

## **BELLS AND WHISTLES**

*(Zattu Cushing, Hezekiah Barker, and the evolution of bells and clocks in Fredonia*

*by Douglas Shepard / Barker Museum Newsletter (Fall, 1998)*

We are so accustomed to the various signaling devices that fill our lives that we barely notice them even as we take in the message. Fire whistles, blinking traffic lights, Sunday church bells, flags at half-mast—they are all almost too familiar to notice, just part of today's world.

However natural they seem though, we should be aware that very early in our Village's history similar methods of signaling important information were tried. What is even more interesting is how much the various signaling devices are tied in with our Village's early history. One of the very earliest stories we hear about is **Zattu Cushing's** dinner horn. Like the iron triangle (called a "Triangular Bell" when it first appeared in **1826**), the horn was used to call people in from distant fields when dinner was ready.

When **Zattu Cushing** and his family came from Buffalo on frozen Lake Erie, they became trapped overnight in a snowstorm. Repeated blowing on the dinner horn alerted some good Samaritans on shore that were able to find the **Cushing** family and guide to them to safety.

There were probably similar incidents that have not come down to us when someone in the far-flung settlement called for help from a neighbor. However, we do have an account that includes a more normal use of the horn. Someone signing himself as "Pioneer" describes the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July **1812**, in the *Fredonia Censor* of July 21, **1858**. He apparently lived some distance from Canadaway, where everyone was heading for the festivities. In his recollection of the events the "the boys" where he lived fired a salute at daybreak, lit a series of bonfires, and "then the cow-horns sounded for breakfast." After which all prepared for the trek through "the distant hills" in wagons, on horseback, "but mostly on foot, following a line of blazed trees, the only guide then through the forest." Finally, an opening appears in the trees "and soon after the little school house was espied, and the hill beyond the creek." (He seems to be coming up from the south, seeing the little schoolhouse and the hill behind it while he is still below the creek) A little tavern seems to be the place of rendezvous. It was kept by **Hezekiah [Barker]**."

Notice that there were no bells ringing because there were no church buildings, thus the absence of steeples. The first official signal was the bell in the Academy tower. The old academy building was erected in **1822/23**. In June of **1828** the *Fredonia Censor* was pleased "to state that a fine toned Bell, weighing 450 [lbs.] has been procured for the use of the Academy." The original building was a two-story frame structure 35 x 50 feet with a 10 x 24-foot tower at the front facing the Common and the site where the little schoolhouse had stood. It had a "bright tinned dome, with lightning rod and weather vane." The Academy **bell** was rung on weekday mornings to call the scholars to their studies, at 9:00 PM for curfew and on Sundays to signal that church services were to begin. It was also used as a fire alarm. In July **1831** (the Village had been incorporated in **1829**) the Village Trustees agreed to pay a **Mr. Taylor** to ring the bell as needed.

The Presbyterians originally owned the second floor of the Academy building for their church. In **1835** they put up their own building next door (where the Village parking lot is today) and bought "an excellent, fine toned bell, weighing 1040 lbs.," which the *Censor* added, was, "an ornament to the village." That bell was rung to call the faithful to church as well as at 9:00 each night. No doubt the 1040-pounder outrang the Academy's puny 450-pounds.

In time the Academy bell cracked, but the Presbyterians agreed in **1841** to permit the Trustees of the Academy to ring the church bell for school purposes. In **1845** Trinity Episcopal Church bought a large bell which was hung in its church tower.

At the beginning of **1851**, "**Abraham Fields**, Sexton." (one assumes he was Sexton of Pioneer Cemetery) put a notice in the *Censor* of January 14<sup>th</sup> that henceforth, to announce local deaths, "one of the Bells will be tolled as follows: First, a short ring, then in case of the death of a male three strokes; ditto female two strokes; after which an interval of five minutes, when the age will be struck."

On July 24, **1866** Deacon [David] Barrell of the Baptist Church set out on a bell-buying journey to Troy, NY. Finding nothing satisfactory at hand, on July 26<sup>th</sup> he left an order with **Jones & Co.** there to cast one for his church. On the morning of August 13<sup>th</sup> the bell arrived, on the 14<sup>th</sup> it was hung, and on the 15<sup>th</sup> it was rung for the first time at noon. It was reported as “a beautiful sounding bell.”

The *Censor* of August 29<sup>th</sup> pointed out that the new Baptist Society bell, 1808 pounds, was toned on E; the Episcopal bell of 1315 pounds on F; and the Presbyterian bell of 1621 pounds on G. Sunday morning must have been musical indeed. Unfortunately, on June 6, **1868**, the Baptist bell was found cracked, but by the end of July a somewhat heavier replacement had arrived.

Before we continue with our account of the Village Bells, we should go back a bit to the spring of **1841** when the bell in the Academy tower cracked. Rather than having the Academy replace it, the Village Trustees decided to buy a Village clock in its place. In April, **Levi Risley**, with authorization, shopped for an appropriate clock, and following his report, the Trustees voted to buy a brass clock from a firm in West Troy, NY. It was delivered September **1841** and by prior agreement was put in the tower of the Presbyterian Church, where it could strike the hours on the church bell.

“This was the first public clock in the country.” Although it was regularly cleaned, serviced and repaired, it began to fail in the **1870s**. The parts that were most worn were replaced or mended in the spring of **1873** “and it now keeps the hundreds of clocks in the village in harmony and keeps the people in approximate unity in their attendance on their appointments.”

However, with the decision of the Presbyterians to replace their church building with another structure, the clock was taken down and stored in the Academy building in **1874**. At any rate, the Trustees discussed various options about repairing or replacing the clock and where it should be put.

**E.A. Curtis** had developed plans for a new tower for the Baptist Church and the Baptist Society expressed its agreement midway through **1875**. What followed were long periods of discussion and delay about replacement. In the meantime a further motion to put the clock in the Baptist tower was defeated in May **1878** and a year later the clock was examined and found “worthless for repair.” Seven years went by. In October **1885**, the *Censor* explained that [finally] “**Amos Harrison** has the contract to rebuild the Baptist Church tower according to a plan made by **Capt. Curtis**... If the old clock belonging to the village can be made to go at a moderate expense it would be a good idea to use it, but the Trustees say they have not the funds to buy a new one.” The Baptist Church tower designed by **E.A. Curtis** finally went up, but without a clock.

In February **1886** petitions for and against buying a replacement clock were presented to the Board of Trustees. Since those signing in favor represented a “greater property valuation in the village” it was agreed to buy a new clock. (i.e. The rich guys won.) By March the *Censor* could say, “Dials for the new town clock have been constructed as high as possible on the tower of the Baptist church. They are six feet eight inches in diameter and it is thought can be seen a long distance. The clock will be put into position in about three weeks.” In April **1886** the clock was installed and began striking the hour on the church bell. The *Censor* was soon able to say, “The town clock is giving good satisfaction so far and even those who opposed the purchase seem to be pleased with it.”

Oddly enough, one of the forces helping the new clock proponents win their case was the announced decision of the **Howard** Watch Co. to move from its East Main Street location to Peoria. What that meant was that they would take their steam whistle with them, a whistle that had at least notified all the Village of the hour in the morning, at noon, and at quitting time. Although we have no notice of exactly when the steam whistle began functioning, it was probably around **1870** when the Watch Factory moved from some small buildings behind the Baptist Church on Temple Street to its new location on East Main Street.

Another factor in the story of Fredonia’s signaling devices is the street railroad. With the development and improvement of electric motors, an electric street car company was formed, a one-story brick power house was built at the intersection of Church and Center Streets, and the electric trolleys began operating in

December **1891**. An important tangential benefit was that the power plant produced the electricity with steam-powered generators and was thus able to supply nearby buildings such as the Village Hall with steam for heating. In addition, the steam was used to blow a fire alarm whistle.

The whistle was connected to the power plant by November **1891**, and residents were informed, “four blasts of the whistle, three short and one long, will be an alarm of fire.” There were problems, of course. Late in **1895** the *Censor* suggested the whistle be blown for a longer time, “at least 5 minutes,” so everyone would hear it.

In the fall of **1892** an additional signaling system appeared on top of the Village Hall. Not whistles or bells, these were flags, weather flags to give the same weather reports as are represented today by various colored symbols on a TV weather map. Of course the system in **1812** was a little less sophisticated. A white flag meant fair weather predicted. A flag that was half white and half blue meant local storms. All blue meant a general storm. White with a dark square in the center meant a cold wave or frost. When a triangular flag appeared above the weather flag, it indicated a warming trend; below meant colder.

Even though the signaling device was made up of flags, it too depended on electricity – to work a telegraph key. From the U.S. Weather Bureau over that telegraph wire came the official report each morning. It was the Village Hall janitor’s job to hoist the flags to let the village know what its weather was to be that day.

With the advent of the telephone and other electrically powered signaling devices, we are into the modern age. It is a far cry- so to speak- from **Zattu Cushing**’s dinner horn, but some part of our past is still there as a reminder. Next time you are down in the heart of the Village, and hear the fire whistle or a church bell, look up at the Baptist Church tower and pay your respects to the bell and the clock: ancient reminders of the signals we sent each other in days gone by.