

Church Bells

by Anne Krantz, Historian

A private tour of the steeple was the free raffle prize at the *Meet Your Meetinghouse* community event held on March 31. It was won by long-time Amherst residents Sue and Bob Heaton. As the tour guide, I was happy to have another opportunity to get back up to the belfry to inspect our historic 1839 bell. In all my research of the meetinghouse, I have never found any information about where the bell was made or who cast it. Since it has endured constant hourly ringing since 1839, it is obviously a well-made and strong bell—stronger than the first three.

The original 1794 bell cracked, and in 1824 was exchanged (plus \$300) for a new bell. But the new bell cracked before it was even hung, during a trial on the 'Plain' when it was struck by a sledge to the outside. The selectmen exchanged it in 1825 after paying for damages, for another bigger bell that lasted until 1839, when it cracked on the 4th of July. Since 1832 the steeple was owned by the town, so the cracked bell was the town's problem. The selectmen were empowered by the town to sell it and they added \$50 to buy the fourth bell. A month later they added another \$100 to buy a 1,400 lb. bell that rings today. [Secomb pg.s 444-446]

However, there is no mention of who made any of the bells. I did find a pamphlet, *Historic Bells in New Hampshire*, by Eva Speare 1944, in a box of forgotten Amherst pamphlets that I bought long ago at an auction, donated by Jean Crocker. Speare, who wrote *Colonial Meeting-Houses of New Hampshire*, 1938 became interested in bells after seeing so many in the meeting-houses she visited all over the state. She describes the few foundries that cast the bells she discovered. The first was Paul Revere, who figured out bronze bell casting and taught the art/craft through apprenticeships to young men who went on to establish other New England foundries. But she provides no indication of who cast the Amherst bell.

The Heaton's and I joined Drew Barton on Friday, April 5 at 8:30 a.m. when he was doing the weekly task of winding the clock. We watched the arduous job of winding the two weights: the one that powers the clock, and the strike weight that makes the bell ring the hour. Then we climbed even higher up the precarious steps to the belfry for 9:00 a.m. bell ringing. We watched the hammer strike the outside lower rim of the bell nine times. With the hammer mechanism, the bell does not swing; instead the hammer makes very precise taps to the outside lower rim of the bell. The sound is loud but not unbearable.

But on to my mission to find clues about who made the huge bell. Happily, the inscription cast into the bell is easily readable: *George H. Holbrook Medway Mass 1839*

George H. Holbrook was born in Wrentham MA, April 28, 1767. (Paul Revere Jr. born 1760.) George apprenticed to the Paul Revere Foundry in Boston to learn machinist and clock-making trades, and also learned bell making. George worked with Paul Jr. at the Lynn St. foundry and they were thought to be fast friends.

For information about how church bells were cast go to https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revere_bells

After serving his full apprentice time, George began manufacturing bells in Brookfield, and was very successful and built up a large business. But personal financial ruin from a bad loan caused him to abandon his bell business and flee to Laconia, NH in 1812 where he tried farming. He happened to be in East Medway in the year 1816, and agreed to cast a bell for a new church. The bell was a good one, and served for many years. This was the first bell cast in Medway and is the date of the establishment of the Holbrook Bell Foundry. "The Holbrook bell foundry was in reality, though not legally, the successor of the famous Revere bell foundry, as during the years 1816-1820 it was the only establishment of its kind in America. The business was successfully carried on by four successive generations of the same family, until the year 1880," when the last owner sold the business. <http://medwaylib.org/History/Holbrooks/Holbrooks.htm>

Our bell of 1839, is a later George H. Holbrook bell that has a cast iron yolk. The yolk is the swinging apparatus that supports the bell securely and rigidly at



the top. The curved yolk extends down toward the middle of the bell where it is attached to two round axle-like poles on each side that rest on the cradle frame. The bell rope is secured to a huge wheel which turns when the rope is pulled, turning the wheel axles and swinging the bell. The clapper is hooked to the inside of the bell at the top and swings independently. When the bell swings, the clapper hits one side of the bell and then the other making the ding-dong sound.

Because the axis point is at the middle of the height of the huge bell, the bell swings so the yolk and top of the bell go in one direction and the bell bottom goes in the opposite, saving lots of space in the belfry. Swinging the bell from the top makes the entire bell swing in the same direction, as shown in the photo of a bell hanging from a rope or strap from the top.

Our huge bell takes up all the space and it is not easy to get photos. It never occurred to me to bring a tape measure to get its dimensions. I hardly noticed the clapper either. Next time.

