

Bells crafted by Revere once pealed from belfry of parish meeting house

By Gordon B. Seavey

The birth of Paul Revere, a name known to every schoolboy for nearly a couple of centuries, was celebrated again last month. He was a great American patriot, skilled craftsman — and maker of bells.

Born on New Year's Day, 1735, he was the son of a silversmith, a trade he was later to follow, and for which he is best known.

Came the Revolution, he then cast cannon in bronze as well as bullets. Later, he turned to making church bells.

What is little known, though, is that the fourth bell he cast came to Westford. It was for the third meeting house under construction to replace the second meeting house (1791) which had been completely destroyed by fire. Only the nails were saved.

From a nicely written ledger sheet comes this "Memorandum of Bells cast by me, Paul Revere," a copy of which is in the archives of the First Parish Church, United. Under the date of 1773 it shows that Bell No. 4 was sold to the town of Westford and its weight was 675 lbs.

And astonishingly, Bell No. 5 came to Westford, also. This one, weighing but 120 lbs., was destined for the new building housing the recently organized Academy. Bells were sold by the weight, the heavier the weight, the greater the cost. The Academy was located at the head of west end of the Common, diagonally opposite the church site.

Economy Improved

As the financial drain of the Revolution slowly subsided, Westford people were encouraged to improve their own lot by erecting a larger meeting house to replace one destroyed by fire. Also, to launch a private secondary school, one of the earliest in the Commonwealth, with a two-story edifice which now houses

the Westford Museum.

Two large buildings at one time! What excitement for elders as well as youngsters, watching the meticulous work of the laborers and artisans from neighboring communities. There is little doubt but that Paul Revere visited Westford.

Inasmuch as the ride from Boston on horseback or by chaise would consume most of the daylight hours, at night he probably was warmly received by gracious and generous hosts.

If this is true, it surpasses any claim that George Washington ever came to town, or that the Vikings or Sir Henry Sinclair ever stepped on top of Tadmuck Hill as some imaginary minds would have us believe.

Westford Wanderings

This theory supports the fact that Revere, already familiar with Westford, had his son, John, prepare for Harvard by entering the Academy in 1799. He studied under Preceptor John Abbot, by then a well-known local name. He was also probably influenced by Rev. Caleb Blake, a pastor venerated for 34 years. Both were Harvard graduates.

Young Revere did not follow his father's businesses and upon graduation from Harvard in 1807 he opened a physician's office on Hanover Street, Boston, near his old home.

Academy records show that after receiving an A.M. at Harvard, five years later, he left for New York where he was a N.Y. University teacher of theory and practice until his death in 1847.

Original bell missing

What happened to the Revere bell? Rev. George E. Downey, pastor of the church and an ar-

dent collector of old records and scattered information concerning the meeting house, says that when the 120-foot steeple of the building was repaired and "shored up" in 1831, it was thought to be a good time to have a larger and more impressive bell, at least for vanity's sake.

Therefore, the Revere bell was either sold or turned in to the Holcumb Foundry in East Medfield for a 1200-pounder. That foundry was a successor to Revere. The present bell, again larger and 300 lbs. heavier, was installed in 1856. It is still usable but its cradle will soon have to be replaced.

Revere's 5th bell was for the cupola of the new Academy building and probably as finances were limited wound up being one-fifth the size of its "brother" at the church. Its fate is probably the same as its larger mate.

A scrap of paper dated Feb. 22, 1809, shows that John Abbot (no longer preceptor) "Both of Paul Revere's & Sons one Academy Bell, wt. 127# • .50 a hundred....\$63.50." Apparently the old bell cracked as it was turned in at 25¢ per pound. Abbot paid cash, \$36.00, for the difference. This statement was reproduced in June Kennedy's *Westford Recollections*, 1729-1975.

In his first year of production, 1793, Revere cast seven bells. His very first weighed 912 lbs and was for "Doctor Lathrop Society," the second to the Town of Amherst, weight 638 lbs., then the third, a 50-pounder for Captain Dane's ship. Nos. 4 and 5 came to Westford and the final for the year went to a church in Hallowell, Maine, a small one weighing but 160 lbs.

Bells stop ringing

Who cared about saving Revere bells two centuries ago? Very few.

Today they are famous. Edward and Evelyn Stickney of Bedford (a sister town to Westford) are among historians who care very much about Revere and his bells. They have located 137 of his castings to date. All but 11 are in New England, with nearly half, 58, in this Commonwealth. New Hampshire has 29, Maine 25, Vermont 11, Rhode Island 2, and Connecticut, 1.

They say that newly located bells are being added to the lost from time to time in the never ending search.

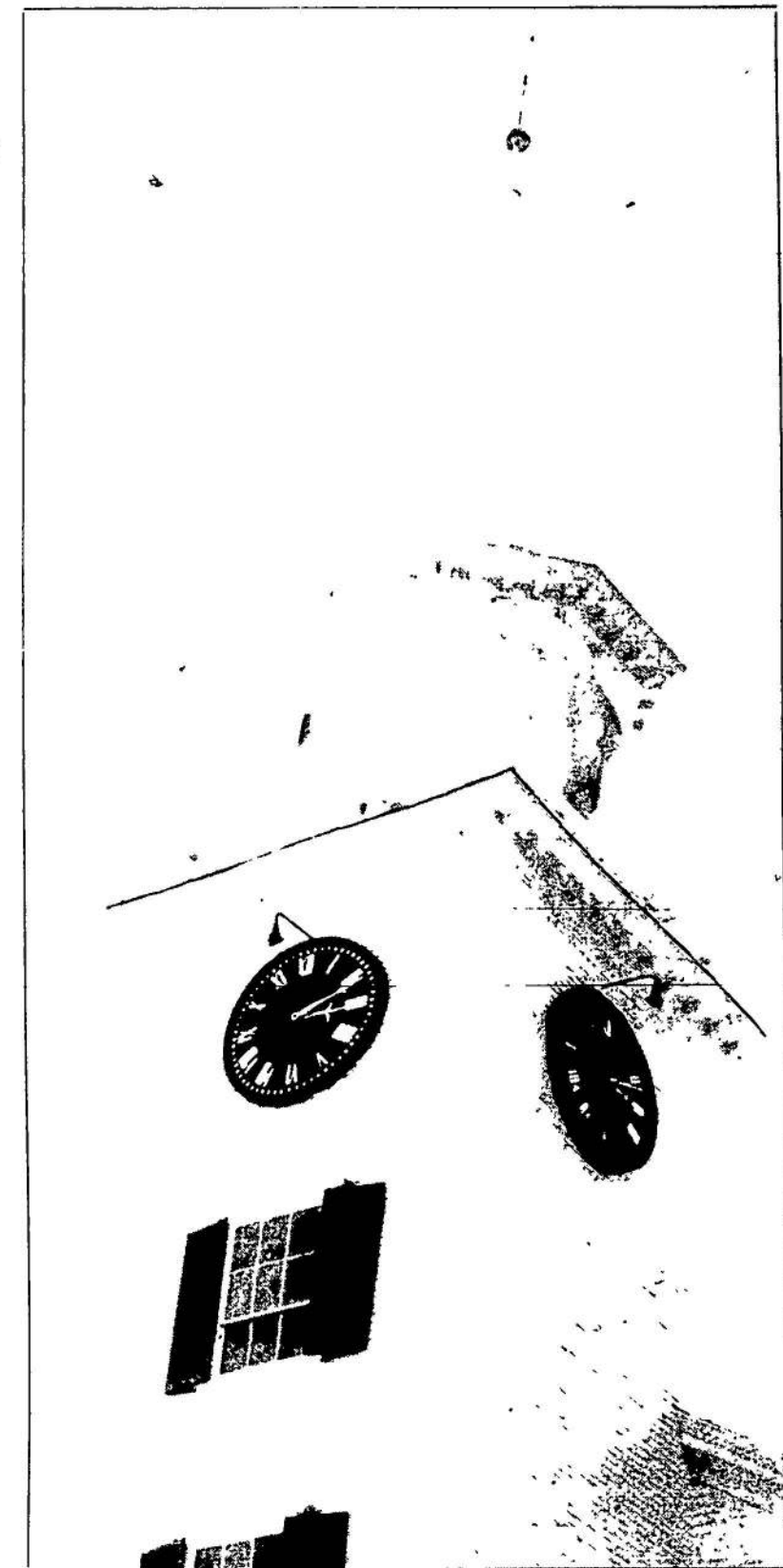
Bells were installed, although a costly acquisition in the early days, not only to call the community to worship or school, but as an alarm system which would warn of an approaching Indian raid, tell of a death with its tolling, or a calamity such as fire — or call the men to the meeting house to discuss town business.

One by one in Westford the swinging bells from church, school and mill have disappeared. They used to tell us when to get up, go to work or church, or turn the lights out at night. Tennyson wrote "Twilight and evening bell, and after that the dark."

From high up in the tower of the old meeting house all through the day and night the sweet melodious sound of the striking hour rings over the Common. On still days and evenings, the bell may be heard in the valleys below.

Paul Revere aroused the folks at Lexington and Concord by his ride over two centuries ago. Many generations later, through his bells one hears not the clatter of horses hooves but the mellow tones from those early bells brought to Westford.

Historian Gordon Seavey is a life-long Westford resident, and former owner-publisher of the *Belmont Citizen*.



The steeple atop First Parish Meeting House once housed bells hand crafted by Paul Revere.

(Photo by Garo Lachinian)