

circa 1890

PORTSMOUTH.

Historic Landmarks in Bell Metal.

Patriotic Vicissitudes of the Bell on Christian Shore.

The North Church Curfew and the Christ Church Chime.

PORTSMOUTH, N.H., Feb. 22. - The celebration of Washington's birthday in this city has not been of especial note. Flags have been displayed, the stores were closed this afternoon, the banks, post office and custom house took the whole holiday, one of the evening papers suspended publication while the other didn't, and the bells of the city were rung for a half hour at sunrise, noon and evening -- the bell concerts being the only feature of the celebration which indicated the slightest approach to joyousness.

On Christian Shore.

The Franklin schoolhouse at Christian Shore has a very handsome and very fine bell "cast by Henry N. Hooper & Co., Boston, 1857." Weight of bell, 488 pounds, weight of tongue, 15 pounds; pitch, B. This bell, besides calling the children to school, was an important section of the old-fashioned fire alarm, when every bell ringer as soon as the cry of fire was heard rushed to his post and commenced to make all the clatter possible and kept it up until somebody came in and stopped him, or his strength and wind gave out; and being the only bell on Christian Shore it is still used as an auxiliary to the electric fire alarm, being rung by hand to arouse the people of that section as soon as the electric alarm is sounded.

But these are not the only purposes it has served. From the time the bell was put in the belfry up to the present date, there has been an annual contest between the boys of "the shore" and the constituted custodians and rulers of the bell as to whether the aforesaid should be rung for a longer or a shorter time -- generally longer -- on the night before the fourth of July, commencing at midnight. In this contest boyish ingenuity and love of mischief have usually, if not always, proved an overmatch for official precaution and legal authority, and in spite of all efforts and schemes to prevent it, the bell persists in welcoming in the glorious Fourth.

Many are the amusing stories told of the tricks worked by the boys to carry their point. One year, when the bell rope had been hauled up into the tower and coiled away, so that if any urchin should effect surreptitious entrance into the schoolhouse, he could not ring the bell, a man who had been stationed on the watch saw a band of boys place against the building a ladder, up which one of their number nimbly ran, the rest of the gang still more nimbly running away on the appearance of the watchman, who, after securing the ladder, went for an officer to arrest and make an example of the supposed-to-be unconscious youngster in the belfry, who was by this time getting in his work in fine style. Half an hour later the watchman and officer again raised the ladder and went up to capture the culprit, but that individual had different plans and as the officer came in he went out and down another ladder placed on the other side of the building. The two ladders were captured, but as the boys had borrowed them from a neighboring business establishment, during the absence of the owner, they had to be returned.

Another time, when the Fourth came on Monday, a regular last-ditch sort of determination set in that the bell should not be rung, and besides the ordinary precautions, two men went on watch early Sunday evening, so that no one could approach the building unseen. This worked all right until the north clock ceased striking the hour of 12, when clang went the bell as usual, and it took the guards some time to find out that a stout line had been fastened to the bell-clapper and led to the roof of a neighboring building. The work had been done Saturday night, but only a thread was carried across then, which served as a hauling line Sunday night to pull over the larger line, which till then was neatly coiled away in the belfry.

Christ Church Chime.

Christ Church, the Episcopal church built at the Creek not many years ago, has a peal of nine bells of unsurpassed tone and workmanship, and weighing as follows, in pounds: 2857, 1998, 1576, 1215, 915, 664, 524, 450 and 363, the last given weight being estimated. The bells were cast at the McShane bell foundry, Baltimore, in 1882.

Mr. Tilton, to whom indebtedness has before been acknowledged in this article, says this chime considered as a whole, in its tone relations, is incomplete. The scale is regarded by the founders as that of G; but owing to slight variations in two of the bells, the explanation of which would take up too much space here, there is no key of G, as the leading note is wanting.

"The remaining bells are faultless. They hang in the tower just as they came from the cast -- a marvel of the founder's skill. Eight bells are firmly belted to a heavy frame; 'Big Roland' swings in the

centre and gives out the finest bell-tone I have ever heard. The ringing apparatus is as primitive as anything in the British Museum. Chime ringing is the simplest thing in the world. No skill is required beyond that necessary to pick out a melody on the piano forte; but the clumsy contrivance at Christ church would wreck an athlete."

In the Interests of Trade.

The last bell in the list is the big and splendid one in the tower of the Jones brewery, which gives forth the hourly record of the great tower clock. This bell was "cast by C. T. Robinson & Co., formerly William Blake & Co., Boston, Mass., 1888." Its weight is 3047 pounds; weight of tongue, 65 pounds; pitch, D sharp. The bell is of exquisite workmanship and tone, and the pitch being almost exactly that of the North church bell, on which the North clock strikes, when the two happen to be striking together, or when one takes up the stroke, say at midnight, at exactly the right interval after the other has ended, the wayfarer who stops on his way home from the lodge, to learn by listening just what the right time is, that he may make no fatal blunder in his story after getting into the house, is liable to be hopelessly mixed up.

Speaking of bells -- it is doubtful whether there are many places the size of Portsmouth that possess so many really fine bells as are to be found here. Among them being two that were cast by Paul Revere, of revolutionary fame. These are the oldest bells in the city, and both were cast in the same year, 1807, when Revere was 38 years of age. The work was probably done at the Revere Copper Works at Canton, Mass., erected in 1801, and still in active opera-

tion, although Revere died in 1811.

One of these bells is in the tower of St. John's Episcopal church. It is apparently as good as ever, and its weight (estimated, for it is not stated on the bell) is between 1200 and 1300 pounds. Queen's chapel, which stood where St. John's church now stands, was burned Sunday morning, Dec. 25, 1806. In the tower of Queen's chapel hung a bell of about 600 pounds weight, taken at the capture of Louisburg in 1745, and given to the chapel by the officers of the New Hampshire contingent of the Louisburg expedition. The metal of this bell is believed to have been used in casting the present bell although there is no positive proof of this. The pitch of the bell is A, and the only inscription is "Revere & Son, 1807."

The other Revere bell is in the belfry of the Universalist church on Pleasant Street. Like that of St. John's it is in good condition, but it is disfigured with daubs of paint put on it at different times by some of that class of persons who, despairing of ever achieving immortality in this world or any other by any other means, cut or paint their initials while here on every object within their reach. This bell apparently weighs less than that of St. John's. It bears the same inscription, and the pitch is C.

The next bell in order of date is that of the Unitarian church, which, according to an inscription, was cast by the "Boston Copper Company, 1828." The weight of this bell is 2540 pounds, and the pitch is F. It has been in the lathe, evidence of which is seen in the turning of a belt of about nine inches a short distance within and above the rim. This was done to correct a false note, produced by an excess

of an overtone, due to the imperfect distribution of the metal. The operation may remedy the defect, but the bell is weakened. In this instance, however, the result is highly satisfactory, the tone of the bell being rich and full, an effect possibly contributed to by the low, heavy stone tower on which it is hung, and its appearance gives little indication of its length of service.

The bell of the Middle Street Baptist church, "cast by George Bandel Holbrook, Medway, Mass., 1828," is a fine casting, weighing about 1000 pounds. The pitch is G sharp. The tone is piercing, unresonant, and not particularly musical.

Trinity Methodist Episcopal church has a bell, "cast by G. H. Holbrook, West Medway, Mass., 1857," of about the same weight as the Middle Street church bell. It is more resonant than its Baptist brother, and is pitched one degree higher -- A sharp.

The North Church Bell.

In the belfry of the Congregational church, or the North church, as it is always spoken of here, is a bell in which the city owns a share, and on which is inscribed the followings:

Jones & Co., Founders, Troy, N.Y., 1863.
Purchased by
John Knewlton, P. Nichols,
for the Parish.
JONATHAN DEARBORN, Mayor,
John H. Broughton, John E. Rider,
Aldermen.

How many bells preceded the one in the belfry of the Old North cannot be stated with certainty, but there were at least two, and probably three. The bell is a good piece of work, weighs about 2500 pounds, and gives a strong, clear, pleasing tone; pitch, D sharp.

The North church bell has always been of special interest to the people of Portsmouth. Down to a period within 50 years it used to commence business early in the morning every weekday, ringing at 5 o'clock and again at 7; at 12 o'clock noon and at 1 o'clock, and again at 9 o'clock in the evening. Somewhere about 25 or 30 years ago the ringing of the bell at 5, 7 and 12 o'clock was abandoned; the 1 o'clock and the 9 o'clock ringings are still kept up. This bell was partly paid for by the city. Having become cracked a new one was obtained in 1863 weighing 500 pounds more than its predecessor.

John E. Rider and Phineas Nichols, the former still in active business here, were appointed a sub-committee to purchase the bell of '63, and they went as far as New York together, where Mr. Nichols was obliged through weariness to stop, while Mr. Rider went to Troy and made the contract. Mr. Nichols assured Mr. Rider that many contributions of silver had been made by residents of Portsmouth, to be used in the new bell, but E. A. Tilton, instructor in music and piano and organ tuner, to whose courtesy and professional knowledge this article is indebted for whatever real worth it may contain, says he has "been told by a manufacturer that such contributions are rarely applied to the purpose designed, as the precious metals are not included in the bell founder's formula". And an iron moulder and brass founder of this city, of almost 50 years' practical experience, says they might put into the bell-metal all the gold and silver they liked, and none of it would ever find its way into the bell, as it would sink to the bottom of the ladle and become "perk" for the founder instead of combining with the baser metals.

About 10 years ago an attempt was made to abolish the "curfew" -- the "9 o'clock bell". An innocent-seeming order was one evening passed by the Board of mayor and aldermen, directing the mayor to suspend the ringing of the North church bell at 9 o'clock in the evening until further orders, "on account of sickness." A reporter who was present at the meeting, after its close asked one of the members who it was that was so sick in the vicinity of the parade, and that gentleman, being taken unawares, replied that he did not know of anyone; and a few moments' further conversation caused the cornered member to acknowledge that the board had no intention of ever giving the mayor any further orders in the matter, but only meant to abolish the ringing of the bell without having any fuss made about it.

EXETER.

About the Bells of the Local Churches.

EXETER, N.H., Feb. 22. - The first mention of any church bell in Exeter is that of the bell on the First church in 1699. It is said that the church which was built at that time was not considered quite complete without some means of calling the congregation together, and on the 5th of September, 1699, it was voted that a bell should be bought of Peter Coffin for the use of the town, and Henry Wadleigh and Samuel Thying were appointed to agree with him for it and get it hung. From that time to the present, nearly 200 years, the summons for the inhabitants to worship on Sundays, and the ringing of the bell at 7 o'clock in the morning, at mid-day and at 9 o'clock at night of every day of the year has been the custom. It is said that the old bell of 1699 was afterwards removed to pickpocket and was used upon the factory

there to call the operatives to work. At an annual town meeting, March 29, 1730, a vote was passed to pay the cost of the steeple, and the selectmen were instructed to hang a bell therein. March 26, 1762, a new bell was purchased that weighed 800 pounds, and March 20, 1764, it was voted "to use the part of the money divided to this parish by the town by the sale of wharf lots to pay for the bell."

The present bell in the church, which is the town bell, was bought in 1882 of Blake and Co. of Boston. It was paid for by the town. It weighs 1000 pounds and cost \$225. Its keynote is A. John Johnson has rung the town bell almost 23 years without interruption, excepting when he was sick in 1888. During this time he has rung the bell 21,000 times and has traveled nearly 11,000 miles in performing his duty. Previous to his ringing the bell for the town, he rang it for the church for eight years, as he was sexton during that time. Is there another man in New England who has rung a bell so many years as this?

The Baptist church bell has quite a history, as it is composed of the metal of two very old bells. In 1838 the bell of the old Water Street church was bought of the Middle Street Baptist church in Portsmouth at a cost of \$175. In 1876, soon after the church edifice was erected on Front Street, Deacon John F. Moses purchased the bell of the Baptist Society and presented it to the church corporation and it was hung in the steeple of the new building. In 1882, Deacon Henry C. Moses bought the old bell of the First Congregational church, and the two bells were combined and recast in the one that now hangs in the Baptist Church tower. It is in the key of F and weighs 1400 pounds. Both the old bells that compose the present one were made by Paul Revere, the patriot and bell founder. The original cost of the bell in the Congregational church

was \$1 per pound. There was a large amount of silver in it.

-- Copied by Jan. L. Garvin, November 12, 1900,
from an unmarked newspaper
clipping mounted in an old scrap
book, and presumed to have
been taken from the Portsmouth
Times, circa 1890.

