

Allentown Liberty Bell rings again for history

■ In 1776, the bronze instrument tolled for independence. Restored, it invites visitors to shrine.

By FRANK WHELAN
Of The Morning Call

At first, the Rev. La Verne Passman was reluctant.

But when urged last week to ring the newly restored Allentown Liberty Bell, a 231-year-old piece of history, the associate pastor of Zion's Reformed United Church of Christ grabbed the clapper and gave it a gentle swing.

A sharp insistent note was followed by a mellow lingering tone.

For a moment, it was possible to imagine farmers and tradesmen answering the then-young bell's ring by running to the stone church — which a year later would hide Philadelphia's Liberty Bell when the British occupied that city — to hear newly elected state representative Peter Rhoads read the declaration of national freedom in English and German.

Allentown's Liberty Bell, which rang when the Declaration of Independence was first read in the city on July 8, 1776, will be the focal point of an exhibit opening Thursday at the Liberty Bell Shrine on Hamilton Street, Allentown. The exhibit, "Allentown's Liberty Bell: Its History and Preservation," will run until Sept. 2.

It is a way of welcoming back the bronze bell, which was taken from the shrine in February 1999

for a full restoration by architectural conservator and metallurgist T. Scott Kreilick of Oreland, Montgomery County.

Included in the exhibit is a video made by Kreilick's wife, Cynthia, a professional video maker, showing how the bell was restored and some of its history.

When Kreilick began his task, he was not sure what he would find. X-ray photos donated by a local company, Prime NDT Services of Whitehall Township, helped guide him.

Perhaps most surprising for him was the discovery that the green patina that covered the bell was not part of it.

"Apparently in 1926 or 1927, when it was given to the church, someone put a coat of some kind of preservative on it," Kreilick said.

Although Kreilick was not exactly sure what the substance was, he decided removing it would not hurt the bell. He discovered the patina covered a gun metal gray surface that burnished to a nice shine.

Clearly visible are the names of Matthias Tommerop, the Moravian bell maker and Danish immigrant, and Leonhart and Salome Abel, the Pennsylvania German couple who donated the bell to Zion's Church; and the date, 1769, that the Abels gave the bell.

The bell's clapper and the staple that holds it in place were an early 20th century replacement made of iron. According to one tradition, the originals were removed in the 1850s when young students at the Allentown Acade-

my, which used the bell to call students to their labors, were ringing it as a prank.

The clapper and staple were rusted and Kreilick feared they would have to be removed. But he discovered the iron staple did not actually meld into the bell's surface and was not harming it. After removing the active corrosion, he waxed and sealed the staple and the clapper.

"Leaving the staple in place is probably better for the integrity of the bronze," Kreilick said.

One thing Kreilick looked for and could not find were tuning marks put on the bell by its maker to test its tone.

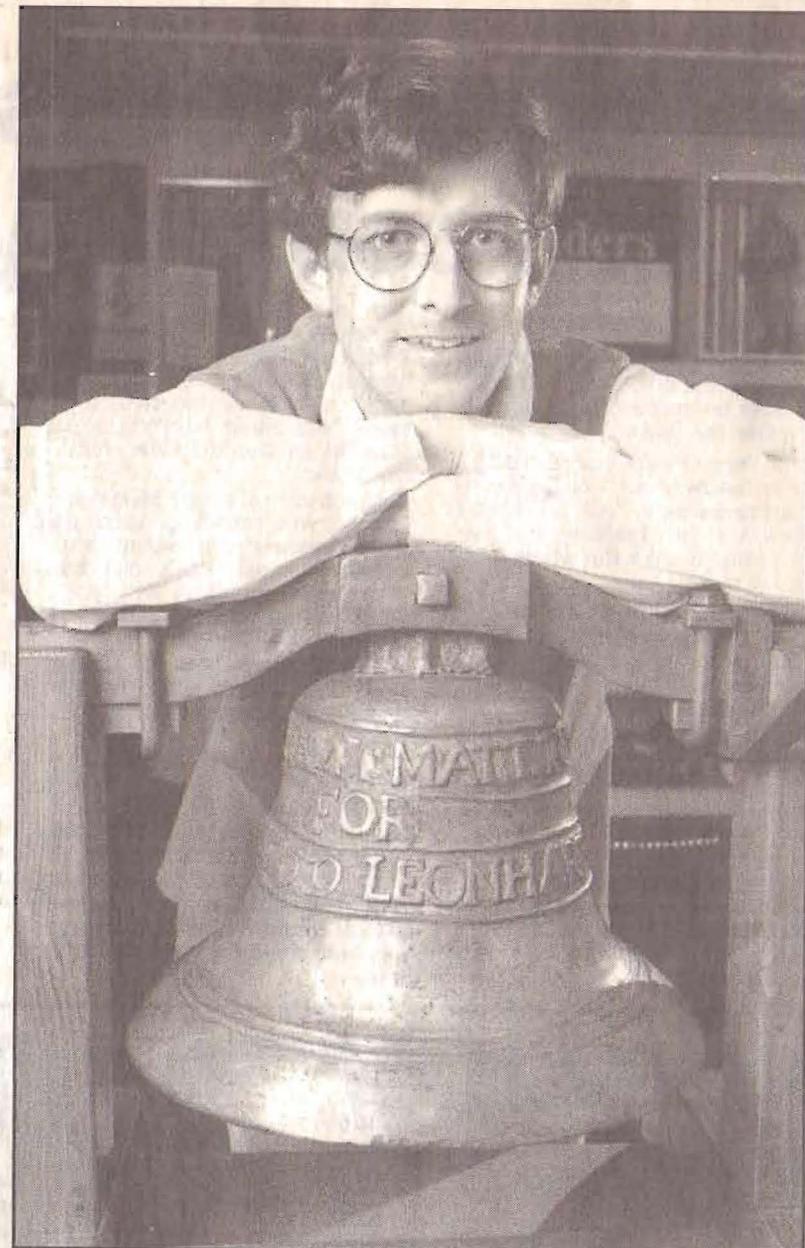
"I guess he must have been satisfied with it from the first," Kreilick.

The bell has been placed in a wooden cradle built by Liberty Bell Shrine President Jim Shedauskas. It will be kept inside as a permanent part of the shrine's display.

Zion's Church is planning a religious service for July 2 that will honor the agreement the church made with the bell's owner Joseph Ruhe, when he turned it over to the church in 1927.

"He wanted it rung every year on July 4th, and we are going to get as close to that as possible," Passman said.

"Allentown's Liberty Bell: Its History and Preservation" opens Thursday, May 11, and will close Sept. 2 at the Liberty Bell Shrine, Church and Hamilton Streets, Allentown. It is open noon to 4 p.m. Monday through Saturday, 610-435-4232.



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Joshua A. Fink, tour director of the Liberty Bell Shrine in Allentown, rests atop the brass instrument that called on city residents to hear the July 8, 1776, reading of the Declaration of Independence. The shrine is at Zion's Church on Hamilton Street.