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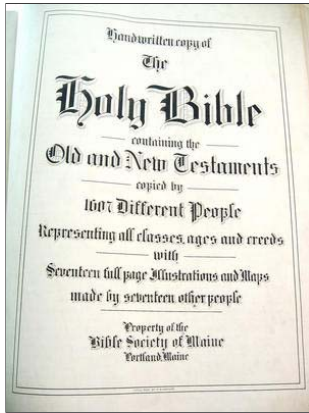
Portland Press Herald Maine Sunday Telegram

COLUMN

Big Handwritten Bible: a window into Maine's soul

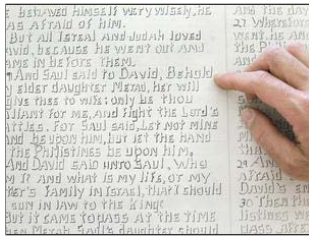
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Courtesy photo

An introductory page in the Big Handwritten Bible says it was copied by people "representing all classes, ages and creeds."



Courtesy photo

One page of the Big Handwritten Bible bears block letters used by one of the 1,607 Mainers who copied the Bible, starting in 1923. Other pages are written in cursive.

Some would say in these economically hellish times that Sally Trice doesn't have a prayer. As administrator of the 200-year-old Bible Society of Maine, she's trying to raise \$7,000 to restore a single Bible?

That she is. But be assured we're not talking about just any Bible.

"I see it as a historic document – and not just for the Bible Society of Maine," Trice said Friday. "This is a document for all of the people of Maine."

It's called, quite accurately, the Big Handwritten Bible. It awaits restoration at the Northeast Document Conservation Center in North Andover, Mass. – in time, it is hoped, for the Bible society's bicentennial commemoration this August.

But we get ahead of ourselves.

It was March 1923. The Bible society's then-superintendent, Edmund Garland, was looking for a way to advance the group's nondenominational mission – putting the Bible in people's hands, then their heads and finally their hearts – when inspiration struck.

Garland's vision: the largest Bible ever to be written, start to finish, by hand. And not just by one hand, mind you, but by a different hand for every page.

For two months, society volunteers dissected the printed King James Bible into individual pages – each 55 lines long. Then they carefully ruled 22- by 28-inch ledger sheets with 55 lines each.

Finally, that May, society members fanned out across the state in search of citizens willing to have a hand in the massive undertaking.

"It was desired that every type of citizenship be represented," says a pamphlet written about the project at the time. And indeed, that's exactly what happened.

One page was written by then-Gov. Percival P. Baxter. Another was written by a man serving a life sentence at the Maine State Prison in Thomaston.

One woman was 91 when she did her page. At the same time, a 6-year-old boy was hard at work on his.

A millionaire completed a page, as did an insolvent debtor. A college president's careful script contrasted with the labor of "a mature man whose school life comprised only a few weeks."

The Book of Ruth was transcribed entirely by girls named Ruth.

Catholics (Roman and Greek), Protestants and Jews took part. Fountain pens met parchment from Kittery in the south to Fort Kent in the north, from Lubec in the east to Magalloway Plantation in the west. Foreign students from Europe, China, Japan, India and Latin America who were attending Maine schools and colleges also joined in.

The last of the handwritten pages, along with detailed illustrations produced by volunteer artists, came back to the society in July 1924, 13 months after the project began. The finished work, bound inside a thick, cowhide cover, weighed 88 pounds.

"I can't imagine the logistics of distributing all of these ledger sheets, plus the pages from the Bible, and then collecting them all, collating them in order and then having them bound," Trice said. "If somebody suggested we do that now, even with what we have in the way of communication and everything, I would find it daunting."

The Big Handwritten Bible had been on display for all to see – and even touch – until last year, when the society moved its Portland headquarters from the Glenwood Square Baptist Church on Brighton Avenue to a second-floor walk-up at 519 Congress St.

Decades of page-turning by visitors had taken their toll on the Bible, Trice said, so the society decided to

send it to Massachusetts for a complete – and alas, costly – restoration. It remains there, awaiting funding.

"The sheets are still in pretty good shape," Trice said. "But the binding and leather cover are in bad shape, really deteriorating. We want it to be accessible, but in its current state, that just can't happen. It's too fragile."

The society, which subsists on donations and a small endowment, applied unsuccessfully for grants to pay for the work. Now, with its 200th birthday celebration fast approaching, Trice said a public appeal for help is the only option.

People with PayPal accounts may make a donation by going to the society's Web site: www.biblesocietyofmaine.org. Others may mail a check to Bible Society of Maine, 519 Congress St., Suite 2A, Portland, ME 04101.

The society does, of course, have plenty of other Bibles.

Last year alone, it sent them to 22 ministries, ranging from the Cumberland County Jail to the Royal Priesthood motorcycle mission in Waterville.

And its small Congress Street library includes Bibles at very affordable prices in 56 languages, including Navajo and Cherokee. You can even find a "green" Bible (all passages about stewardship of the Earth are highlighted in green) and a "poverty and justice" Bible (highlighted verses deal with the poor and persecuted).

But the way Trice sees it, the Big Handwritten Bible is Scripture at its finest. And the list of 1,607 names that goes with it – well, that's a window into Maine's very soul.

"People might look at the list and say, 'That was my grandmother' or 'That was my great-uncle,'" Trice said. "It was designed to bring attention to the Bible – and that's what we want to continue to do."

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