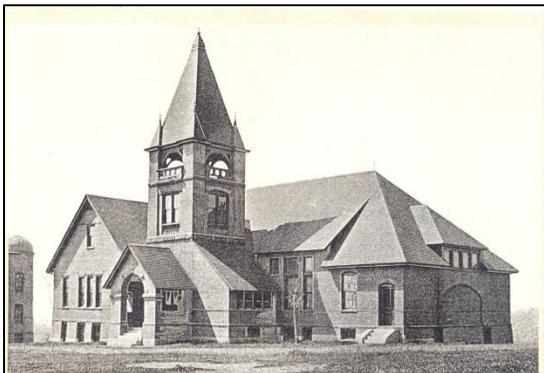


The Academy Bell

In old New England the church bell was a common enough sound, calling people to services, pealing for marriages and deaths and other noteworthy events. By the 1800's other bells would become significant in people's lives, especially those of the mill and the school. For millworkers, physical labor would no longer be dictated by the chore, weather, and season, but by the clock and the bell. For others, the sound of the school bell would signal the beginning of each days' intellectual labor (as well as time for play). Surely this was the case with the Nichols Academy bell. Did the early Academy have a bell, and was this the same one our students rang?

We might assume that the *original* Academy, i.e. the one that Amasa Nichols had built c. 1815-1816 and burned down soon after, had a bell but we do not know. But its replacement, completed in 1819, definitely had one. A sketch from John Warner Barber's *Historical Collections ... Massachusetts* (1840) shows the second Academy building (1819-1873) with a short belfry in the middle. There are also entries in Academy account books for 1826 and 1827 for payments of \$5.00 annually and \$3.33 per quarter to individuals for "ringing bell and making fire," and in 1827 for a new bell rope. In 1871, when construction of a new Academy building was discussed by the Board of Trustees, it was recommended that the old belfry to be taken down and replaced with "a belfry of a modern pattern" and "a [new] bell be made." Instead, in 1873, the old Academy building was torn down and the Academy moved into the old Unitarian church that stood next to it. No mention was made of what happened to the old school bell.



Fast forward a decade and a bell cast by the Meneely Bell Foundry in West Troy (NY) rang from Hezekiah Conant's newly-constructed Academy and Alumni Hall building (1881-present), a gift from the Nichols Academy Class of 1884. For over 50 years this bell, like its predecessor, was part of the soundscape on The Hill. That it held a special place in the minds and hearts of students is evident when one notes that the first school newspaper, started in January 1904 to "reflect the life of both the Academy and the town," was called *The Academy Bell*, the bell tower appeared on the cover of the first catalog of Nichols Junior College in 1931 and became part of the first College seal the next year and the first Nichols Junior College's yearbooks were titled *The Tower*.

While iconic, the Academy bell was clearly not immune from student pranks. Describing some of the pranks perpetrated by Academy students in the latter part of the 19th century, Charles L. Goodell wrote in his *Black Tavern Days: Stories of Old New England* : “One zero morning there was no bell. The boy who usually rang it pulled away at the rope bell but no sound cleft the frosty air...Up to the bell-deck he crept... somebody had turned up the bell and filled it half full of water and the tongue was frozen stiff. It took many teakettles of boiling water before the bell could speak as usual.”

That bell would remain above Academy Hall until the Hurricane of 1938 partially destroyed the building, making the bell tower unstable. When the tower was taken down, the bell was stored away until a new home was found for it in 1952 atop the newly-completed Alumni Memorial Hall. And when that building was razed in 2011 to make way for the new Fels Student Center, the bell was again put in storage, until it was put on display in the newest academic building on campus in 2021 and included in the investiture activities for President Sulmasy.



By the way, in 1958, the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston donated a bell cast in 1877 that was set in place on the roof above the main doorway of the redesigned Academy building where it remains to this day.