIGINAL TONGUES,
AND
With the former TRANSLATIONS diligently
compared and revised,
BY HIS MAJESTY'S SPECIAL COMMAND.

Appointed to be read in Churches.

C A M B R I D G E,
Printed by JOHN ARCHDEACON Printer to the UNIVERSITY,
And sold by JOHN BERCROFT, JOHN RIVINGTON, BENJAMIN WHITE,
and EDWARD DILLY, in London; and T. & J. MERRILL,
in Cambridge. 1775.

CUM PRIVILEGIO.

Volume 38, No. 2

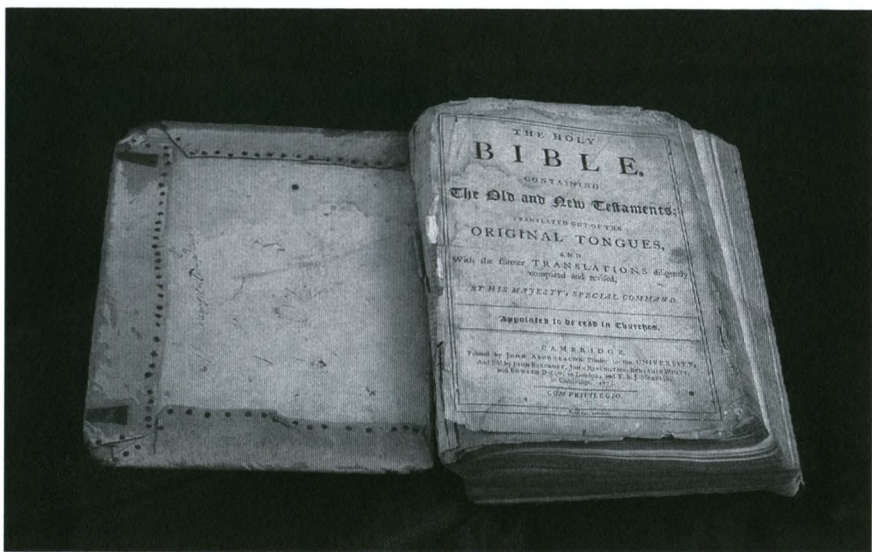
By Elizabeth James
AmeriCorps volunteer at Cockayne Farmstead

Heritage and Identity: The Eighteenth Century Bible of the Cockayne Family

The collection at the Cockayne Farmstead is eclectic, to say the least. Ranging in age from Adena arrowheads to a 2001 calendar, it is difficult to characterize the nature of the home's archival holdings. However, amidst a plethora of 19th century correspondence, books, and printed ephemera, one item stands out as being particularly special. Within the collection is a Bible printed in 1775 on the Cambridge University Press in England, complete with a hurriedly scrawled listing of family birth and death dates on the back of the title page. This brief listing demonstrates how books were used for purposes far more diverse than simply reading. How a family chose to use a Bible provides unique insight into understanding the inner lives of the men, women, and children who used it.

Anyone with even a casual interest in American history knows about the turbulent and revolutionary nature of the 1770s. However, while many know about the founding fathers and the famous conflicts that burdened them, fewer know about some of the surprising difficulties that troubled average Americans. Namely, basic access to books, especially Bibles. Earlier, during the 17th century, England outlawed the printing of English language Bibles at any press save for one in Scotland, one in Oxford, and one in Cambridge.¹ Despite this seemingly simple restriction, the vast majority of American towns did not even enough printing equipment to produce anything lengthier than a newspaper.² As a result, America relied almost exclusively on imported books, primarily printed pamphlets, newspapers, and broadsides for popular consumption. The reliance on importing foreign books limited their consumption to wealthier individuals. This also meant that any information in books was outdated by the time they arrived to America.

In 1775, when tensions with the British were at their height, the Continental Congress banned the importation of all British goods.³ A mere two years later, three suffering ministers in Philadelphia wrote to the Continental Congress saying that, “books in general, and in particular, the Holy Scriptures contained in the Old and New Testaments are growing so scarce and dear, that we greatly fear that unless timely care be used to prevent it, we shall not have Bibles for our schools and families.”⁴ However, it would not be until 1782 that Robert Aitken printed the first English language Bible in the United States, finally giving the colonists the Bibles they wanted so desperately.⁵



This was the world in which the Cockayne Bible existed. Printed in England in 1775, it would have been one of the last books to come to America prior to the ban on British imports. By 1777, with the future of America uncertain and books growing increasingly rare, the Bible would have provided a source of comfort for families living in those turbulent times. Printed especially for use in churches, the Bible would have been bought purely for access to the scriptures they contained—save for one intricate engraving after the title page, depicting the gifting of the Ark of the Covenant to Moses, the book is entirely barren of illustrations. Sold for fourteen shillings in 1775, the rough equivalent of \$135.00 today, the book would have arrived unbound as a stack of folded sheets of paper.⁶

It would have been up to the Cockayne family to have it bound, an additional expense that was compounded by importation fees and the already expensive Bible. The bindings present on this Bible are also par-

ticularly novel, featuring two layers of binding one on top of the other. The under layer is of a traditional dark leather, but the upper layer is of spotted brown and white cow skin. The rebinding could be an indication of changing tastes, and the use of cow may have demonstrated the new agriculture focus of the family.



However, while the exterior of the book is extremely unique in appearance, it is the inside that gives the greatest number of subtle clues about the Bible's use and information about the family. Even seemingly innocuous marks, like that of a random string of numbers or a ring of water, can tell an entire story of use, reuse, love, and neglect. This Bible traveled with the family from Maryland, to Pennsylvania, and finally to West Virginia. It readily shows its wear, with several of the opening pages incredibly worn, and in a couple of instances, ripped out entirely. Sporadic loops and random words litter the pages, implying that the Bible may have been used as a bit of scrap paper by a bored adult or a child who had escaped the watchful eye of a parent. In addition, random addition and subtraction problems are scattered throughout. These math problems are written in a more sophisticated script, implying that the Bible was perhaps kept on a desk or work area. Ever the businessmen and women, the Cockaynes kept careful records of all of their dealings. Even, perhaps, doing some quick math in the family Bible.

But the most obvious sign of intervention, the list of births for three generations of Cockaynes (from circa 1737 to 1810), is also one of the most interesting. Before the era of well-documented births, deaths, and marriages, the family Bible often served as one of the primary methods of record keeping. However, beyond a simple clerical record, the Bible allowed immigrants to construct a narrative of the life of their family in America. As such, their family tree begins with the first Cockayne of this line to come to America, allowing the Cockaynes to create a distinct American identity in a British Bible. Even with all of the random scrawls in the margins of the Bible, that it even exists today demonstrates its inherent value as a treasured possession that conveyed a sense of heritage and identity.

Even typical, everyday objects present a deep insight into the lives of their owners. Even something as simple as a well-worn pen or a pipe can inform an observer as to the habits or vices of the owners of those objects. But certain items, like this Bible, can provide a particularly unique snapshot of a moment in the life of a household in 18th and 19th century America. The Cockayne collection is brimming with thousands of other letters, objects, and artworks just waiting to have their stories told.

Endnotes

¹ “The Bible in British America and the Early Republic.” The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

² Federer, William. “July 15: Bibles In Colonial America.” *Western Journalism*. N.p., 15 July 2014. Web. 18 Nov. 2015.

³ Ferrell, Lori Anne. *The Bible and the People*, 119.

⁴ Ferrell, 121.

⁵ “Earliest American Bibles.” Houston Baptist University.

⁶ Lawrence H. Officer and Samuel H. Williamson, “Computing ‘Real Value’ Over Time With a Conversion Between U.K. Pounds and U.S. Dollars, 1774 to Present”, *Measuring Worth*, 2015.

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