

HISTORY OF THE LIBERTY BELL

National Parks Service



On November 1, 1751, a letter was sent to Robert Charles, the Colonial Agent of the Province of Pennsylvania who was working in London. Signed by Isaac Norris, Thomas Leech, and Edward Warner, it represented the desires of the Assembly to purchase a bell for the State House (now Independence Hall) steeple. The bell was ordered from Whitechapel Foundry, with instructions to inscribe on it the passage from Leviticus.

The bell arrived in Philadelphia on September 1, 1752, but was not hung until March 10, 1753, on which day Isaac Norris wrote, "I had the mortification to hear that it was cracked by a stroke of the clapper without any other violence [sic] as it was hung up to try the sound."

The cause of the break is thought to have been attributable either to flaws in its casting or, as they thought at the time, to its being too brittle.

Two Philadelphia foundry workers named John Pass and John Stow were given the cracked bell to be melted down and recast. They added an ounce and a half of copper to a pound of the old bell in an attempt to make the new bell less brittle. For their labors they charged slightly over 36 Pounds.

The new bell was raised in the belfry on March 29, 1753. "Upon trial, it seems that they have added too much copper. They were so teased with the witticisms of the town that they will very soon make a second essay," wrote Isaac Norris to London agent Robert Charles. Apparently nobody was now pleased with the tone of the bell.

Pass and Stow indeed tried again. They broke up the bell and recast it. On June 11, 1753, the New York

Mercury reported, "Last Week was raised and fix'd in the Statehouse Steeple, the new great Bell, cast here by Pass and Stow, weighing 2080 lbs."

In November, Norris wrote to Robert Charles that he was still displeased with the bell and requested that Whitechapel cast a new one.

Upon the arrival of the new bell from England, it was agreed that it sounded no better than the Pass and Stow bell. So the "Liberty Bell" remained where it was in the steeple, and the new Whitechapel bell was placed in the cupola on the State House roof and attached to the clock to sound the hours.

The Liberty Bell was rung to call the Assembly together and to summon people together for special announcements and events. The Liberty Bell tolled frequently. Among the more historically important occasions, it tolled when Benjamin Franklin was sent to England to address Colonial grievances, it tolled when King George III ascended to the throne in 1761, and it tolled to call together the people of Philadelphia to discuss the Sugar Act in 1764 and the Stamp Act in 1765.

In 1772 a petition was sent to the Assembly stating that the people in the vicinity of the State House were "incommoded and distressed" by the constant "ringing of the great Bell in the steeple."

But, tradition holds, it continued tolling for the First Continental Congress in 1774, the Battle of Lexington and Concord in 1775 and its most resonant tolling was on July 8, 1776, when it summoned the citizenry for the reading of the Declaration of Independence produced by the Second Continental Congress. However, the steeple was in bad condition and historians today doubt the likelihood of the story.

In October 1777, the British occupied Philadelphia. Weeks earlier all bells, including the Liberty Bell, were removed from the city. It was well understood that, if left, they would likely be melted down and used for cannon. The Liberty Bell was removed from the city and hidden in the floorboards of the Zion Reformed Church in Allentown, Pennsylvania, which you can still visit today.

Throughout the period from 1790 to 1800, when Philadelphia was the nation's capital, uses of the Bell included calling the state legislature into session, summoning voters to hand in their ballots at the State House window, and tolling to commemorate Washington's birthday and celebrate the Fourth of July.