

Ezekiel Cheever Biography

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Biography

Ezekiel Cheever, the most influential schoolmaster in early New England, was born in London and educated at Christ's Hospital and Emmanuel College, Cambridge. He came to Boston in 1637 but soon moved on as one of the founders of the New Haven colony. There in 1639 he opened a school in his home, where his pupils included the future Puritan poet Michael Wigglesworth. Cheever also served as deputy to the General Court and preached occasionally. But when he charged the elders of his church with usurping the congregation's authority, he was tried and censured by the church (1649). Cheever responded with staunch conviction: "I had rather suffer any thing from men, than make shipwreck of a good conscience, or go against my present light though erroneous, when it is not discovered."

While at New Haven, it is believed, Cheever wrote his extraordinarily popular *A Short Introduction to the Latin Tongue* ... (1709). Commonly known as the *Accidence*, it was a standard text in American schools into the eighteenth century; an edition of the *Accidence* was published as late as 1806. Cheever also wrote *Scripture Prophecies Explained* ... (1757), three concise essays stressing his millennial beliefs. The world, he declared, will not be "annihilated" but "perfected," as the saints enjoy "bodily resurrection." And Christ will "personally" return a thousand years "before the general judgment" to establish an "outward glorious visible kingdom."

About 1650 Cheever moved back to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, serving as schoolmaster at Ipswich (1650-1661). Charlestown (1661-1670), and the Boston Latin School (1671-1708). Each town where he taught sent a disproportionately large number of students to Harvard College. His friend Judge Samuel Sewall wrote on the day Cheever died that he had "Labour'd ... Skillfully, diligently, constantly, Religiously, Seventy years. A rare Instance of Piety, Health, Strength, Serviceableness." And Cotton Mather, a former pupil of Cheever's, preached the funeral sermon for this "*Master in our Israel*," emphasizing that Cheever yoked learning to piety: "The *Bible* is the Sacred *Grammar*, where The *Rules of speaking well*, contained are. He taught us *Lilly*, and he *Gospel* taught: And us poor Children to our *Saviour* brought." Cheever "us from *Virgil* did to *David* train," for "Who Serv'd the *School*, the *Church* did not forget." As teacher of countless New England leaders and through his *Accidence*, Cheever exerted a profound impact on early American verse and rhetoric.