

JUSTUS FOX  
A GERMAN PRINTER OF THE EIGHTEENTH  
CENTURY

BY CHARLES LEMUEL NICHOLS

The *History of Printing in America* by Isaiah Thomas was published in 1810.

A work of this character and in an entirely new field would naturally be found inaccurate in some details, and this was the case in the volumes upon which Thomas had labored for eight years. Having been disappointed in some sources of information which he had reason to expect before the publication of his work, Thomas within a short time determined to prepare a new edition which should rectify the errors of the one in the hands of the public.

A few years later, therefore, he had filled a copy of this history with extensive notes, on the title page of which was written by him:

"In this copy of four books (as I obtain information) I make the necessary alterations and corrections but as I generally do it in haste, it is my intention, should I live, to take another copy and make all the alterations with more care. If I should not live to fulfil my intention and the work should again be printed I hope some friend will do it. I have not read it through since it was printed. The Phraseology in many places needs alteration."

This was dated March, 1815, and a reference to his Diary shows that during this year its pages contained frequent records of sickness, a circumstance which may explain the tone of uncertainty in the note above.

Although Thomas lived many years after this time, the work was not completed by him, and it remained

for a Committee of this Society, including his grandson, Judge Benjamin Franklin Thomas, to edit the revised edition in the year 1874.

Thomas had frequently solicited criticisms and the correction of errors in his book from many of his friends, and he received a number of communications on the subject, some of which are preserved in the files of his letters. Among these friends none did such extensive work as William McCulloch of Philadelphia.

In the manuscript collections of our Society is a quarto volume of 296 pages entitled, "Additional Memoranda for the History of Printing by Isaiah Thomas Communicated by William McCulloch."

Below this title, in the hand of Thomas, is written: "This History was intended to go no further back than the Revolution. Many articles in this MS. are of course not adapted to the work, and many of the anecdotes &c are more calculated for private perusal than for publication, and were written principally for the amusement of I. Thomas, author of the work above mentioned."

Wm. McCulloch, a printer of ability in Philadelphia, began writing to Thomas his criticisms of the work as early as 1812, but later gathered together the information he had collected into the volume noted and forwarded it to him late in 1815. It relates largely to Pennsylvania, about which his information had been insufficient, and deals particularly with the paper mills, printers, type-founders and press-makers of Germantown and its neighborhood.

The book contains a fund of information on these and kindred subjects, and its facts seem to have been gathered with care and discrimination from as reliable sources as were available. It deals largely with the correction of inaccuracies in dates and names in Thomas' book, but many interesting biographies of Pennsylvania printers are included.

Thomas used much of this information in his own revision, although it was of necessity fragmentary

and condensed. The revision of 1874 drew upon it still more extensively, but there remains considerable material which is worthy of reproduction.

It is my desire to bring before you some details in the life of Justus Fox, the facts of which life are obtained largely from this book written by McCulloch.

Some Mennonist families from Germany and others from the New York province commenced the settlement of Germantown in the year 1692. In 1719 there came from Germany, to the new town about twenty families of the Tunker sect, and these were the first of this branch of the Baptist Communion to settle in America. Their importance in the later history of this town has led to the statement that the settlement of Germantown took place in 1719, instead of at the earlier date.

A few years later Christopher Sower came there with his family, and passed the first fourteen years of his new life in various occupations. In 1738 Sower established himself as a printer, having secured the press, type, and book stock which had been sent from Germany by a Baptist Society, to be employed for the propagation of the Gospel among the German settlers.

Jacob Gans, to whom the Baptists of Germany had sent the printing material for the object above stated, proved entirely unfit for the task, and Sower was able to secure the property for a very moderate sum. Although ignorant of the printing business, Sower's native ability enabled him to gain both facility in the new work and the confidence and patronage of his fellow-townsmen.

Christopher Sower had a large acquaintance in Germany, and it has been said that many families migrated to this neighborhood as the years passed, in consequence of the glowing accounts contained in his letters and those of his son, of the prosperity and opportunities of the new country. As his business increased, Sower was obliged to secure from these

new-comers many helpers and apprentices in the various branches of his work, among whom in 1750 was Henry Kurtz.

This man, in his old age, was one of the sources whence McCulloch obtained the information contained in his book.

The father of Kurtz, desiring the assistance of his son in his growing business as a tobacconist, appealed to Sower for his release from apprenticeship for this purpose, and Sower agreed to do this on condition a new apprentice was furnished him. Knowing of the recent arrival of a vessel from Germany, Kurtz suggested a boy named Justus Fox, who was one of the emigrants just landed.

Justus Fox was born at Mannheim, Germany, March 4, 1736. His father, a cabinet maker, was sufficiently prosperous to give his son a good education, which included study in the Latin School of the town—a sure sign of the possession of larger means than the majority of his neighbors.

While studying at this school, the boy, when not more than five years of age, wondered how the books were made which he used and endeavored to devise methods by which this could be effected; so early did his genius, later developed, show itself.

Young Fox arrived in Philadelphia in the beginning of September, 1750, and on the following day was engaged as an apprentice by Christopher Sower who, acting on the information furnished by Kurtz, came to town for that purpose.

When an infant, Fox was never able to take milk, and later developed an aversion to many of the foods of childhood. He records that, as he rode from Philadelphia to his new home, sitting on horseback behind his new master, his heart failed him as he thought of the many difficulties which awaited him, not the least among them being the kinds of food used by the colonists.

He, then, decided that from this time he would compel himself to overcome his antipathies in this direction. Hunger and this decision enabled him to conquer his greatest aversion at the first meal, when he found his only food was mush and milk, and from that period he suffered nothing of this kind to disturb his equilibrium. This homely illustration of the character of the boy is given by McCulloch to foreshadow the same persistence which he employed in overcoming the obstacles of his future career.

Fox worked as an apprentice six and a half years, and after the expiration of its term continued with the elder Sower in his printing office, becoming a valuable assistant in various capacities.

After the death of his master in 1758, he was transferred to Sower, the second, and continued in his employ until the death of the latter in 1784.

The first Christopher Sower printed more than sixty works after Fox became his apprentice. These were largely in the German language, and included a yearly almanac and a semi-monthly newspaper. There were, however, a number of works in English, among which were John Tobler's Almanacs both for Pennsylvania and for South Carolina from 1755 to 1762, after which date they passed into the hands of other printers.

Sower erected the fifth paper mill in this country in order to supply in part the need of paper in his business, and manufactured his own ink for the same purpose.

Fox was in this way bred to the various branches of the printing business, and made good use of the varied knowledge thus acquired.

The second Sower was far more progressive as a business man than his father, and developed still more extensively all the branches of his trade, so that even his printing presses were made under his own supervision. He saw, soon after taking possession of his father's business, that Justus Fox was too valuable a man to be confined to the printing press.

For the senior Sower, Fox had cut on wood various illustrations for the German almanac and other books; he had made lamp black for a superior quality for the printer's ink, and he had cut moulds for type at various times of need. To the development of these three branches of work then the younger Sower applied the energies of Fox for the extension of his business.

The lampblack made by Fox was perfected to such a degree that in 1815 the term "Germantown black" stood for the best quality known, and its manufacture was continued by Emanuel, son of Justus Fox, many years after the death of his father. This lampblack furnished such an excellent quality of printer's ink that at one period Fox supplied a large proportion of the ink used in this business in Pennsylvania and the southern colonies. A recent writer in the *Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* (vol. vi, p. 131) says: "These Foxes were so conscientious in the manufacture of their product as to have unconsciously added a leaf to the wreath of Germantown."

When planning to print a third edition of the German Bible, Sower, realizing the delay in getting type from across the ocean, as well as the expense of it, decided to import the necessary outfit for the establishment of a type foundry. Franklin in his autobiography states that he made special type for his own use as early as 1728. Christopher Sower, in 1749, cast a number of type, making the moulds first of lead, and later of plaster of Paris. These cases were, however, sporadic, and no regular font of type had been cast in America until the foundry apparatus ordered by Sower the second, arrived from Germany in 1772, was set up by him and placed in charge of Justus Fox.

The first font of type made by Fox in this foundry was "pica" for the third edition of the Sower Bible, and its cost was 3000 pounds currency. It was the intention of Sower to cast sufficient type for a standing

edition of this Bible, and to this end he had a large font made, and cast many supernumerary sorts, of no use except for such a purpose. Of lower case letters for example, 72,000 of the letter *o* were made. The beginning of the war in 1775 and the reversal of Sower's fortunes in consequence put an end to this plan.

The moulds which came from Germany were found to be very imperfect,—on account of the jealousy of the German printers, it was said,—and it took great industry and skill on the part of Fox to rectify these faults. He made, however, many new punches, and then added to the German type a font of Roman and one of Italic for use in the English books to be printed by Sower. Fox became also very skilful in mixing the metal for his type which, in consequence, proved very durable.

McCulloch states that Fox cast the type with which Francis Bailey printed in 1784 *The Laws of Pennsylvania*, and that he himself had received by inheritance from his father a set of figures and capitals in long primer for his almanac which had been in constant use for twenty-five years with little evidence of wear. Here again we note the versatile power of this German, but added to it we see the unusual trait of persistence in the employment selected for him, as well as a large amount of patience in working out the details.

He remained in charge of the foundry until the war, during which Sower was so unjustly deprived of his printing establishment, when his type was cast into the fields and his book stock scattered to the winds.

It being supposed that the foundry was the property of Fox, this was not disturbed, and he continued to run this branch of the business for the benefit of the real owner, Sower, until he died in 1784. Fox then purchased it of the family and continued the business, at first in partnership with his son, and later alone, until his own death in 1805. The foundry was then sold by his son to Samuel, son of Christopher Sower, and it thus reverted to the original family.

The manuscript account states that Fox possessed a ready talent in drawing heads and designs on wood, and that he cut the figures himself, always using applewood for this purpose. A number of these cuts are believed to have been done by him for the Sowers, father and son, to illustrate the books and almanacs issued by them.

McCulloch sent with his manuscript volume an interesting collection of almanacs, separate leaves and pamphlets with which to extra-illustrate his narrative, and wrote on them various details of their origin.

This "bagatelle," as he called it, was obtained from Henry Kurtz, who had collected during his life a large amount of material of this character, because of his interest in the printing art.

McCulloch urged Thomas to preserve these because of the interest which they would awaken after a hundred years had elapsed.

Among these are several items worthy of consideration in this paper:

Number 1 is a German almanac dated 1749, issued as a rival to Sower's Almanac in 1747 by Franklin, and continued for many years under various publishers. This has a special interest apart from Fox.

Number 5 is the Sower Almanac for 1762 containing cuts of Montreal and of Frederick III of Prussia done by Justus Fox, the latter being considered by McCulloch as the best block executed by Fox.

Number 6 is the opposition almanac for the same year printed by Peter Miller, and containing cuts by Fox of Crown Point and Niagara Fort.

Number 8 is a leaf from Sower's Almanac of 1763, having a full page cut of George III, the largest and most elaborate plate by Fox.

Number 9 is the Sower Almanac for 1773, with cuts of Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth, as well as a full-page drawing of Constantinople and the Dardanelles, a picture which has considerable interest for us today, and for which Fox was paid \$16 by Christopher Sower.



These wood cuts are rude and imperfect according to the standards of today, but are worthy of careful consideration.

Wood engraving in America during the 17th and 18th centuries has received scanty attention, none of the writers on this subject having attempted to deal with engravers before the time of Alexander Anderson.

Linton, indeed, speaks of the cuts in the Hieroglyphic Bible printed by Isaiah Thomas in 1788, but dismisses them with the remark that they were probably done in England, and supplied with a new title page by Thomas.

In a letter written a few years ago, the late David McNeely Stauffer, the authority on engravers in America, stated that, in consequence of the lack of signed cuts and other difficulties, he had made little progress in the history of this part of his favorite study. While it would therefore be impossible for me to expect to throw light on the subject, it may not be uninteresting to speak of the illustrations in our almanacs before the time of the Revolution in connection with the work of Fox.

The *Kalendarium Pennsilvaniense* for 1686 was the first book printed in Pennsylvania. In his preface to it, Samuel Atkins wrote: "I had thoughts to have incerted a figure of the moons eclips, a small Draught of the form of this city and a Table to find the hour of the day by the Shadow of the Staff; but we, having not Tools to carve them in that form that I would have them, nor time to calculate the other, I pass it for this year."

This will illustrate one of the difficulties of our colonists in their early years.

In the Massachusetts Colony, however, work had been done already by our first wood engraver John Foster, whose life and varied accomplishments our associate, Dr. Green, has so well described. Ten years before these words of Atkins, Foster had illustrated his almanacs with astronomical diagrams and with that

"Man of signs" which has figured so prominently in this form of literature from the earliest times.

With his skill as an engraver already established, it is a fair inference that these were the result of his own handiwork.

No cuts or designs had been engraved for this literature before his Almanac for 1675, nor did other almanacs contain any ornament of this kind until in 1687 Nodiah Russell's Almanac presented a full-page cut of King David with his harp, the cut being unsigned and very crude. In 1693 the "man of signs" was used by John Tulley, a new block being employed and his Almanac for 1701 was illustrated with a small figure of an eclipse.

Samuel Clough's almanac for 1703 was ornamented with two astronomical designs as elaborate as the one in Foster for 1675 but from new blocks, and this author usually employed the "man of signs." Whittemore, his successor, also used the "man of signs" in his almanacs, and in that for 1714 placed on his title-page an excellent cut of Queen Anne, while his almanac for 1727 was decorated with the arms of England, although not so well executed as the portrait.

In Pennsylvania, Titan Leeds' almanac for 1715 contained a large astronomical design, while those for 1726 and 1727 beside the "man of signs" was ornamented with rude cuts at the top of the title page, and in 1728 and later years Leeds placed the family coat of arms on those almanacs printed in New York as well as the Pennsylvania issues.

Franklin's Poor Richard's Almanac contained with few exceptions the "man of signs," and in the issue for 1737 is to be found the cut of a leaf of Rattlesnake weed illustrating an article on that subject.

These are the chief illustrations in the almanacs of the colonies until Christopher Sower began printing in 1738, and issued his first almanac in 1739.

The fifth issue, that for 1743, was ornamented with a cover bearing an elaborate design with which to

attract the public interest, and the quarto size of book was employed in place of the usual octavo form. Without question, both of these innovations came from German originals, but they distinguished the German from all other almanacs in this country and showed the business acumen of Sower in adopting them.

It is said that Sower himself designed this cover, and Hildeburn states that it was cut on type metal—a material which was used largely during the 18th century in this country, especially for the rude cuts of broadsides and newspaper ornaments.

This block was employed yearly until it was too much worn for further use, and in 1759 it was carefully recut by Fox for the 1760 almanac, and so well was it executed that the block was employed, after the sale of the almanac in 1784 to Michael Billmeyer, under his name for more than a score of years.

The next step in the illustration of almanacs took place in 1749, when Franklin printed, in his *Poor Richard*, calendar pictures at the head of each monthly page. These cuts, though not uncommon in German almanacs, had never been employed in the English colonies before this time. W. J. Linton said it was reported that Franklin made these cuts himself. McCulloch, however, in Number 1 item shows the 1749 almanac printed by Gothard Armbruster, which contains the same cuts on which McCulloch has written, "These cuts were bought in Germany." It would seem therefore that Linton's statement was wrong, for this evidence comes from a contemporary and is confirmed by one acquainted with the parties. Seidensticker states that Franklin purchased type and stock from Gothard Armbruster the latter part of 1748 or early in 1749, and this would explain the appearance of the cuts in the two almanacs for that year. These calendar cuts never appeared in the German almanac again, their place being taken by new designs, but Franklin used them for nearly twenty years in his *Poor Richard*.

The almanac of John N. Hutchins of New York, for 1761 and for a few years later contained calendar cuts, and these ornaments then disappeared until in 1790 they were used by Isaiah Thomas, and in 1800 were adopted by Robert B. Thomas, in whose almanacs they still are seen yearly.

In 1755 Christopher Sower printed John Tobler's almanac for Pennsylvania, and for several years the same issue for Charleston, South Carolina. Four of these had rude cuts at the top and bottom of the title page, signed with the initials "G. H."

In 1759, James Turner who had been an engraver in Boston from the year 1743 and later worked in Philadelphia from 1758 to 1767, made and signed a cut of Boston which appeared on the title page of the Ames Almanac for 1760, which was printed in Portsmouth, N. H.

In the same year was started a series called Father Abraham's Weatherwise Almanacs, one peculiarity of which was a frontispiece or a cover design. The frontispiece for 1762 and that for 1764 were made and signed by Henry Dawkins, who lived in New York, until his death in 1776.

These are the only signed woodcuts in almanacs within the period we have marked, except that by Paul Revere in Edes & Gills Almanac for 1770.

An important point in the history of engraving should be noted here. The first issue of Father Abraham's Almanac—that for 1759—contained a full-page copper plate of Frederick III, King of Prussia, signed, "J. M. aet. 14, sculp. 1758." It is claimed that this is the earliest copper plate engraved in Philadelphia and it may be added the earliest copper plate used in an almanac. The same plate appeared in Hutchins' Almanac and Moore's New York Pocket Almanac for the same year.

The object of this review is to show how little material progress had been made in this line before the work of Fox. It is probable, therefore, that the

impetus of competition started his work, and that the stimulus afforded by the strife in the colonies and the wars on the continent furnished the material for illustrating his almanacs.

In order to learn the extent of book illustration, other than that of almanacs, the titles in Evans' Bibliography have been examined to the year 1750. Of the 2000 imprints recorded, less than a score contain a title-page cut or a frontispiece. This does not include the many Acts and Resolves and the Proclamations in the various provinces which often displayed the royal arms on their titles, or the few broadside and newspaper cuts which are to be found.

Hildeburn whose special field is Pennsylvania was then examined from 1750 to 1765, the period of Fox's known activity in this line, and but a dozen books were found in the same class, one-half of which appeared in 1764.

This is a crude method of studying the question, it is acknowledged, since neither Evans nor Hildeburn are expected to note all illustrated work. Most of the well-known books, however, are there recorded, and the examination will serve to emphasize the point that a small proportion of the books in the English Colonies were illustrated before 1750, and that no larger number were so treated in Philadelphia until about 1765.

The same then is true, as is seen in almanac illustration, that little occurred to stimulate engravers in the colonies until after 1760,—indeed, the period of greatest interest in wood-cut illustration is from 1775 to 1800, a period which does not enter into this discussion.

In addition to the list of cuts made by Fox already noted, McCulloch mentions a bust of General Wolfe and a picture of Quebec, neither of which it has been possible for me to locate. There are several cuts in the other Sower Amanacs which could be ascribed to him with probability.

When we compare the engraved work done by Fox with that of his contemporaries, his cuts show equally correct technique and careful execution. While the plans of Crown Point and others of that nature are not as elaborate, as the drawings by James Turner, for example, the portraits excel anything I have seen of that period, and when we remember that this was but one branch of his work, developed without instruction, we find another evidence of the remarkable versatility of this man.

To show that his contemporaries had a high opinion of his skill in this work, McCulloch stated that when the United States Mint was established in Philadelphia in the year 1792, Fox was asked to take the position of engraver and die-cutter. Finding that this new work would interfere with his various vocations already in hand, Fox declined and suggested a fellow-worker, Jacob Bey, who was appointed to the position.

Justus Fox was pious, humane and charitable. He belonged to the Tunker sect of Baptists, so called from a peculiarity in their mode of baptism, a sect which believed in universal salvation. He was a man of small stature and, contrary to the custom of his sect, wore no beard. He possessed much grace of manner and dignity of person.

Hearing of the genius of Franklin, and knowing no one through whom he could meet him, Fox went alone to his house, told him frankly his purpose, and was not only cordially received, but remained an intimate acquaintance of that great man until his death.

The writer in the *Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* on "The Germantown Road and its Associations," says that, "At the corner of Indian Queen Lane and Main Street stands the house in which Sower, the second, cast his first type, and north of it stood the house which was formerly the residence of Dr. Justus Fox, a worthy citizen of that day."

It has been stated of Fox that besides being a printer, he was a physician, an apothecary, and a surgeon;

that he had eleven trades, from any one of which he could earn a competence, and sufficient evidence has been produced to place him far above the average of his day.

This man has been brought before you as the representative of a type of man always to be found in a new country.

The Sowers were more favored, and had a larger grasp of affairs; they were the captains of industry in their community. Fox was also the product of his time and his surroundings, and he represents a class of subordinate leaders without whom the Captains would be helpless, and would fail of their success.

In every new country there are required and are produced by the necessity, men who gain facility in many special lines of work, whose mental processes become so active and so well trained that each unaccustomed task is met, each sudden emergency overcome with ease and certainty.

Two of his fellow-workers, Jacob Bey and Frederick Geyer, possessed the genius and versatility of Fox, yet both failed in their life work, the one because he lacked persistence in execution, the other definiteness. Justus Fox possessed these qualities and more, slow in action but constant in labor, versatile but not brilliant; he exercised infinite patience in overcoming difficulties combined with exactness in arranging details; qualities upon which lasting success ever depends. His is an excellent example of the Teutonic mind.

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