



Female Academy

## **Norridgewock Historical Society Newsletter**

**Volume 21 Number 4 Winter 2015**

**Jay Robbins, past president of the Arnold Expedition Historical Society, current president of the Swan Island Historical Society was the speaker for our September meeting. He presented several maps dating back to the 1600 and 1700's.**

**One of these maps was from the British Engineer John Montesore's 1761 map of showing the source of the Kennebec, Penobscot, and Chartierre Rivers, all used by the Arnold Expedition in 1775. A point of interest was that Swan Island was always shown on all the old maps. The Kennebec River was the main route of travel in those days.**

**Native Americans had their own Navy and used birch bark canoes to accomplish their needs. When the British were planning their expedition, they needed larger, sturdier boats and had bateaus built in Pittston, each weighing in at approximately 400 pounds, which also needed to be carried over those portions of land not served by the Kennebec.**

**Mr. Robbins also spoke about historic Maine forts and the development and building of the Old Canada Road, known and used today as Route 201 and Route 27 . He had many stories to tell and had some of the books about these historic places and events with him at that meeting.**

**The October meeting featured guest speaker Daniel Tortora, historian, author and Professor of History at Colby College. In addition to his presentation on Father Rasle, the Mission Village, a massacre and a monument, he retraced the steps of the establishment of the Jesuit mission and the first Roman Catholic mass in 1604. He also described**

the battles with the French, the British, and other native tribes. Concluding his presentation was a very descriptive account of the Benedict Arnold Troops and the more recent memorial celebrations at the Father Rasle Monument at the site of the village, now in Madison, Maine.

If you are interested in the historical events of Norridgewock and central Maine, come to some of next seasons meetings and ask those questions you have about how, when, who and where.

We are officially on break as it is now our winter season. The museum will begin its next round of meetings in April on the fourth Wednesday at 7 PM.

Web site:

Please update and correct the web address for the Norridgewock Historical Society to read:

<http://www.norridgewockmuseum.com>. Thank you. My sincerest apologies for any inconvenience. Ed...

Our email address is: [norridgewockhistsoc@gmail.com](mailto:norridgewockhistsoc@gmail.com)

## Norridgewock's Paul Revere Bell

One of two corn canning shops in town, the Jewett shop was run for many years by Fred Jewett. After Fred died in 1949 his nephew Sidney Jewett and his family came up from Georgia to run the business. They moved into Sidney's father's house on upper Main Street where Fred had lived, second on the right after Monument Square. Next to the house was a carriage house or barn, in the lower level of which were some horse stalls. And in one of the stalls the family discovered an enormous

**metal bell.**

George Jewett who was about 10 at the time says the bell was 35 to 40 inches high. It was nearly as wide, and heavy: George and his friends could push it around a little but not quite tip it over. It was brownish with a little green, so was probably made of bell metal bronze. George remembers a peculiar hole in the bell, a missing "sliver" perhaps 6 inches wide at the rim and 15 or 20 inches high. The edges of the hole weren't broken, they had been *melted*, such that George wondered why the bell had been saved. Someone told the family it was the Paul Revere bell from the 1794 Congregational Church which had burned down two years earlier. That was very interesting, but George doesn't remember anything on the bell to identify the maker.

For the Jewetts, it turned out that canning corn was just about finished. After a few years of trying to turn the business around, the corn shop closed, the house contents were auctioned off, and in 1953 the family moved back to Georgia leaving the mystery bell there in its stall.

Certainly the old Congo church did have a bell, a big one, but Frank Hilton is sure the Jewett bell did not come from the church. Frank's father Ralph was active in the Congregational Church. After it burned many pieces of the big bell lay in the rubble, platter-sized and irregular. Sensing possible value, Ralph picked them up and took them home in wooden boxes. The boxes were stacked in his shed for years until around 1960 church trustees voted to sell the metal as junk. It brought \$100.

So we have a puzzle, two claims on the same bell, both from thoroughly reliable people. Could Norridgewock have had two big bells?

Brainard Tripp sheds light on the church bell. Living across the street from the church, it was Brainard who first discovered the church fire. His mother called the fire department which responded quickly but wasn't able to save the building. Brainard and a crowd of others watched it burn. In his own words:

"I remember how the church burned. It started in the basement on the far side from the road, and probably because of the chimney effect of the bell tower, swept east and engulfed the main entrance and the corridor and stairs leading to the sanctuary and bell tower, eventually bringing down the

**bell. The crowd watching the fire gave out a cry in unison as this ball of fire came crashing down and sending up and out a shower of sparks upon impact. Considering the relatively long time it stayed up there exposed to intense heat, perhaps as long as an hour, and the long fall, I doubt it could have remained intact."**

**Bell metal bronze, about 80% copper and 20-25% tin, melts at around 1500F. If the church bell hung in what amounted to an up-draft blast furnace for close to an hour it would have been very soft when it broke free and fell. No wonder it splattered into the many pieces Ralph Hilton gathered up.**

**The history of the church's bell seems to be this. A bell tower was added to the church in 1818. By 1821 the church was looking into the expense of ringing the bell on the Sabbath, and in 1836 the church was hiring a sexton to ring the bell for funerals. In 1850 William Peet of NY, the son of the church's minister Rev. Josiah Peet, said he would donate a bell to the church if towns people would paint the church. They did and William did, and his father presented the bell to the church in 1850. It must have replaced an earlier bell that we don't know anything about. Cast by Meneely & Co. in NY State the new bell weighed 1218 pounds. With a tone near A flat (just below middle C) and about 39 inches diameter, the sound carried all through the villages on both sides of the river. The Meneely bell gave good service until its demise in 1947.**

**Then what about the Jewett bell? When Somerset County was created in 1809, the county seat was placed at Norridgewock. At first county officials met in smaller buildings using the Rasle bell found at Old Point to call court together. In 1820 the county built a \$4,300 court house just west of the Congregational Church. 140,000 bricks were ordered for a 40' x 50' building with a bell tower. One record says on May 18, 1821 a 575 lb bell costing \$216.20 was sold to Munson and Barnard, Boston merchants, intended for Norridgewock. Another record says "A group of citizens raised funds for a bell to be placed in the cupola of the building, and the county treasury contributed \$100. The bell, from the Paul Revere foundry in Massachusetts, was to be used to call people to court. It was a good quality bronze bell, with a gold tinge said to have come from an English gold coin tossed into the molten mass as it was poured to form the bell." [From**

## **"Court Houses of Maine"]**

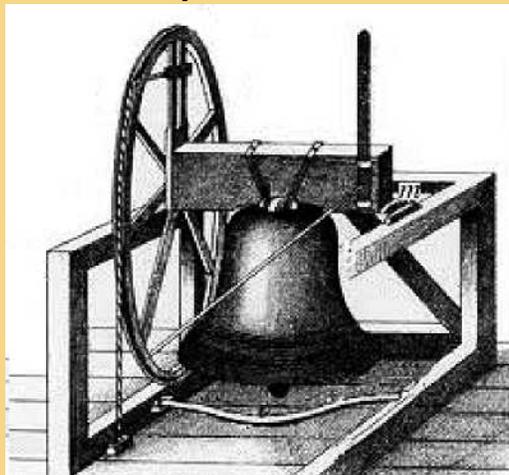
**In 1821 Paul Revere had been dead for 3 years, but the foundry he started in 1792 continued until 1828 casting over 950 bells in all. Norridgewock's bell was Foundry No. 238, weighing 554 lbs and about 29" diameter with a tone close to Middle C. (We can't explain the weight difference.) Revere himself had carefully supervised the early bell making, many of his bells bearing the words**

**"THE LIVING TO THE CHURCH I CALL AND  
TO THE GRAVE I SUMMON ALL".**

**Probably Norridgewock's bell didn't say that because the bell wasn't made for a church, also George doesn't remember any wording on it.**

**The Revere bell served the court until 1872 when the county seat was moved to Skowhegan. In May 1873 the County gave Norridgewock a deed to the lot the court house stood on, probably including the court house although the deed doesn't say so. In 1875 when the building was being renovated an architect supposedly said the bell was too heavy for the tower, so the bell was taken down.**

**More likely, after the bell was taken down to be moved to Skowhegan it was found too heavy for the cupola on the *new* court house.. So probably the bell was left sitting there at the old court house. In 1878 the Baptist church in town voted to ask the Selectmen about getting the court house bell for the church, but the church probably didn't get it. Since 1878 no mention of the court house bell has turned up.**



**Then in 1949 a big bell turned up in the Jewett barn. Jewetts had**

bought the buildings in 1912 from a Nellie Heckert, who bought them in 1909 from John Pierce of Chicago. He bought them in 1907 from Ellie Watts who had owned the property since 1871, the year she married Frank J. Watts. It was Frank who built the substantial buildings the Jewetts came to in 1949, after he moved a previous house on the property farther up Main Street.

And it was probably Frank Watts who put the court house bell in his wife's barn. In 1887 the court house building was occupied by "F. J. Watts Coat Manufacturing" according to an insurance map. The Watts company operated on the North side of the river until 1890, and in that year the old court house burned. So apparently the Watts company was using the building when it burned, and may even have been responsible for the fire. With the bell sitting somewhere in the building, George says maybe a hot rafter or beam fell against it. That could very nicely explain the peculiar hole in the bell.

The Watts Company didn't own the court house, the town probably owned it. Nor did Watts own the bell, in fact maybe it wasn't clear who owned the bell, the town or the county or the citizens who helped buy it. Watts had been Town Treasurer at times, maybe now he decided to act for the town. Maybe he knew about the gold coin, and to get the bell to a safer place he took it home and put it in the barn out of sight.

Frank Watts went bankrupt in 1901. One of his sons stayed in the house for a few years until his mother sold the property. If any of the later owners knew about the bell in their barn (some were elderly or absentee), they probably didn't know what to do with it. WWII should have taken the bell as scrap metal, but Fred Jewett then living in the house would have known it wasn't his bell to give away. So there it sat until 1949.

When the Jewett family left Norridgewock in 1953 the house contents were auctioned off. The buildings went to Peter Cote the grocer who lived there with his family quite a few years. His daughter Giselle, the only surviving Cote, remembers the horse stalls in the barn but nothing about a bell. Floyd Whittemore who bought from Cote knows nothing of a bell. So probably Pete Cote had it hauled away as scrap, unaware of it's history.

But not quite all of the bell was hauled away. In a locked cabinet in

**our museum is a small box containing what looks like drippings of hot metal, like dripped candle wax. The box is labeled "Pieces of the Old Court House Bell".**

**We very much appreciate the contributions from NHS members George Jewett, Frank Hilton, and Brainard Tripp. Does anyone have anything else to add? Any idea of where the Revere bell went after 1953?**

**Submitted BY: Eastman Wilder**

**Norridgewock Historic Society**

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*Merry Christmas & Happy New Year*

*Next Meeting: April 27 2016. Hope to see you there.*



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