

THE HOLBROOKS & THE HOLBROOK BELL FOUNDRY

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THE HOLBROOK BELL FOUNDRY OF EAST MEDWAY

The business of manufacturing bells and church or town clocks, which, in former years gave employment to so many people, and contributed so much to the prosperity of (this) place, and which carried the name of the town to almost every habitable portion of the country (if not the world), was established in 1816, by Major George Holbrook, who removed from Brookfield, Mass., where he first began the business in 1797. The reason for his removal from Brookfield was financial troubles caused by indorsing notes to a large amount for a supposed friend. Major Holbrook being obliged to meet these payments, was financially ruined. His successful business, and the beautiful home, famous among those of Worcester County for its elegance and generous hospitality, passed into the hands of strangers. Broken in health and spirits he returned to his native town, Wrentham, Massachusetts. While residing there, he was informed that a bell was wanted for the new meeting-house in East Medway, and he secured the contract to cast it. The bell was the first cast, and the first which ever hung in a steeple in the town. It was cast in a shanty standing on the site of the present residence of E. L. Holbrook, Esq.

Through the assistance of many friends, the shanty was built out of refuse lumber, and the melting furnace was built out of the condemned bricks of a neighbor's brick kiln. Major Holbrook did the greater part of the work himself. The bell was cast in the presence of almost the whole population of the vicinity, in fact so great was the number of people, and so eager were all to see such an unusual sight, that the sides of the building were taken down, and the space for the workmen roped around, in order that the people might see, and the bell makers might have room to work. The first venture of the bell business was successful. A finely-cast, clear-toned bell, weighing 1,208 pounds was cast. The bell for many years called the good people of the parish together for the worship of God, and to all other public gatherings. The coming of

Major Holbrook into the town had been opposed by very many good and well-to-do people, who objected to his becoming a citizen, for fear that he would become a pauper and a charge upon the town; but immediately upon his successful production of a bell which pleased them, and of which they were very proud, offers of assistance poured in from every side, and a large and successful business was established, one foundry after another being built, each one larger and more complete than its predecessor. It is an interesting fact that Major Holbrook in early life had been an apprentice in the bell foundry and clock-making business to Paul Revere, of Revolutionary fame, for whom he entertained a warm friendship until his death.

The Holbrook bell foundry was in reality, though not legally, the successor of the famous Revere bell foundry, as during the years 1816-1820 it was the only establishment of its kind in America. The business was successfully carried on by four successive generations of the same family, until the year 1880, when the proprietor accepted a position offered him in the Pension Office Department, Washington, D.C., and sold the valuable patterns and franchise to parties in San Francisco, California, who had long been endeavoring to acquire the same.

During the period of its existence, over eleven thousand bells were cast at this establishment, and sent to all parts of the United States, British Provinces, Mexico and the Sandwich Islands. As to the reputation of the Holbrook bells, they were everywhere celebrated. They were exhibited at the industrial exhibitions throughout the country, and came in competition with the bells of others, and always achieved the highest awards; and never, in a single instance, receiving any but the highest award. Among other awards was the grand gold medal from the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics Association, of Boston, for general superiority and pure musical tone, and this on occasion when the proprietor of the principal rival in the business was President of the Association, and had many bells on exhibit at the same time. On another occasion, the grand gold medal of honor of the American Institute of New York was awarded to the Holbrook foundry for undoubted superiority and general excellence, as compared with the production of others, and for the pure and musical tones and

extraordinary vibrations of their bells. In fact the very flattering testimonial from this association, which accompanied the medal, denominated the production of the Holbrook foundry as the standard bells of America, a declaration which the proprietors pointed to with no little pride, holding it, in their estimation, higher than patents of nobility, or of lordly birth. These complimentary testimonials were from leading musical men and mechanics of the country, among whom were Dr. Lowell Mason, Mr. George J. Webb, and James Chickering, Esq., the famous piano manufacturer of Boston.

Major George Holbrook, who established the foundry, was a man who had great ingenuity, and could work his way out of any mechanical predicament, and could successfully plan and lay out the work for others, though he possessed no great faculty of doing the work himself. It is to his son, Colonel George H. Holbrook, who became an eminent musician, that is due the credit of improving the tone of the bells, and changing them from noisy machines to musical instruments. This justly celebrated musician succeeded his father in the business, which he prosecuted until 1872. He was justly regarded as the foremost bell maker in America.

The business was for several years in charge of E. L. Holbrook, Esq., the son of Colonel Holbrook, until he entered the business of manufacturing church organs, which was more agreeable to him, and for which his superior musical education preeminently fitted him. Mr. E. H. Holbrook, a grandson of Colonel Holbrook, in 1868 became associated with his grandfather in the in the business and in 1872 succeeded to the full ownership of control of the same, until it was relinquished in 1880. Very few business houses, which were in existence in 1816, and which have been constantly carried on by the members of the same family, can now be found in the town or vicinity. Few families have ever associated in a business so long continued, and on which they can look back on with so much to be proud of, and so little to regret, as the proprietors of the Holbrook Bell Foundry.

MAJOR GEORGE HOLBROOK

George Holbrook, son of Daniel and Esther (Hall) Holbrook, was born April 28, 1767, in Wrentham, Mass. He received a limited education in the public schools; and while young was apprenticed to Paul Revere, of Revolutionary fame, to learn the machinists and clockmaker's trades. After serving his full time, he began manufacturing bells in Brookfield, having learned the art from an old English encyclopaedia;* was very successful and built up a large business. Meeting with financial troubles in 1812, he removed to Laconia, N.H., then Meredith Bridge, where he was a farmer. Happening to be in East Medway in the year 1816, and knowing that a bell was wanted for the new church just completed, he agreed to cast it, and did so in a shed where Mr. E. L.

Holbrook's house now stands. It was a novel thing, and people came from many towns to see the sight. The bell was a good one, was raised in the church and served for many years. This was the first bell cast in Medway and is the date of the establishment of the Holbrook Bell Foundry in this place. Major Holbrook received his title as an officer of the State Militia. Mary Evalina Holbrook, daughter of Major Holbrook, was born Jan. 2, 1807, in Brookfield, Mass. She was a lady of great personal beauty and accomplishment. She was a leading singer in the Handel and Haydn Society of Boston, Mass., and a great favorite among musical people. She married John Baker, Jr.

COL. GEORGE HANDEL HOLBROOK

George Handel Holbrook, son of George and Mary (Wood) Holbrook, was born July 21, 1798, in Brookfield, Mass., attended town school, moved to Medway in 1816, became associated with his father in the manufacture of bells and church clocks, succeeded in 1820 to the entire business which he carried on until 1871, having at that time cast over ten thousand church and other bells. He married Jan. 1, 1824, Louisa Harding, 24, of Medway, daughter of Thomas and Keziah (Bullen) Harding.

In 1837 he began building church organs, in company with his

cousin, Mr. J. Holbrook Ware, until 1850, when the partnership was dissolved. Col. Holbrook, a musician and a violinist of more than local reputation, was a member of the Handel and Haydn Society of Boston. He was, when young, offered the leadership of an orchestra in one of the theaters of Boston. He was very much interested in military service, and held every commission from ensign to colonel, declining the position of brigadier-general to which he was elected. He was postmaster at East Medway for over thirty-five years, and represented the town in 1835 in the legislature. He was of a quiet, retiring disposition, though genial. His house was always open to musical and literary people, and he will be remembered for his liberality in providing musical entertainments of the highest order. The Handel and Haydn Society and Boston's most celebrated musicians often performed under his direction. Colonel Holbrook died March 20, 1875, aged seventy-six years. He was succeeded in the organ business by his son, Mr. Edwin L. Holbrook, and in the bell business by his grandson, Mr. Edwin Handel Holbrook.