

# First Presbyterian Church of Blackwood

## A Legacy of Philadelphia Bell Founding



First Presbyterian Church of Blackwood's Bell

**B**ecica Associates was retained by the First Presbyterian Church of Blackwood, Blackwood, NJ to perform a structural condition assessment of their existing church building. The current church building replaced the original following its destruction in a major fire circa 1850. Investigation of wood roof truss members over the sanctuary led us to the belfry, where we discovered the church's bell, a piece of our nation's history which compelled us to investigate further.

The First Presbyterian Bell bears a date of 1852 and founder's name J. Bernhard of 78 N. 6th Street, Phila., located within a few blocks of Independence Hall. Cast onto the bell are the words "First Premium Awarded", suggesting the bell was a gift. Being similar in size and character to the Liberty Bell, possible historical significance of this 156 year old bell led us to uncovering a rich history which First Presbyterian's bell shares with some other prominent Philadelphia area bells.

### Liberty Bell

The original State House Bell (later renamed the "Liberty Bell" in an abolitionist article published in 1835) came from London, England. It was ordered in 1745 and cast in 1753 by the Whitechapel Foundry. The Whitechapel founders specialize in bells and were made famous by the Liberty Bell, Big Ben, and a peal of bells at the National Cathedral in

Washington, DC.

During testing in Washington Square, the State House Bell is said to have cracked during first use. John Pass and John Stow of Philadelphia were commissioned to recast the 2,080 pound bell in 1753, using the melted down metal from the original Whitechapel bell and some additional copper. Even though the final Pass & Stow bell was hung in the State House (Independence Hall), a replacement was ordered from the Whitechapel Foundry in 1754. When the new Whitechapel bell arrived, it was deemed to have no better tone quality than the Pass & Stow bell, so the Pass & Stow bell remained in the tower (now on display at Liberty Bell Center), and the new Whitechapel bell was hung in the attic and connected to the State House clock. This bell was later referred to as the "Sister Liberty Bell", named so for its resemblance to the first Whitechapel bell.

### Sister Liberty Bell

During State House renovations, ownership of the Sister Liberty Bell was transferred to the Olde Saint Augustine's Church (243 N. Lawrence Street, Phila.). The bell was hung circa 1830 in a cupola and tower designed by architect William Strickland. Having suffered irreparable damage when Saint Augustine's Church was burned by anti-Catholics in the Philadelphia Nativist Riots (May 8, 1844), the remnants of the Sister Liberty Bell were recast in 1847 by J. Bernhard & Company and transferred to Villanova University for safe keeping, where it can now be viewed in the Falvey Memorial Library. Bernhard cast First Presbyterian's bell only five years after recasting the Sister Liberty Bell.

### Other Bells

Bernhard & Company existed between 1845 and 1880 and filled bell orders for structures and boats throughout the United States. Other bells by Joseph Bernhard and Company were made for:

- Lutheran Church of St. James,

Concord, NJ (1845)

- Warrior Rock Bell, Warrior Rock Lighthouse, Oregon (Originally), Plaza Park, St. Helens, OR (Currently) (1855, previously used by the US Coast Guard)
- New Dungeness Lighthouse, New Dungeness Spit, WA (1855, 1,200 pound bronze bell)
- St. Mark's Church, Mauch Chunk, PA (1858, 1,116 pounds, sold)
- The Friends of Old Saint Thomas, Chester Heights, PA (1860)
- Christ Ascension Lutheran Church, Philadelphia, PA (1861)



Sister Liberty Bell

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