

San Antonio People of Faith Historical Museum

Forty-two Lines that Changed the World

On a cool, wet August morning in 1454 A.D., an elderly Benedictine monk slowly made his way into the scriptorium of the Helmarshausen Abbey in Germany. He pulled his worn woolen tunic closer to him and tried not to think about the sore back, shoulders, and arms that would become his cross by the time the bell tolled for midday Mass. Instead, he chanted to himself the words of St. Benedict...*ora et labor*, to pray and work, as he placed a lantern on a shelf above the copy table to enhance the dim daylight creeping through the scriptorium window. He reminded himself that his work as a scribe was a high honor: transcribing Sacred Scripture and allowing God's Word to direct his hands. Silently, he thanked God for the lay brother who had scored lines in the parchment sheet which he now draped over the angled table. This morning he would continue copying the words of Isaiah. He picked up a sharpened quill and dipped it in black ink. Another six months, he mused, and God willing the Bible would be ready for the illuminator to highlight key letters to the specifications of the nobleman who commissioned the sacred book.

No doubt this scribe would have been astounded had he known that in a small printery in Mainz, just a three day journey from the Abbey on a good horse, craftsman and inventor Johannes Gutenberg was in the final phase of perfecting a wooden printing press with movable metal type, a machine destined to change the world. For several years prior, he'd tried to keep his project and printing experiments secret, but a need for financial backers forced him to acquire financiers and a partner, Johann Fust. But historians agree that the printing of the book begun in 1455 that has come to be known as the Forty-two-Line Bible (printed in 42-line columns) was solely due to the genius of Gutenberg and his revolutionary printing press. Most historians also agree that a total of 180 books were printed, 135 on paper and 45 on vellum, and that the entire run of the 180 books probably took from three to five years to complete. By today's standards, that seems incredibly long but in the mid-15th century it was an unimaginable accomplishment. Block printing had already been in use in Asia for several centuries, but in comparison to Gutenberg's press, it was a slow and labor intense process that was not cost-effective.

By the beginning of the 16th century, hundreds of printing shops had sprung up in Germany and throughout Europe. According to the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, "Before the invention of the (Gutenberg) printing press, the total number of books in all of Europe was around 30,000. By 1500 CE...the number had grown to as many as 10 to 12 million." The use of movable type mechanized the book printing process, thus making books cheaper and learning more accessible to the middle classes. These books were not only Bibles, Psalters, and religious texts; there were also Greek and Roman classics, science books, arts and humanities books. Literacy rates soared as men and women outside monasteries and apart from universities eagerly obtained and read books. Despite the amazing technological inventions of the 20th and 21st centuries, the Biography Channel named Gutenberg the "single most influential person of the second millenium," and *Time* magazine cited Gutenberg's invention as the single most important in the past thousand years.

According to the Britannica Encyclopedia, only 40 complete or partial copies of the original Gutenberg Bible exist in the world. The University of Texas puts the number of complete, intact copies at 20--and its Harry Ransom Center on the Austin campus purchased one in 1978 which is kept on permanent display. Elsewhere in the United States, a complete and perfect vellum copy is part of the Library of Congress collection, and nearly complete texts are at California's Huntington Library, New York's Morgan Library, New York Public Library, and in the library collections at Harvard and Yale Universities.

The San Antonio People of Faith Historical Museum, 1201 Donaldson in the St. Paul Community Center hopes to reopen soon. In the meantime, the domestic church displays are always in need of donated items such as old family Bibles, especially early versions such as the Douay-Rheims, an English translation of the early Church official Bible, the Latin Vulgate. If you have a family heirloom Bible in need of a home, please call 210-733-7152. We would be proud to add it to our collection.



A representative page from the Gutenberg Bible that is always on view at the Harry Ransom Center, an internationally renowned humanities research center at the University of Texas at Austin.