

Don't let attack block access to Liberty Bell

By William C. Kashatus

When I learned that Mitchell A. Guillatt, a troubled young man, attacked the Liberty Bell with a steel mallet, I was concerned. Not because of the five crescent-shaped abrasions he left on the lower lip of the bell, but because of the inevitable discussion that is now taking place within the National Park Service and the larger museum world about limiting access to the nation's most venerated symbol of liberty.

I can just imagine the alternatives being considered:

- Enclose the bell in Plexiglas so no one can touch it.
- Charge an admissions fee to limit the "unsavory elements" of the public.
- Place the bell in a vault and let the public view it via closed circuit TV.

What we seem to forget in all the hysteria over higher security is that the Liberty Bell has already survived many potential disasters and that visitors must be exposed to the 2,080 pound copper and tin icon in order to appreciate the story behind it.

Cast at London's Whitechapel Bell Foundry in 1752 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of William Penn's Charter of Liberties, the bell cracked during its first testing in Philadelphia. After two recastings, it was hung in the State House tower, but its sound was so unpleasant that it was almost returned to England for credit toward the purchase of a new bell.

A year after the bell rang to announce the public proclamation of the Declaration of Independence on July 8, 1776, it was removed from Philadelphia and hidden in Allentown to prevent its capture by the British Army, which occupied Philadelphia from September 1776 through June 1777. Again, in 1828, the bell was threatened when it was given as scrap to the contractor who was casting a new bell for

ered that the cost of removing it exceeded its scrap value, he returned it as a gift to Philadelphia.

Although the Liberty Bell rang for the last time on Washington's Birthday in 1846, public access to it has never been restricted. Removed from the tower in 1852, the Liberty Bell, for the next 124 years, was exhibited in various locations on the first floor of Independence Hall, where visitors could see and touch it.

Between 1885 and 1919, the Bell traveled more than 25,000 miles by railroad across the country, helping to mend whatever differences still existed between North and South after the Civil War and Reconstruction. Millions of Americans saw it, touching and kissing it wherever it stopped.

By 1975, the National Park Service realized that millions of visitors who wanted to get close to the Bell could not be accommodated in Independence Hall. Therefore, the Liberty Bell was ceremoniously removed and placed in a glass pavilion that would allow for public accessibility 24 hours a day.

The Liberty Bell is more than an "archaeological resource"; it is our nation's most venerated icon, instantly recognized throughout the world as a symbol of freedom. While it may be considered "federal property," the bell belongs to all Americans. Never should our access to it be limited. Never should we be charged a fee to see a symbol of freedom that is God-given. Like our democracy, the Liberty Bell may be fragile and imperfect, but it has weathered many threats, and it has endured.

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