

The Dr. Gene Scott Bible Collection

STATION 42:

THE ENGLISH BIBLE IN AMERICA:

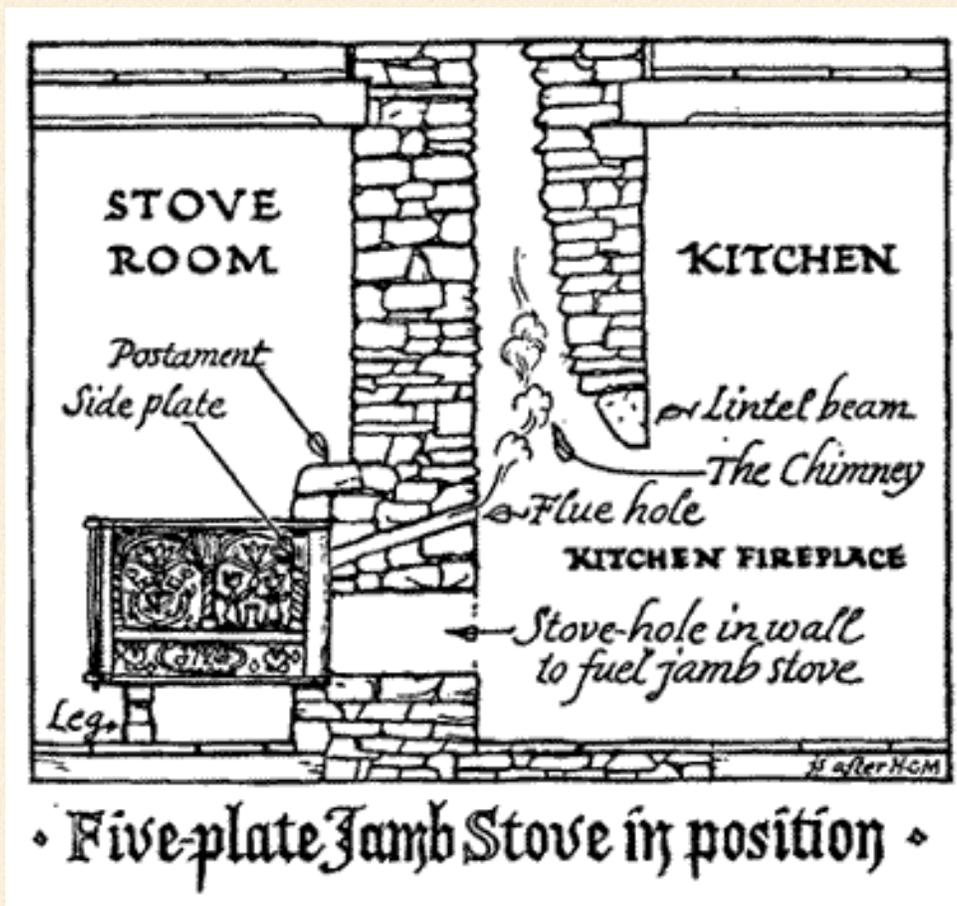
"THE BIBLE IN IRON"

Among the most neglected artifacts of America's heritage, unknown or unrecognized until scholars became interested in them at the end of the 19th Century, were the rectangular cast iron panels shown here. They originally were fitted together, five or six at a time, to form cast iron stoves, used to heat houses. Their purpose and use were eventually forgotten, and the plates were sold as scrap or recycled to other uses. Very few have survived, most of these in museums or various historical societies.

In 18th Century Pennsylvania (and occasionally in neighboring Colonies), the iron stoves used for heating the houses of the more prosperous farmers and merchants of Germanic or Dutch origin reflected a European tradition of bedrock piety that dictated that the hearth reflect the sacred traditions of their faith. What more suitable subject than scenes from the Bible, often accompanied by abbreviated verses of favorite Psalms?

Though other subjects (historical, allegorical classical, or just plain decorative) were also used, many of the surviving examples (as demonstrated here) portray Biblical scenes. The oldest plates were imported from Europe; the first American iron foundry dates from the 1720s. The era of decorated stove plates lasted until about the time of the American Revolution. This art, intended primarily for America's Germanic settlers, paralleled the early editions of the Bible in German printed by the Saur family of Philadelphia (shown at [Station 53](#)).

The method of making these plates was simple: into a form containing moist sand, a wooden mold of the design was stamped, leaving a negative impression in the sand. Then molten iron was poured in, taking its shape from the sand. If the cast was unsatisfactory, no problem; the iron was simply re-melted and the casting process repeated. When the complete set of plates were produced, they could be fitted together to form the top and sides of a stove which was either set against a wall (five-plate stove) or free-standing (six-plate stove). Similar cast iron panels could be used to line the back of an open fireplace.



Cooking was done over open hearths; these stoves were intended only for the heating of houses, with the five-plate stoves open at the back to receive logs or embers from the open hearth on the other side of the wall. Their demise was due in large part to the discovery of ample supplies of American coal, and the ability of the foundries to make stovepipe, leading to very different stoves and furnaces. Thus, by the turn of the 19th Century, the need for these plates was already dying out, and it is a miracle that the examples shown here (and the approximately 200 others known throughout the collections and museums in America) survived at all!

As "The Bible in Iron," these plates reflect another means by which the people could have with them the inspiration from and reflection on the essence of God's Word in their everyday lives. As such, they evoke the "picture Bibles" of earlier centuries ([see Station 37](#)) and testify to the importance of God's Word to the people of those rugged days.

From the "PREFACE" to the Handbook "THE BIBLE IN IRON" by Henry Mercer

German colonists of eighteenth century Pennsylvania brought with them stoves of five rectangular cast-iron plates bolted together to form a box. This box was set from 13

to 15 inches from the floor, its front on a stone or pottery support, its open, flanged back rested on a postament, the flanged edges mortared into the stone house wall. From the stove two holes, one above the other, passed through the wall, to the fireplace of the adjoining room. The larger, flush at the bottom with the base-plate, was the stoke-hole; the upper, and smaller hole, slanted upward, vented the smoke into the chimney.

The front and side plates of these stoves were decorated in low relief, usually with Biblical pictures and texts or with religious symbols, a characteristic which suggested the title of this book (*and of this display*).

American production of five-plate stoves covered a span of probably less than fifty years (c. 1726-c. 1773.) - the six-plate or Holland stove even less, the first having been cast here c. 1760. The importance of both of these was diminished by the introduction in 1764 of the ten-plate stove with its interior oven, the first cook-stove in America.

The Bible in Iron had its beginning in a leaflet by Henry C. Mercer - *The Decorated Stove Plates of Durham*, Contributions to American History by The Bucks County Historical Society, No. 3. (Doylestown, Pa. c. 1897). Five plates were described. There were no illustrations. This was followed in 1899 by a twenty-six page pamphlet - *The Decorated Stove Plates of the Pennsylvania Germans*, number six of the same series. In it were pictured twenty-three plates and fragments.

Fifteen years later, in 1914, as a result of long study of the now large and growing collection, the pioneering book on the subject, *The Bible in Iron*, was published. It was card-board bound, 174 pages, illustrated by 240 half-tone engravings beneath each of which was a lecture-like commentary. Dr. Mercer gave the greater part of the edition to the Society, the proceeds from the sale being added to the Fackenthal Publication Fund.

*The book shown here
is the third revision
of the 1914 book.*



FROM "THE BIBLE IN IRON"

A large number of remarkable castings in iron have been found in Eastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York and Virginia. They are heavy, flat rectangular plates, about two feet square, covered with patterns in very low relief, consisting of tulips, flowerpots, sheaves of wheat, stars, medallions and pictorial designs, showing human figures, often enclosed in architectural canopies. Many of them are dated in the later years of the 18th century, and nearly all show inscriptions set in panels or cartouches.

Discovered among the rubbish of old farms, as makeshift chimney tops, stepping stones or gutter lids, buried under soot and ashes, as hearth pavements for still existing fireplaces where apple butter is cooked, soap boiled, or hams smoked, or rescued at the last moment from the scrap-heap of the junk dealer, they at once arrest the attention, as perhaps the most interesting and instructive of any of the relics of colonial times which have survived.

Some of them were found to have been used in old houses, probably from the end of the 18th century, as firebacks; that is, plates of iron set in the wall of an open hearth, back of the fire but notwithstanding the fact that a number of their present owners continue to call them firebacks, they were not made to be so used. The plates were found to fit together in grooves, five or six at a time, so as to form rectangular or box-shaped stoves, which could be reconstructed from the loose plates and the purpose and construction of which was entirely unlike that of a fireback.

American histories had overlooked them. Franklin in his *Fireplace* pamphlet of 1744, followed by *Chamber's Encyclopedia* of 1788, Watson's *Annals of Philadelphia*, Vol. 2, page 34; Bishop's *History of American Manufacturers*, Vol. 1, page 182, and J. M. Swank, in *Iron and Coal in Pennsylvania*, page 19, though noting the plates as parts of so-called "German" or "Jamb stoves" or "Holland stoves," had not referred to their decoration.

Popular tradition had forgotten them, and when J. H. Martin in his *Historical Sketch of Bethlehem* (Phila. J. L. Pile 1872, page 135), described the designs of six of them at the Young Men's Missionary Society in Bethlehem, and when later in 1897 the writer tried to describe some of them in *Decorated Stove Plates of the Pennsylvania Germans*, there seemed to be no general information on the subject.

Their inscriptions were so rusted, abbreviated or illegible, that for a while it was not learned that the language on them all was German, that the stoves represented by the plates were the first cast-iron house-warming stoves ever used in America, and that the latter were not invented here, but that a whole series of stoves, of the same kind and make, had flourished in Europe, long before the building of American furnaces, or the making of American stoves was thought of.

Scattered over Northern Europe, where the subject has not yet been fully explained or understood, in Germany, Flanders, Holland and Scandinavia, the castings, which have recently come into the possession of museums, show at once that they are the counterparts and immediate predecessors of the American plates. Like the latter, they illustrate scenes from the Bible, and are covered with inscriptions, but at first sight, though of generally similar character, many of them appear much older than the American plates...Many are dated and become more ornate and significant as we approach the middle of the 16th century.

Compared with the foreign originals the American plates are crude, but their construction and the religious spirit of their illustrations and inscriptions is the same; and now, when the craft of iron casting, notwithstanding its great technical development, has so far degenerated artistically that the modern stove is a monstrosity, they prove that the iron caster was still an artist two hundred years ago in the American Colonies and in the German Fatherland.

A study of them shows that their explanation, whether in America or Europe, forms

one single story. Their history is that of German art, which was transplanted across seas and survived for a while in colonial America, and we must turn back to Europe, and examine particularly the forms of stoves which were first brought to America, and introduced into the colonies, in order to understand the American stoves and stove-plates...

What memories, what legends must have clustered about these monumental structures of black splendor, most magnificent and oldest as we learn, in the castles, and the sight of which has grafted upon the German language such phrases as "Tell it to the stove," or "Beg it from the stove," as if so remarkable an object with its pictures and inscriptions itself spoke, or listened to dangerous and impossible things told to it when no one was near.

The plates thus far studied, both in Europe and in America, fall into the following groups:

- **FIRST:** Figures of saints and Catholic subjects, with Gothic adornment and portrait medallions of knights and persons. These are the oldest patterns, and they appeared exclusively at the beginning and continued in Catholic districts.
- **SECOND:** Classical subjects, such as Coriolanus and his mother, the Rape of the Sabines, Julius Caesar, the Sibyls, etc.
- **THIRD:** Coats of Arms. Very abundant from the first, far outnumbering all other patterns in England, France and Belgium. The arms of crafts, emblazoned with implements, etc. appear in the 17th century.
- **FOURTH:** Allegorical subjects, frequently female figures representing Justice holding scales, Faith, Virtue, etc. appear in the 17th century.
- **FIFTH:** Patriotic and warlike subjects such as royal portraits, national arms, memorials of Bonaparte or royal emblems. In France and Lorraine, these were ordered turned to face the wall, or inside the stove, by a decree of the National Convention in 1793.
- **SIXTH:** Landscapes. Pictorial designs, churches and modern filigree, appearing in the 18th century, as casting technology changed. The patterns became more and more realistic, tasteless and meaningless in the 19th century.
- **SEVENTH: Bible subjects.** Beginning with the Reformation about 1530, and by far the **most important, interesting and widely spread of all the designs.** Brought to America by German emigrants in the 18th century. Much finer in the 16th than the 17th century. Much retarded by the Thirty Years' War, 1618 to 1648, they become more pictorial in the 18th and 19th centuries and sometimes consist of moral maxims and filigree alone.
From the Old Testament: Creation of Eve. Adam and Eve. The Expulsion from Paradise. Abraham, and Isaac. Pharaoh at the Red Sea. Moses and the snake in the wilderness. Lot and his daughters. Joseph and Pothiphar's wife. Joseph interpreting the dream. Elijah's miracle of the oil at Sarepta. Elisha's miracle of the oil. David and Uriah. The Judgment of Solomon. David and Goliath. Jonah prophesying the end of Niniveh. The punishment of Haman. The fall of Sodom.

Joseph and the five kings. The Molten Calf. Death of Nahab and Abihu. Death of Absalom. Esther and Mordecai. Daniel in the Lions' Den. Susanna in the garden.

From the Apocrypha: Judith in the camp of Holofernes. The siege of Bethulia. From the New Testament: John the Baptist. Birth of Christ. Baptism of Christ. Last Supper and Foot Washing. Christ at Gethsemane. The capture of Christ. Visit of the Shepherds. The Flagellation of Christ. Carrying the Cross. Turning water to wine at Cana, most popular of all Biblical patterns among the poorer classes in Germany, endlessly copied and repeated. Conversion of Paul. Christ and the Woman of Samaria. The Miraculous Feast of the Five Thousand. Peter walking on the water. The Good Samaritan. The Prodigal Son. The Rich Man and Lazarus. History of the rich and poor. Christ in the Temple. The Crucifixion. The Resurrection. The Last Judgment. Illustrations of the quotation, "He who climbs in not by the door is a thief and a robber."

American Biblical plates most often referenced a quotation, but the pictorial plates were based on woodcut illustrations from the "Elector Prince's Bible" published by the Endters family of Nuremberg beginning in 1640 (the edition of 1747 is the most likely one to have influenced the German-American stove plate designers; Endter's Bibles are shown at [Station 36](#)).



THE FLORAL STOVEPLATES

*Adapted from "The
Bible in Iron"*

The change from pictures to symbols was engendered by the same thinking which produced the picture plates, since both symbolize Jesus Christ and His Church: the Biblical stories, allegories of the Church Expectant; the floral plates, the Kingdom of God, the Church triumphant.

In the floral plates we find sermon texts designed to teach, comfort and otherwise help the Children of God in their preparation for the promised Kingdom – passages which do not lend themselves to pictorial illustration. The added emphasis on the Kingdom probably came as a result of the anxiety felt by the Pennsylvania Germans faced by the threatened outbreak of war between the French and English; milleniarism is fostered by tribulation.

The floral pattern stove plates suggest more questions and provide more answers than any other plates cast in America. Bearing names or initials of the furnaces and iron masters, and dates, their designer took a small group of symbols and using a lively imagination, produced designs new to America and not found on the stove plates of Europe.

Of course, as there is nothing new under the sun, all of the Renaissance framing, the columns and arches, the decoration of the spandrels, the use of banded inscription, and the general composition, can be found on earlier plates cast in both Germany and this country.

The symbols represented include some or all of the following:

1. THE WHEAT SHEAF symbolizes the harvest, both earthly and divine. Used in conjunction with the star, the lily, the heart and other symbols.
2. THE STAR is symbolical of the Messiah, the Star out of Jacob, foretold by Balaam, and the "bright and morning star" of Revelation. Possibly in anticipation of the dawn of the Kingdom, the Day-star of Peter i:19 may have been on the designer's mind. An eight-pointed star is traditionally the symbol of Regeneration. It appears at the top of the designs, and unlike the lozenge, was not used as a general decorative filler.
3. THE LILY, with its tulip shape, symbolizes the felicity of the Church of the New Testament as promised in Isaiah xxxv:1 (Luther's text had "lily" in place of the King James's "rose"). It also symbolizes God's providence (e. g. "the lilies of the field").
4. THE HEART is a symbol of the Holy Spirit as Divine Love, and as such a symbol of the Kingdom. It became progressively more prominent in

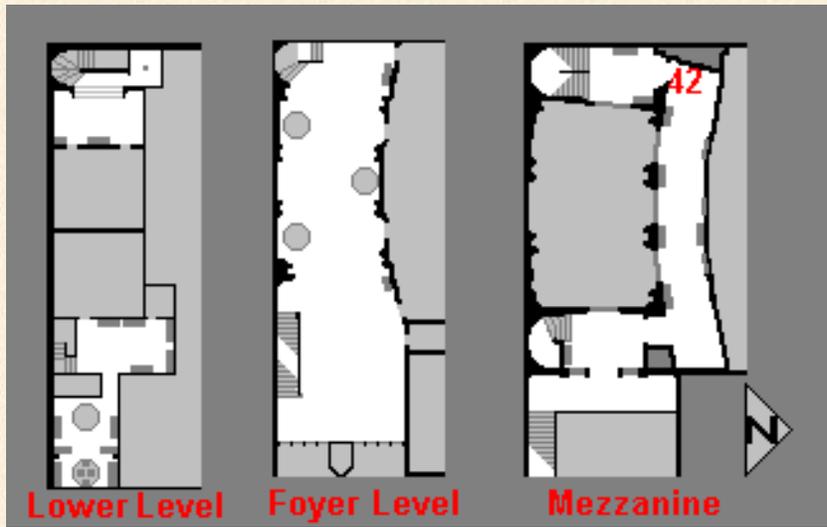
religious art of the 17th century. The complex of heart with descending triangle and sprouting a lozenge-stemmed lily is known in German folk art of Franconia; a flower-twig springing from the cleft of a heart was an alchemical hieroglyph for revivification well before 1636. The lily in Jacob Boehme's symbolism is the godly life, a new incarnation, sprung upward from the Divine Seed or Spark symbolized by the lozenge.

5. THE CIRCLE as a symbol of the Eternal would be a proper substitute for the Heart, symbol of the Holy Spirit as Divine Love (Romans v:5).
6. THE LOZENGE is the most often used motif on the floral plates. One authority suggests that it represents Christ as the Cornerstone (Ephesians ii:20) and Diamond, because the German word for cornerstone, *Eckstein*, also means diamond (as in card suits), though others have pointed out that this term among card players was not known to 18th century German colonists. However, the lozenge was originally a solar talisman like the swastika, and the Babylonian cuneiform sign for sun, often used in a seven-rayed sun symbol, and was assimilated into Christian art in a period of heliolatry, becoming a symbol of Divine Light, the Logos ("a ray of a certain invincible Light which is the God of Angels" - St. Augustine), the Divine Spark or Seed, and hence a mark placed upon things dedicated to God. The early Christian union of cross (as symbol of the Passion) and the lozenge (as symbol of the Logos, the pre-existent Christ) symbolizes the two natures of Christ. It was also a Jewish symbol, the mark of divinity, as a symbol of Wisdom of the Shekinah. It was also the shape of protective amulets from throughout history ("redemption from the power of demons can only be wrought by the Logos" - Adolf Harnack).

Nine stove-plates in all, illustrating many of the points made in these descriptions, can be seen at Station 42.

STATION LOCATION MAP

Below is a floor plan map of the Cathedral in 3 sections, one for each level. The first section is the Lower Level, the second is the Foyer Level, and the third is the Mezzanine Level. This station is located on the west end of the Mezzanine level, at the red #42.



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