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## *Foreword*

The contents of this present edition, with the exception of this foreword, are a camera reproduction of the 1777 *New England Primer* (pre-er).

*The New England Primer* introduced in Boston in 1690 by Benjamin Harris, was the first textbook printed in America. For 100 years after its introduction, *The New England Primer* was *the* beginning textbook for students; until 1900 it continued to be a principal text in all types of American schools: public, private, semiprivate, home, dame, parochial, etc. The Founders, as well as most

Assembly committee: Education  
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Submitted by: Lynn Chapman



### Helpful Notes to the Reader

- The illustrations in *The New England Primer* reflect the printing of the era in which they were introduced and used. The illustrations are crude and the typeset is small and irregular, indicative of the hand-engraving, hand-typesetting, and hand-printing on the slow machines of that era.
- In the *Primer*, our letter "s" often appears as "f," "f," or "f," and an "ss" appears as "ff," or "ff." To our eyes, this initially creates visual confusion. However, the eye and brain tend to rapidly adjust and compensate, particularly with younger students. Soon, these unusual substitutes for our familiar "s" become no hindrance in reading and understanding the *Primer*.
- Originally, *The New England Primer* was a text for students just beginning to read;

since there were no grade classifications in American schools until the 19th century, it was simply called a *Primer* (a small elementary book for teaching children to read). It is the current equivalent of a first-grade text or reader. However, it is probably well above the reading and vocabulary level of today's typical first-graders – a potent commentary on the difference between the educational system of our Founders and that of today!

David Barton  
February 1991

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other Americans, learned to read from *The New England Primer* and the Bible.

Although later editions offered more reading and vocabulary words than the first editions, the *Primer* underwent few significant changes over its 200 years of widespread use. The core of the *Primer* – its rhyming alphabet, the Bible alphabet, its Bible questions, and Shorter Catechism – remained intact from reprint to reprint.

The value of the Shorter Catechism, an inseparable part of the *Primer*, was explained in the 1843 reprint:

Our Puritan Fathers brought the Shorter Catechism with them across the ocean and laid it on the same shelf with the family Bible. They taught it diligently to their children . . . If in this Catechism the true and fundamental doctrines of the Gospel are expressed in fewer and better words and definitions than in any other summary, why

ought we not now to train up a child in the way he should go? – why not now put him in possession of the richest treasure that ever human wisdom and industry accumulated to draw from?

The 1900 reprint described the impact of the *Primer*:

*The New England Primer* was one of the greatest books ever published. It went through innumerable editions; it reflected in a marvelous way the spirit of the age that produced it, and contributed, perhaps more than any other book except the Bible, to the molding of those sturdy generations that gave to America its liberty and its institutions.

May this 1991 reprint of *The New England Primer* once again challenge, inspire, and help mold a sturdy generation of Americans who will be able to contribute significantly to America's liberties and institutions!