

A Bell with a Tale to Tell

History of the Meeting House Bell, Benton Falls, Maine by Barbara Warren

Benton Falls is part of Benton, Maine (pop. approx. 2700). Originally the area was part of Clinton. On March 16, 1842 Benton came into existence under the name of "Sebasticook". However, Benton does not appear as the name of the town until 1850. In 2016, members of the town's small, historic Benton Falls Congregational Church launched the *Benton Falls Church Steeple Restoration Project* for roof and steeple repairs in order to preserve the nearly two centuries old building and the REVERE bell that hangs in its belfry. Although not cast by Paul Revere himself (he had died in 1818), this bell, the last bell-sale (purchased October 19, 1828) listed in the records of the Revere Foundry and Copper Mill in Canton, Mass, has an interesting history.

The Benton Falls Meeting House was erected in 1826. It was the first meeting house in town. Although predominately a Congregational church, the building has been used by Baptists, Methodist and Universalists, as well as local secular groups. Four of the town's most prosperous men- Hobart Richardson, Asher Hinds (the Jr.), David Reed, and Johnson Lunt- at their own expense sponsored its building. Hinds was responsible for negotiating the purchase of the bell. Per a letter/invoice (now on file at the Maine State Museum) addressed to Asher Hinds, dated February 11, 1831, the cost of the bell (plus accrued interest) was 257 dollars (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$8,138.51 today). The bell was brought "down" from Boston by schooner to Bath and then up the Kennebec River (as far as Gardiner/Augusta) where it was transferred to a longboat for its journey to Winslow and from there for the final 5-mile leg up the Sebasticook River to what is now Benton Falls (at that time still part of Clinton). In those days, water travel to the Falls area was rather easy and boats carrying forty tons were able to pass, most of the time during the summer, to the lower falls (as far as boats could travel on the Sebasticook). When it reached the landing spot (earlier known as Grant's landing), the boat was tied up to "Old Charley" a large boulder (still there) on the west side of the Sebasticook River just below the falls. Tradition has it that as the bell was being brought ashore it was dropped overboard, but its 798 pounds of weight was rescued from the river and, fresh from its "baptism, hauled up Brimstone Hill to the church by teams of oxen.

Another interesting story is told regarding the shipment of this bell: In 1833 Asher Hinds married Mrs. Lucy Turner Lunt of Bath, Maine. Over the years, Mrs. Hinds often recounted the story of having heard the Revere bell ring as the schooner carrying it from Boston hit rough water as it entered the harbor near her home at Bath on its way up the Kennebec River to Augusta where it was transferred to the longboat that would carry it on the remainder of the journey up the Sebasticook River. At the time, she asked, "What bell is that?" and was told that it was intended for the Meeting House at Clinton. She had no idea that one day she would live within hearing distance of the bell. After she married Asher Hinds and moved to Benton Falls, from the front porch of the Hinds's homestead, just down the hill from the church, she could look down upon the river and see the large boulder, "Old Charlie", where the bell had fallen into the Sebasticook. Until her death in 1883, she attended the Benton Falls Meeting House and heard the bell, that her husband had purchased 55 years before, ring every Sunday.

Until November of 2016 (when it was determined that the belfry was no longer sturdy enough to support the swing weight) the Revere bell had been wrung every Sunday and on special occasions. The rich-tones of its peals echoing throughout the town. However, while waiting to be returned to its proper place in the belfry the bell continues to serve the community. On November 11, 2020 at 11:00 am, several months after the bell had been taken down, a group of about 20 members of the Benton Falls Congregational Church and residents gathered around the Revere bell, to commemorate Veterans Day with a bell ringing ceremony. The on-going steeple restoration project and efforts to have the building placed on the National Register of Historic Places is about saving a 195-year- old country building, its historic bell and preserving its unique early American history, workmanship, and architecture for future generations.



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