

## Allentown's Liberty Bell: Its History and Preservation



### The Bell Is Cast

The bell itself bears witness to its origin. Just below the shoulder of the bell, and extending to the bell's waist, there are three rings of text, telling us that the 14-inch tall bell was cast in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in 1769 for Leonhart and Salome Abel. They were residents of Northampton Towne (now Allentown). The letters first had to be hand-carved into a wooden mold, which Matthias Tommerop then used to make the bell.

Tommerop, a Danish immigrant who sang while he worked, lived in the Moravian community at Bethlehem and 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 in 1773 when the log church was replaced with the stone building (at right). Then on July 8, 1776, this bell, the only bell in town, was rung to gather the residents when the Declaration of Independence was read to the people of Northampton Towne. This bell was in the church tower all the while the State House Bell from Philadelphia (now known as the Liberty Bell) was hidden under the floorboards of the church from September, 1777, to June, 1778. In 1790, Zion's church replaced the bell with a larger church bell in the tower, and Allentown's 'Liberty Bell' made its way to the Allentown Academy in the early 1820's.



The bell came into the possession of Joseph Ruhe, who bought the Allentown Academy property, in 1886. The bell's history was discovered by Ruhe's son, Robert. In 1926, Joseph 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 Philadelphia's Liberty Bell and then were returned to their respective towns.



### The Bell Is Returned to Zion

The Tommerop bell finally was returned to Zion's Church on September 25, 1927, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the hiding of the Liberty Bell at the church. Joseph Ruhe donated the bell to the church with the stipulation that the bell should be rung every Fourth of July, and that the Declaration of Independence should be read in the church. The bell was enshrined in a small enclosure above the church entrance (pictured at left). Then in 1962 it was moved to hang in a small niche above the entrance to the Liberty Bell Shrine.

The Allentown Liberty Bell hung unprotected in this niche until February, 1999, when church and museum leaders "re-discovered" the bell upon reading an article by local historian, Frank Whelan. Recognizing its historic value as an artifact of the city's history, they had it removed for evaluation.

## The Preservation of the Bell: Examination, Removal, and Assessment

On February 12, 1999, T. Scott Kreilick, architectural conservator and metallurgist, came to Zion's church to examine and assess the condition of the Allentown Liberty Bell, which had hung outside for more than 70 years. 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 Shrine. The bell was wrapped in a blanket and lowered to the ground. Ten days later, Kreilick provided a written assessment to church and museum leaders, recommending that the bell be tested to determine if there were any hidden cracks that would prevent the bell from being rung.



### Preliminary Testing



Kreilick, along with museum board member Jim Shedlauskas and church associate pastor, the Rev. LaVerne Passman, transported the bell to Prime NDT Services, Inc. for preliminary testing on April 9, 1999.

Through radiographic testing and X-rays, 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

The following January, 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 first were washed and then blasted with walnut shells, which provided a mild abrasive cleaning to remove the exterior coating on the bell. A chemical application was used to create an attractive patina for the bell. 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 worship service in Zion church, attended by city, county and state representatives. 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.

T. Scott Kreilick noted that 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 restored properly and remembered."

