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# Office of State Archaeologist

## 1726 St. Helena's Parrish Bell Conserved

By Jonathan Leader



St. Helena's Church Archivist, Bob Barrett, with the historic 1726 bell. (SCIAA photo courtesy of Jonathan Leader)

Every once in a while a project comes along that is both intellectually intriguing and fun. The St. Helena's Parrish Bell was one such project. St. Helena's Episcopal church was founded in 1724, making it one of the oldest continually active churches in the United States. The Parrish itself dates to 1712, and the church was supposed to have been built earlier,

but had to be delayed due to the problems engendered by the Yemassee war. This would not be the first time that a war interfered with the orderly running of the church.

The bronze church bell was special ordered from a firm in London, produced by a foundry in Amsterdam, and delivered to the church in South Carolina in 1726. It

is a relatively small bell with a mellow tone, the shape pleasing to the eye, and simple ornamentation. There is a dedicatory Latin phrase cast in relief around the upper portion of the bell "SOLI DEO GLORIA A° 1726." that translates as "To God Alone Be Glory," a commonly used phrase derived from Acts 4:11-12. The "A° 1726" refers to the date of the manufacture.

One part of the ornamentation that was not common was an applied silver sheet along the bell's lower edge. The very thin sheet of silver was bent into a "U" and was very carefully fitted by hand, fully encasing the edge. This affectation would lead to an unfortunate circumstance later in the bell's history.

The Parrish figured prominently in the American Revolution with several important people, including Thomas Heyward, Jr., a signer of the Declaration of Independence, being members. This brought a great deal of notoriety to the church from the British authorities. So much so, that the bell had to be removed from the steeple and buried to ensure that it would not be looted. Fortunately, this circumstance was short lived with no lasting harm to the bell.

Less than 100 years later, the entire congregation fled when Federal troops occupied Beaufort in November of 1861. Again, the bell was removed from the steeple and was said to have been buried. The church was converted to a hospital and stripped of its furnishings. Local history has it that even marble tombstones were brought in for use as operating room tables, and the



The CAT scan of the 1726 bell revealed a structural defect from the manufacture. (SCIAA photo by Jonathan Leader)

hand using a variety of techniques including stereomicroscopy and patina identification. A CAT scan was also conducted to assess the internal metallographic structures and to identify the inherent vices from the original foundry work that might jeopardize the re-use of the bell. It was fortunate that this was done, as a serious fault, invisible to the naked eye, was discovered. Nonetheless, the bell was determined to have sufficient structural integrity to be used.

The bell is now undergoing meticulous hand cleaning to remove foreign materials and to ensure a stable patina. A specially designed armature will be constructed to support the bell in a viable way. The result will be an historic artifact returned to use by the community that saw its birth nearly 300 years ago.

balconies were decked over to make a second floor.

Regardless of the facts, there is no dispute that the church was in a wrecked state by the end of the Civil War. The congregation returned and spent many decades rebuilding and refurbishing the church. This was done without apparent animosity. In fact, the present altar was a gift of the sailors of the U.S.S. *New Hampshire* stationed in Port Royal Sound during the reconstruction. The *New Hampshire's* sailors built the altar and carved it by hand, making it an important folk crafted object in its own right, not to mention a poignant object of reconciliation.

The bell's whereabouts were a mystery for many years. After the war, eventually a member of the Parrish returned the bell with the statement that it had been buried in a

barn. Amid great rejoicing for its return, the bell was placed in safe storage.

Recently, the church formed a committee to consider the possibility of restoring the bell to use. The committee members include Mr. Bob Barrett, Chair; Ms Molly Gray, Dr. Larry Rowland, Mr. Gerhard Spieler, Mr. Boogie Tudor, Mr. Jim Williams, and Mr. John Ballantyne. I was contacted to provide the metals analysis and conservation expertise.

The bell was very carefully examined by



Dr. Jonathan Leader engaged in metallographic analysis of the historic church bell. (SCIAA photo courtesy of Jonathan Leader)