

# American Bibliographical Notes

## THE LITTLE WHITE LIES OF WILLIAM H. WHITMORE

William H. Whitmore (1836–1900) was an outstanding member of that nineteenth-century school of amateur historians whose scholarly endeavors bestowed upon posterity so many valuable monographs, compilations, and edited works. Largely self-educated, he generated an impressive array of titles, including the *Massachusetts Civil List*, *The Andros Tracts*, chapters in the *Memorial History of Boston*; he was a prime mover in publishing the extensive *Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston* as well as in the Massachusetts Historical Society's edition of *The Diary of Samuel Sewall*. Something of a prickly pear, noted by his memorialist as having 'very decided opinions on all matters,' totally obsessed with whatever he was doing at the moment and highly critical of others who might be working in the same or related fields, Whitmore's scholarship was held in high esteem by many of his contemporaries, and most of his works are still consulted by researchers today.

The present note is confined to what Whitmore himself considered to be his crowning achievement, the publication in photofacsimile of the 1660 and 1672 compilations of Massachusetts laws, together with *A Bibliographical Sketch of the Laws of Massachusetts from 1630 to 1686*. The latter title, written to interpret both of the law volumes, still stands as one of the most comprehensive bibliographical treatises on the laws of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Those compilations, produced between 1887 and 1890, are truly impressive, particularly when compared to other works of the time. The use of photography, the compiler's extensive bibliographical research and meticulous attention to the smallest detail were landmarks in the field of scholarship, and in

many respects Whitmore's work has successfully withstood the test of time. It is, therefore, all the more disturbing to note several rather surprising shortcomings that have caused endless confusion and even errors among those who have relied upon his scholarship. Whether caused by arrogance or carelessness is no longer of moment.

One of the more frequent errors is the improper arrangement of some of the materials used in both facsimile volumes, perhaps a product of the compiler's preoccupation with the physical composition of the original seventeenth-century books. Some of the copies available to him were imperfect, or he suspected that they were, and in wrestling with problems of pagination he was forced to rely upon whatever evidence could be derived from the materials at hand. Sometimes that evidence was insufficient or misleading. When a leaf or a signature appeared to be missing, Whitmore would labor to fill the space with a broadside, or an act printed on facing pages of a single folded sheet, using little more than chronology as a guide. The folly of such reasoning has since become evident as the materials unmistakably intended for such gaps have come to light, or when it has been ascertained that the seventeenth-century printers made errors in pagination.

More serious is the evidence that Whitmore took certain liberties with the photographic plates that he represented as being faithful reproductions of the original printings. In some instances, when an act originally issued as a broadside was too large to fit the format of the facsimile edition, the colony seal was omitted from the head of the sheet and the matter explained in a headnote. In the case of an act of May 3, 1676 (Evans 217), however, liberty became license. For ninety years researchers examining page 343 of Whitmore's edition of the laws of 1672 have found a broadside headed by a cut of the colony seal followed by the words *General Court Held at Boston the 3<sup>d</sup> of May 1676*. The electroplate was avowedly made from the copy owned by the Boston Athenæum, yet the Athenæum has no record of ever having owned a copy with that

composition. Their copy, which appears to be unique, contains the words *At A* between the cut of the colony seal and the words *General Court*. . . . One must surmise, then, that the broadside was too large for the format of the facsimile edition and that the compiler simply masked out the words *At A* and superimposed a copy of the seal to suit his purposes. The possibility of there having been two printings of that broadside is most remote; it is virtually certain that no copy of Whitmore's version ever existed.

It is also evident that Whitmore paid no attention to the particular version of the colony seal used at the head of some of his facsimiles. In a broadside headed *At A Council Held at Boston the 9<sup>th</sup> of April, 1677* (Evans 234), and an edition of session laws headed *Several Lawues & Orders . . . May 23<sup>d</sup>. 1677* (Evans 235), shown on pages 347 and 249, each item is headed by a cut of the colony seal bearing the likeness of a male Indian. That version of the seal was used exclusively by John Foster and his successors at the Boston press. All copies of both items, one of them unique, examined by the present writer are headed by a seal boasting a female Indian, a version used only by Samuel Green at his press in Cambridge. Whitmore, then, has confused generations of bibliographers and other interested parties by tacitly implying that each item had appeared in two editions, one printed at the Cambridge press, the other in Boston, a most unlikely possibility indeed.

More evidence of tampering appears at pages 213-18 of the second facsimile edition of the laws of 1672. The page headed *Orders Made at A General Court held at Boston, January the 6<sup>th</sup>. 1673* (Evans 178) was originally issued as a broadside with a blank verso, but Whitmore filled that verso with the first page of an issue of session laws headed *Several Laws and Orders Made . . . the twenty seventh of May, 1674* (Evans 190). An examination of original copies of each item reveals at once that they were printed separately and could not have appeared as Whitmore published them. Perhaps the error originated with an engraver who was retained to make the plates more legible

where blurring had been caused by the photography. A glance at original copies of the *Several Laws and Orders* reveals that the signature mark 'C' was so heavily inked that it caused a 'bleed-through' which the engraver appears to have mistaken for a '2.' It must be assumed that Whitmore did not check the engraver's work against an original copy and that he interpreted the '2' to mean 'C<sup>2</sup>.' If so, and because such a leaf could not be a verso, he appears to have tortured reasoning to the breaking point and assigned the leaf signed 'C' to the impossible position of a verso, although such an arrangement caused the printed marginal notes to appear in the gutter margins. The same is true of the following item, *Several Laws and Orders made . . . the seventh of October 1674* (Evans 191), which Whitmore represented as a single sheet printed on both sides, with the marginal notes of the first page printed in the gutter margin. It was originally issued as a single folded sheet printed on facing pages only. Still another error, also probably generated by the engraver, appears on page 239 of the facsimile edition of the laws of 1660, where the *Several Lavvs and Orders* of April 29, 1668 (Evans 124), appears as *Seveval Lavvs and Orders*. No evidence can be found that the later version ever existed.

These are some of the major errors detected in Whitmore's crowning bibliographical effort; anyone willing to take the time to compare his facsimile editions with original copies, or even with some of the editions on Microprint cards, will detect a host of other errors, such as garbled signature marks and 'corrected' plates that proclaim incorrect dates for sittings of some sessions of the General Court. Why Whitmore, with his penchant for detail, should have permitted these errors to slip by him is a mystery. It should be noted, however, that those errors are not exposed here because of any perverted pleasure in faulting one who is not around to offer a rebuttal—and he surely would were he alive—but rather to help exorcise some of the myriad 'ghosts' he spawned.

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