

# The Randolph County Courthouse

## 1838 Belfry Bell

*By L. McKay Whatley*

*From Notes on the History of Randolph County  
randolphhistory.wordpress.com*



*Bell being replaced in 1909 Courthouse*

From the earliest days, the Randolph County Court House had a bell to announce the beginning of its sessions of court. Preserved and moved from building to building as county government expanded, it is one of the oldest artifacts of county government. In August, 1838, Jonathan Worth, Hugh McCain and John Balfour Troy were ordered by the county justices to buy and hang a bell in the courthouse. Re-installed in a belfry when the 1838 courthouse was remodeled in 1876, it was moved into the attic belfry of the 1909 building on Worth Street, where it remained for 90 years. In 2002 it was removed,

restored, and installed in a glass case on the second floor of the 2003 courthouse, no longer able to ring, but more visible than ever before. Enhanced security measures limited access to the courthouse in 2009, and only those citizens paying fines at the Clerk's Office on the second floor could see the bell. In December, 2015, upon the recommendation of the Landmarks Commission, the county ordered the bell moved back to the lobby of the 1909 courthouse, where it can be viewed without restriction. That move was accomplished on January 22, 2015.

The Randolph County Courthouse Bell is marked "G.H. Holbrook/ Medford, Mass". That refers to George Handel Holbrook, whose family ran a bell foundry in that town from 1822 to 1880. There are evidently more than 120 Holbrook bells known to still exist, cast from 1816 to 1879.

One of the earliest professional bell founders in Massachusetts was Aaron Hobart of Abington, who was casting bells as early as 1770. Hobart learned from a man named Gillimore, a deserter from the British Navy, who had learned about bell casting in England.

In 1792, Revolutionary patriot, silversmith, and coppersmith Paul Revere volunteered to cast a bell for a Boston church. Knowing a lot about metal, but little about bell casting, he turned to Hobart for advice. Hobart sent both his son and Mr. Gillimore to Boston to help Revere, who subsequently became a professional bell founder. He obtained a large quantity of Revolutionary War cannon from the government and, in a "swords to plowshares" fashion turned the cannon into church bells (brass cannons and bells are made from a similar mixture of copper and tin). He remained active in the business until his death in 1818.



Paul Revere was the master bell founder who trained George Holbrook, father of the creator of the Randolph County bell. Major George Holbrook was born in Wrentham, Massachusetts on April 28, 1767, and *The Grove Dictionary of Music* states unequivocally that Holbrook was apprenticed to Revere. *The History of Medway Mass*, states that Holbrook was apprenticed to Revere "to learn the machinist and clock-maker's trades" and that they "entertained a warm friendship until his death."

George Holbrook did not cast his first bell until well after he was established in other trades in Brookfield, and he listed his occupation as "clock -maker" for several years there before changing it to "bell-founder." The earliest indication of his entry into the bell business is from an advertisement of 1803; the first Holbrook bell now known was cast in 1804.



The advertisement mentioned above, dated September 19, 1803, states: "George Holbrook respectfully informs the public that he carries on the business of bell-founding upon a plan recently discovered and known to very few people in this country or in Europe. A bell made upon this plan, and rightly hung, weighing 800 pounds will give a sound as heavy, clear, agreeable to the ear, and shall be heard as far as one of 1000 pounds made in the usual way."<sup>13</sup>

Hearing that a bell was wanted for the church in East Medway, he volunteered his services and cast a successful bell there in 1816 in a primitive shanty. The casting is described in *The History of Medway*: "Through the assistance of many friends the shanty was built out of refuse lumber, and the melting furnace was built out of the condemned bricks of a neighbor's brick kiln. The bell was cast in the presence of almost the whole population of the vicinity, in fact, so great was the number of people, and so eager were all to see such an unusual sight, that the sides of the building were taken down and the space for the workman roped around, in order that the people might see, and the bell makers might have room to work."<sup>16</sup>



Frederick Shelley notes that "In December 1821 and January, 1823 the Holbrooks acquired land on both sides of the turnpike, (now Main Street) running through East Medway. They build a factory, blacksmith shop, and furnace on the southwest corner of what is now Main and Spring Streets."<sup>17</sup>

George Holbrook married in 1797 and his son George Handel Holbrook was born on July 21, 1798, named after George Frederick Handel the composer. According to Shelley, he learned the clock-making and founding trade from his father. He ran the business until 1871, having cast over 11,000 bells, including several hundred church bells. The firm continued to cast bells until 1880.



Both older and younger Holbrooks were talented musicians. George played and made bass violins; G.H. played the violin and pipe organ, and he became very active in the Handel and Hayden Society, a Boston-area institution. The Holbrook tradition in bell-casting improved upon the Revere tradition by casting a more musical bell.<sup>14</sup>

*The History of Medway* editorializes: Major George Holbrook, who established the foundry, was a man who had great ingenuity, and who could work his way out of any mechanical predicament, and could successfully plan and lay out the work for others, though he possessed no great faculty of doing the work himself. It is to his son, Colonel George H. Holbrook, who became an eminent musician, that is due the credit of

*improving the tone of the bells and changing them from noisy machines to musical instruments.*<sup>18</sup>

It appears that the Holbrook firm was the first American founder to cast a tuned carillon of bells. Bells sound separate tones from different parts of the individual bell, and tuning a bell so these tones form a perfect chord is one of the most exacting tasks of bell making. One Holbrook catalogue said, " ... the different tones, which, sounding in unison, form one grand tone, each one of which shall be in perfect tune and harmoniously blended together, like several instruments in the hands of masters, sounding a chord at once—it is this quality which makes the bell pure and musical."<sup>15</sup>

Four generations of the "Holbrook Dynasty" carried on the family business of casting bells until 1880, and manufactured pipe organs into the twentieth century. There are at least 110 Holbrook bells known to survive according to one list, <http://www.chepachetfreewill.org/otherholbrookbells.htm> (which does not include the Randolph County bell).

