

WHOSE BELL TOLLS FOR WHOM ?

By Dr. Paul Loatman - Mechanicville City Historian

[The following article clarifies an aspect of parish history about which there was common misunderstanding regarding the origins of the bell in the William St. church. The bell threatened to crash through the deteriorating 150 year old church tower in 2002, necessitating costly emergency repairs, at the time the article was written. Subsequently, the repairs were made and the bell restored.]

Recently, our pastor, Father Bill, discovered that the condition of the tower of the Church of the Assumption had deteriorated so badly that emergency repairs were needed to prevent its collapse. To avoid such a disaster, the 1,800 pound bell itself had to be removed from the tower, lest it crash through the choir loft and first floor before taking aim at the furnace in the basement. Had this occurred, we can only imagine which apostate would have been blamed for the destruction, given the large number of people who claim they are afraid to go to church because the shock of their appearance will cause the building to collapse around them. Apparently, those now attending the Church of the Assumption are a regular “Sunday-go-meetin” congregation, so we can attribute the deterioration to Mother Nature and the laws of physics rather than anyone’s apostasy or heresy.

When the bell was lowered from its perch, its markings indicated that it had been cast in Sheffield, England, in 1861, leading many people to assume that it has been pealing here in Mechanicville almost as long as the Catholic parish has been in existence. But, like so many stories in history which seem to make sense, the saga of the bell is not as simple as that.

When John Short and his fellow Irish immigrants began erecting St. Paul’s Church in 1852, they were practicing an early version of the philosophy, “if you build it, they will come,” made popular by baseball teams in our own era. The “they” in this case were Catholic priests, because by 1852, following the sudden influx of refugees from the Emerald Isle fleeing the horrific potato famine of 1848, there were plenty of Catholics congregating in Mr. Short’s barn on William St. to hear Mass. These church services were performed by itinerant missionary priests who were responsible for serving as many as nine congregations located between Troy and Glens Falls. The thinking went, therefore, that building a permanent church structure would exponentially increase the chances of securing a permanent priest-in-residence here. Voila, Mr. Short and colleagues were proven correct, because a few years after completing their handiwork in 1854, Fr. Thomas Kyle became the first of a stream of Augustinian priests who would serve the parish for the next 145 years and continue to do so today.

The building that those Irish immigrants created without benefit of an architect or the Diocesan Advisory Board on Church Restorations (there being nothing to restore yet) was unpretentious and without adornment, a simple brick

edifice lacking both a bell and a church tower. Given the abject poverty of the original congregation, such adornments might have been viewed as unholy luxuries more distracting than edifying for the performance of the Divine Service. But, as the group became more established in coming years while earning a toe-hold on the bottom rung of the socio-economic ladder, its ability to support an institution like the church grew enormously. Thus, Father Philip Izzo, the new pastor, was able to raise funds to erect a steeple tower that housed a bell in 1869. And, these things remained undisturbed for the next forty-seven years until the now robust, growing congregation of railroaders, paper mill workers, and local Irish businessmen erected a new edifice- the current structure on North Main St. This new building, by the way, happened to cost fifty times what the original church had cost. But, tradition being tradition, the one reminder of their past that the parishioners took with them when they moved into their new quarters was the church bell which had hung in the William St. building since 1869. Consequently, Mechanicville's first Catholic church was not only abandoned; it now was struck dumb, as it were, bereft of a bell.

Three years later, in 1919, the Church of the Assumption was founded as an Italian national parish when the new congregation purchased the old St. Paul's structure for \$7,500. How and why this transpired will be explained in a later article, but suffice it to say here that when Bishop Edmund Gibbons scheduled his visit to consecrate the new parish, its pastor, Fr. Serafino Aurigemma, made the embarrassing discovery that his church lacked a bell. What to do? James Parente, one of the parish's original altar boys, and his friend, Raphael DeMatteo, hit upon a plan to make the tower resound with sound again. Louis Smaldone of Saratoga had acquired a bell (presumably as salvage from an old church, Fr. Aurigemma believed) that he hung from a tree in his backyard, ringing it once a year to mark St. Michael's Feast, a special holy day for the Italian community in the Spa City. Mr. Parente, a close friend of Fr. Aurigemma, claimed in a 1967 interview with me, that he persuaded Mr. Smaldone to part with the bell by pointing out that Mechanicville's Italians would be ringing it daily as opposed to the infrequent use to which it was put by their opposite numbers in Saratoga. Mr. Smaldone could not resist such logic, but there also was the small matter of a \$200 payment which had to be negotiated between the parties before the deal could be consummated. Meager as this amount may seem today, the newly-founded Church of the Assumption had just paid \$7,500 for its church building, and the cupboard was now bare. But not to worry; the local lodge of the Sons of Italy came to the rescue and footed the bill. The bell may not have been installed in time for the Bishop to deliver his welcoming sermon to the new congregation in both English and Italian. But, that problem was quickly remedied when it was raised to its high station later that same day through what the pastor described as "the fervid work" of John Rocco, Michael Martone, Peter Federico and Raphael DeMatteo. And there the bell remained, tolling happily away undisturbed until its recent dismantling.

If all goes according to plan, the renovation of the tower will be completed shortly and the bell will be restored to its exalted position, ready to call Catholics

to come together in the worthy structure which has served them so well for 150 years. But, as can be expected, repairs and improvements to God's house sometimes require the employment of this world's resources, which is another way of saying that Fr. Bill would appreciate any and all contributions from bell-lovers, past, present, and future who have heard the wonderful pealing of our humble bell and would like to hear it again. The good father can be reached at The Church of the Assumption, 49 William St. in Mechanicville. He, John Short, Fr. Philip Izzo, Fr. Aurigemma, and countless parishoners who have been baptized, married, or buried from the church will be greatly appreciative because they know that the bell tolls for thee.