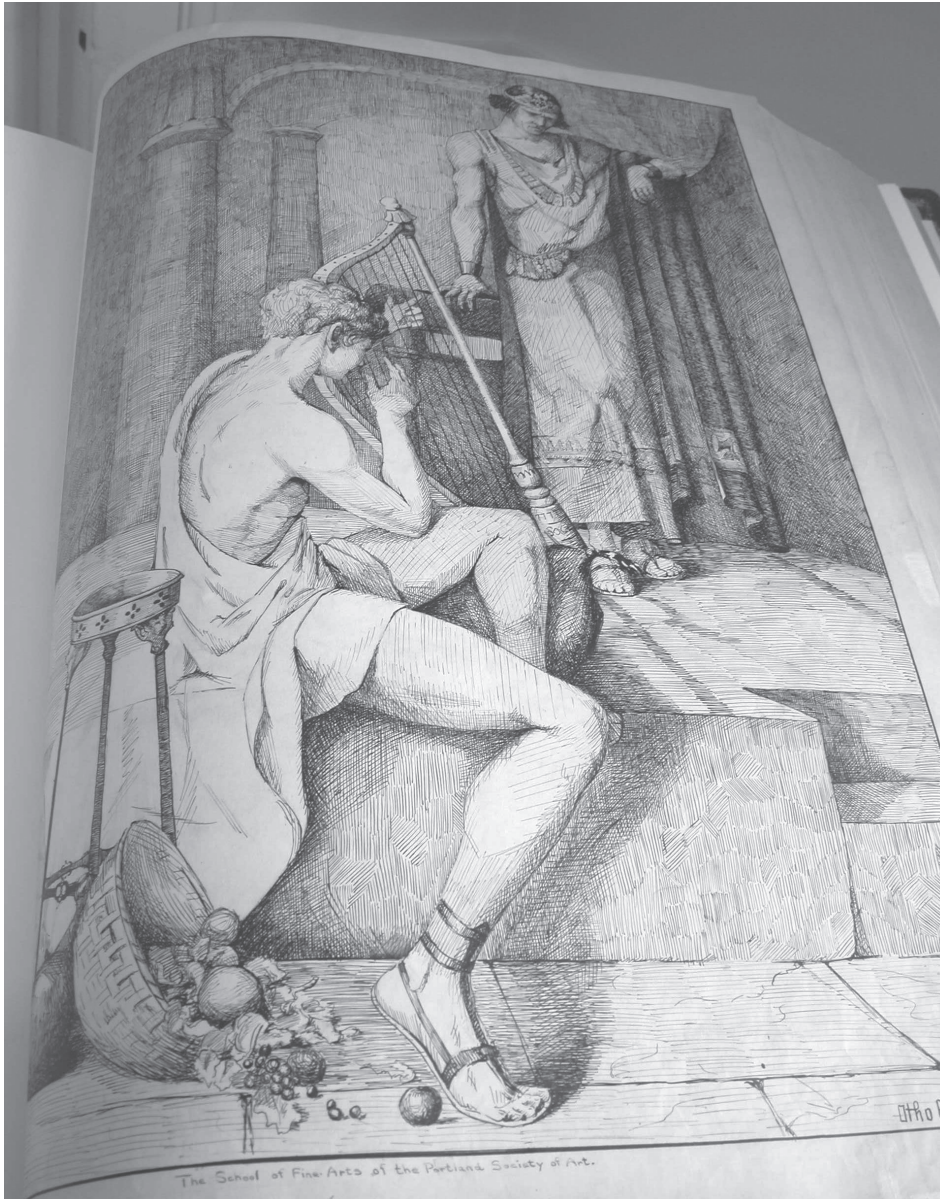


THE BIG HANDWRITTEN BIBLE

By *Bonnie Smith*

PHOTOS BY HEATHER BRANCH



This page was created at The School of Fine Art of The Portland Society of Art

The words of the Bible are read daily by millions of people around the world and bring comfort to believers during times of great joy and times of great sorrow. In the pages of the Bible rest the words that govern Judaism and Christianity and it is

through these words that become familiar in their message as well as their familiarity, that Jews and Christians explore and practice their faith. With over 3 billion copies in circulation, the Bible is the most read book in the world.

While many people read the Bible in varying stages and others read it cover to cover, it is not necessarily the order in which the words are read that is important, but the value and comfort they bring to the reader and believer. It is this comfort, this delivery of the word that the Bible Society of Maine has dedicated itself to since 1809 - "to place the Word of God into the hands, minds, and hearts of those in our State and beyond".

The Bible Society of Maine's Executive Director, Reverend Jim Duran further explains the Society's mission, "The heartbeat of this ministry is to make available the written Word of God to all who desire to read it. We are devoted to spreading the good news of Jesus Christ to a world hungry for hope." This is accomplished through the provision of Bibles "in a language and format that each can understand and a price that each can afford." It is through the contribution of money, time and effort from churches and individuals that this work has been able to continue for more than two hundred years.

In 1923, then Executive Director Edmund Garland, in an effort to further the mission of the Bible Society, initiated a project that would not only help spread the word of the Bible but include the people of Maine in the process. His mission was to create the largest Bible ever written by hand, or more accurately, hands. More precisely, Maine hands.

Given today's effortless means of communication and transfer of information it would be easy to overlook the realities of the Maine of 1923. Communication with rural areas was difficult. For one piece of mail to travel from one end of the state to the other took weeks and the effort necessary to initiate, organize and maintain the integrity of this process was enormous.

Obviously Director Garland was not intimidated by any of these barriers and over the next



"Where you go, I will go" said Ruth to Naomi. The Book of Ruth was transcribed entirely by girls named Ruth.

several months a team of volunteers undertook the arduous task of dividing the Bible into even sections. Reverend Duran explains the process, "Volunteers sliced individual pages, each 55 lines long, from a King James Bible. Subsequently they ruled 22 by 28 inch ledger sheets with 55 lines each."

Hand writing the Bible was only part of the plan. The other part was that the handwriting was that of the citizens of Maine. "The goal was to have individuals from every strata of society lend their hands to this work and teams of volunteers traveled across the state looking for citizens willing to have a hand in this amazing project." In the end, more than 1,600 individuals

transcribed the King James Version.

In a 2009 Maine Sunday Telegram article, the writers were identified as follows, "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 wrote her page. At the same time, a 6-year-old boy was hard at work on

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Reverend Jim Duran stands next to the Big Handwritten Bible



The heart-beat of this ministry is to make available the written Word of God to all who desire to read it.

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."

In July of 1924, a mere 13 months after the beginning of the project, the last of the handwritten pages was returned to the Bible Society. The finished collection of writings, some in block letters others in elegant

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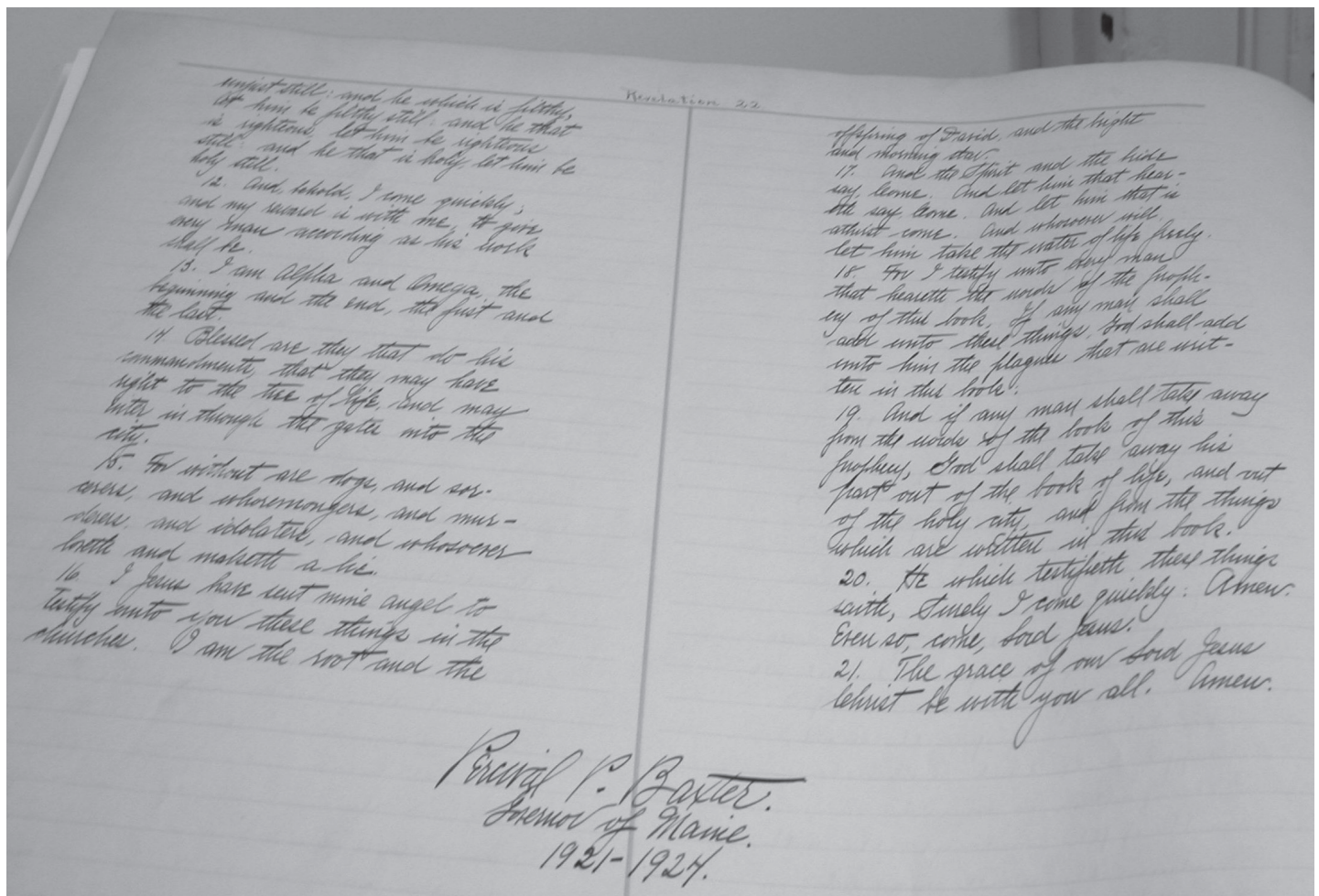
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Governor Percival Baxter's handwritten page

cursive script were combined with full page original illustrations and bound in a thick cowhide leather. The Big Handwritten Bible weighed in at a remarkable 88 pounds.

Through the years the Big Handwritten Bible has been on display and thousands have viewed, read and touched the pages. While the pages have held up under this exposure, the cowhide cover did not fare as well and a project was undertaken to restore the Bible to its former beauty.

While the Bible Society of Maine is home to the Big Handwritten Bible, it is certainly not the only Bible they have. They distribute Bibles to ministries across the state and have Bibles written in 56 languages.

Reverend Duran is fast to note that the attraction of the Big Handwritten Bible is its history, but there is a lot more to the story. "The Bible establishes its authority in a multitude of verses. Here is one of my favorites: All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. 2 Tim. 3:16-17."

In closing, Reverend Duran again reiterates that it is not the fact that the 1923 project was completed, but the meaning behind the words on each page. "As impressive as the 1923 project was and the incredible logistical challenges it overcame,

what is most important are the truths contained in the Bible. We appreciate those who participated in making this Handwritten Bible a reality - it has been a blessing to people who have visited to see it. Above all, we want to give honor and praise to the Divine Author of all scripture who has revealed Himself and His Son through the pages of the Bible."

The Bible Society of Maine, located at 519 Congress Street, Suite 2A in Portland, welcomes visitors of all faiths. Their website can be viewed at www.biblesocietyofmaine.org.

