

*The following is an excerpt from a grant application for a Connecticut Historic Resource Fund (HRF) Grant written in 2006. The project won funding in 2007 and the tower restoration was completed in July of 2008. Sources of information include accounts from church historical records by Helen Bray and reports of more recent history by Charles Waggoner.*

## **A Project for Restoration of St. Peter's Church Bell Tower, Cheshire CT**

Stephen C. Parsons, AIA



The brick Victorian gothic Bell Tower of St. Peter's Episcopal Church, a community landmark in Cheshire, Connecticut is the culmination of a structure that evolved over many years. This tower is now threatened with serious deterioration to the brick and wood exterior due to damage from water that had infiltrated for many years. The sounding of the bell, once part of the familiar day-to-day atmosphere of the community has fallen silent, since any movement of its great weight threatens its structure, with the potential for the bell itself falling, causing loss of the bell itself, and irreparable damage to the tower. The church on this site has played a continuous role in the life of Cheshire since its founding in colonial times. Preserving and protecting it, and restoring the functioning of its bell will help allow this role to continue long into the future.

### **History of the Tower and Bell**

The tower portion itself dates from 1889, 14' square, 65' high, the second highest landmark in Cheshire, with only the Congregational Church spire set back on the nearby town green, higher. The site of the present church was donated in 1760 by Joseph Moss, the church's first leader "for the consideration of 7 pounds, 10 shillings for the love and good will of the church of the Blessed



Redeemer.” The site is at the intersection of historic routes from New Haven to Farmington and Waterbury to Wallingford, which continue as busy roads to this day, with upwards of 32,000 vehicles passing daily.

While Congregationalism initially was the official religion in Connecticut, Anglicans continued as a significant independent group. The history of construction on the site

parallels the growth and transformation of this church in the community. The original small wood church was replaced with a larger one in 1770 to which a steeple was added in 1795. Samuel Seabury, the first appointed Bishop of the newly formed Episcopal Church in this country was a close friend of St. Peter’s rector, Reuben Ives, and spoke at the church in the last years of his life. “They had better build a church to their steeple,” he is reported to have wryly commented, upon hearing of the new church improvement project. That same year he helped found Episcopal Academy (now Cheshire Academy) on a site directly across the street from St. Peters. A strong relationship between these two institutions continued for many years. The rector of the church and the head of the school often being the same person. Today the Academy still uses the church building for opening ceremonies and convocation.



In 1839 the wooden church, deemed structurally unsound, was demolished. The nave portion of the present brick church building was erected for the cost of \$4000 from plans drawn up by Sydney M. Stone, and included a bell tower centered on the east front entrance to the nave from the street. First mention of a bell on the site dates from as far back as 1814. In 1881 the present bell was donated to the parish. According to records, the new bell weighed 3800 pounds and required repair of the existing bell tower. The old bell was transported to Troy, NY, presumably as a trade-in for the new.

The original 1839 early gothic revival entry and tower was removed in 1889, replaced with the present simple, commanding Victorian gothic bell tower with reinstalled 1881 bell as a part of a new narthex and parish functions in front, with the tower situated at the northeast corner, prominently visible at the crossroads, and unchanged to this day.

### **Present Threats to the Tower**

The ringing of the bell was a regular part of community and church life for call to worship, weddings, and funerals, but fell silent in the late 1970’s. Pronounced swaying was noticed at bell ringing, and the church was advised to immediately stop use of the bell, which threatened greatly increased risk of it collapsing its wood structure and falling.



Repair and maintenance of the tower was difficult to observe and access and too easily deferred over the years. Water was discovered to be infiltrating through a chimney nested in a back corner of the tower and scuppers designed to drain out any water that came through side openings of the tower were blocked. Extensive rot of woodwork at openings as well as the bell's actual supporting wood structure had become evident. Exterior brickwork had been attacked by the water entering from behind and extensive exterior spalling became evident. The leaking upper roof and the roof below the open bell area were replaced and scuppers repaired to stop the source of the damage.

A renewed emphasis has been given to adequate and long-lasting maintenance of the church building, including the symbolic bell tower since the mid 1990's. This critical piece of the maintenance and restoration project comes after important projects throughout the church facility to repair and replace all roofing and mechanical systems, rectify leak prone conditions, and bring interior space up-to-date. An important part of this work has been to make the facility fully accessible with ramps and toilet facilities. The church, in this bell tower restoration, is continuing its tradition as steward of an important historical resource in the community.

### **Preserving the Tower for the Church and the Community at Large**

Church life from the founding of the town invariably help set the tone for the aesthetic qualities, preserved today in its historic landmark buildings and homes. Properties in the immediate area form a contiguous newly formed Historic District. This district, including the town hall and green, 3 religious buildings, and many homes serving as place of business and residence, gives Cheshire a distinct sense of place and make it an attractive tourist destination for local civic events and helps draw people to the area to live and work. St. Peter's has been an active supporter and participant in this district. Church members actively participated in a Historic Commission sponsored reenactment



of events in the town surrounding the life of Titus Moss, a junior warden of St. Peter's who served and died in the Civil War.

The church frequently sponsors other community and cultural programming, including art shows, support groups, and special services, and concerts. Writings from the local church run prison support group were given a

special reading at a Stations of the Cross service on Easter Week. Last year, an evening of music for Martin Luther King Day was jointly sponsored with Cheshire Academy. Performance events particularly benefit from the historic traits of the facility. Restoring use of the bell and securing its housing will enhance these uses. A wide range of ways to reinstate the bell tradition are being explored for marking significant points of ritual, calling to worship, tolling certain hours, announcing events, rejoicing, warning, and mourning. The bell tower serves as a symbolic landmark in the community to be both seen, heard, and enjoyed, and is, as such, universally accessible.

## The Program for Restoration

The office of Edward Saad and restoration architectural consultant Donald Baerman, AIA, widely respected in their restoration design work for historic institutional buildings, were retained to plan the project. They have compiled complete design restoration drawings and specifications with the intent toward complete fidelity to original architectural detail and appearance of the 1889 Victorian Gothic bell tower. Original brick masonry exterior wall surfaces that have suffered water damage will be repaired or replaced. The attached plans and specifications describe the project, to be publicly bid. In summary, the work to be undertaken under the funding of this grant includes the following:

- Roof surfaces and flashings on uppermost roof and parapet as well as secondary roof under the bell in the belfry area will be repaired, or replaced as needed, and scupper/downspout system restored to working order.
- Portions of spalled, cracked, and damaged brick masonry will be replaced. Cracks will be sealed, and mortar repointed for all brick and stone components.
- The interior surface of this brick masonry, exposed on the inner face of the belfry, will be coated with a lime wash.
- Restore existing deteriorating and/or rotting belfry level opening wood components, duplicating all existing form and detail. Components include sash, louvers, sill plates, and hatch cover. Up to 20% of existing wood is budgeted to be replaced, depending on condition. All wood components will be treated with fungus repellent coating, and painted.

Exterior scaffolding will be erected for access to all sides of the tower, allowing complete, thorough work and easy inspection. An essential portion of Bell tower work that will be accomplished independently of this grant is the repair of the bell's supporting armature and final, non-invasive cleaning of bell surface.



Purchase and installation of a digital stationary bell ringer is an essential part of the project that is also being applied for funding under this grant. This controller will automate the striking of the bell in place. Since this will be accomplished without actual swinging, these stresses will never have to be brought onto the bell tower structure again, further ensuring its stability over time.

## A Continuing History of Stewardship

St. Peter's has a continuous tradition of responsible stewardship maintaining and improving its facilities. The present bell tower restoration project is an important fourth step of a master plan for comprehensive facility renewal charted out in 1996. Each step has been carefully planned, budgeted, and executed:

- Replacement of mechanical systems and roof. Completed 1998;
- Handicapped access, extensive reconstruction of parish hall, renovation of lower floor to classrooms. Completed 2000;
- Replacement of rusted, leaking steel curtain wall window system on 1950's rear addition with energy efficient bronze anodized aluminum curtain wall window system. Completed 2006.
- Subsequent to the Bell Tower project is the restoration of landscaping in the historic St. Peter's historic burial ground adjacent to the church.

### **Serving as an Example to Others**

Success of this project would reinforce the important place of the church bell and tower in the historical community environment of this historic New England town. This kind of facility is typically difficult to maintain, and all too frequently abandoned and lost as a historic resource. The successful restoration of a bell tower at St. Peter's will be an important precedent for other institutions facing the same issues of how best to preserve their facility for generations to come.

