

Aitken Bible

Prior to the American Revolution, the only English Bibles in the colonies were imported either from Europe or England. Publication of the Bible was regulated by the British government, and required a special license. Robert Aitken's Bible was the first known English-language Bible to be printed in America, and also the only Bible to receive Congressional approval. Aitken's Bible, sometimes referred to as "The Bible of the Revolution," is one of the rarest books in the world, with few copies still in existence today.

History of the Aitken Bible

On January 21, 1781, Robert Aitken presented a “memorial” [petition] to Congress offering to print “a neat Edition of the Holy Scriptures for the use of schools.” This is the text of that memorial:

*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 Honours 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.

After appointing a committee to study the project, Congress acted on September 12, 1782, by “highly approv[ing of] the pious and laudable undertaking of Mr. Aitken.” The endorsement by Congress was printed in the Aitken Bible:

The endorsement was signed by Charles Thomson, who was Secretary of the Continental Congress. Thomson, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, is also famous for "Thomson's Bible," the first American translation of the Greek Septuagint, published in 1808 (Thomson was an accomplished theologian, publishing such works as "A Regular History of the Conception, Birth, Doctrine, Miracles, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus Christ.")

Robert Aitken printed three documents in the front of his Bible, the report of the committee established to review his memorial; the report of the Congressional Chaplains; and Congresses endorsement. Below is the text of these documents:

BY THE UNITED STATES IN
CONGRESS ASSEMBLED:

September 12th, 1782.

THE Committee to whom was referred a Memorial of Robert Aitken, printer, dated 21st January, 1781, respecting an edition of the Holy Scriptures, report, "That Mr. Aitken has, at a great expense, 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 recommended 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 our 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, and 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 the work, and if approved, to give the sanction of our judgment, and the weigh of your recommendation.

We are, with very great respect,
Your most obedient humble servants.
(Sign'd) JAMES DUANE, Chairman in behalf
of a Committee of Congress on Mr. Atken's Memorial.

Reverend Doct. White and Revd. Mr. Duffield, Chaplains of the United States in Congress assembled.

Report.

Gentlemen,
AGREEABLY 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 of the demand for this invaluable book, we rejoice in the present prospect of a supply; hoping that it will prove as advantageous as it is honorable to the Gentleman, who has exerted himself to furnish it, at the evident risk of private fortune. We are, Gentlemen, Your very respectful and humble servants,

(Sign'd) WILLIAM WHITE,
GEORGE DUFFIELD.

Philadelphia, September 10th, 1782.

Honble James Duane, Esq. Chairman, and the other
Honble 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.

CHA. THOMSON, Sec'ry.

In 1968, the American Bible Society reprinted the Aitken Bible,
this is the title page of that reprint:

To sign up on the WallBuilders email list and receive future information about historical issues and Biblical values in the culture, visit <https://wallbuilders.com/ABTsignup.asp>.