

Plainfield library now home to one of few remaining copies of oldest Bible printed in America

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BRI 0116 historic bible

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Sarah Hull, Plainfield Public Library's head of local history, genealogy and special collections displays a Bible dating to 1791 on Monday at the library. The Bible is part of the library's Marjorie and Roger Vail Collection. / Jason Towlen/Staff Photographer

PLAINFIELD — Nestled between two pages in one of the oldest Bibles ever printed in America, partially covering an

illustration depicting “Christ reasoning with the doctors,” sits a handwritten recipe for a homemade itch salve, with ingredients including a dash of turpentine and a touch of hog’s lard.

“It must work,” Plainfield Public Library head archivist Sarah Hull said wryly, “because they pinned it in the Bible.”

It’s just one of many examples of how the two family Bibles donated to the library’s permanent collection of historic archives last year are obvious historic treasures — one dates to 1791, the other to 1822 — they’re also windows into the everyday lives of generations upon generations of one of Central Jersey’s first settling families. The last known surviving members of the Vail family, the late Marjorie and Roger Vail, donated an expansive collection of such items in 2005 and left more to the library in their wills.

Thomas Vail, the first of the family in America, arrived in Salem, Mass., in 1640, and his great-grandson, John Jr., settled in Plainfield about a century later. Today, more than 80 of the 243 people buried in the Plainfield Quaker Meeting Cemetery have that surname.

The crown jewel of the Vail Collection, as it is known, is a copy of the extraordinarily rare 1791 Isaac Collins Bible. It is “the first complete Bible printed in America,” wrote John Tebbel, the journalist and media historian who chronicled the history of American book publishing from the colonial era into the late 20th century, according to a 2004 New York Times obituary.

Demand for Bibles was high in late 18th-century America, Hull explained this week, but supply was low. England, still smarting from its defeat in the Revolutionary War, had stopped sending copies across the Atlantic. Collins, who owned a print shop in Trenton, was working for the state when he announced a proposal to publish his own Bible if he could obtain a 25 percent deposit from at least 3,000 subscribers, a target he hit with ease.

Collins recruited a legion of the most experienced proofreaders he could find, and later claimed to have had his own children proofread the text 11 times.

“After laboring for two years, the finished product was as near to perfection as possible, with only two errors: a misplaced punctuation mark and a broken letter,” Tebbel once wrote. “For decades (afterward), the Collins Bible was considered the most typographically accurate Bible in America.”

It was also among the earliest examples of what later would be termed the American “family Bible,” an oversized and extensively illustrated text that became a fixture in 19th- and 20th-century American homes. It was the King James version of Christianity’s holy texts, but with one bold omission: the dedication to King James, which Collins felt “seems to be wholly unnecessary for the purposes of edification, and perhaps on some accounts improper to be continued in an American edition.”

Today, fewer than 100 copies of the Collins Bible survive. Several Garden State universities and historic institutions have one, but Hull said Plainfield Public Library might be the only public library anywhere with a copy in its collections.

The pages of the older of the two Vail family Bibles are actually in worse condition than those of the 1791 version, but unlike the latter, the binding is intact.

“Still, I think they’re both in good shape. The pages generally are in pretty good condition,” Hull said, donning protective white gloves and slowly turning the pages over in the library’s climate-controlled archive room. “They were kept well.”

All manners of notes and papers have been found in both copies during the library’s continuing and painstaking efforts to create a digital reconstruction of each page, and to preserve the hard copies as well as possible, Hull added. There’s an ornate 19th-century advertisement leaflet for cough medicine in one spot, for example, and a strip of fabric with a note about a birth in the Vail family in another. One page of one of the Bibles was torn and hand-stitched back together, well before the 1901 advent of adhesive tape.

The two Bibles are kept secure at almost all times in the library, stowed away in sealed boxes with special metal sides (a total of 51 of those boxes contain the entirety of the Vail Collection, which features items dating from 1772 through 2005, including textiles, postcards, photographs, notes, newspapers, diplomas, pieces of correspondence, official records and more). But Hull and library Assistant Director Mary Ellen Rogan said they hope to share them with the public at large once the slow work of cataloging the pages is complete. In addition to creating a searchable online database of the pages, they plan to open an exhibit at the library sometime in 2014.

“We’re looking for more donations of family Bibles and family Bible records, too,” Rogan added, encouraging potential donors to call the library at 908-757-1111. “I just picked up off eBay ... genealogical records for the Warne family (another early local family) pulled out of a Bible.”

The Family Bible Project, as it’s known at the library, is being funded by grants from the New Jersey Historical Commission and the Plainfield Cultural and Heritage Commission. It’s all part of an archives collection which has no shortage of gems, such as its three original Audubon prints, part of legendary American naturalist and painter John James Audubon’s groundbreaking “Birds of America” book series, and an expansive collection of engravings, drawings and paintings by 19th-century American artist Winslow Homer.

An exhibit of original etchings by Homer from Harper’s Weekly, pieces dating from 1858 to 1874, is currently on exhibit in the library’s Anne Louise Davis Gallery.