

THE MORNING CALL

LOCAL

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Forgotten bell cast in 1769

■ The 'other' Zion's Church bell was rung to celebrate independence.

By BOB WITTMAN
Of The Morning Call

Thousands of people visit Allentown's Liberty Bell Shrine at Zion's Reformed United Church of Christ every year to see the replica of the famous bell that proclaimed the nation's freedom in 1776. But hardly anyone pays any attention to a weathered old bell that hangs above the shrine's front door.

The little bell, manufactured 230 years ago in Bethlehem, is the oldest bell in Allentown and was rung on the date the Declaration of Independence was read to the local populace on July 8, 1776.

Even though the bell was rung at noon every July 4 for many years after that, present-day church leaders had forgotten about it.

They were unaware it was a working bell and were unfamiliar with its historic status until an old photo of it was published in The Morning Call last year.

But church officials began to get reacquainted with the bell Friday, when a conservator hired by Zion's Church examined it for cracks and removed



DENISE SANCHEZ / The Morning Call

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T. Scott Kreilick inspects the bell that hung over the Liberty Bell Shrine Museum.

BELL

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it — temporarily, at least — from its niche high above the shrine's main entrance.

"Generally, it looks in pretty good shape," said Scott Kreilick, an architectural conservator and metallurgist from Oreland, Montgomery County.

Kreilick reported to a church committee standing on the Hamilton Street sidewalk beneath the bell that no cracks are visible. But the clapper is quite rusted, and the bolt that holds the bell to the yoke it hangs from is corroded and missing a nut.

Kreilick works for the Philadelphia's public art office and is in charge of inspecting and repairing the city's 560 outdoor monuments and sculptures. He also is affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania, where he earned a degree and manages the school's architectural conservation laboratory.

He plans to follow up Friday's visual inspection with a radiography examination, similar to an X-ray.

"That way we can pick up any cracks that are not obvious," said Kreilick.

The bronze bell is made from a copper and tin amalgam and can be repaired by welding, Kreilick explained.

Church officials are not sure what they will do with the bell after the examination is complete.

"Our ultimate goal is to ring it on July 4," said LaVerne Passman, an associate pastor at Zion's Church.

The church would like to reinstitute special Fourth of July services centered on the ringing of the bell, which was cast in 1769 by a Moravian foundry in Bethlehem operated by Matthias Tommerop when the Zion's congregation was just seven years old.

The bell served as the town bell and was rung to give warnings of fires and to

herald public announcements and other happenings in the fledgling village.

In 1790, the church replaced the bell with a larger one, and the original was moved to the Allentown Academy at 8th and Walnut streets. It was rung daily to mark the start of classes for a half century.

In 1886, the old academy building became the property of Joseph Ruhe, who razed the school to erect a home on the site. The Ruhe family owned the bell until 1927, when it was returned to Zion's Church under the stipulation that it be rung every July 4.

It was erected over the front doors to Zion's sanctuary in an arch constructed of 13 stones where it hung for the next 36 years.

In 1963, the church opened the Liberty Bell Shrine in the basement to commemorate the spot where the real Liberty Bell was hidden from the British during the Revolutionary War.

A new separate entrance leading to the shrine was built on the north facade, and the bell was moved to a niche above the doors.

Through sunshine and snowstorms, the bell occupied that space continuously until Friday.