

Photo by AMY SWEENEY

Ron Weston helped spearhead the work that needed to be done to restore the church steeple.

The Bell Tolls (Again)

Steeple gets new life at Old South United Methodist Church

By KELLY BURCH

On a crisp October morning, the clock at Old South United Methodist Church in Reading was restarted and a bell that has been the soundtrack to life in Reading for more than a century rang out for the first time in over a year.

"I can't believe how much I've missed the bell," said Nancy Chloodian, co-chair of the Reading Steeple & Bell Tower Preservation Fund. "It was the first thing I noticed when I moved to Reading. Without it I was disoriented."

Although there was little fanfare, starting the clock marked the end of a massive steeple reconstruction

that has been happening at Old South Church for nearly 18 months. To mark their success, the key players in the project – two church members, two clock experts and a builder – quietly listened to the bell's tones.

"It has such a phenomenal resonance," said Ron Weston, project manager and co-chair of the preservation fund.

The ceremony was fitting for the church steeple that has been a familiar presence, looming over Reading center for more than 100 years.

"As you drive up Main Street and see the bell, it is just such a majestic sight," Weston said.

However, in early 2012 that sight was in danger. An



Photos by BOB LEVESQUE of American Steeple and Tower Company

Rick Levesque hangs from the cupola of the Old South United Methodist Church in Reading, ready to receive the spire.

inspection of the steeple and the cupola (the portion of the steeple that reaches above the bell higher into the sky) revealed that both were plagued with rotting wood. Without reconstruction, the steeple would need to come down, taking with it a town's image and a congregation's spiritual beacon.

"We got through one thing, and found even more issues," Weston said.

Eventually, the team decided that they needed to find the root of the problem. The men at American Steeple and Tower Co. were able to find leaks in the steeple that were causing the water damage. In turn, the water damage was causing the massive columns that support the steeple to rot, which attracted beetles that did even more damage.

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New England, who has been caring for the Old South clock since 1979.

Although the steeple was in a precarious condition, it looked just fine to passersby.

"That was a problem with the fund-raising," Weston said. "At the street level it looked great, but if you touched it it was falling apart."

While Weston, a retired engineer, organized the build, Nancy Chloodian and Suzy Axelson, his co-chairs on the preservation fund, turned their attention

to fund-raising.

"I went crazy," Chloodian said.

The pair appealed not only to the church, but to the wider community in Reading.

"In the end, it was a perfect split," she said. "People in the church gave larger amounts, but more people from Reading donated."

The community raised about \$90,000. The rest of the money for the \$130,000 restoration came from a discretionary fund handled by the trustees of the church. However, the co-chairs still plan to replenish those funds.

"The hope is to pay that back, so donations are still very welcome," Chloodian said. "They will also help keep the fund alive for future repairs."

Parts of the steeple were removed last fall so that they could be repaired over the winter months. In the spring, the

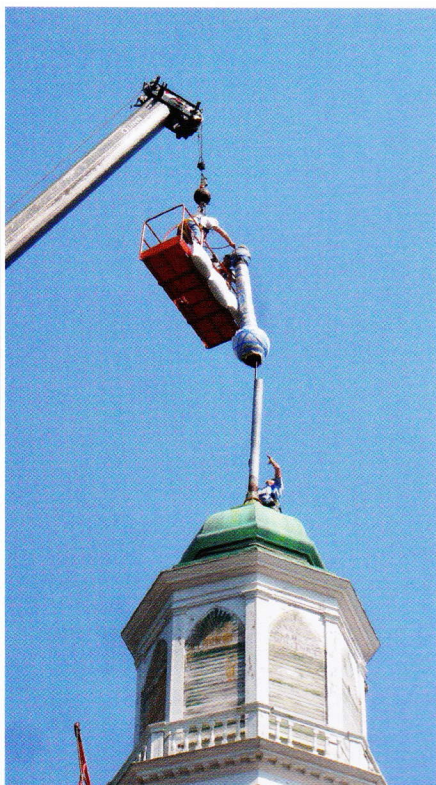


Photo by RON WESTON

Workers from the American Steeple Company carefully fit the newly refurbished gold leaf spire over the rod.



The weather vane on top of the spire at Old South United Methodist Church was repainted in gold leaf. It is about 8 feet tall and weighs between 20 and 25 pounds. It's hollow, fabricated of so-called 16-ounce copper sheet stock. Bob Levesque of America Steeple and Tower Co. says it's not very heavy, but it is bulky and awkward to move around. If you hug it like a "tall thin Teddy Bear" you can "manage it" to its next location, he says.

construction began in earnest. The work included installing a new roof, support beams, shutters and a crib for the bell. In addition to the new construction, many parts of the steeple were refurbished and repaired.

As the roof was replaced, the bell was suspended from the ceiling of a higher level. Bob Levesque of American Steeple and Tower Co. worked beneath the

1,555-pound bell daily.

"I had a lot of faith in my equipment," he said.

Levesque designed a new crib for the bell to rest on, that distributes the bell's weight more evenly and allows for better access around the bell.

"A lot of thought went into this project," Weston said. "It wasn't just slam-bang." **R**



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Steeple chasers

On the morning that the bell is restarted, I scramble up stories of rickety, wooden ladders along with The Readings Director of Photography Amy Sweeney. We reach the bell level and crawl through a hatch onto the open-air balcony, where the bell enjoys sweeping views of Reading.

"How high up are we?" I ask Rick Levesque.

He doesn't keep track.

"If you go 20 feet you might as well go 120," he says. "If you fall you're going to get hurt just the same."

Levesque, along with his son and cousin, clearly are not afraid of heights. Part of the project included scrambling up the cupola to the highest point of the steeple to replace the weather vane at the very top, at least 150 feet above the town green.

Levesque is used to extreme working conditions and says that working on the Old South Church has been a pleasure.

"It helps to work with people who are enjoyable," he says. "These guys were hands-on and common sense prevailed."

With a last-minute adjustment to the bell finished, we climb back into the hatch and down to the clock level. In the center of the small room, levers in the clock's heart swirl and click.

"Want to wind it?" asks David Roberts.

I take a long handle and am surprised at how heavy the crank is to turn. After a few revolutions, I hand the crank back to David, who completes the rest of the necessary turns.

Along with his brother James, David has been winding the clock at Old South Church since the 1970s. Every Friday afternoon, one of the brothers climbs up into the steeple and winds the clock 350 revolutions. As the clock is wound, weighted levers rise up through the steeple and drop as time passes during the week.

The clock, which was built in 1912, is incredibly accurate. Its intricacy is beautiful.

"It's a museum piece," Ron Weston says.

In the center of the steeple, levers

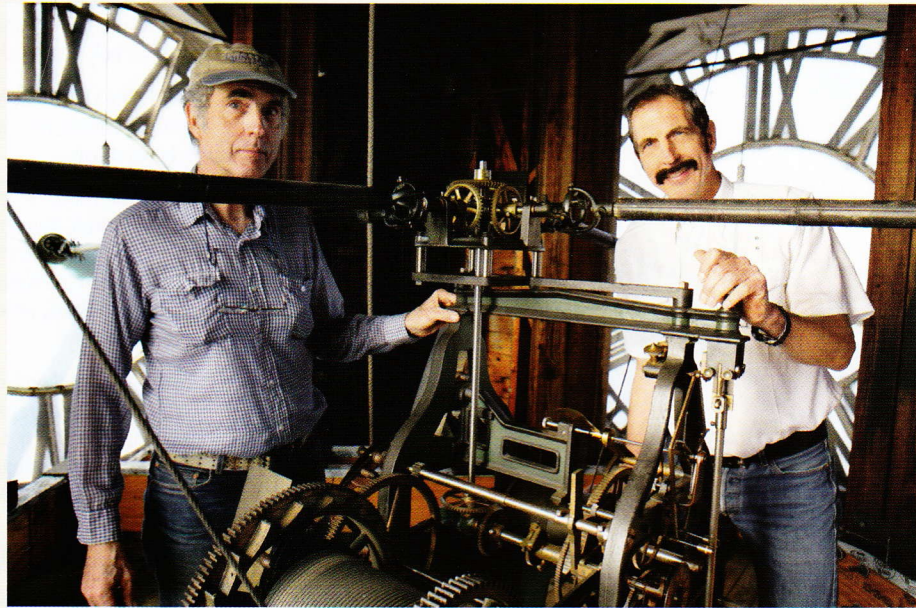


Photo by AMY SWEENEY

James Roberts and his brother, David, from The Clockfolk of New England have been winding the clock at the Old South United Methodist Church for years. One of the brothers climbs the tower stairs to complete the task — 350 cranks — every Friday afternoon.

TICK TOCK ...

▶ **The clock at** Old South United Methodist Church is a Seth Thomas Clock.

▶ **The Seth Thomas** Clock Company produced all sorts of clocks — for anywhere from tabletops to steeples — beginning in 1813 and was a very well-respected clock-maker at the time.

▶ **The bell in the steeple** was produced in 1913 by the Meneely Bell Company of Troy, N.Y.

turn, swinging a giant pendulum that reaches down to the floor of the level below. A zinc temperature compensating rod adjusts the length of the pendulum to make up for extreme weather in the steeple, which is not insulated.

All of this happens without any electrical power.

"There's a lot of engineering in this thing," Roberts says. "It's beautifully done."

If anything can get in the way of the clock, it is nature. On stormy winter mornings snow can build up on the north face, stopping the hands from turning. Occasionally, a fly or a lady bug will get caught in the gear and grind the

whole clock to a halt, Roberts tells me as he pauses to catch his breath.

David and James Roberts tinker with the clock. Hands on all the faces scramble into the correct position. The bell rings out, shaking the entire steeple. The Old South Church's clock is back up and running.

"I'm very happy it's completed," Weston said.

For Nancy Chloodian, who can hear the bell from her home and uses it to pace her day, the ringing has a deeper meaning. She is so passionate about the steeple project that when her grandparents died, she asked mourners to donate to the Reading Steeple and Bell Tower Fund in lieu of flowers.

"Now every time I hear it I think of them," she says.

The group carefully climbs down the ladders and meets in the ground floor of the church. Hands are shaken and everyone heads out to start their days. Weston is obviously pleased with how the project has ended.

"The town's most significant landmark — the thing that is Reading — will be preserved for generations to come," he says.

— Kelly Burch