

Originally published in the Town Crier, September 24, 1986

Following the Spaulding Bell

Editor's note: The following is the text of a speech made by Maureen Kelley during an open house and dedication ceremony at the Tewksbury Fire Department Main Station House on September 13, 1986.



Picture of bell from Town Crier Article

Today Tewksbury comes together to accept an aerial ladder truck, a piece of equipment which speaks to us of the future. At the same time, we recognize those who have gone before in this department, Tewksbury's deceased firefighters. We do this symbolically with the dedication of this, the Spaulding Bell.

This 99 year old bell, which rests on its fine new pedestal again, reminds us of the merging of the past and future – that merging is here and now.

This beautiful bell, cast in 1887, has had a long and interesting history.

Often referred to as the Foster School Bell, in reality it came to the town several years before the Foster School was actually opened and did not hang in the belfry at the Foster School until many years after the school was dedicated.

The bell came to Tewksbury in 1887, the year in which it was cast. It arrived in Tewksbury at a time when the center of town was referred to as Tewksbury Village – and it came to a town which had several years before formed a group known as the Village Improvement Association.

One member of the Association was Benjamin Spaulding, then a young man and a seventh generation descendent of Rev. Sampson Spaulding, the first minister of the Congregational Church.

Benjamin Spaulding was a charter member of the Village Improvement Association and, as part of this group, was committed to beautification of the town and development of the common. In 1891 this group assisted in the building of the bandstand.

But how was this man involved with this bell?

Well, in 1887 a new District Number Two school was built in the village, actually on the spot where Nahil's Drug Store now stands. This school was the first home of Tewksbury High School, serving in this capacity until 1891 when the first class was graduated. The town built the school, but the bell that was hung in the belfry in 1887 was donated through the fund-raising efforts of Benjamin Spaulding.

The bell was purchased from the McShane Bell Foundry in Baltimore, Maryland, a company that is still in existence. We believe the bell was transported by train to Tewksbury and then by wagon to the school. The bell would see many changes in Tewksbury in the coming years and its fate would be tied to many of those changes.

During 1891 – 1892 the high school classes were held in the vestry hall of the Congregational Church and the district school, home of the bell, was used as an elementary school. The Foster School was dedicated in 1894 and served as Tewksbury's third high school until 1900.

In that year the Foster School was converted to elementary use and high school students were sent to Lowell High School. This situation existed until Tewksbury's fourth high school (now the Center School) opened in 1935. The present high school is actually Tewksbury's fifth high school location.

Between 1895 and 1906 many individuals tried to have the bell moved to the new Foster School. When the Foster School had opened in

1894, the District Number Two School was converted to use as the new home of the public library. Many residents felt the bell belonged in the new and larger Foster School. But, town meeting being what it is and was, the money was not actually appropriated until 1906. The bell was moved at a cost of \$170. It was then 19 years old.

From 1911 to 1920 the library shared the District Two School Building. During this era the old District Two School was called the Library School. In 1920 the library was moved to the new town hall and the Library School House was renovated and renamed the Spaulding School after Ben Spaulding, the man who had given the school its bell.

Benjamin Spaulding died in 1925 at 72 years of age. In the last year of his life he served on the School Building Committee for the addition to the Foster School.

Between 1926 and 1941 the Spaulding School was used sporadically. The 1946 town meeting voted to have the selectmen sell the building. This was not actually done until a few years later.

Benjamin Spaulding was eulogized after his death in these words: "(an) active and valued member to whom the interests of the town was the first consideration ... (he was) of sterling honest and unquestionable integrity in all his dealings with his fellow man."

Spaulding's accomplishments were many. He served as postmaster for many years. During these years the post office was located in his home, the Spaulding Homestead on East Street, current residence of the Gaffney Family.

Benjamin Spaulding was the first treasurer as well as a founding member and trustee of the present Tewksbury Cemetery Corporation. He was a founding member of the Village Improvement Association; a trustee of the public library; a member of the Committee on Appropriations; a member (1902) of the Old Home Week Committee; the Street Lighting Committee; the Foster School Addition Building Committee; and a parks commissioner.

He can very appropriately be remembered at this time along with Tewksbury's deceased firefighters because Spaulding was a member of Tewksbury's Committee on Water Supply and Fire Protection.

In addition, at a special town meeting in 1902, he urged the town to investigate means of protecting the town against fire and encouraged the town to purchase a new chemical engine.

The bell Benjamin Spaulding had brought to the town remained in the belfry of the Foster School for many years after his death. However, during the 1930s, structural damage to the belfry necessitated the removal of the bell. For many years it rested unused on that attic floor.

In the mid 1950s the bell was removed from its resting place. According to retired school custodian Supt. Frank McCusker, there was a major roofing project undertaken at the Foster School. The roofers and custodians together cut a hole in the floor and lowered the 400 lb. bell down into the school's old third floor assembly hall – Pickering Hall – by means of a rope, chains and brute strength. In the current vernacular, it was an awesome undertaking. For the next 30 years the bell was stored in various locations – almost but not quite forgotten.

In the past few years we have seen a resurgence of that spirit inherent in Tewksbury's early Village Improvement Association. We are seeing a real renaissance in Tewksbury's Center. Suddenly people are recognizing what we have and why we should preserve our heritage.

Civic minded individuals and groups have given the town a restored bandstand, a statue commemorating Anne Sullivan, a restored watering trough, flag poles, park benches, flowers planted on the common, and a restored hand tub fire engine on display today.

Businessmen have seen the good in restoration of historic buildings and the town has begun restoring our town hall. Finally, this historic bell has been preserved and displayed.

Benjamin Spaulding and the Tewksbury Village Improvement Association would be very proud of us, as would Tewksbury's deceased firefighters, who in their own way, helped preserve and protect their town. It is now our town. Our new aerial ladder will help protect it but the decisions of all of us who work for restoration will preserve it. The Spaulding Bell is silent now but in another way it gives ringing testimony as it symbolically honors all who have, like Benjamin Spaulding, "been active and valued members to whom the integrity of the town was the first consideration." What better legacy can we leave?