



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

From the Archives of Museums on the Green

Church Bells and Death Knells

by Meg Costello

Did you know that Paul Revere is still delivering a message, every day, in Falmouth? He made the bell that hangs in the tower of First Congregational Church and rings at the top of every hour. If you listen carefully, you'll hear what Katharine Lee Bates called "the living voice of Paul Revere," marking the precious hours as they pass by.

Before telegrams, phones, radio, TV, and the internet existed, when even newspapers were few and far between, church bells were a source of information. They warned of fires and invasions. They signaled the start of church services and town meetings. They also served as an instant obituary notice, through an ancient practice called the death knell.

Revere anticipated that the bells he made would often be rung to commemorate a death. On many of his creations, including Falmouth's bell, he engraved this saying: "The living to the church I call / And to the grave I summon all."

Death knells are not to be confused with the tolling that occurs at a funeral. A death knell was rung as soon as the minister or sexton became aware that a parishioner had died, in order to communicate the sad news to everyone within earshot of the church. This practice had roots in the English medieval custom of ringing bells immediately after a death to frighten away evil spirits, which might otherwise try to divert the newly departed soul from its path to heaven. From its superstitious beginnings, the death knell evolved into a practical means of communication, informing people which of their neighbors had just died.

The traditional code for a death knell called for the bell to be rung twice three times for a woman, or three times three for a man. Then, the bell would toll one stroke for each year of the deceased's life. Those listening and counting had a good idea of who was gone. They could prepare for a funeral, probably in a day or two, after which more tolling would accompany the body from church to the grave.

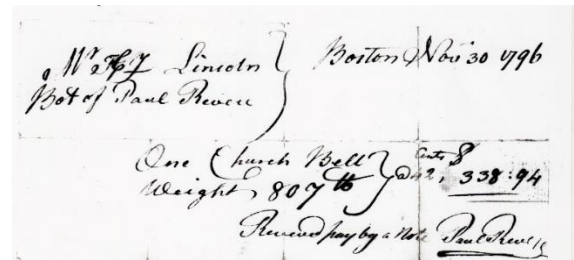


Photo of Revere bell at First Congregational Church.

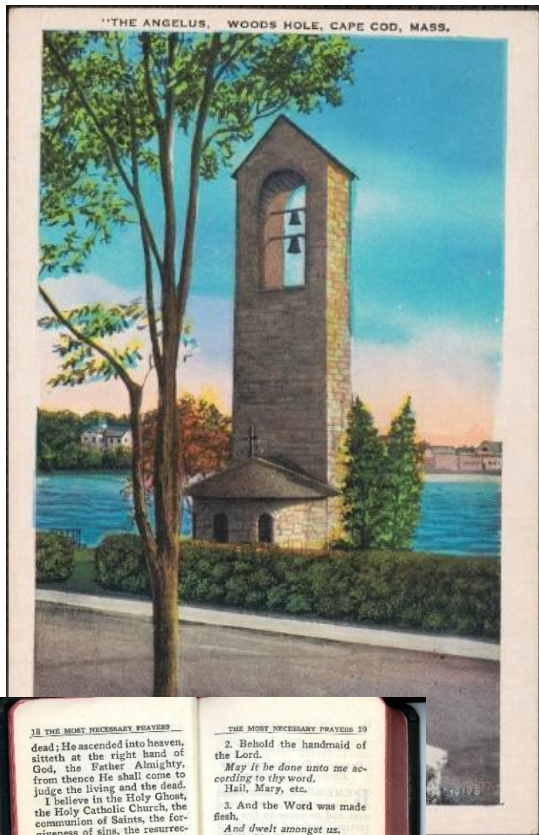
Receipt for payment for Falmouth's bell, signed by Paul Revere.

The death knell was sounded in Falmouth up until the Civil War. Edward H. Jenkins (1850-1931), in his memoir “Old Falmouth Sketches,” recalled hearing it:

At some unusual time in the week it would boom out its signal that someone was dead. Play stopped, the housewives went to their doors to listen; the carpenters rested their hammers. You thought of all the feeble folk in the village and of the ships that had not been spoken lately. Then the bell counted the age. We boys reckoned the years backwards: 1859, '58, '57, and so on and we felt relieved when our year of birth was passed, for it confirmed our feeling that we were too young to die. Back the time went to 1789. Old Cap'n Pierce it must be, a pensioner of the war of 1812. Then the hammers began again, the housewives took up their work and we boys our play. Sometimes the bell gave one sharp bang – and ceased. One year old. That hurt more than the long tolling.

For many years ringing the death knell was the responsibility of church sexton Baalis Shiverick. His bell ringing had a personal touch so distinctive that when he himself died, and his knell was rung by another pair of hands, listeners said immediately, “It must be that Baalis is out of town.” And so, he was.

Fans of classic mystery stories may recall Dorothy L. Sayers’s novel *The Nine Tailors*, which shows the death knell still being rung in an English village in the 1930s. Sayers creates a spooky mystique around the church bells in her story. She gives them names like Batty Thomas and Tailor Paul, Jericho and Jubilee. Each has its own personality, and in the end, they help to bring a murderer to justice.



Naming bells was not a practice confined to fiction. New bells in Catholic churches were usually blessed by a priest in a ceremony informally dubbed the “baptism of the bells.” Frances (Crane) Lillie, a Catholic convert, established the St. Joseph bell tower in Woods Hole. She chose to name its two bells after Gregor Mendel and Louis Pasteur, Catholic believers who were also groundbreaking scientists. The bell “Mendel” is carved with the message “I will teach you of life and of life eternal.” The inscription on its partner “Pasteur” reads simply “Thanks be to God.” Their purpose, according to Mrs. Lillie, was to remind the scientists working in Woods Hole of the ultimate source of all knowledge.

St. Joseph’s bells are best known for ringing the “Angelus” three times a day. This call invites Catholics to say a prayer commemorating the angel Gabriel, and the message of salvation he brought to Mary. The “Angelus” bells ring in a pattern similar to the death knell for a man: three chimes, a pause, three more chimes, a pause, three final chimes, and another pause. The sequence is finished not by tolling, however, but by a brisk, brief pealing. The similarity suggests that both practices may derive from the same roots in medieval Europe.

Postcard from the Anita Gunning Postcard Collection, Falmouth Public Library, hosted at Digital Commonwealth.

Prayer book, gift of Mary Tavares, in Museums’ archives.

Newspapers and telephones eventually made the death knell obsolete. An ever-growing population, attending many different churches, also led to its demise. Tolling church bells for a funeral remained common practice. In some cases, the bell ringer would toll the years of the deceased's life as the procession left the church—an echo of the old death knell custom.

Rev. Henry Herbert Smythe, the beloved retired pastor of St. Barnabas, “died quite suddenly of heart failure” in 1930. The town was plunged into shock and sorrow. All Main Street businesses were closed in silent tribute on the afternoon of his funeral, as the cortege wound its way to Oak Grove Cemetery. According to the *Enterprise*:

As the bier was taken from the church the bell was tolled seventy-six times, one stroke for each year of life, and symbolically as the sexton Joseph MacKilligan gave the final stroke, the rope snapped and fell coiled about his feet. (*FE*, 11/20/1930, pp. 1, 12).

Did MacKilligan somehow manipulate the thick rope and tons of moving metal to produce this dramatic effect? Or, did the St. Barnabas bell pay its own tribute to Rev. Smythe, proving that it knew for whom it tolled? You be the judge.



Rev. Henry H. Smythe, c 1925