

Since 1763, the ancient Westford bell has rung from old meetinghouse's spire

By GORDON B. SEAVEY
Sun Correspondent

WESTFORD — High in the slender steeple of the old meetinghouse (now the First Church, United) on the common, every Sunday the ancient bell swings into action to announce the approaching hour of divine service.

From its perch 60 feet above the ground, its sonorous ring may be heard in the valleys below Tadmuck Hill on clear days.

The inscription cast onto the bell reads:

"I to the church the living call,

And to the grave I summons all."

Bells have been closely associated with religious services since the sixth century by Christians. Westford mounted its first bell 220 years ago.

Early Westford settlers made great effort to secure a town bell, a costly project in those days. Not only was it to be put to use for calling the community to worship but as an alarm system which would warn of an approaching Indian raid, tell of a death or of a calamity such as a fire, or call the men (only) to the meetinghouse to discuss town business.

Town records show that as early as 1762 a group gathered to raise, by popular subscription, "money sufficient to purchase a meetinghouse bell." It was to be "about 550 pound weight."

Chosen as a committee were Captain Jonas Prescott of what is now Forge Village, Captain Samuel Fletcher of the Nashoba District and Deacon John Abbot who lived nearby.

Matching sum

By June of the next year, 27 pounds had been subscribed by 26 of the wealthier citizens to the bell fund. The selectmen authorized town clerk Nathaniel Boynton to advise his younger brother, town treasurer Lt. Joseph Boynton, to release to the committee a matching sum from the town treasury, as previously agreed.

It is not known who made the bell, but Captain Jonas made a "Journey to Boston to Receive a bell," and to make payment for same.

Two weeks following, Ephraim Hildreth, Jr., received twelve shillings for bringing the bell, no doubt by ox cart, to Westford.

Since the meetinghouse had no steeple, a separate "bellfree" had to be erected. The site chosen was probably diagonally across from the church, at the corner of Main Street and Boston Road. It is thought to have been on what was later to be the part of the plot of land on which the Academy was built.

Tolling of the bell

Historian Hodgman wrote a century ago: "The dimensions of the belfry are not given except that the bell was to hang fifteen feet high . . . and it was to be as wide as the Committee think proper."

It is evident, however, that it was not a mere skeleton of framework, but a building framed, boarded, clapboarded, plastered, painted and glazed.

"The coming of the first bell ever brought to town was an event of some significance to the public. Its glad peals were to call them to the house of God, and its solemn tolling was to announce the passing of many a soul from earth to heaven."

The first bell-ringer was Ebenezer Stone, owner of the land upon which the installation was made. He was paid one pound a year for his duties.

An old custom, taken from England, was when the "death angel

called home a soul, the bell tolled forth the solemn tidings to the community, with the sex and age of the departed one."

The bell was swung clear over twice, with a pause between. Then, the bell was struck three times three strokes for a male, three times two strokes for a female. Then, another pause. The bell then was tolled slowly, one stroke for each year of the person's life.

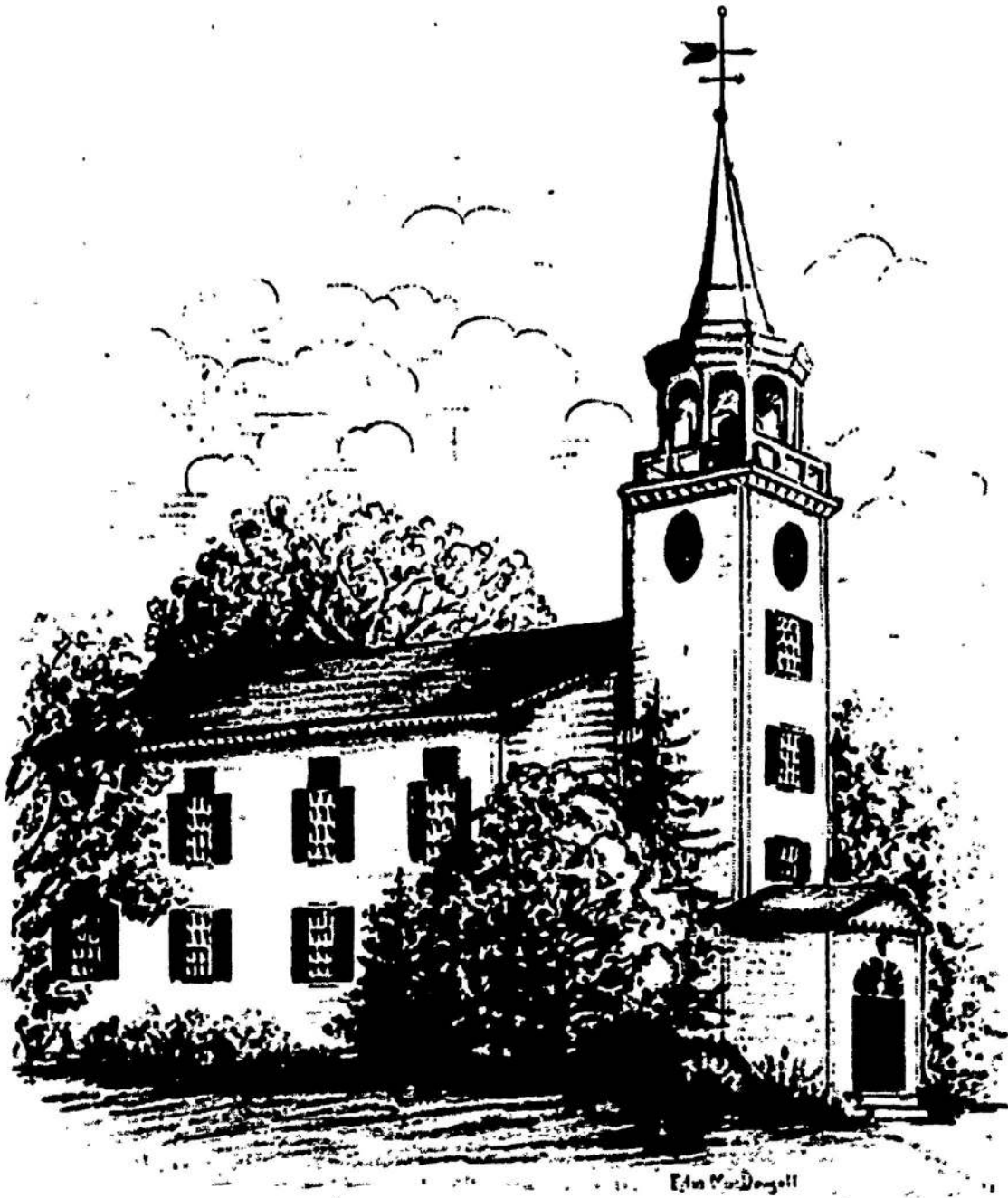
The custom was revived fairly recently upon the death of President Wilson and later, the mill owner Abiel J. Abbot.

During the Bicentennial celebration, the old bell rang out for all the hundreds of Westfolk who had passed on over the past 200 years.

Many resident recall that at midnight every July 4th, the young blood of the town wildly rang the bells all over town.

Although there seems to be no proof, over the years it has been believed that the bell and also the weathervane atop the 120-foot steeple of the present meetinghouse were products of Paul Revere, or at least from the Revere Foundry in Medford.

It's like saying that George Washington slept here and there in Westford, although to Revere the town of Westford was no stranger. He entered his son, John, in Westford Academy in 1799, to prepare for Harvard College.



As the bell tolls

The First Parish Church, United, of Westford houses the 1763 bell which is said to have been struck in the Revere foundry in

Medford. Edna MacDougall made this sketch of the old meetinghouse.

John was graduated from the latter in 1807, became a practicing physician on Hanover Street in Boston and later a professor of theory and practice in New York University, where he died in 1847.

No records show what happened to the town's first bell. The First Parish Church installed a new bell in 1835, and the present one in 1856. Bells, when damaged by fire or crack with usage, can be recast, being of about 13 parts copper to four of tin.

Other old bells

Other interesting bells of old Westford include the one from the cupola of the original Academy when it was built in 1794.

After the building was abandoned in 1897, the bell was used as a large flower pot in a nearby garden. Luckily it was rescued

from oblivion. It is now on display in the lobby of the fourth Academy structure on Patten Road.

The second Academy bell, a gift of J.W.P. Abbot, was in the second building, now the Roudenbush Community Center.

When the cupola was struck by lightning seven years ago, the bell was placed in storage while the damages were repaired. It is now destined for the grounds of the new museum on Boston Road, which incidentally was the home of the original Academy bell.

All the mills along Stony Brook Valley had bells in the towers. They were rung in the morning to arouse the workers and in the evening sounded the curfew, a signal for all youngsters to streak home to bed.

Today, they are silent.