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Joshua Fink, a tour guide at the Liberty Bell Shrine at Zion's Reformed UCC Church in Allentown, shows off the 230-year-old bell.



The TOLL OF TIME

As restoration nears, Allentown's Liberty Bell peals its story

By FRANK WHELAN
Of The Morning Call

When officials at downtown Allentown's historic Zion's Reformed UCC Church decided to restore Allentown's Liberty Bell replica, they called on architectural conservator and metallurgist T. Scott Kreilick of Oreland, Montgomery County.

Kreilick, who started in his career in the late 1970s, says he never thought he would be able to combine his interests in historical preservation and metallurgy. "To tell you the truth, I didn't think there was any way to make a living at it," he says.

But in 1995, after he received a master's degree at the University of Pennsylvania in architectural preservation, he found a whole new world open to him.

"As it turns out, there are very few people out there who do what I do," he says. Today, Kreilick is called on by many clients, including the City of Philadelphia, to help in the preservation of outdoor sculpture and other metalwork.

Allentown's Liberty Bell was rung to call

together the town for the first public reading of the Declaration of Independence on July 8, 1776.

In February, Kreilick helped remove the 230-year-old bell from the niche over the Liberty Bell shrine's door next to the church where it has been located since 1962.

The bell is on display on the upper level of the shrine as part of an exhibit, "Allentown's Liberty Bell and the Sesquicentennial Celebration of 1926," which continues through Aug. 31. When the exhibit closes, the bell will be turned over to Kreilick for restoration.

"We believe Allentown's Liberty Bell is a definite link in the story we tell here at the shrine," says shrine president Jim Shedauskas.

Zion's pastor, the Rev. Robert Stevens, sees the bell as an important part of both the church's and Allentown's past and future.

"The bell represents our connections to the community and our connections to the church," says Stevens. "Today, in the context of the Christian faith, it proclaims freedom and the values of respect for diversity for all those in our community."

The history of Allentown's Liberty Bell is understandably less well known than that of its Philadelphia sister. But in many ways, it also reflects America's story.

Its maker was an immigrant, Matthias Tommerop. A Moravian, he came to Bethlehem

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from Holstebro, in the province of Jutland in Denmark, in 1761 aboard the ship Hope. Apparently, he knew the trade of bell-making before coming to America.

Tommerop set up his shop in the basement of Bethlehem's Single Brethren House. He acquired the nickname, the Singing Dane, because he sang while he worked.

His first work in America was a small prayer and refactory bell (location unknown). In 1762, Tommerop completed a bell for the Moravian settlers in Bethabara, the first Moravian settlement in North Carolina.

Probably the largest bell Tommerop ever cast was in 1768 for the old Northampton County Courthouse in Easton. It weighed 236 pounds. This bell was rung on July 8, 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was read in Easton. It is on display at the Northampton County Government Center.

Sometime in 1769, Leonhart Abel and his wife, Salome, members of Zion's congregation, approached Tommerop to make a bell. Joshua Fink, a Moravian College history student and tour guide for the Liberty Bell Shrine, has discovered their names on Allentown tax rolls from 1765 to 1775. It is not known whether this bell was paid for by the church or was a gift from the Abels. Tommerop put their names along with his own and the year 1769 on the bell.

No more is known about the Abels. According to 19th century Moravian Bishop Joseph Levering, Tommerop did his last known work in July 26, 1776, when he recast the bell that hangs in the steeple of the Moravian Bell House on Church Street in Bethlehem.

A little more than a month later, the Continental Army took over the Single Brethren House as a hospital for the Army. In September 1777, Tommerop was relocated with the other single men to the settlement of Christiansbrunn, where he died on Feb. 22, 1778.

Where Allentown's Liberty Bell was in the 20 years from 1790, when Zion's church got a new bell, to 1820 is unclear. In 1823, it was given to a private school, the Allentown Academy, 8th and Walnut streets. During this period, it was used to call scholars to their labors.

It was also during this period that the bell lost its first clapper. According to one account, several of the school's students liked to frighten the neighbors and set the night watchman on the run, by tying a string to the clapper and hiding in a nearby willow tree. From the safety of their perch they would watch the fun as the watchman tried to find out from where the noise was coming.

One night, the watchman had had enough. He climbed to the tower, discovered the string and took the clap-

per off the bell. Unfortunately, the watchman never told anyone where he hid it.

In 1881, the academy closed. In 1886, wealthy cigar-maker and real estate investor Joseph Ruhe purchased the property, tore down the old building and built his home on the site. He kept the old bell.

According to one account, Ruhe's son Robert had shown a particular interest in local history and asked his father to keep the bell. When the young man died of typhoid fever at age 23, Ruhe kept the bell as an informal memorial to his son.

It was not until 1926 that Allentown's Liberty Bell was again in the spotlight. That year, an exhibition to celebrate the 150th anniversary of American independence, called the Sesquicentennial, was held in Philadelphia. An exhibit at the Sesquicentennial featured a collection of what were called Pennsylvania's Liberty Bells. The bells were brought from Allentown and Easton, as well as Berks, Lancaster, Lebanon, York and Chester counties. Ruhe presented the bell at the exhibit where he was welcomed as guest of honor.

In a solemn ceremony on Sept. 25, 1927, the Allentown Liberty Bell was returned to Zion's Church and placed in a niche over the church's front door. Sarah Margaret Sipple, a daughter of Zion's pastor, the Rev. Simon Sipple, pulled aside the American flag that was draped over the bell.

Wallace Ruhe, Allentown architect in the firm of Ruhe & Lange and a son of Joseph Ruhe, gave the bell rope a tug and, for the first time in many years, its mellow tone was heard. "It seemed as if the benediction were being pronounced as the little token from the past pealed out its message once more," noted The Morning Call.

Joseph Ruhe gave the bell to Zion's church with the stipulation that it be rung every year on July 4, in honor of the reading of the Declaration of Independence. He died at age 96, Allentown's oldest citizen, on May 27, 1932, and was buried in Union-West End cemetery.

It is not known whether the bell was regularly rung on July 4. The one time that it was recorded as having been rung was on July 8, 1936, when Sipple had the church sexton perform the task. Unfortunately, no one knew what Sipple had planned and it caused a small scale panic. Many people in the crowded downtown streets, thinking it was a bank or fire alarm, rushed out of Leh's department store.

In 1962, after establishment of the Liberty Bell shrine and at the time of the city's bicentennial, Allentown's

Liberty Bell was moved from its location over the church door to a niche over the shrine's entrance.

It was there until this past February when Zion's officials decided to see whether it was in good enough condition to be rung again. They hired Kreilick to check the bell. At the same time, Prime NDT Services Inc. of Whitehall, a radiographic or X-ray business that looks for flaws in metals, offered its services free of charge.

Both Kreilick and Prime came back with fairly positive results. The bell itself is, for all its 230 years, in fairly good shape.

"We were all pretty much amazed at the quality of the way the bell was made," says Prime's Robert Shumway. "We found no gross de-

fects, nothing that would prevent it from being rung again."

Kreilick notes that the iron that has been attached to the bell over the last 100 years has caused whatever problems the bell has. "All corroding iron should be removed," he wrote in his report to the church. "This includes the staples, the pin holding the bell and stock together and the clapper." Although the clapper can be cleaned and reused after treatment, he recommends metals less susceptible to corrosion than iron be used to replace the staples and the pin.

Kreilick plans to clean the bell in a way that will remove "active corrosion not historic fabric." Part of this project will include the use of finely crushed walnut shells to blast free

the corrosion. The walnut shells are used because their hardness is similar to, but less than, that of bronze, and will not harm the bell.

Kreilick does not plan to make the restored bell shine like a new penny. "The bell has earned its historical context," he says. "Stripping it to bare metal would detract from rather than enhance the bell's appearance."

Kreilick admits that for all of the science involved in restoring Allentown's Liberty Bell, he sometimes thinks of it with a touch of historic romance. "I can just see Matthias singing away as he worked on this interesting little bell."

Allentown's Liberty Bell Shrine, Church and Hamilton streets, Allentown, is open noon to 4 p.m. Monday through Saturday. 610-435-4232.