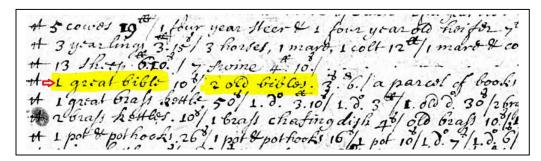


## Going In-Depth: The Bell Family Bible By Dawn L. Roe

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Pictured left: Roe is a NYS Registered Historian and a descendant of Lieut. Francis Bell. The Bell family bible is the oldest scripture she's had the pleasure to explore; she dates its publication from about 1599 to 1644. The last bible Roe researched belonged to President Abraham Lincoln.

The Bell family elders would be delighted to learn that their bible has survived more than three and a half centuries. It was a thrill to hold the relic during our recent visit at the Stamford History Center with my sisters. The book has received many published accolades over the years but little has been documented about its origins. We know that descendants within the line of Jonathan Bell passed the devotional book down for several generations before it found its home at the museum. The inscriptions were made by Benjamin Bell, son of Jonathan and grandson of Francis. The 1897 publication of the New York and Genealogical Record featured the Bell family history by John V. Hecker, which claimed that Benjamin received the bible from his father Jonathan who in turn received it from Francis who carried the bible from England in 1630.



Partial inventory list from the estate papers of Jonathan Bell (1641-1699) courtesy of Ancestry.com. CT, Wills and Probate Records, 1609-1999 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com from Probate Files Collection, Early to 1880;Author: CT State Library (Hartford, Connecticut); Probate Place: Hartford, Connecticut

The above inventory list illustrates that Jonathan did indeed own several bibles; he had one Great Bible and two old ones. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude one of them could have belonged to his father but is the Bell bible old enough to have come from England on the 1630 voyage? That answer proved to be very complex.

The Bell family bible is what is known as the Geneva Bible, named after Geneva, Switzerland the location where Protestant reformers fled during the reign of Queen (Bloody) Mary to compose the bible in English. It is also known as the "Breeches Bible" due to a verse contained therein that describes the clothing of Adam and Eve as breeches, a word later known as britches. The Geneva bible is historically significant because it is the first bible to contain numbered verses to its chapters and is credited as the first English "study" bible. It is said to have been the bible of choice among Puritans and Pilgrims.

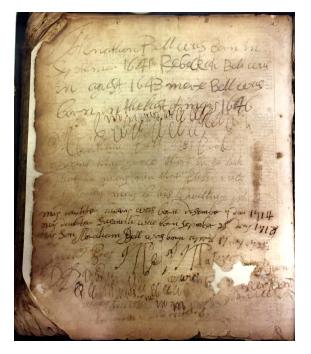
On the right is a page from the Bell bible; it is the title page to the second division of the Old Testament. I was able to find an exact match listed with an auction house in London, England. The auctioneer shared their copies main title page, confirming the Bell bible was a product of the Barker dynasty of printers in England. Which Barker printed it depends on the date of publication. The London Library advised that they believe the deputies of Christopher Barker, printer to Queen Elizabeth I, printed this page for the first time about 1599 by searching several older Geneva bibles in their collection.

The deputies (George Bishop and Ralph Newbery) carried out the labor towards the end of Christopher's life but their work retained the Barker name because Barker held the patent. After Christopher's death in 1599, the patent was transferred to his son Robert for the remainder of his life. Robert continued as a Royal printer. (Robert also printed the first edition of the King James in 1611)



What makes dating the Bell bible so complicated is the fact that the 1599 Old Testament was often paired with newer versions of the New Testament. This combination was found in 1608 as well as 1640, both containing the identical page as the Bell bible. With conflicts that resulted from the release of the King James Bible in 1611 (desire to remove the marginal notes contained in the Geneva), several websites suggest the Robert Barker bibles of the 1630's and 1640's may have been printed in the Netherlands from Amsterdam and Dort, yet retained the England cover pages. There are also many references to the Geneva being smuggled back into England. The Geneva bible issued its final release in 1644 when it ceased publication. Its popularity existed during a turbulent time in the history of English printed scripture.

Hundreds of editions of the Geneva were published, each with verse variations and some having Old and New Testaments from different years. We know from Jonathan's estate inventory the family did have a "Great" bible, which is even older than the Geneva. What became of these additional bibles is unknown. If the Bell bible dates within these later releases (1630 to 1644), then its origins are not as depicted by other descendants over the years. However, if it falls before 1630, then that fits the timeline of Francis's arrival to the colonial colony. In conclusion, the only way to properly date the Bell bible would be to re-examine other pages. However, to remove the bible from its case may cause additional damage to what is already very fragile.



Left: Family history preserved inside the Bell Family Bible at the Stamford History Center. It contains the birth record of Jonathan Bell, the first child born at Stamford plus the births of his siblings Rebecca and Mare or Mary Bell. Mary is the ancestor of Dawn Roe, author of this article.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide new insight to an artifact to which my family is personally connected.

Our visit to the Stamford History Center and the Hoyt-Barnum House was warm, welcoming and memorable.

Dawn