

From lofty spot to flower pot, then on to Littleton

Paul Revere-cast bell almost lost to Westford through Academy moves

By Gordon B. Seavey
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What is now judged as one of the most valuable pieces of Colonial history tied to Westford Academy is a 127 lb. bronze bell cast in the foundry of Paul Revere & Son. Saved from extinction many years ago, it now proudly sets in the east lobby of the fourth Academy building, now on Patten Road.

This bell is a recast of the original bell which weighed 120 lbs. and purchased for the first Academy building in 1793, a year prior to the students entering its new building at the head of the Common.

When a large bell cracks through weather conditions or hard use, it loses its sweet ringing sound, resulting in a toneless clunk. It is then recast, with new materials added to the melt.

When Westford's bell cracked, possibly by vigorous ringing for a special occasion, it was recast in 1809. This original bell was sold back to Revere at 25¢ a lb., which was then remelted into the present bell, which now weighs 127 lbs. The cost of labor and new materials at 50¢ a lb. brought the total to \$63.50, less the allowance of \$27.50.

The faded hand-written document by Revere & Sons was made out to John Abbot, a former preceptor and then a trustee. There is no record of how the bells were transported to and from the foundry in Medfield.

The revitalized bell was used to summons students to classes each morning and again after lunch for 88 years, when the school was trans-

ferred to its new building (now the Roudenbush Community Center) in 1897.

The original Academy building was then shuttered until it was moved a decade later to a Boston Road location, about 700 feet distant. All this time, the bell sat alone in silence in its lofty perch in the cupola.

Moved to Littleton

The old building was on a triangular lot of half an acre at the head of the Common, which was used by the students as a playground. It abutted the 18-room mansion of John C. "Jack" Abbot. Abandoned, it probably became an historical eyesore. Abbot purchased the land and building and arranged for Henry "Tricky" Keyes to remove the old school from the grounds, less the Revere bell.

The bell, without its clapper, was placed in the formal garden of the Abbot estate, turned upside to form an urn-like giant flower pot. It blossomed regularly for many years.

Abbot, who died in 1934, perhaps did not realize the historical value of the bell. If so, we are certain he would have never allowed the piece to be utilized in such a way. When his only remaining son, Robert, took over the property, the bell was removed to the latter's home in Littleton.

Here it remained for many years until a friend, the late Allister F. MacDougall spotted it and secured its return to the town. He purchased it in 1940 and kept it in storage in his barn until the third Academy building (now the Abbot Middle School) was erected in 1958. It was placed here, as a gift from him, and then moved to its present location at the new Academy on Patten Road.

Until his death last June, MacDougall had been a trustee of the Academy for over 50 years and a past president for nine.

Old rope box

When the original Academy building was renovated and restored to its present condition as the Westford Museum, workmen found among the attic hand-hewed timbers a series of pulleys which guided a rope from the cupola down to a small cupboard on the upper floor, adjacent to the preceptor's platform. At the appropriate time, the principal would open the cupboard, pull down on the rope, gradually get the bell above to swing, and then ring the "alarm."

Can't you see those early students called from outdoors, playing ball on the Common or in idle chatter sitting on the rail fence, reluctantly entering the two-room school building to take up their Latin books?

Paul Revere was principally known for his craftsmanship in silver but during the Revolutionary War he cast bronze cannon for the troops... and of course every child today knows of his midnight ride to Lexington, yelling "The British are coming!"

He also made bronze bells for churches and schools, numbering perhaps 200, for all over New England. His fourth bell, weighing 675 pounds, was for the First Parish Church, also at the Common. In 1798 he cast a 242 pounder for the Frigate Constitution.

Gordon Seavey is a native of Westford and on many occasions had the opportunity to ring these Revere bells from time to time. He never knew what became of the "necessary house," an important part of the old Academy complex.

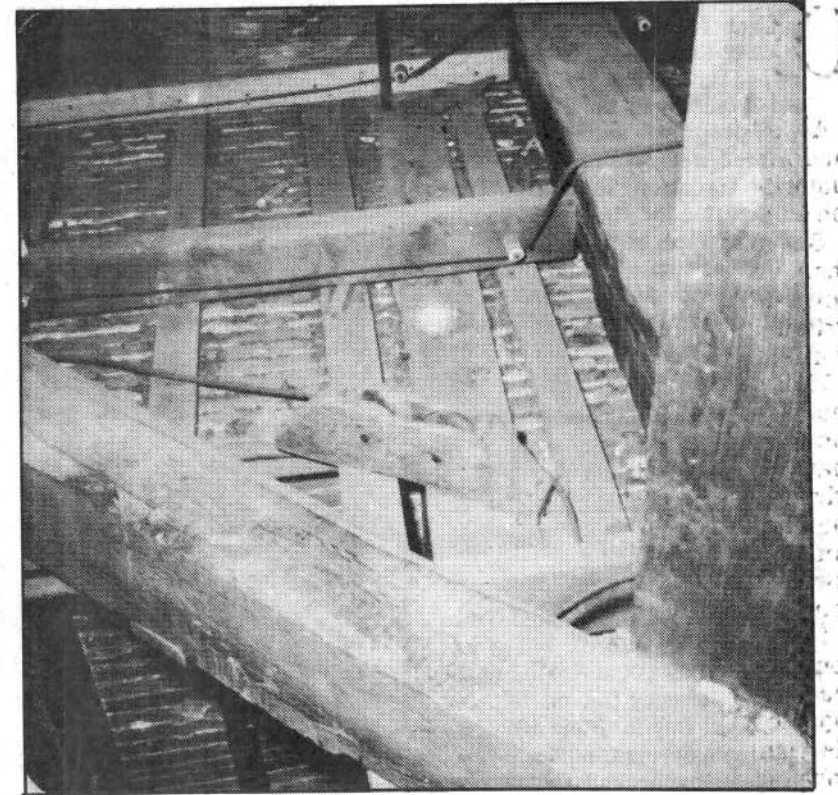


Photo courtesy Gordon B. Seavey

A series of pulleys in the attic of the first Westford Academy (now the Westford Town Museum) lies all but forgotten among the hand-hewed beams of the attic. These pulleys once guided a 127 lb. bronze cast bell from the cupola down to a small cupboard on the upper floor, adjacent to the preceptor's platform. The bell was first cast in 1793 by Paul Revere, and was recast in 1809 after it cracked.