

# ROBERT BELL, PRINTER

---

Not quite two years since, in the spring of 1906, the writer came across an item relating to Robert Bell, a Quaker city printer of the later Colonial period, whose brilliancy of career was unearthed in detail mainly through a business deal we noted he was to have had with Lancaster's prominent townsman, Edward Snippen; and there is so much of general as well as some local interest attached to Bell's life that it is now and here presented to our Historical Society as a valuable addition to eastern Pennsylvania history.

Some one whose identity has not been revealed states, in the Master Printer, that "Robert Bell's very name is forgotten, and only recalled when one of his publications is found in the auction room or on the second-hand stalls. To the world at large Franklin's name stands alone in representing the Philadelphia printer, while that of Bell is as dead as the world's indifference can make it." We shall endeavor to bring his work back to life.

Bell practically began his publishing career where the famous Franklin left off, and from then on really issued and sold a larger variety if not more books than his philosophic predecessor. The period of his activity ranges from 1768 to 1784. Bell was in Philadelphia prior to the former date, probably as early as 1765. He was a reputed Scotchman, and supposed by one authority to have been a partner of George Alexander Stevens, coming

to Philadelphia in 1766. The correct time of Bell's entrance to that city is unknown, and has been given from 1765 to 1768, the latter date obtaining some preference.

### **Edward Shippen's Early Letter.**

To aid in establishing Bell's advent in America we find Edward Shippen, writing from Lancaster, at Christmas, 1765, desires his correspondent in Philadelphia to seek for "a small octavo entitled 'Instruction for the Education of Daughters,'" and requested that "Mr. Yeates inquire among the gentlemen of St. Andrew's Club for it, either in French or English; if he fails in these searches, I must beg the favor of Mr. Luman or Mr. Bell to send to Scotland for it."

If the foregoing letter alludes to Robert Bell, or another of that surname, one John Bell, "is not a serious matter," says a writer; yet when the former's "importance as a printer and patriot is considered, any facts or data regarding his career are desirable to be known."

Even lately, after most of this paper was written, the Public Ledger answering a correspondent, states that "Bell is said to have been the first to establish a circulating library here (Philadelphia), if not in this country;" and that two library companies were organized in 1765, "both in existence before Bell came to this country. Bell never was a librarian." Be this as it may, we have from another source, prepared a few years ago, that "Bell must have been a very busy man, as he set up a subscription library in addition to his other occupations, waifs from which, bearing the label of its founder, are occasionally found. The wording of this label reveals his originality. Indeed, his origi-

nal vein of wit and genius, as well as his patriotic ardor in behalf of his adopted country, are freely shown in nearly everything he touched, and particularly in his advertisements and prospectuses." His re-publication in 1774 of Blackstone's "Commentaries," of which there are five volume editions, was a stupendous project for a struggling colonial printer, and it is gratifying to discover a big list of subscribers to at least 1,500 copies (some of which reached Lancaster), testifying to its appreciation.

### **Bell Introduces Cheap Editions.**

Quoting a portion of Hildeburn's preface to "Issues of the Press of Pennsylvania," it states that "Robert Bell, with perhaps the exception of Andrew Stewart—who reprinted a number of popular English works—was the first to present in home-made garb a judicious selection from every class of literature current in England . . . . His success in offering cheap editions soon compelled his fellow-printers to enter the same field." This shows that he was far in advance of his time; and this trait he followed in all his advertising methods of book printing, publishing and selling.

Taking as a starting point the year 1768, one of the earliest of Bell's curious advertisements appeared in Franklin's Pennsylvania Gazette, of April 14, thus:

"Any person possessed of libraries or parcels books may have ready Money, according to their Value, by applying to Robert Bell, Bookseller and Auctioneer, at Mr. James Emerson's, the Sugar Loaf, between the River and Front street, in Market street; Or, if the Possessors choose to take the Chance of a public Sale, they may have them exhibited, with a

regular Catalogue, by Auction, at the Uppermost Vendue-House, in Second street, near Vine street, where the intrinsic merit and excellence of each book shall be rationally expiated upon, with Truth and Propriety; also the extrinsic or original Value Properly demonstrated for the satisfaction of Sellers and Buyers."

During 1768 Bell began his buoyant business as a publisher in earnest. In July of that year he uses the Pennsylvania Chronicle to advertise his first publication, "which introduced to the people of this continent the first American edition of two works of those duo immortals and staunch friends, Doctor Samuel Johnson and Oliver Goldsmith: 'The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia, etc.,' and 'The Traveller, or a Prospect of Society, etc.'"

### **Starts a Printing Place.**

Late in 1769, or early in 1770, Bell established a press in the building occupied shortly before by the Union Library, next door to St. Paul's Church, in Third street. He also soon became noted as an auctioneer of books, and on one occasion, February 7, 1774, he put himself on record as a "Professor of Book Auctioneering." His numerous catalogues would astonish our latter-day Lancaster antiquarians, Messrs. Auxer, Steigerwalt and others. In 1770 he issued a catalogue of second-hand Greek and Latin Classics, and on October 25 of that year another catalogue was printed; followed by others in 1773 (announcing fifteen hundred new and old volumes).

In support of a petition to the Assembly to authorize book auctions in Philadelphia, he printed this memorandum, January 17, 1774: "The more

Books are sold, the more will be sold, is an established Truth, well known to every liberal Reader, and to every Bookseller of experience." Bell always made a sale for his books when the demand for them fell short; and he not alone petitioned the General Assembly to aid him in his book auctions, but he journeyed to other States "to make things go."

### **Catalogues Galore.**

His other known catalogues of books bear the dates of 1774, 1777, 1778 (three lists, one being a "Collection of Sentimental Food," and another consisting of 2,000 volumes in Bell's Circulating Library); 1780, 1782, 1783 (2,421 works and 21 maps for sale), and 1784 (the last being several hundred new and old medical works).

Hildeburn gives a joint Lancaster and Philadelphia publication and printing thus: "The Chronicle of the Kings of England from the Reign of William the Conqueror (first King of England) down to his present Majesty, George the Third. By Nathan Ben-Saddi. Lancaster: Stewart Herbert, jun., 1775. Philadelphia: Robert Bell and Benjamin Towne, 1775." Who of our local historians knows anything of this Lancaster publisher?

### **Prints Many Patriotic Pamphlets.**

Robert Bell printed many pamphlets and books prior to and during the Revolution, in which his patriotic sentiments are glowingly set forth. No printer in America could have done more; he was indefatigable. He was especially busy in 1776, when he printed a series of letters to the Legislature on "American Independence." A second edition of "Plain Truth" was partly printed on coarse blue paper,

which, as Bell stated, "constituted the law of necessity," and he added, further, "The Patriot surmounteth every difficulty," etc.

"Common Sense," by Thomas Paine, printed in several editions by Bell, became known the world over, and consumed much paper. One of these editions was also printed by Francis Bailey, in King's Street, Lancaster, during the same year. Bell himself placed "Large Additions to Common Sense," thus keeping his printing establishment fully occupied.

The first American editions of Thomson's "Seasons" and of Milton's "Paradise Lost" were both issued by our subject in 1777. A large number of classics were introduced from Europe by Bell, printed at his own press, including "Aesop's Fables," "Robinson Crusoe," the "Letters of Lord Chæsterfield," Voltaire's "Romances," Sheridan's "School for Scandal," and others.

### **His Numerous Publications.**

We have personally copied fully 150 distinct titles of books and pamphlets printed by Bell, and they embrace every subject imaginable. from religion to liberalism, medicine to mystery, science to sentiment, politics to pleasure; and, were it no digression on this occasion, many of these titles would be edifying to present-day book-lovers. His penchant for publicity is shown in a pert pamphlet printed by him in 1778 on "The humble confession, declaration, recantation and apology of Benjamin Towne, Printer, in Philadelphia."

Among the "upper ten" in Lancaster, after the Revolution, representing what might be termed the "four hundred," there were some fastidious book-buyers, and these no doubt ob-

tained their quota' of Bell's imprints, as Philadelphia was a point of constant change and barter for the well-to-do. Bell kept in touch with these desirable people in all the nearby towns of Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

### **Contemporary Philadelphia and Lancaster Printers.**

During Bell's time, or a decade before, to about 1785, there were a host of other printers in Philadelphia, some of whom achieved more general fame than he did. The list includes: B. Franklin, David Hall, B. Towne, James Chattin, Anthony Arbruster, Christopher Sauer (spelled three ways), Henry Miller, John Dunlap, Styner & Cist, Jos. Crukshank, Rob't. Aitkin, Francis Bailey, James Humphreys, Jr., David C. Claypole and Thos. Bradford.

In the town of Lancaster, with a population of about 2,000 at the same time, we find almost as many printers who were particularly interested in producing German books, pamphlets and newspapers: James Chalten, 1751; Henry Miller, 1752; S. Holland, 1753; Francis Bailey, 1774-84; Matthias Bartgis, 1776-77; Theophilus Cossart, 1778-82; Jacob Bailey, 1784; and others a few years later. F. R. Diffenderffer, Litt. D., particularizes on these industrious individuals in his prolific paper published in our society's pamphlet, January 1, 1904.

### **Bell's Demise in the South.**

Robert Bell's last days saw him leave Pennsylvania almost with as little ceremony and record of the circumstances as when he first arrived in Philadelphia from Scotland. One chronicler tells us that "he continued to the end his auctions, his printing

and bookselling. In 1784 he visited Richmond upon business and died there September 23." The Ledger, under recent date, says "Bell went South on a business trip, not to peddle his books, as one writer notes, but to sell his books to booksellers in other towns. In some of the larger towns, such as in the city of Charlestown, Bell at times would auction off parts of his stock, but he was in no sense a peddler. While on this trip he fell ill at Richmond, Va., and died there on September 16, 1784."

One or the other of these dates of Bell's demise is surely wrong, like some other bits of unverified information regarding his vending of books, etc. We should also state that, out of the correspondence carried on by the writer at intervals for over twenty months, it has been impossible to locate the final resting-place of one of the most persevering and patriotic book printers ever having dwelt in the shade of "Penn's woods." All honor to his pristine public service!



Author: Landis, David Bachman, 1862-

Title: Robert Bell, printer / by D. B. Landis.

Primary Material: Book

Subject(s): Bell, Robert, 1732?-1784.  
Printers--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.  
Philadelphia (Pa.)--History--Colonial period, ca.  
1600-1775.

Publisher: Lancaster, Pa. : Lancaster County Historical Society, 1908

Description: [195]-202 p. ; 23 cm.

Series: Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society ; v. 12,  
no. 5

Call Number: 974.9 L245 v.12

Location: LCHSJL -- Journal Article (reading room)

+++++

Institution Name  
Institution Address  
Institution Phone Number  
Institution E-mail Address