Allentown’s Liberty Bell:  
Its History and Preservation

The Bell Is Cast

The bell now known as the Allentown Liberty Bell has an interesting early history, which was cast around the top of the bell in three uneven rings. The small bell was cast in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in 1769 for Leonhart and Salome Abel, who were residents of Northampton Towne (now Allentown.) The letters were handcarved in a wooden mold used to make the bell by its founder Matthias Tommerop of the Moravian community at Bethlehem. Tommerop, a Danish immigrant who sang while he worked, cast bells for other communities in his workshop in the basement of the Single Brethren’s House until 1776.

The Bell Makes History

The bell was given to Zion’s Reformed Church by Leonhart and Salome Abel, most likely when the church was built in 1773. On July 8, 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was read to the people of Northampton Towne, the small bell, the only bell in town, was used to gather the residents together. The bell hung in the tower of the Zion’s Reformed Church while the State House Bell (the original Liberty Bell) from Philadelphia was hidden under the floorboards from September, 1777, to June, 1778. In 1790, the bell was replaced by a larger church bell and the Allentown Liberty Bell made its way to Allentown Academy in the early 1820's.

The bell came into the possession of Mr. Joseph Ruhe, who bought the Allentown Academy property in 1886. The bell’s history was discovered by Ruhe’s son, Robert, who died at an early age. In 1926, Rev. John Baer Stoudt, a local historian researched and developed an exhibit entitled “The Liberty Bells of Pennsylvania.” Mr. Ruhe consented to have the Allentown Liberty Bell exhibited along with the other five Liberty Bells at the Sesquicentennial Exhibition in Philadelphia from August to December, 1926. On December 3, 1926, all six bells were photographed around the original Liberty Bell and then were returned to their respective towns.

The Bell Is Returned to Zion

The bell returned to Zion’s Reformed Church on September 25, 1927, during the 150th anniversary of the hiding of the Liberty Bell in Zion Church. Mr. Joseph Ruhe donated the Allentown Liberty Bell to the church with the stipulation that the bell should be rung every Fourth of July and the Declaration of Independence read in the church. The bell was hung in a small tower above the church entrance until 1962 when it was hung in a small niche above the entrance to the Liberty Bell Shrine. The Allentown Liberty Bell hung unprotected in this niche until February 12, 1999, when T. Scott Kreilick examined the bell consequently removed it from the elements at the request of church and museum leaders.
The Preservation of the Bell: Examination, Removal, and Assessment

On February 12, 1999, T. Scott Kreilick, architectural conservator and metallurgist, came to Zion’s Reformed United Church of Christ to examine and assess the condition of the Allentown Liberty Bell, which had hung outside since 1927. Seven decades of exposure had soiled the bell, but after visual examination and inspection, Kreilick reasoned that the bell could be removed from its niche above the entrance to the Liberty Bell Shrine Museum. The bell was then wrapped in a blanket and lowered to the ground. Kreilick presented a written assessment on February 22, 1999, and recommended that the bell be tested to determine if there were any hidden cracks that would prevent the bell from being rung.

Preliminary Testing

T. Scott Kreilick, along with museum board member Jim Shedlaukas and the Rev. LaVerne Passman transported Allentown’s Liberty Bell to Prime NDT Services, Inc. for preliminary testing on April 9, 1999. Through radiographic testing and X-rays of the bell, which were donated by Prime NDT, it was determined that the bell was structurally sound. The X-rays revealed no internal voids or cracks in the bell, only residual sand and gas pockets from the casting process. The bell was then returned to the Liberty Bell Shrine Museum and displayed during the summer of 1999 in the exhibit “Allentown’s Liberty Bell and the Sesquicentennial Celebration of 1926.”

The Preservation Process

In January, 2000, T. Scott Kreilick transported Allentown’s Liberty Bell to J. N. Phillips Casting in Germantown, PA, to begin the preservation process. The pin holding the bell to the stock was removed and the bell and components were first washed and then blasted with walnut shells. An exterior coating was removed from the bell and chemicals were applied to the surface of the bell to create a patina. The clapper and staple were chemically treated and a protective wax was applied to the bell, stock, clapper, and other components. A new pin was made and the bell and components were reassembled. The bell was returned to the Liberty Bell Shrine Museum on May 3, 2000, in time for the opening of the exhibit “Allentown’s Liberty Bell: Its History and Preservation.”

On July 2, 2000, the bell was rededicated in a service in Zion church, and ever since, the bell is rung in the church at a commemorative Independence Sunday service closest to the fourth of July, as well as in Fourth of July bell-ringing ceremonies in the Museum.

Mr Kreilick has said the Allentown Liberty Bell is “a piece of our history that is irreplaceable. It’s a symbol of not only the church…but…a symbol of Allentown…it was here when the Declaration [of Independence] was first read in Allentown . . . and there aren’t too many survivors of that time. For that reason alone it should be remembered and restored properly.”