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The New-England Primer

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The New-England Primer

Abstract

The New-England Primer was one of the first textbooks used in U.S. public schools. It cost two to four pence and was commonly found in colonial households. The first U.S. edition was most likely printed by Benjamin Harris of Boston before 1687, and it was reprinted consistently for the next 150 years. Although its authorship is unknown and its contents occasionally changed across editions, The New-England Primer always contained core elements used to teach literacy and Christian morals, explicitly embedding Protestant Christianity in the curriculum. The earliest existing version in print is the 1727 edition; others have been lost to time.

Disciplines

Christianity | Curriculum and Instruction | Curriculum and Social Inquiry | Education

Comments

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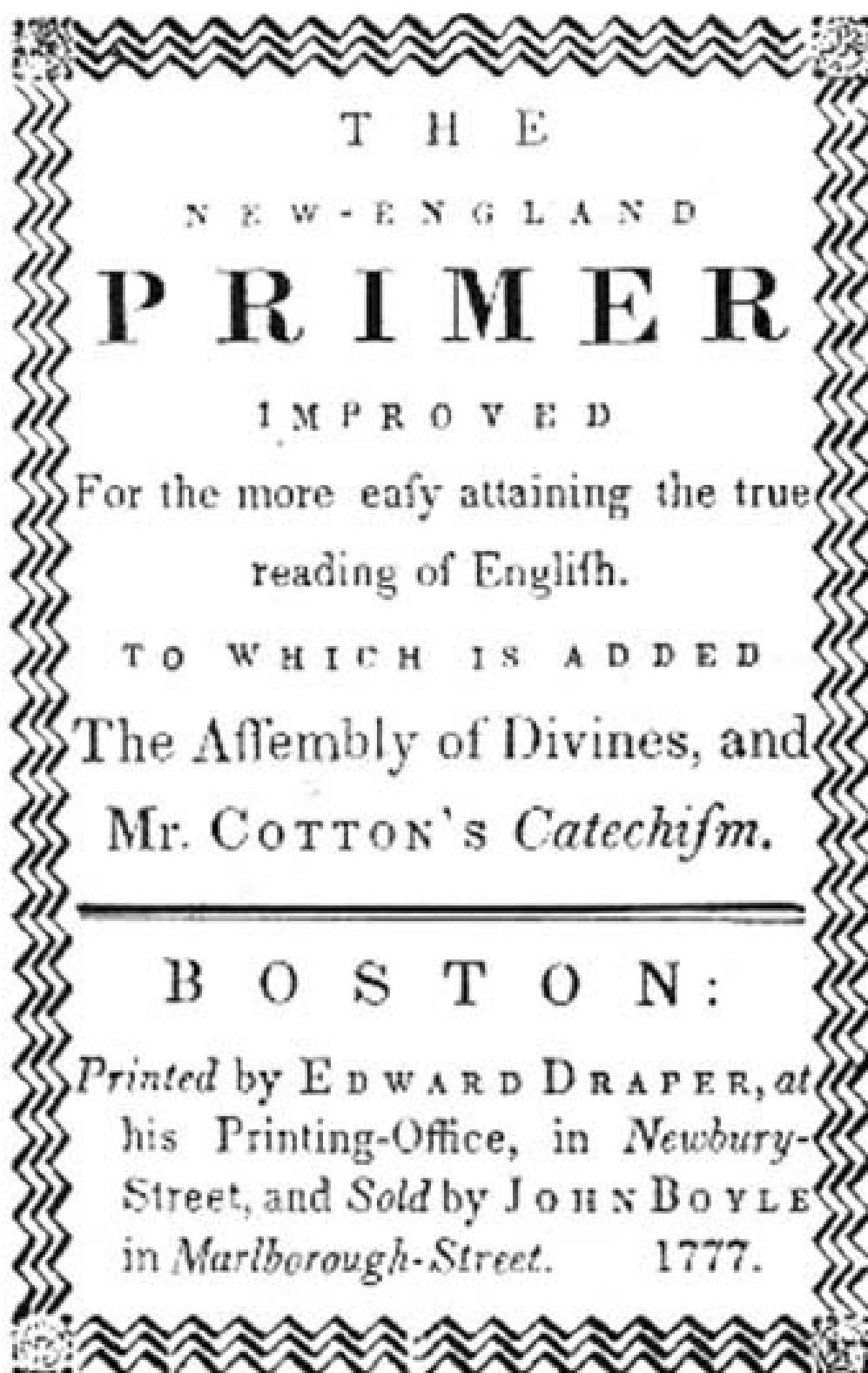
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The New-England Primer was one of the first textbooks used in U.S. public schools. It cost two to four pence and was commonly found in colonial households. The first U.S. edition was most likely printed by Benjamin Harris of Boston before 1687, and it was reprinted consistently for the next 150 years. Although its authorship is unknown and its contents occasionally changed across editions, *The New-England Primer* always contained core elements used to teach literacy and Christian morals, explicitly embedding Protestant Christianity in the curriculum. The earliest existing version in print is the 1727 edition; others have been lost to time.

History and Context

The first primers were called “primary manuals” and contained prayers for Christian church services. As England became more Protestant than Catholic and as Puritans separated from the Church of England in the 16th century, Puritans began printing their own primers, which also contained alphabets and catechisms intended for religious instruction. Shortly after Puritan Christians of New England founded public schools in 1647 with the explicit intention of promoting both literacy and scriptural knowledge, *The New-England Primer* began its long dominance in colonial schooling. Although some printers changed the title to appeal to local customers—such as the *New York Primer*—*The New-England Primer* remained the best-selling and most popular edition.

The title page of a 1777 edition of *The New-England Primer*. Earlier editions of the primer have not survived.



Source: The New-England Primer (1777). Boston: Edward Draper.

Content and Pedagogy

All *New-England Primers* contained an alphabet and lines denoting the vowels and the consonants. Following the alphabet was a section of combinations of letters known as a

“syllabarium,” which increased from syllable combinations (ab, ac, ad) to one-syllable words (are, air, add) to four- and sometimes six-syllable words. The 1727 edition includes up to five syllables (admiration, beneficial). After the syllabarium was a series of woodcut illustrations of each alphabet letter and an accompanying rhyme (A: In *Adam's Fall* / We sinned all; B: Thy Life to Mend / This *Book* Attend). There was also an “Alphabet of Lessons for Youth,” which were moral teachings with each alphabet letter starting a new paragraph (“A wise son makes a glad Father, but a foolish Son is the heaviness of his Mother”). Sometimes other prayers and lessons intervened, as well as lists of numbers, the Ten Commandments, and the books of the Bible. The *Primer* always contained the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, a poem about martyrdom attributed to John Rogers, and Puritan catechisms such as the Westminster Short Catechism (Question: What is the chief end of man? Answer: Men's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever).

Words of five and six syllables in a syllabarium from *The New-England Primer*

<i>Words of five Syllables.</i>	
Ad-mi-ra-ti-on	Admiration
Be-ne-fi-cial	Beneficial
Con-fo-la-ti-on	Consolation
De-cla-ra-ti-on	Declaration
Ex-hor-ta-ti-on	Exhortation
For-ni-ca-ti-on	Fornication
Ge-ne-ra-ti-on	Generation
Ha-bit-a-ti-on	Habitation
In-vi-ta-ti-on	Invitation

Source: *The New-England Primer* (1777). Boston: Edward Draper.

Students were expected to memorize and be able to recite the contents of the *Primer*. E. Jennifer Monaghan has noted that *The New-England Primer* was intended to be more theological than pedagogical, and that starting in the 1730s it was more common to teach reading and writing with the spelling book. Historian Joel Spring has also noted that the *Primer's* content emphasized submission to authority, which may have helped reinforce distinctions of social class.

Illustrations of alphabet letters from *The New-England Primer*



Source: *The New-England Primer* (1777). Boston: Edward Draper.

- The New England Primer
- New England Primer
- New England
- alphabets
- syllables
- catechisms

- Puritans

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- [Religion, Culture, and Education in the United States](#)
- [Religion, Curriculum Issues](#)
- [Religion, the Courts, and Public Schools](#)
- [Religious Orientation and Diversity](#)
- [Religious Pluralism](#)

Further Readings

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