



Going In-Depth: The Bell Family Bible

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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.

5 cows 19th / 1 four year steer & 1 four year old heifer 7th
 # 3 yearlings 3/15 / 3 horses, 1 mare, 1 colt 12th / 1 mare & co
 # 13 sh. ap. 6/10 / 7 swine 4/10 /
 # 1 great bible 10/1 / 2 old bibles 3/6 / a parcel of books
 # 1 great brass kettle 5/0 / 1 d. 3/10 / 1 d. 3/4 / 1 d. 3/0 / 2 brass
 # 2 brass kettles 10/1 / 1 brass chafing dish 4/1 / 1 old brass 10/12
 # 1 pot & pot hooks 26/1 / 1 pot & pot hooks 16/1 / 1 pot 10/1 / 1 d. 7/1 / 1 d. 6/1

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.

