

BETWEEN STIFF OAK COVERS A STUDY
of
THE NEW ENGLAND PRIMER

AN ABSTRACT OF
A THESIS
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MASTER OF SCIENCE

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The New England Primer had its origin in the early English primers of the sixteenth century. Certain features remained through the many editions that were printed during the following two centuries. Included in each edition was an alphabet, a syllabarium, a series of didactic sentences extracted from the Bible, the Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed, a Rhymed Alphabet with accompanying crude pictures, the poem of the martyred John Rogers, the Catechism, and a poem called "A Dialogue between Christ, Youth and the Devil."

Changes appeared as the various editions were printed. Some were expedient eliminations or modifications to suit a printer's convenience. Political vicissitudes made necessary several adaptations to fit the current situation.

The agent responsible for the introduction of the Primer in America was Benjamin Harris, a London printer with a pronounced aversion to the Catholic Church and firm inclination to publish his views. His rashness caused several conflicts with the authorities in England and resulted in his expatriation. In New England publication of the Protestant Tutor, a work printed previously in England, met with great success.

Alterations of the American edition included a reduction of the bulk of the Tutor, an intensification of its school-book character, and substitution of the title the New England Primer.

The ready acceptance of the New England Primer by the colonists must be viewed in terms of the society which they comprised. Theirs was a stratified group isolated physically from Europe, dedicated to doing God's will and obliged to devote itself to the conquest and development of the American wilderness. Personal contact with the great minds of the old world was difficult to effect, as was communication in America.

Class distinctions from England were maintained and new ones, related to the new settlement, arose. Despite the demarcation, there was mobility, enabling men to improve their economic situation.

The form of the New England town, with the church as the dominant feature of the central green, led to a pattern of church leadership in other aspects of village life. Educational opportunities were enlivened by the standards set by church and town.

Calvinism, harsh and punitive, was the dominant belief and the colonists lived within its rigid frame. There was strict adherence to its doctrine in the selection of teachers and books and powerful influence of the church in regulating the life of the teacher in the community. Church and state were closely allied in the establishment and maintenance of schools. Religious instruction was accented.

The New England school was kept by a variety of types of teachers, including the Dame School teacher and the male teacher with his dual role of instructor in the winter and farmer in the summer.

District schools, though of lower quality than those of the towns, were useful in affording some education to the children of the frontier. But lack of money and the inability of the people to attach dignity and importance to the profession made teaching undesirable as a calling. Low standards led to ill-prepared teachers who were able to cope with the Primer because of its simplicity. The Primer and the horn-book supplied the need for unsophisticated textbooks.

The eagerness of the Puritans in providing their children with education came from a desire to assure the perpetuation of the ideals of their society. To this end discipline was made severe and the Puritan child was constantly reminded of his guilt and of the urgency to prepare for the Day of Judgment. The New England Primer was a suitable instrument to prod his conscience.

The Puritan writer was handicapped in the expression of his ideas by the limitations imposed by his theology. As he was unable to employ appeals to the senses, he resorted to a simple, realistic, selective approach. Austerity is found in the style of the New England Primer.

Opposing images of the Puritans present them on the one hand as a group of the finest beings, sent by God to the wilderness. On the other hand, they are seen as a multitude of lawless, depraved fanatics.

Deficient as it seems by today's standards, the Primer constituted a basic curriculum for the colonial child. Educational opportunities were limited by the pressure of the

economy. Formal learning had a short season. In the Primer the need was answered. The single function of the Primer was to teach the child to read so that he might be able to read the Bible. This was accomplished.