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New England Primer

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NEW ENGLAND PRIMER

For more than 150 years the *New England Primer*, often called “The Little Bible of New England,” served as the principal textbook for millions of colonists and early American citizens. First compiled and published *circa* 1688 by Benjamin Harris, a British journalist who emigrated to Boston, it gained popularity not only in New England but also throughout colonial America and parts of Great Britain with estimates of copies sold from six to eight million by 1830. Less than a hundred pages in length, this early textbook proved significant in both reflecting the norms of Puritan culture and propagating those norms into early American thought.

The historical milieu in which the *Primer* emerged contributed significantly to its rise to prominence. In 1630 a group of more than 1,000 Puritans settled the Massachusetts Bay area with the goal of developing a society based on Biblical principles as embodied by the English Reformation. The doctrine of the priesthood of the believer motivated Puritans to teach reading to all citizens so that they could know and follow the Christian Scriptures. As early as 1642, Massachusetts law required literacy instruction to all children, servants, and apprentices. The 1647 Old Deluder Satan Act—in order to ensure that “learning may not be buried in the grave of our forefathers”—required every township of 50 households to hire a teacher. Towns twice that size were mandated to set up schools that would prepare students for Harvard. With only the hornbook and Bible available in most schools, New England was ready for a textbook that would be affordable, portable, and compatible with the predominant worldview.

Borrowing principles from Comenius’s *Orbis Pictus* and his own *Protestant Tutor*, Harris incorporated crude woodcut illustrations and religious content to teach rudimentary reading skills

and to encourage rote memorization of Calvinist doctrine. Graduated literacy instruction began with the alphabet, simple letter combinations, and syllables, increasing to complex sentences intended for rote memorization. Themes of sin, death, punishment, salvation, and respect for authority were displayed through alphabetic rhymed couplets, poems, prayers and scriptures. The theme of punishment, for instance, was exhibited in the rhyming couplet for the letter *F*: “The idle fool/Is whipt at school.” Such themes for a child’s textbook may seem morbid in light of Jean Jacque Rousseau’s notions of childhood innocence, but they would not seem so to Puritan families who embraced the doctrine of infant corruption caused by the original sin of Adam.

The *Primer* was reproduced by a variety of publishers, resulting in 450 editions by 1830. Adaptations were printed for various geographic regions and ethnic groups, such as the 1781 *Indian Primer* printed in both the Mohawk and English languages. With each new edition came content changes, though the core elements of the pictured alphabet and catechism remained constant. The couplet for the letter *A* never changed—“In Adam’s fall/We sinned all,” but many of the others were modified to reflect evolving political or religious beliefs. For instance, independence from Britain saw the alteration of “Our king the good/No man of blood” to “The British king/Lost states thirteen” and later to “Queens and kings/Are gaudy things.” One of the most blatant political alterations was made in 1776 when an image of King George III was simply relabeled with the name of John Hancock.

The influence of the Great Awakening brought about several changes to the *Primer*. For example, the couplet for the letter *C* was amended from “The cat does play/And after slay” to “Christ crucify’d/For sinners dy’d.” The Great Awakening’s influence shifted the *Primer*’s emphasis from God’s wrath to His love and contributed to the addition of more prayers and

hymns, such as Isaac Watts' "Cradle Hymn." As moral education became more secularized, the emphasis on punishment and sin softened. For example, in later versions, consuming fire as a punishment was replaced with the threat of having treats taken away. Literacy as a means to finding eternal salvation was replaced in one 1790 version as a path to financial security, and in an 1819, edition the rhyme for *K* expressed the value of play—"Tis youth's delight/To fly their kite."

Various adaptations of the *Primer* included the Lord's Prayer, Apostles' Creed, Ten Commandments, Westminster Shorter Catechism, John Cotton's *Milk for Babes*, and the common children's prayer "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep." Also present in some editions was an account of John Rogers' martyrdom accompanied by a woodcut of his burning at the stake while his wife and children watched. The catechetical drill included some of the following questions: "What is the chief end of man?" "What is the first commandment?" "What is faith in Jesus Christ?" Later such secular questions were included as "Who saved America?" and "Who betrayed America?"

Though criticized for depicting children as depraved and for using God as a metaphor to manipulate submission to the political and religious authority of New England, the *Primer* made a lasting impact on the moral landscape of America. Of the millions printed, fewer than 1,500 copies remain, the earliest having been published in 1727. This relatively low number of surviving texts indicates the constant use the *Primer* received and the impact its principles had on the development of American values. The multiple editions of existing copies serve as a valuable historical record chronicling the changes in colonial and early American philosophy of education.

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See also: Calvinist Schools, Old Deluder Satan Law, Religion and the Curriculum

FURTHER READINGS

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