

CHRISTOPHER SAUR  
AND HIS  
FIRST GERMAN BIBLE.



## Christopher Saur and his First German Bible.

*Read by Rev. Dr. J. G. Morris, December 20th, 1892.*

Original translators of the Bible into vernacular languages have received and well deserve the grateful recognition of all Christians, but the printer of the precious book who undertakes the work at his own risk, and pays all the cost, and is even compelled to buy all the material, and more than all to learn the art of printing that he may creditably perform the work, deserves an equal share of credit. This is what Christopher Saur, Sr., of Germantown, Pa., did in 1743, in reference to the German Bible, who became a printer with the noble view of supplying his countrymen with copies of the Word of God.

The early German immigrants into Pennsylvania were chiefly Protestants, especially Lutherans. To bear to America a copy of the Scriptures in their own language was the ardent desire of each pious heart, but many were too poor to buy a copy at home; others in the rapacious seizure of their chattels at the port of embarkation, to which unprincipled government officers subjected them or the no less heartless severity of ship owners who seized everything they had for passage money on their arrival, were deprived in their misery of the benefit of the written word. The demoralizing influences of a scarcity of the Bible became apparent too soon, for the people were at the same time destitute of the regular ministrations of the clergy. This unhappy state of things aroused the zeal and excited the fears of Saur and other pious Lutherans.

They wrote to Germany, portraying in vivid colors the sad spiritual destitution of their countrymen in America, invoking the aid of the pious in their behalf. The call was not in vain. Collections were made in different Provinces and Bibles

were purchased and forwarded to Mr. Saur, to be sold at a low rate among the Germans in America and to be given gratis to the poorest.

Contributions in copies were made by the Bible establishment at Halle, founded by Karl Hilderbrandt, Baron of Canstein, and by similar institutions elsewhere. But all these exertions did not meet the want. There were not Bibles enough for those anxious to purchase, and there were none to give to the poor.

The demand of Bibles thus created, induced speculators to import copies which they held at enormous prices. To remedy these evils, Mr. Saur now resolved to undertake the great task of printing an edition in America. There was not a type-foundry nor an ink manufactory in the country, and all the materials for printing and binding had to be imported. It was apparently a rash undertaking; yet he resolved to attempt the work, for which he believed God had inspired him. In 1739, he issued his prospectus and for several years he inserted his proposals in his almanac which he had been issuing for several years.

The form of the book was to be in large quarto. "In thickness it shall be about the breadth of a hand, for we are willing to take good paper to it," is his language. He enters minutely into the style of the workmanship, the probable price depending upon the number of subscribers "but this much we will say, that, all unbound, none shall cost over fourteen shillings."

He informed some friends in Europe of his determination, who encouraged him by word and contribution, and a type founder named Luther, in Frankfort, presented him with a small font of type, on condition that he would favor him with a few copies of the edition as a specimen of his skill in the art of printing. This good patron Luther did not know that Saur at that time was not a professional printer.

With all the difficulties before him, he was determined to carry on his work, and not even waiting for his subscription list to reach the number sufficient to justify the undertaking he began, in 1740, to strike off an edition of 1200 copies, adopting, as his text the 34th edition of the Canstein Bible

Society, then regarded as the standard edition of Luther's version among the Lutherans in Germany. A report became current, probably instigated by envy or infidelity, that the edition was spurious and interpolated, and this occasioned trouble and vexation. Even some of the clergy warned the people against it. But after many struggles he had the satisfaction of seeing the last sheet struck off in August, 1743.

The sale of the Bible was slow, for the opposition to it extended among the Germans in the other colonies. These were not all his troubles. Men actuated by less pious motives imported, or offered to import, Bibles from Germany, to be sold at a less cost; others sought to produce the impression that Saur's Bibles were all sold, which was not true. All these schemes however, failed, for he was resolute and patient. Before 1760 the sale became so brisk that Saur began a second edition of 2000 which he completed in 1763 and which meeting no opposition, was followed by a third edition of 3000 completed in 1776.

The copies of the first edition are very scarce. The third edition may be said to have been almost totally destroyed. It fell into the hands of the soldiery and was soon torn up for cartridges and waste paper.

I have lately seen in a Dodd, Mead & Co. catalogue of New York, a copy of Saur's Bible for sale. It is said to be in fair condition as regards the text, but the pages are considerably stained and spotted, and the margins of title, preface and index are somewhat frayed. It is bound in original old calf with leather and bronze clasps; price \$ 400. It was originally published by Saur for 15 shillings.

I have no doubt that one of those rich bibliomaniacs of New York has already bought this book and only because of its exceeding rarity.

One interesting fact in connection with this narrative, is, that tradition has it, that the house in which some editions were printed *is at present the parsonage of Dr. L. Albert's Lutheran Church*. Everybody who has enjoyed the generous hospitality of the present occupants of that ancient mansion, has admired the elegant modern improvements which would have thrown the simple old Christian Saur into convulsions.

