

**MEMOIR OF  
ISAIAH THOMAS**

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Memoir of Isaiah Thomas by Benjamin Franklin Thomas

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**BENJAMIN FRANKLIN THOMAS**

**MEMOIR OF  
ISAIAH THOMAS**



MEMOIR OF ISAIAH THOMAS,

BY HIS GRANDSON

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN THOMAS.

BOSTON.

1874.

## M E M O I R .

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“On the 5th of June, 1632,” says Governor Winthrop, “arrived in Boston the ship William and Francis, Mr. Thomas master, with about fifty passengers—whereof Mr. Welde and old Mr. Batchelor (being aged 71) were with their families and many other honest men.” This Mr. Thomas, master, was, I believe, Evan Thomas, who in 1639 or 1640 settled in the colony of Massachusetts Bay.

The first notice of him upon the colony records is of September 1st, 1640. “Evan Thomas, having a wife and four children, is allowed twenty bushels of corne at harvest.” He was admitted a freeman of the colony in 1641, and a member of the Artillery Company in 1652. Evan was a successful vintner, paying into the colony treasury from twenty to forty pounds a year for licence or duty or as his proportion of the “rents of wine.” We are sorry to have discovered any stain upon his escutcheon; but we find on the General Court record this entry, October 17th, 1654. “Lieut. Hudson and Evan Thomas having been fined for selling beere above two pence the quart and also forfeited bond for appearance at the Court of Assistance to answer the same; this court upon their pet, thinkes meet to

remitt their bonds, but se no cause to take off their ffines." Occasionally, like more modern merchants and vintners, Evan seems to have dabbled in speculation outside of his regular line of business. In the Suffolk Registry of deeds, vol. 2d, p. 192, is recorded a receipt by Isaac Allerton Senior (one of the principal men of Plymouth colony and its first assistant) dated New Haven, Nov. 29th, 1653, for one hogshead and four barrels of mackerel from Evan Thomas, vintner, of Boston, to adventure for half profits. Evan died August 25th, 1661.

It is the family tradition that Peter Thomas, the grandfather of Isaiah Thomas, was the grandson of Evan. Peter, the eldest son of George and Rebecca Thomas, was born in Boston February 1st, 1682. He married Elizabeth Burroughs the daughter of the Rev. George Burroughs, who in August, 1692, was hung at Salem as a witch. The only evidence of his guilt consisted in the fact that though of rather small stature and frame he had remarkable physical strength. The thorough research and careful judgment of Mr. Upham leave him as man and Christian minister without stain or reproach. He was the victim, not of fanatism, but of malice and perjury. Peter was a merchant and acquired a good estate. He owned a store and carried on his business on the town dock.

Peter's fourth son was Moses Thomas, soldier, mariner, trader, farmer, and schoolmaster. Without the consent or knowledge of his father, in 1740 he enlisted as common soldier in the expedition against Cuba. His father, after futile efforts to procure his discharge, secured him the position of clerk of one of the officers. He was one of the few who escaped the sword, and the more wasting pestilence of that disastrous expedition. On his return he sailed on

a voyage to the Mediterranean. Afterwards, for some years, he was a school master at Hampstead, Long Island. Weary of teaching the "young idea how to shoot," he bought and cultivated a farm at Hampstead. Soon tired of this he became a trader and kept a store in the village. He was not an exception to the adage; he gathered no moss. It was while living in Hampstead, that he met, fell in love with, and married Fidelity Grant. Fidelity was a native of Rhode Island. Her father was a merchant of that colony, trading to Philadelphia and the West Indies. Dying and leaving his business in a very unsettled condition, his widow, taking the daughter with her, went to the West Indies and thence to Philadelphia to settle his estate. They had relatives in Hampstead, and on their return went there to reside. Moses remained at Long Island some three or four years after his marriage and then returned to Boston. Trying many things, holding fast to none, he wasted a few years in Boston, and then went to seek fortune in North Carolina, where he died in 1752.

His father, an active, stable, frugal merchant, a solid man of Boston, not relishing the roving life and infirm purpose of his son, made a will in which he cut him off with five shillings. Though the father survived the son, he died without altering his will, and the widow and children of Moses were left entirely destitute. Two children, born at Hampstead, had been left with the relatives of their mother at that place. The relatives had become much attached to, and desired to retain them. The circumstances of the mother obliged her to acquiesce. We shall not appreciate the sacrifice required of this young mother of twenty-six years, unless we understand how entire the separation was. In 1752, and till after the revolution, there



was no communication from Long Island by mail to any part of the continent. Opportunities for the private conveyance of letters seldom occurred, the mother could not afford the expense of visiting her children, and the result was that, for many years together, she did not hear from them.

Three children born after the return to Boston remained under the mother's care. She had the energy and business capacity wanting in the father. She had no money, but she had friends ready to help her in the best way, by enabling her to help herself. Women then engaged in active outside business more frequently than now. It was a quite common thing for widows, especially of printers, innkeepers, and traders, to take up and carry on the husband's trade, and not uncommon for them to set up business of their own. The friends of this young widow loaned her money with which to open a small shop.

Putting her children to board in the near country, she devoted herself to their support. By industry and frugality she was able to do this and something more. Little by little she laid by enough to purchase a small estate in Cambridge. This, she ultimately lost. Having a large price offered for it in Continental paper, and having faith that these paper promises would sooner or later be transmuted into silver and gold, she sold house and land and, the story is short, was one of the thousands of victims of paper money. She was however never reduced to want, but lived to a good old age to witness the success of her son and to share the fruits of it.

Isaiah Thomas, the youngest son of Fidelity and Moses, was born January 19th, 1749, old style. At the age of six years he was brought home to Boston. If he was ever in

a schoolhouse it was before his return. He used to say that six weeks "schooling" was all he ever had, and poor at that. The mother meant the boy should have the common school education of the time, be taught to read, write, and cipher, and be trained to some mechanical pursuit.

There was in Boston in 1755, Zechariah Fowle, a printer and pedler of ballads and small books; it was the custom of that day to hawk about the streets new publications. Mr. Fowle, having no children desired to take Isaiah. He promised the mother that he would treat the child as his own, give him a good school education, instruct him in the art of printing, and if, when arriving at the age of fourteen, the boy did not wish to remain with him, he should be at liberty to choose another place and trade. The lad had been with him about a year, when Mr. Fowle persuaded the mother to have him bound to him as an apprentice. The writer has before him the original indenture of apprenticeship, bearing date June 4th, 1756. Its principal provisions it may be well to give, not only as an illustration of the usages of the time, but to enable us to judge how far, in his dealings with the boy, the covenants of the master were kept. After fixing the time the apprenticeship was to continue—to the age of twenty-one—the conditions of the service to Fowle and his wife and heirs are thus stated: "During all which said time or term, the said apprentice, his said master and mistress, well and faithfully shall serve; their secrets he shall keep close; their commandments lawful and honest everywhere he shall gladly obey; he shall do no damage to his said master, etc., nor suffer it to be done by others without letting or giving seasonable notice thereof to his said master, etc.; he shall not waste the goods of his said master, etc., nor lend them

unlawfully to any; at cards, dice, or any other unlawful game or games he shall not play; fornication he shall not commit; matrimony during the said term he shall not contract; taverns, alehouses or places of gaming he shall not haunt or frequent; from the service of his said master, etc., by day nor night he shall not absent himself; but in all things and at all times he shall carry and behave himself towards his said master, etc., and all theirs, as a good and faithful apprentice ought to do, to his utmost ability during all the time or term aforesaid." The covenants of the master, if not so comprehensive are equally plain and explicit. "And the said master doth hereby covenant and agree for himself, his wife and heirs, to teach or cause to be taught the said apprentice, by the best way and means he can, the art and mystery of a printer, also to read, write and cypher; and also shall and will well and truly find, allow unto, and provide for the said apprentice, sufficient and wholesome meat and drink, with washing lodging and apparrell, and other necessaries meet and convenient for such an apprentice, during all the time or term aforesaid; and at the end or expiration thereof shall dismiss the said apprentice with two good suits of apparrell for all parts of his body, one for the Lord's day, the other for working days, suitable to his degree."

Mr. Fowle had a small printing office and shop on Middle street, near Cross street. His printing apparatus consisted of one press, one font of small pica of about three hundred and fifty pounds, about two hundred pounds of English and one hundred pounds of double pica. The library of the office was made up of a "tattered dictionary and an inkstained Bible." The master was a singular man, irritable and rather effeminate. With little industry, and no