

Long Beloved Nantucket Island Landmark

For centuries, the tower of the Unitarian Church has been a stately and recognized part of the Nantucket Island skyline.

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- by Eleni Sinnis

For centuries, the tower of the Unitarian Church has been an integral part of the Nantucket skyline. Notable within this historic structure on Orange Street is beautiful trompe l'oeil painting, the Goodrich Organ (the oldest American-built organ intact and in continuous use), the Town Clock, and the cherished Portuguese Bell that marks each hour with its bright, clear sounds.

Built in 1809, the structure housed the congregation originally known as the Second Congregational Meeting House Society. Around 1837, people began referring to the building as the "Unitarian Church." In the 1960s, the congregation's name changed to the Second Congregational Meeting House Society, Unitarian Universalist."

The Portuguese Bell first rang from the tower on December 18, 1815. On the bell is an

inscription in Portuguese: "To the Good Jesus of the Mountain the devotees of Lisbon direct their prayers, offering Him one complete set of six bells, to call the people to adore him on his sanctuary. Jozé Domingues da Costa has done it in Lisbon on the year 1810." When learning that the bell that has been hanging in this island church for 200 years is from Portugal, you may wonder how it came to be such a beloved part of life on Nantucket.

A story of the bell's origin in Portugal during the early 1800s is told in a 1903 article in The Sacred Heart Review. According to the article, a plague ravaged Lisbon and desperate civilians prayed and promised to place six bells in the Church of the Good Jesus of the Mountain if the plague



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ended. When the plague ended, devotees accepted this as an answer to their prayers. The work of creating the six bells was given to Joze Domingues da Costa, renowned as the best bell caster in Lisbon.

In 1812, Nantucketers Charles Clasby and Captain Thomas Cary traveled to Lisbon, known then for its superlative bells, to find one for the church tower. Captain Cary was considered a "connoisseur of bells." According to an article printed in August 1878 in the Nantucket Inquirer and quoted in the Nantucket Historical Association's *Historic Nantucket* (January 1965), Captain Cary stated that "Clasby invited me to go to the foundry with him and assist in selecting a good-toned one. When they raised the third one and struck her, 'ah, Clasby, you need to look no further: that's the bell you want; she is a beauty...'" The bell they chose was the one da Costa had made for the Church of the Good Jesus of the Mountain. He was reluctant to sell them the bell, but eventually da Costa relented.

Before leaving Lisbon for home, the Nantucketers were informed of the declaration of war with Great Britain. They knew that they would be in danger if they encountered any British ships. According to the article in *Historic Nantucket*, on their way home in the schooner William and Nancy, they were spoken by a British ship, but, fortunately, the ship had been at sea a long time and was unaware of the declaration of war.

Because the bell arrived back on Nantucket during the War of 1812, it was hidden from both the British and the Americans: it was feared that, if discovered, the bell would be melted down for the bronze needed to build more cannons. When the war ended in 1815, the bell was finally placed in the tower. In 1823, the first Town Clock, made on Nantucket by Samuel Jenks, was installed in the tower, below the bell.

The Portuguese Bell weighed three-quarters of a ton, and in 1830 the congregation rebuilt the tower so it could support the weight of the bell. The new tower also continued to be used as a fire watch, with two men on duty during the 1840s, switching through the night: one hour on duty and one hour off. If the watchman saw fire he would wave a lantern in the general direction and ring the bell. The tower served as a fire watch until the early 1900s.

Jay Gibbs was the last to ring the Portuguese Bell by hand. When he retired in 1957, he had been the chief ringer for 25 years. The clock was replaced by an electric movement that ran the clock and controlled the bell ringing every hour on the hour and rang "the 52s." The 52s refer to the three times a day—7 am, noon, and 9 pm—that the Portuguese Bell would ring for three minutes (calculated to be exactly 52 strokes).

During the Quaker and Whaling Era, the 52s were intended to let islanders know when to get up, when it was time to break for lunch, and when it was time to go home to bed. It was said that in the time it took for the bell to ring all 52 times, one could travel from home to work or work to home. The custom of ringing an extra 52 strokes daily goes back to 1811, when the old Revere bell in the North Church was used. According to a 1975 issue of the NHA's *Historic Nantucket*,

originally the bell was only rung 52 times at 9 pm “to warn the citizens to their homes.” The additional two times a day was added later by a vote, and throughout town, they were referred to as the “fifty-twos.” Today the beloved tradition continues. The clock which now occupies the four faces of the South Tower was installed in 1881, a gift from William Hadwen Starbuck to the Town of Nantucket.

Long a part of life on Nantucket, the sentiment quoted in a 1975 issue of Historic Nantucket describes it well: “The tones of the ancient Portuguese bell, originally cast to call the good people of Lisbon to prayers, has been heard by generations of Islanders, whether borne on the wings of a gale or echoing softly within summer breezes. Many have counted the measured strokes of the hours with the evening and morning prayers.”

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Insider's Guide to Nantucket

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