

►►► HISTORY

The 1797 Paul Revere bell in the steeple of First Congregational Church of Essex is the fourth oldest of its kind still in existence.

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First Congregational Church of Essex

RING TO IT

readies for Revere bell to toll anew

By MICHAEL CRONIN • Photos by PAUL BILODEAU



The Rev. Tim Ziegenhals emerges from a small opening in the steeple of First Congregational Church of Essex. The steeple is undergoing repairs that will allow the church's original Paul Revere bell, which has been silenced for a couple of years, to ring again.

It's been months since First Congregational Church of Essex's historic Paul Revere bell rang throughout downtown.

Now, after months of fundraising for renovations, the Rev. Timothy Ziegenhals thinks it could be up and running as early as this summer.

The spire of the 39 Main St. church, particularly its belfry, sustained significant water damage over the years.

Two years ago, local contractor Greg Campbell told Ziegenhals the supports could no longer handle the bell swinging back and forth.

Since then, the bell has remained silent.

It wasn't until last September that church officials started to focus on repairing the spire. To date, the church has raised about \$250,000 toward its \$350,000 goal through private, three-year pledge donations from its congregants.

Despite falling short of its goal, Ziegenhals reported this spring that the church had enough resources to start construction. ►



The spire of First Congregational Church of Essex is undergoing repairs after suffering extensive water damage over the years.



Brian Cox of Preservation Timber Framing uses a chisel to remove wood from a beam as part of the restoration work for the steeple at First Congregational Church of Essex.

Erik Lindquist of Preservation Timber Framing points out some of the new supports being erected within the steeple that will allow for the suspension of the Paul Revere bell.





Erik Lindquist heads up the stairs of First Congregational Church of Essex to the steeple, where he's been working with the team from Preservation Timber Framing on repairs to the belfry.

"The pandemic sucker-punched us," Ziegenhals lamented in May, "but we're still open for donations. It's given us hope to see people come together for the project."

Church officials are hoping a grant from the town's Community Preservation Act will help fill the majority of the funding gap. Craig Hammon, chairman of the church's steeple fund, says the request shouldn't run afoul of laws governing the separation of church and state.

"The requests we're making are not for a religious or worship space, but the steeple, specifically the place that preserves the Paul Revere bell," he explained back in December. "The selectmen had an office in the building for many, many years (from 1819-1894). They would also hold meetings there."

First Congregational Church of Essex has served as one of the town's most historic landmarks.

Essex initially was established in the early 15th century as Chebacco Parish, which was part of Ipswich. By century's end, the people of Chebacco wanted to build their own meetinghouse

independent from Ipswich. Town officials forbade the "men of Chebacco" from building the meetinghouse, so in response, a band of local women took on the project themselves. The building was completed in 1683.

The current church is the parish's fourth meetinghouse. Constructed in 1792, it houses the 18th church bell cast at the foundry of silversmith and American patriot Paul Revere in Boston's North End.

The 827-pound bell was made by blending silver dollars, silver spoons and jewelry contributed by the people of Chebacco Parish. Bearing an inscription that reads "Revere Boston 1797," it was hauled from Boston by ox cart and then hoisted into the church tower. It stands today as the fourth oldest Revere bell in existence.

Fast-forward to 2020: The church has teamed up with Preservation Timber Framing of Berwick, Maine, owned by Arron Sturgis, to carry out the building's first renovation project since the 1970s.

A three-person crew has been working to revive the chapel to its former glory in more ways than one. Along with the

structural repairs, the steeple is being re-shingled and the trimmings will be modified so the tower appears as it once stood in the 19th century.

"(The bell) will be lit up so you'll be able to see it anywhere in town," says Erik Lindquist of Preservation Timber Framing.

In mid-May, Lindquist was working on a new deck in the belfry made from locally sourced wide oak timber. All timber used in the restoration project was acquired from Mayer Tree Service in town.

The project was about 25% complete in May, according to Brian Cox, another worker with Preservation Timber Framing.

"There's still a lot of work to be done on the inside," Cox said at that time. "The cradle, where (the bell) is suspended from right now, needs a lot of work."

Once the work to the inside of the spire is finished this summer, workers will begin to repair the outside of the structure.

To learn more about First Congregational Church of Essex's steeple project or to donate to the campaign, contact Craig Hammon, chairman of the church's steeple fund, at 978-764-8890 or visit fccoe.org. 📌