A replica of the Stretch clock recently reinstated at the west end of Independence Hall.

(Photograph taken by the author in summer of 1973.)
During the spring of 1973, workmen completed the construction of a replica of a large clock dial and masonry clock case at the west end of Independence Hall in Philadelphia, the original of which had been installed there in 1753 by a local clockmaker, Thomas Stretch. That equipment, which resembled a giant grandfather's clock, had been removed in about 1830, with no other subsequent effort having been made to reconstruct it. It therefore seems an opportune time to assemble the scattered information regarding the history of that clock and its bell and to present their stories.

The acquisition of the original clock and bell by the Pennsylvania colonial Assembly is closely related to the acquisition of the Liberty Bell. Because of this, most historians have tended to focus their writings on that more famous bell, and to pay but little attention to the hard-working, more durable, and equally large clock bell. They have also had a tendency either to claim or imply that the Liberty Bell and the clock bell had been procured in connection with a plan to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary, or "Jubilee Year," of the granting of the Charter of Privileges to the colony by William Penn. But, with one exception, nothing has been found among the surviving records which would support such a contention. That one
exception has considerable merit, however. It is to be found in the text of Leviticus 25:10 from which Isaac Norris, Speaker of the Assembly, selected to be inscribed on those bells the phrase “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.” The phrases immediately preceding and following it in the Bible are “And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year,” and “it shall be a jubilee unto you.” Since the Charter had been granted in 1701, and the Assembly voted to purchase the first of the bells during the year 1751, there can be little doubt that every member of this deeply religious colony was fully aware that the fiftieth anniversary with its Biblical implications had arrived.

The earliest event, therefore, which is in any way connected with the State House clock and bell occurred in October, 1701, when the Pennsylvania Assembly accepted William Penn’s Charter of Privileges. Even though the colonists of Pennsylvania had already received rights beyond those given to any other American colony, the Charter of 1701 contained more genuine freedoms and privileges than had ever been granted to any comparable group of people in history.¹ For fifty years following the Charter, Pennsylvania flourished and prospered beyond all expectations. As the year 1751 approached, the verse from Leviticus seemed to cry out for particular attention: if any passage in the Bible carried a personal message to Penn’s colonists, this was it.

Although construction of the State House had begun in the spring of 1732, no provision was made for any steeple to be added until the 1749/1750 session of the Assembly, when, on January 27, it was “Ordered, That the Superintendants of the State-house, proceed, as soon as conveniently they may, to carry up a Building on the South-side of the said House to contain the Staircase, with a suitable Place thereon for hanging a Bell.” Then, after passing a few other acts, such as one to “encourage the killing of Squirrels,” and amending another “against killing of Deer out of Season,” the Assembly adjourned “to the Sixth Day of the next Sixth Month.”²

¹ Among numerous sources in which the provisions of the Charter of Privileges can be found is Samuel Hazard, *The Register of Pennsylvania*, II (July, 1828–January, [1829]), 142–144.

² *Votes and Proceedings of the House of Representatives of the Province of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1774), IV, 135, hereinafter cited as *Votes of Assembly*. The Assembly proceedings cited in this paper are reprinted, with occasional minor errors, in the *Pennsylvania Archives*, Eighth Series, Vols. IV, V, and VI.
During that adjournment, Speaker John Kinsey died, and the first action taken when the Assembly again met was to elect his successor: "And it being moved, that the Speaker of this House, is, since the last Meeting, deceased, ISAAC NORRIS, Esq; was unanimously chosen Speaker in his Stead, and accordingly placed in the Chair."

Norris was thoroughly steeped in the Penn tradition. His father, Isaac, Sr., had been one of William Penn’s best friends, and after Penn’s death had become a trustee of the province. Isaac, Jr. had been born and for many years lived in the Slate Roof House at Second and Sansom Streets, where Penn had stayed before moving to Pennsbury. The girl young Norris married was Sarah Logan, daughter of James Logan, Penn’s former secretary and Chief Justice of the Province. Norris was well educated, a linguist, and an excellent student of the Bible. He pursued a career reminiscent of his father’s, both financially and politically. At the time he became Speaker of the House, Norris was also the ranking member of the group of three Superintendents of the State House and so became the leading character involved with the procurement of the bells and the clock for that building.

For many years after his first election as Speaker of the Assembly, Norris’ re-election to that office became almost automatic. He was, accordingly, the Speaker during the last session in 1751 when the following two actions were taken:

Ordered, That the Superintendants of the State-house provide a Bell of such Weight and Dimensions as they shall think suitable. That the said Superintendants do apply to the Trustees of the General Loan-Office for an immediate Supply of such Sums of Money as they may judge necessary to remit to Great-Britain for the Purpose aforesaid: And that the Payment made in Pursuance of this Order, shall be allowed by the Committee of Accounts in their next Settlement with the Trustees, who shall have a Copy of this Order delivered to them, signed by the Clerk of this House, if required;

and "Resolved, That Robert Charles be allowed Fifty Pounds Sterling, as an Assistant to the Agent [Richard Partridge, ‘at the Court of

3 Ibid.
5 Votes of Assembly, IV, 203.
Great Britain'], for the ensuing Year." Norris, in his capacity as a Superintendent of the State House, thereupon prepared the following letter to Robert Charles:

Respect'd Fr'd Rob't Charles

The Assembly having ordered us (the Superintendants of our Statehouse) to procure a Bell from England to be purchased for their use we take the Liberty to apply ourselves to thee to get us a good Bell of about two thousand pounds weight the cost of which we presume may amount to ab't One hundred pounds Sterl. or perhaps with the Charges something more and accordingly we have now inclosed a first Bill of Exch'n viz't John Perrin and Son on Messrs Thomas Flowerdew & Comp's for £100 Sterling. We would have chosen to remit a larger Bill at this time, but will take care to furnish more as soon as we can be informed how much may be wanted.

We hope and rely on thy care and assistance in this affair and that thou wilt procure and forward it by the first good opps as our Workmen inform us it will be much less trouble to hang the Bell before their Scaffolds are struck from the Building where we intend to place it which will not be done 'till the end of next Summer or beginning of the Fall. Let the Bell be cast by the best Workmen & examined carefully before it is Shipped with the following words well shaped in large letters round it viz't

BY order of the Assembly of the Province [sic] of Pensylvania for the State house in the City of Philad'a 1752

and Underneath

Proclaim Liberty thro' all the Land to all the Inhabitants thereof Levit. XXV. 10.

As we have experienced thy readiness to Serve this province on all occasions We desire it may be our excuse for this additional trouble from Thy Assured Fr'd

Signed by

| Isaac Norris |
| Thomas Leech |
| Edward Warner |

6 Ibid., 204.
7 Isaac Norris Letter Book (1719-1756), 25, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP). One assumes that the spelling of "Province" in the inscription was correct in the actual letter. Norris' letter was sent in the care of a Captain Child, undoubtedly Capt. James Child, "commander" of the ship Catherine, who advertised in the Pennsylvania Gazette, Oct. 31, 1751, that his ship was about to sail for London. The next issue, Nov. 7, notes that the Catherine, William Vass, master, had cleared port.
Robert Charles placed the order for the bell with the Whitechapel Bell Foundry at Whitechapel, then a suburb of London. 8

Before the casting of the bell was completed, the desirability of procuring a large clock for use with it was discussed in the Pennsylvania Assembly, and on March 11, 1752, it was “Ordered, That the Superintendents of the State-house do provide a large Clock to strike on the Bell, in the Tower of the said Building, with a suitable Dial-plate to show the Hours and Minutes.” 9

Although the task of procuring the new clock turned out to be a relatively simple one, that of procuring the bell was still far from being accomplished, and was to cause Isaac Norris and his fellow Superintendents numerous perplexing problems. Perhaps the best summary of them appears in the following excerpts from Norris’ letters to Robert Charles between 1752 and 1754:

September 1, 1752

The Bell is come ashore & in good order & we hope will prove a good one for I have heard that it is approved by all hitherto tho we have not yet tryd the sound. We are making a Clock for it of our own Manufacture which we expect will prove better than any they would send us from England where when once they had put it out of their hands they have done with but here the workmen would be made very uneasy if he did not exert his utmost skill as we do not stint him in the price of his labour. The superintendants of the State House by me return their thanks for thy care in procuring us so good a bell and we may hereafter join in a letter for that purpose. . . . 10

March 10, 1753

In that Letter [of September 1, 1752] I gave Information that our Bell was generally liked & app

8 Edward M. Riley, History of the Independence Hall Group, 18 (reprint from Historic Philadelphia from the Founding until the Early Nineteenth Century [Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, Vol. 43 (1953), Pt. 1]). Riley includes this information on the foundry: “The Whitechapel Bell Foundry, which cast the bell is still in existence. Thomas Lester was taken into partnership with Richard Phelps in 1735. Prior to that time, Lester was foreman of the foundry. When Phelps died in 1735 he left the business, plant, etc. to Lester who died in 1769.” See also Charles Michael Boland, Ring in the Jubilee, the Epic of America’s Liberty Bell (Riverside, Conn., 1973), 29-35. In New England in this period there were a few bell founders casting bells for local meetinghouses (Carl Bridenbaugh, The Colonial Craftsman [New York, 1950], 40), but it is doubtful that any of these bells were comparable in size to that ordered by Norris. Most colonial bells were probably of English manufacture.

9 Votes of Assembly, IV, 221.

10 Isaac Norris Letter Book (1734-1753), 30. A few marks of punctuation have been added to Norris’ letters.
the Mortification to hear that it was cracked by a stroke of the clapper
without any other violence as it was hung up to try the sound. tho this
was not very agreeable to us we concluded to send it back by Cap’n Budden
but he could not take it on board upon which two Ingenious Workmen
undertook to cast it here & I am just now Informed they have this day
opened the mould & have got a good Bell which I confess pleases me very
much that we should first Venture upon and succeed in the greatest Bell
cast for ought I know in English America. the mould was finished in a
very Masterly manner & the Letters I am told are better than in our
old one. when we broke up the metal our Judges here generally aggreed
it was too high & brittle & cast several little bells out of it to try the sound
& strength & fixed upon a mixture of an ounce and a half of copper to a
pound of the old Bell & in this proportion we now have it. ...  

April 14, 1753

I wrote a long letter under the 10th of March last and sent it to the bag
of a ship then said to be ready to sail where it yet lies but I propose to
take it back again & recomend it as well as this to the care of my Fr’d
Robert Willing. the Merch of that ship I am informed is either under
arrest or in Goal & the Vessel stopt. ... A native of the Isle of Malta & a
son of Charles Stow were the persons who undertook to cast our Bell.
they made the Mould in a Masterly Manner and run the metal well, but
upon tryal it seems they have added too much copper in the present Bell
which is now hung up in its place but they were so teized [teased] with the
witticisms of the Town that they had a New Mould in great forwardness
before Mesnards arival & will be very soon ready to make a second essay.
if this should fail we will embrace Listers [sic] offer & send the unfortunate
Bell again to him by the first opportunity. ...  

November 8, 1753

We got our Bell new cast here and it has been used some time but tho’
some are of opinion it will do I own I do not like it. if therefore Lister
will cast us another upon the terms he formerly proposed, that is two
pence a pound for recasting, And send it at our risk for which we will
pay the Insurance there I will engage to return the metal of our present
Bell by the first opp° this [proposal] to a Bellfounder who must always
have a q‘ty of metal in stock cannot I should think make much odds, and
I have an inclination to compare the sounds. If he accepts of these terms,
for which I will engage, he may Cast the Bell as soon as he pleases and
then we must depend upon y‘r care in shipping it by y‘e first good oppor-
tunity. ...  

11 Ibid., 33.
12 Ibid., 39.
13 Ibid., 43.
Upon my return from this Journey I shall make the Necessary provision for the Cost of our Bell for we have not yet concluded whether to send back our Old Bell and pay the Casting or to keep them both as the difference on Comparing them is not very great. . . .

The proceedings of the Assembly for August 13, 1754, show that Norris kept his promise: "The Speaker, in Behalf of the Superintendents of the State-house, desired the Opinion of the House whether they should send the old Bell to England in Part Pay for the new One they had purchased (as they had a Right to do by their Agreement) or keep them both for public Use. Resolved, That the said Superintendents do pay for the new Bell, and keep the old One for such Uses as this House may hereafter appoint." The foundry's charges for the two bells, as reported by Robert Charles, were £150 for the first one, and £137 for the second. These amounts do not reflect the total cost which would include, for example, insurance and transportation. From reports submitted to the Assembly by the Committee of Public Accounts, it would appear that the associated costs were initially paid by Robert Charles who was later reimbursed by Norris. The fiscal report submitted "the 19th of the 8th month 1752" states "By Cash paid Isaac Norris, for Robert Charles, towards a Bell £198," and the report submitted at the session of August 27, 1754, includes an item "To Cash paid Isaac Norris, for Robert Charles, towards a Bell £170." A similar report, dated August 29, 1753, shows that Pass and Stow were paid £60 13s. 5d. for recasting the first bell.

It has occasionally been observed that some differences exist between the inscriptions specified in Norris' letter of November 1, 1751, and those which are on the Liberty Bell. Both of those versions

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14 Ibid., 53.
15 Votes of Assembly, IV, 323.
16 Account [of Robert Charles] with the Province of Pennsylvania, Franklin Papers, I, 159, HSP. Aside from a conceivable willingness on the part of the foundry to share part of the loss occasioned by the cracking of the first bell, it seems probable that the foundry had saved the gauges (for shaping the core and the cope), also the mould boxes, etc., which could have been especially constructed for the first bell, thus reducing the cost of the second.
17 Votes of Assembly, IV, 231.
18 Ibid., 325.
19 Ibid., 267.
are presented below. The one at the left is that which Norris had specified; the one at the right is that which Pass and Stow had cast into the Liberty Bell. The latter is believed to be the same as the Whitechapel foundry had originally used except for the changes Pass and Stow had made in the name of the foundry, its location, and the date.

**As Specified**

By order of the Assembly of the Province of Pensylvania for the State house in the City of Philad*. 1752

[and underneath]
Proclaim Liberty thro' all the Land to all the inhabitants thereof.

Levit. XXV. 10

**As Cast by Pass and Stow**

Proclaim LIBERTY throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants thereof.

Lev. XXV: X.

[and underneath]
By Order of the Assembly of the Province of PENNSYLVANIA for the State House in Philad*

Pass and Stow
Philad*
MDCCLIII

It has recently been established that when the two bells were originally cast at the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, they contained the following foundry-identification, place and date line: “Thomas Lester of London made me 1752.” That foundry, still operating after more than 400 years of continuous activity, has recently cast a large number of small replicas of those two bells, and that line clearly appears thereon.

The most obvious other differences between the two inscriptions quoted above, are the reversed positions of the two phrases, and the apparently deliberate addition of a few words to the quotation from Leviticus combined with the omission of a few words from the other phrase. The reason for these changes seems obvious. The foundry would have wanted to make use of substantially the same size of lettering throughout, and to have each of the two phrases occupy an entire line completely surrounding the bell.

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20 In a letter to the author dated Aug. 22, 1973, Douglas Hughes, co-proprietor of the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, stated in part: “In 1752, our master founder was Thomas Lester, and we visited a number of churches where there were Lester Bells of that year or a year either side, and his regular method [of identifying his bells] was, ‘THOMAS LESTER MADE ME 1752.’”
They had a problem. The Superintendents had called for one phrase consisting of one hundred and four characters and spaces to be inserted in one line, and another phrase of only eighty-three characters and spaces to be placed in the other line. They solved the problem by modifying the two expressions so that they would have practically the same number in each line—eighty-seven and eighty-eight respectively. And since it was not uncommon for a Biblical quotation to be cast between the top “wires” or lines around the bell, the founder no doubt considered that in this instance, also, the Biblical quotation should come first.²¹

When Pass and Stow recast the bell, they used letters that differed slightly from those used by Lester, but the Philadelphians seem to have liked them, for Norris commented that “I am told [they] are better than in our old one.”²² And with regard to the spelling of “Pennsylvania” and the abbreviation of “Philad,” the founder merely complied with the specifications. Norris invariably used those spellings for both names.

In 1751, there existed none of the animosity between the colony and England that prevailed just before the Revolutionary War. The phrase from Leviticus was an expression of pure exultation over the liberties the Pennsylvania colonists had enjoyed during the previous fifty years. There was no feeling of bravado or antagonism intended by it. In fact, it was not until twenty-four years later, on July 8, 1776, when the Pass and Stow bell was tolled to announce the public reading of the Declaration of Independence in the State House Square that the inscription on the bell began to take on its presently accepted, intensely patriotic implications. And it was much later than that before the expression “Liberty Bell” became permanently attached to the Pass and Stow bell: the first use of the name appeared in an 1839 antislavery booklet distributed in Boston by the “Friends of Freedom.”²³ The Liberty Bell’s English twin—the clock bell—on the other hand, faithfully performed its duties for almost a century, but always anonymously. So it had come to pass that by 1753, the State House had acquired two of the largest bells in America, and a new clock.

²³ Stoudt, 59.
The selection of a craftsman to make the clock apparently presented no problem. There were numerous clockmakers in Philadelphia at the time, many of whom were noted for the excellence of their workmanship. The man they chose, Thomas Stretch, was especially well qualified. His father, Peter Stretch, was one of the earliest clockmakers to settle in the Province. Before coming to Philadelphia, he had acquired an intimate knowledge of the art from some of the finest clockmakers in England—Thomas Tompion, George Graham, and Daniel Quare.24 His shop was at the southeast corner of Front and Chestnut Streets, then called “Peter Stretch’s Corner at the Sign of the Dial.”25 One of Peter’s interests was local politics, and in about 1708 he was elected a member of the Philadelphia Common Council, an office he held until almost the year of his death, 1746.26 During part of that period, Isaac Norris, Jr., was also a member of the Council.

Thomas had learned clockmaking from his father and became so skilled that his watches and clocks are as highly prized by collectors as those made by Peter. Soon after the death of his father, Thomas Stretch sold the property at the Sign of the Dial and established himself a block farther west, at the southwest corner of Second and Chestnut Streets.27 During his prime years, he was probably the most competent clockmaker in Philadelphia. In 1752, therefore, when Isaac Norris was selecting a man to build the first tower clock for the State House, he chose Thomas Stretch, the son of his old friend and fellow council member, to do the job.

The original plan of the steeple for the State House called for the clock and bell to be located in the uppermost stories, and the bell recast by Pass and Stow was installed there as soon as the appropriate frame for it was ready. The remaining part of that plan, however, was disregarded, because the clock was not installed in the tower, but rather at the center of the floor in the attic of the main building, with the second of the two British bells mounted immediately, and conveniently, overhead in a little cupola on what was then a flat platform on the building’s roof.28

25 Ibid., 226.
26 Ibid., 230.
27 Ibid., 226.
28 The cupola or canopy is described in a 1774 account printed in Riley, 19–20.
The clock was provided with two long slender rods supported within tubes. One rod extended to the west end of the building where it operated the hands on the clock dial; the other extended to the hands on a similar dial fastened to the eastern wall of the building. No masonry clock case was provided there; a circular window now occupies the place where that dial had been located.\(^\text{29}\)

The masonry case on the west wall was obviously intended to create an impression of a gigantic grandfather’s clock, but it also served an important operational function. Within it were long vertical slots extending downward to below ground level, for accommodating the heavy weights that activated both the clock and the clapper of the clock bell. The weights were suspended from ropes which passed over pulleys near the top of the case and on to the large drums within the clock works.\(^\text{30}\) (In the replica of the clock which has just been installed, an electric motor operates the clock hands, so the slots are not needed.)

There can be little doubt that Isaac Norris and his fellow Superintendents of the State House had been directly involved with this change of plans. Norris’ personal influence is suggested in the *Historical Structures Report on Independence Hall*:

The intention at first was to put the clock in the tower. Perhaps the availability of a second bell after the decision to place the Liberty Bell in the tower influenced the builders to place the clock elsewhere. Norris himself may have had something to do with it, for in the Norris of Fairhill manuscripts at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania is a diagram of a clock on an account dated August 5, 1755, which is a fair if plain prototype for the one eventually placed on the west wall of the State House. . . .\(^\text{31}\)

Several eighteenth-century views of the building show the westerly-facing clock dial with its huge masonry case. One of the best known is the 1799 view by William Birch which also shows a portion of the little cupola on the roof close to the tower, and the outline of the bell hanging within it.

Edmund Wooley, the master carpenter, completed his work on the tower in June, 1753. In his account is an item for “Time Spent in attending the Clock makers while fixing ye Clock ye first time.”\(^\text{32}\)


\(^{30}\) Ibid., 50.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 49.

\(^{32}\) Riley, 17.
This drawing of the main clock dial and the masonry case of the Stretch clock was reproduced from the Norris of Fairhill Manuscripts in the collection of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
By mid-1753, therefore, the clock had been installed in the State House attic, but six years were to elapse before Thomas Stretch received any pay for it. Among the incidental expenses reported to the Assembly on September 30, 1759, was one “To Mr. Stretch for making the State-house Clock, and for his Care in cleaning and repairing the same for six Years, £494 5 5½.”

Despite Stretch’s reputation as a clockmaker, there is evidence that the clock may not have performed as reliably as it should. In 1756, for example, when the Friendly Association for Regaining and Preserving Peace with the Indians by Pacific Measures was organized, its rules stipulated that members were to be fined two shillings “for not attending punctually at the time appointed, which is to be determined by the State House clock, if it goes; if not by the watch of the oldest member present.” The next year, however, right or wrong, “Thomas Stretch’s Standard Clock” was to fix the time of meeting.

On January 13, 1762, a little more than two years after Stretch ceased his maintenance work on the clock, the Assembly took the following action: “The House being acquainted that the State-House Clock is found to be much out of Repair, and the Public likely to be deprived of the Use thereof, Ordered, That the Superintendents of the State-House do agree with Mr. Duffield, to repair the said Clock, and take Care of the same for the future.”

A list of “Incidental Charges” dated September 30, 1763, shows that Edward Duffield was paid £76 14s. id. for his “Account of Services done.” Whether these services included anything more than the care of the clock is not known, but there is no indication that the Assembly had authorized him to perform any other work during this period. When one considers that Duffield was paid only £20 in each of the years 1764 and 1765 for maintaining the clock, it would appear that he had done considerable extra work on it in 1762 to make it run satisfactorily. Some problem requiring the maker’s particular knowledge and attention must also have turned

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33 Votes of Assembly, V, 84.
34 Harrold E. Gillingham, “Indian Silver Ornaments,” PMHB, LVIII (1934), 103-104.
35 Votes of Assembly, V, 190.
36 Ibid., 279.
37 Ibid., 372, 431.
up in 1764, for, in addition to its maintenance fee to Duffield, the Assembly paid Thomas Stretch £33 4s. for his services. Stretch’s death in 1765 ended any further attention he might have given his clock.

For the next thirteen years Duffield (1720–1801) performed the maintenance work on the Stretch clock. He was a fine craftsman who had kept a clock- and watchmaker’s shop at Second and Arch Streets from 1741 until 1747, when he moved to Lower Dublin Township in Philadelphia County, northeast of the city. In 1775, he resigned from his State House job and was succeeded by the celebrated David Rittenhouse (1732–1796), astronomer, mathematician, and clockmaker. Just before the British troops occupied Philadelphia, Rittenhouse, as Treasurer of Pennsylvania, fled to Lancaster with the Supreme Executive Council. Not only was his clock-maintenance work thus brought to a halt, the occupation also brought about a temporary separation of the clock from its bell.

Three days after the Battle of Brandywine (fought on September 11, 1777) it was painfully obvious that the safety of Philadelphia was seriously threatened. The Continental Congress, fearful that if the British did take the city, they might recast its large bells into shot, cannon balls, or even cannons, passed the following resolution: “Resolved, That the Board of War be directed to order the commissary general of military stores, to apply to the supreme executive council of the State of Pennsylvania, for an order to remove all public bells, in Philadelphia, to a place of security, upon a near approach of the enemy to the city.”

The response from the Supreme Executive Council was almost instantaneous. On that same day, Sunday, September 14, 1777, it approved an order which read in part: “That Colo. Flower employ Jas. Worrell, Francis Allison & Mr. Evans, Carpenters, or such other workmen as he may think proper to employ, to take down the Bells of all the public Buildings in this City, & convey them to a place of safety.” The “place of safety” to which the Liberty Bell
was taken was beneath the floor of the Zion Reformed Church in Northampton (now Allentown), Pennsylvania, but no one has satisfactorily explained where the equally large clock bell was taken. Although some of the bells of Christ Church shared the Liberty Bell’s hiding place, it seems certain that the clock bell did not.

It must be remembered that the two State House bells were so nearly identical that they have at times been mistaken for one another. That might well have been the circumstance behind two accounts published in 1859 and 1876. In an 1859 history of Independence Hall, it is stated that “while the British threatened to take and occupy Philadelphia, this Bell [the Liberty Bell], together with that belonging to Christ Church, was taken down, and conveyed to the river, near Trenton, where they were buried in the water, in order to prevent them from falling into the hands of their enemies. In this condition they remained from 1777 to the close of the American Revolution. . . .” 43 The 1876 story of the Liberty Bell contains essentially the same information. 44 These tales have been thoroughly discredited insofar as the Liberty Bell is concerned, but a possibility exists that they might have been partially true if the bell under consideration had been identified as the clock bell.

On August 22, 1778, the Pennsylvania Evening Post and the Pennsylvania Packet both carried identical notices: “The bells of this city, removed on the approach of the enemy, by the commissary of military stores, are returned safe and again hung.” 45 Presumably, the Stretch clock and its faithful bell began operating again in their normal manner from that time forward, but the clockmakers who took care of them were never again as well qualified as those who did so before the war.

Perhaps not much attention would have been given to the Stretch clock after the Revolution if a lively controversy had not arisen between two rather cantankerous local clockmakers, Griffith Owen and Robert Leslie. After Owen had taken care of the clock for at least a year, the minutes of the Supreme Executive Council for March 22, 1784, contained these quite blunt statements:

43 David W. Belisle, History of Independence Hall from the Earliest Period to the Present Time (Philadelphia, 1859), 86.
44 Joseph S. Longshore and Benjamin L. Knowles, The Centennial Liberty Bell (Philadelphia, 1875), 16.
45 Pennsylvania Evening Post, Aug. 22, 1778; Pennsylvania Packet or General Advertiser, Aug. 22, 1778.
An order was drawn on the Treasurer in favor of Mr. Griffith Owen, for twenty-seven pounds seventeen shillings and six pence specie, in full for his services in taking care of the State House clock for one year, ending the fourth day of March, 1784, and cash paid for a new pair of lines.

Ordered, That the Secretary inform Griffith Owen that he is now discharged from any further care of said clock, and that he deliver up the key of the same to the Door-keeper of this Board.⁴⁶

Owen’s reply to this action is of considerable interest, for it explains some of the difficulties under which the clock and its caretaker had to operate. His letter, endorsed March 25, 1784, was addressed “To His Excellency the President & Council.”

Gentlemen,

Mr. Trimble inform’d me that you had concluded that my employment should cease in taking care of the Clock, the reasons were that she had stopt sundry times & had not kept the true time—the reasons why she stopt I shall point out—the first time she was stopt two days while I was cleaning of her, the second time the frost broke the arbour that swings the hammer, the third time was occasioned by the breaking of the old lines & the new ones being considerably thicker took me some time in freeing them. The severity of the weather I believe stopt her once & it was the occasion of her going irregular the sudden changes of the weather is all the way that it can be accounted for, those accidents happening in the most severe part, & I being obliged to work in the Clock room delay’d me longer than I should have been had it been otherwise; the Clock is now in good order & keeps good time, & is I think effectually guarded against the like accidents for the future. If you will be pleased to continue me to take care of her & she should not perform to yours and the publicks satisfaction I will give up my charge at any time without demanding any thing for my future trouble.

With the most perfect respect
I remain Gentlemen your
most humble Servent,

GRIFFITH OWEN⁴⁷

Owen was successful in his plea, and for the next three years things seem to have gone on quite smoothly. But at its meeting on February 1, 1788, the Council took an action which foreshadowed new difficulties for him: “The petition of Robert Leslie, stating that the hammer of the State House Clock is not properly fixed, and

⁴⁶ Colonial Records, XIV, 55.
⁴⁷ Pennsylvania Archives, First Series, X, 563.
that for a trifling expense it could be made to answer the purpose much better than at present: Ordered, That he be employed to make the alteration in the hammer, mentioned in his petition." The job must have been done promptly, because within two weeks, on February 13, 1788, the Council approved the payment to Leslie of £6 15s.49

Griffith Owen was apparently not favorably impressed by Leslie's innovation. According to the December 9, 1788, minutes of the Council, he appears to have removed it before it had been in operation for even a year:

A memorial from Robert Leslie of the city, clock and watch maker, containing a complaint against Griffith Owen for removing from the State House clock, the newly constructed hammer which the memorialist had invented and placed there by direction of the late President and Council, was read and referred to Colonel [Richard] Willing, Colonel [Abraham] Smith, and Christopher Kucher, who were instructed to make inquiry into the necessary annual expense of keeping the said clock in repair, and report to Council.50

There is no record of the committee's report. Owen, however, continued to hold his job for almost a year thereafter, until October 3, 1789, when it was taken over, at least until October 11, 1790, by his rival, Robert Leslie.51

Following the Revolution the State House was once again used for its original purpose. The Pennsylvania legislature met in the main building, while the westerly wing, Congress Hall, housed the government of the new nation. In 1799, however, the Commonwealth moved its capitol, temporarily at least, to Lancaster, and in 1800 the federal government moved to Washington. Only the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania remained. Then in 1802, Charles Willson Peale, the eminent painter and amateur scientist, began using the second story for a combined picture gallery and museum at an annual rental of $400.

The State House had suffered its share of wear and tear. It had

48 Colonial Records, XV, 380.
49 Ibid., 387.
50 Ibid., 618–619.
51 Ibid., XVI, 180.
survived the filth of the British occupation. Even earlier, in 1773, there had been complaints that the steeple was rotting away; out of necessity in 1781, appropriately the year of victory, it was finally replaced by a simple spire.52 Throughout these years, the State House was looked upon not as a patriotic symbol, but as just another old building in Philadelphia. Almost to prove the point, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 1816 passed an act which called for a subdivision of the property in the State House Square into building lots, and for their sale, including the State House itself, at public auction for not less than $150,000. The Act included an important option, and an interesting reservation. The option granted the City of Philadelphia the privilege of purchasing the entire offering for $70,000. The reservation specified that if the City did not exercise the option, the Commonwealth would retain the Stretch clock (and, presumably, the clock bell), “if deemed worth taking,” for the new State Capitol in Harrisburg.53 Philadelphia exercised its option,54 but it is unlikely that the action had been motivated by any sentimental or patriotic considerations. Such considerations were not then in vogue. It took a return visit from the aging General Lafayette in 1824 to bring about an abrupt and dramatic reversal of the nation’s apathy toward its history.

The tremendous receptions which had been given Lafayette in New York and Boston may well have challenged Philadelphia’s reception committee to exceed their efforts. There were many who knew or personally remembered that Lafayette had been wounded during the Battle of Brandywine in defense of Philadelphia. Whatever the reason, after some forty-seven years, Philadelphia and Lafayette were joyously brought together again. In a magnificent barouche drawn by six cream-colored horses, he led a huge parade through the city to a hastily refurbished State House, where his arrival was marked by “the thunder of one hundred cannon from the Square and the glory pealing strokes of the Bell of the Revolution.”55 All the pent-up sentimental and patriotic emotions in the

52 Rosewater, 84.
53 Ibid., 93. No mention was made of the Liberty Bell; apparently the legislature intended that it too should go on the auction block.
55 Harold Donaldson Eberlein and Cortland Van Dyke Hubbard, Diary of Independence Hall (Philadelphia, 1948), 357-359; Rosewater, 88.
hearts of the people had burst forth in triumphant welcome. Nor did it subside during the entire year of Lafayette’s visit in America. Patriotism took on a new meaning, and historic places and relics changed as if by magic from ordinary objects to priceless possessions. In keeping with this new spirit, the State House was renamed Independence Hall, and thoughts were soon directed toward restoring it to its original design. Particular attention was given to its steeple, and to replacing the often-faltering Stretch clock with a new one, complete with a bigger bell.

Action on these improvements was not taken immediately, but at the February 7, 1828, meeting of the Philadelphia City Councils, a committee was named “To cause the turret in the rear of the State House to be surveyed, and to procure a plan and estimate of the cost of carrying it up to a sufficient height to place a clock and bell therein.” The report of that committee was presented at the February 28, 1828, meeting of Councils. It was proposed that the brick foundation of the tower, already sixty-nine feet high, be carried up two stories higher and be topped with a wooden steeple. This brought a storm of protest from other members. One of them claimed that “this is a mammoth chimney—so it would be called if it was ever erected—a straight mass of walls—a shot tower, no symmetry to it.” William Strickland, the architect who had drawn those controversial plans, redesigned the tower so it more closely resembled the original, and on March 15, 1828, Councils approved it.

Throughout the debate, the Stretch clock received considerable attention. Councilman Wayne had about the only kind words for it. He believed that “it might continue in use for fifty years,” and later stated, “The clock is represented as a very bad one, yet we find the very man who has had the keeping of it in order [Isaiah Lukens], is now offering to buy it.” In general, however, the councilmen seem to have agreed with the committee’s report that its only value was that of old metal. Councilman Benjamin Tilghman was very blunt: “If there is anything proverbial, it is the badness of the clock at the state house; it is an excusing, not a regulating clock. It is a clock

56 Eckhardt, 90.
57 The Register of Pennsylvania, I, 152.
58 Ibid., 154; Riley, 34.
which affords no rule to go by, but a rule not to go by, for everybody knows it can never go right.”

After City Councils had approved the new plans, Isaiah Lukens, town clockmaker, was awarded the contract for the new clock. This clock, like the one which presently occupies a place high in the steeple, had four dials, one facing each of the cardinal points of the compass. It cost $2,000. John Wilbank, a Philadelphia foundryman, received the contract for the new bell. It was to weigh 4,000 pounds, twice as much as the one used with the Stretch clock. Its price was 45c per pound, less a credit of $400 “for the bell that the clock now strikes upon.”

Here again, a bell for the State House has been described contemporaneously as perhaps the largest one made in America up to the time it was cast. And here again, the first one delivered by the foundry turned out to be unsatisfactory, and a new one had to be provided. The first bell delivered by Wilbank weighed 4,275 pounds and was installed in the new steeple in September, 1828, where it remained until December of that year when Wilbank replaced it with one having a more satisfactory tone. For just a brief period while the exchange of these Wilbank bells was taking place, there were at Independence Hall the two Wilbank bells, the Pass and Stow bell, and the Stretch clock bell.

At the time Wilbank's first bell was rejected, his contract was voided, and on November 4, 1828, a second contract was negotiated. It too contained the provision that a $400 credit would be allowed “for the bell sold him by the Committee,” namely, the bell that the Stretch clock had struck upon. Thus, when the terms of this second contract had been fulfilled, Wilbank should have become the owner of the old Stretch clock bell. With all the rigging and tackle he must have been using to get the 4,000-pound bell into the steeple, it should have been relatively easy for him to lower the 2,000-pound clock bell from the roof of the State House onto his wagon. But he did not do so. It has been reported that Wilbank

50 The Register of Pennsylvania, I, 154.
60 Ibid., II, 144.
61 Ibid.
decided not to remove the bell to his foundry, declaring, “I cannot destroy the Bell . . . your children and my children will some day value it, so I let it stand.” City Councils subsequently took him before a magistrate in an effort to compel him to lower the bell. Wilbank won the case, but was ordered to pay the costs, and to forfeit the $400. The bell, now the property of the city, remained where it was.63

While the matter of the bells was being settled, Isaiah Lukens’ clock was being installed in the new steeple, the completion of which had been celebrated on July 4, 1828.64 Judging from the derogatory remarks made about the Stretch clock earlier in the year, one might assume that its career had ended. Such was not the case. Until the end of 1828, when the second new clock bell was installed, it continued to function as usual.65 Then, on October 8, 1829, the proceedings of City Councils note: “The clock has been sold to the Rev. Michael Hurley of St. Augustine’s Church for 250 dollars.”66

St. Augustine’s Church was located on the west side of Fourth Street, just south of Vine, in Philadelphia. When Father Hurley (c. 1780–1837) took over its pastorate in 1820, the church had not yet acquired sufficient funds with which to build a steeple, and he no doubt felt a very strong responsibility to accomplish that goal. On learning that the State House clock was about to be replaced by a new one, it occurred to him that a purchase of the old clock might help to raise funds for the needed steeple. Even though he had barely enough money, he bought the old Stretch clock. He then engaged William Strickland, architect of the new State House steeple, to design a steeple for St. Augustine’s to accommodate the clock and a bell. When Strickland’s plans were approved, Father Hurley ordered work on the steeple to be begun immediately.

The work proceeded rapidly, but the fiscal program did not fare so well. By the time the steeple was completed, Father Hurley became painfully aware that he could not raise enough money to

63 Stoudt, 112. A similar account of these events, as related by members of Wilbank’s family (but in which the clock bell is confused with the Liberty Bell), appeared in the Philadelphia Press on Dec. 1 and 2, 1918, under the following captions: “Liberty Bell only Junk in Her Girlhood,” and “Liberty Bell Junk Tale Great Surprise to D.A.R.”

64 Ibid.

A diagrammatic cross-section of the State House showing the locations of the four bells and two clocks therein for a short period in 1828.
pay the anticipated costs. During his fund-raising campaign, however, he had observed that the people of the neighborhood were enthusiastic over the idea of having a public clock in their vicinity. That gave Father Hurley an idea. He circulated a petition to City Councils extolling the clock as a public benefit. A digest of the petition presented on January 14, 1830, follows:

The Memorial of the undersigned citizens of the North-Eastern section of the city respectfully represents: That they have for some time past been strongly impressed with the opinion that a public clock in their section of the city would be of great advantage. Your memorialists have regarded with great satisfaction the beautiful Cupola recently placed on St. Augustine in North Fourth Street. Being upon the highest ground within the city plot, and elevated to a degree affording a view second to none in the city, it is a very superior situation for the clock. Some months since, the pastor of the church purchased on his own responsibility the old State House Clock for the sum of $250, with the expectation that the citizens would contribute the necessary funds for repairing the clock and purchasing a suitable bell. The whole of the expense of the clock and bell will be upwards of $1,200, a sum greater than your memorialists believe can be collected from the citizens. They therefore come before your honorable bodies and ask for a remission of the price of the old clock and such further aid as you may be pleased to the object they contemplate.

Your memorialists are authorized to state that the clock and bell when completed are to be considered public property, and will be placed under the care of the constituted authorities if desired by them.67

Two weeks later, Councils resolved

That the sum of two hundred and fifty dollars for which the old State House Clock was sold to the Rev. Michael Hurley, be and the same is hereby remitted; and, that the clock and bell about to be placed in St. Augustine church, be and the said bell and clock are hereby vested in the Pastor of said church of St. Augustine and his successors forever; in trust, for the use and benefit of the citizens of Philadelphia—Provided that in the event of the removal or demolition of said church, and provided also that unless the said clock be kept in order and repair without any expense to this corporation this grant shall cease and be void; and that the property of said clock and bell shall be vested in the “Mayor, Aldermen and Citizens of the City of Philadelphia.”68

67 Ibid., V, 72.
68 Ibid., 87.
It will be noted that the foregoing resolution referred to a “clock and bell about to be placed in St. Augustine church.” The bell in question was the old clock bell, cast at the Whitechapel Foundry in England, for which Wilbank had allowed the city $400. Through the court action mentioned earlier, the city had regained its title to the bell, and could dispose of it in any manner the Councils desired, so they had chosen to entrust it to Father Hurley and his church.

Unfortunately, the new clock and bell brought only temporary happiness to the people of that neighborhood. Within a short time they became faced with a long series of events which brought them great sadness. In 1832, Philadelphia was struck by an epidemic of Asiatic cholera. Aside from the many deaths which occurred, business suffered, and money became scarce. Within a few years it had an effect on St. Augustine’s clock and bell. In February, 1835, a petition was sent to Councils by citizens asking that a suitable person be appointed to take charge of them, the organization being unable to attend to the same any longer. In the succeeding month the committee of Councils reported that the cost of attending the clock had been $50 a year, and the congregation could no longer afford it. The committee then recommended that the clock be taken care of in the same manner as other city clocks. In accordance with the recommendation an ordinance was subsequently passed concerning the establishment and the appointment of a person to take charge of all the public clocks and bells, at a salary of $200 per annum. The bells were declared to be those at the State House, the old Court House, Second and Market, at Second and Pine, at the market west of Broad Street, and at St. Augustine’s Church, “whenever an agreement shall be made not to charge rent for the use of the cupola and access thereto.”

On June 16, 1835, Mayor John Swift and Father Michael Hurley signed the agreement required by the ordinance. Two years later, the community was saddened by Father Hurley’s death. And not long thereafter came the worst calamity of all.

About the time of Father Hurley’s death, the Native American

70 A copy of the agreement is in the archives of the Convent at Villanova University.
Party was organized, with its main objective “to suppress the undue influence and misused privileges of the foreign population.” Early in 1844, almost every section or ward in the County of Philadelphia had a branch of this party. It was generally understood that the Irish, especially those of the Catholic faith, were its prime targets. Tempers on both sides, triggered by deep prejudice and hatred, frequently became strained. When gangs of hoodlums joined members of the Native American Party, matters would often take a turn for the worse, and burning, looting, and some killing resulted. On May 8, 1844, after two days of rioting, St. Augustine’s Church was destroyed by fire, and with it both the Stretch clock and its bell. Nothing could be salvaged from the clock, but fragments of the bell were later gathered from the ruins and, in 1847, were recast into a new bell by Joseph Bernhard. According to advertisements published in the Philadelphia city directories between 1843 and 1847, Bernhard became the owner of John Wilbank’s foundry. It is accordingly an interesting turn of fate that the Wilbank bell and the remnants of the Stretch clock bell should both have been cast at the same location.

Bernhard’s new but much smaller bell was suspended from a tree at St. Thomas of Villanova’s College (now Villanova University), where it served as the “College Bell” for about fifty years. Then when the first edifice of the Church of St. Nicholas of Tolentine was built in Jamaica, Long Island, by the Augustinians, the bell was moved to that church. Very little attention seems to have been paid to its history while there, but shortly before the outbreak of World War II, historians of the Augustinian Fathers of Villanova traced the bell and arranged to have it returned to the University. The first time it again rang there was in 1942, the year of its return, to celebrate Villanova’s one-hundredth anniversary. It now occupies a sheltered spot in the Falvey Memorial Library, where it ranks as one of the University’s most cherished possessions.

In its first one hundred and twenty-five years, four bells were cast for the State House in Philadelphia. With the exception of the second (the Stretch clock bell) each was substantially larger than its predecessor, and at the time each was installed it was the largest

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72 Ibid., 87.
This drawing shows the relative sizes, the weights, and the names of the founders of the large bells which have been in use at the State House. The one shown in dashed lines represents the bell which was recast from the fragments recovered from the Stretch clock bell after its destruction in 1844.
bell in America. The greatest of them all is the 13,000-pound bell (1,000 pounds for each of the original thirteen states) cast at the Meneely and Kimberly foundry at Troy, New York. That huge bell has been occupying the steeple since 1876. If one considers the Bernhard bell as being representative of the original Stretch clock bell, then all these clocks and bells still exist. The Meneely bell and the Liberty Bell still occupy their places in Independence Hall, although there are plans to build a new “home” for the Liberty Bell in the close vicinity. The Seth Thomas clock contributed by Henry Seybert in 1876 continues to strike on the big bell in the steeple. The Wilbank bell still tolls the hours as measured off by the Lukens clock, but both are now located in the steeple of Germantown’s Town Hall. The remains of the Stretch clock bell are enshrined at Villanova University. And now, in replica, the dial of the Stretch clock and its tall masonry case once again occupy the western wall of Independence Hall.

Washington, D. C.

Arthur H. Frazier

73 A short history and description of this bell is printed on the reverse side of a photograph taken of it by Leo Daft who had entered it in accordance with an Act of Congress in the year 1876 in the office of the Librarian of Congress at Washington.