

**“Remove all public bells, in Philadelphia, to a place of security.”**  
Continental Congress Resolution, Sept. 14, 1777



*by William W Reynolds*

The British Army commanded by Gen. Sir William Howe landed on the western shore of Elk River in Cecil County, Maryland, on August 25, 1777, with the objective of occupying Philadelphia, capital of the recently declared independent United States. While the invasion had been anticipated by Continental authorities, the landing stimulated their action to move to a more secure location the important collection of military stores in Philadelphia, as well as those at Head of Elk, Maryland, and Valley Forge and French Creek, Pennsylvania. Fortunately for the Continentals, Howe consumed thirty-two days covering the fifty-seven miles to Philadelphia, providing time to move the city's military stores, papers, money, books, and other items to a place of safety. The British Army's position as it moved from Head of Elk towards Philadelphia threatened evacuation routes running west from Philadelphia but not routes running north, so the Lehigh Valley became the place of security preferred by Pennsylvania and Continental authorities.

The Continental Congress took the first action relative to Philadelphia stores on September 4 by ordering:

That the Board of War make such dispositions as they shall judge prudent and necessary for removing, at the shortest notice, to a place of security, all the military stores belonging to the Continent, in case the exigency of affairs should render it necessary.[1]

While these stores were not as extensive as they would be in 1781 prior to the Yorktown Campaign, they were essential to the Continental Army and their safety was a source of great concern for Gen. George Washington. Pennsylvania authorities ordered that wagons be sent to Philadelphia from Bucks, Lancaster, Northampton, and Philadelphia Counties to move these stores north to Bristol, whence they were shipped up the Delaware River to Trenton, New Jersey. (They were later shipped to the Lehigh Valley and farther west.) Over the next several days, the authorities extended that order to Berks and Chester Counties and asked Lancaster County for additional wagons. Eventually, over 900 wagons were provided to support these and related efforts, many from farmers who needed them for the fall harvest and who have received little credit for their sacrifice.[2]

Washington knew that the Continental Army would have to maneuver rapidly as the British Army approached, so he ordered its baggage loaded on wagons and sent east of Brandywine Creek on September 7. Three days later, state authorities ordered the gunpowder and related supplies at French Creek moved, first to Reading then to Bethlehem. All these measures were precautionary since Washington was confident that his army could defeat the British before they reached Philadelphia. Unfortunately, that did not happen and the British victory at Brandywine caused authorities to order the removal to Easton of Pennsylvania Loan Office money and papers, the books and papers of the Council of Safety and Board of War, and, later, the books of the State Library.[3]

Next in the hierarchy of importance were the bronze bells of the State House, churches, and other institutions in Philadelphia. The previous September, Washington had removed the bells of New York to keep them out of British hands, at the request of that state's Provincial Convention. In March 1777, Richard Henry Lee had reminded his colleagues in the Continental Congress that the British Army would probably seize Philadelphia's bells if they occupied the city.[4]

Accordingly, on September 14 with the British Army less than thirty miles from the city, Congress resolved:

That the Board of War be directed to order the commissary general of military stores, to apply to the supreme executive council of the State of Pennsylvania, for an order to remove all public bells, in Philadelphia, to a place of security, upon a near approach of the enemy to the city.[5]

The parties mentioned clearly decided that time was of the essence since that same day, a Sunday, the Pennsylvania Council authorized Col. Benjamin Flower, the Commissary General of Military Stores, to employ carpenters "to take down the Bells of all the public Buildings in this City, & convey them to a place of safety." [6]

Colonel Flower understood his direction to mean that he was to take down *all the bells* of Philadelphia and proceeded with that work on September 15. His “carpenters,” men who “shared the duties of the architect and contractor of today,” made a list of the bells as they brought them to ground, recording the diameter at the lip of each as a method of identifying them for reinstallation.[7]

That list was incorporated in a “return” (Figure 1) of the bells made after they arrived at Allentown (then officially Northampton Towne) later in the month.

There were nineteen bells in the city at the time and all but one were taken down for removal to a “place of security.” Christ Church retained one of its “ring of eight bells,” probably as a result of the vestry’s remonstrance. (Previous accounts state that only eleven bells were removed, two at the State House, two at St. Peter’s Church, and seven at Christ Church.[8])

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Return of Bells at Allentown in 1777

No.	Diameter	Location
1	3' 9"	
2	3' 5"	
3	3' 3"	
4	3' 1"	
5	2' 10.5"	
6	2' 8"	
7	2' 6"	Christ Church, Philadelphia
8	3' 11.5"	State House Steeple
9	3' 10"	State House Clock
10	2' 5"	Colledge [sic] Steeple
11	2' 2"	St. Peters Church
12	1' 8"	
13	1' 8"	Court House Steeple
14	1' 9"	
15	1' 7.5"	Lutheran School
16	1' 4.5"	
17	1' 5"	Sweeds [sic] Church
18	1' 8"	Fish-House
19		Small Bell

Philadelphia bells moved to Allentown in September 1777 as listed in the return:

No.	Diameter	Location
1	3' 9"	
2	3' 5"	
3	3' 3"	
4	3' 1"	
5	2' 10.5"	
6	2' 8"	
7	2' 6"	Christ Church, Philadelphia
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16	1' 4.5"	
17	1' 5"	Sweeds [sic] Church
18	1' 8"	Fish-House

Many of these bells and their locations are easily identifiable, especially the State House Steeple bell, now known as the Liberty Bell, those in Christ Church, St. Peter’s Church, and Swede’s Church (Gloria Dei), and the Philadelphia County Court House bell. Less obvious is the State House Clock bell which was known as the “sister” to the Steeple Bell, having been ordered as a replacement for it. The “Colledge” was the Academy and College of Philadelphia, the Lutheran School was the German Lutheran School associated with Zion Lutheran Church, and the Fish-House was the private club known as the Schuylkill Fishing Company.

Most of these bells were privately-owned and at least one person, the rector of Christ Church, Rev. Jacob Duche, objected to their removal. On September 16 he asked Colonel Flower to delay removal

of the church's bells while he took his objections to the Continental Congress and Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council; subsequently, the vestry informed that council: that the Vestry considering themselves as guardians of the civil rights of the united churches, thought it their duty to offer some reasons by way of remonstrance against the removal of the bells belonging to Christ Church.[9]

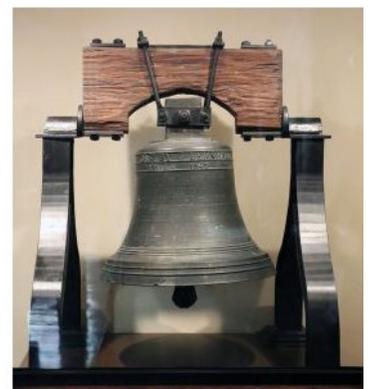
The Executive Council considered the matter later that day but did not change their decision other than to allow one of Christ Church's bells to remain in place; all the bells listed above were removed. Presumably, most of the private owners understood the risk of leaving them in place for the British to find and were happy to have them removed and secured at no cost to themselves.

The contractors hired by Colonel Flower had to install rigging in nine locations to allow the bells to be safely lowered to ground since the lightest bell weighed over 100 pounds and the heaviest weighed over 2,000 pounds. Each bell then had to be attached to the new rigging, unbolted from its permanent mount, and manually lowered to the ground. Bringing all eighteen to the ground and loading them on wagons required about eight days. On September 19, news arrived in Philadelphia that the British Army was crossing the Schuylkill River twenty miles from the city; that news proved to be false, but it provided incentive to remove the bells expeditiously. Wagons were in even greater demand than they had been earlier in September, so those found to haul the bells were probably loaded to their limit, around 2,000 pounds. On that basis transporting the eighteen bells would have required seven wagons, each with a four-horse team. (The Continental Artillery, no stranger to hauling heavy items, preferred to limit wagons to about 1,400 pounds of load to conserve both wagons and horses.)[10]

Elizabeth Drinker, who kept a daily journal during this period, recorded at 9:00 p.m. on September 23 that "All ye Bells in ye city are certainly taken away" so the bell convoy probably departed Philadelphia earlier that day, a mere three days before the British Army arrived. Realizing the latter's proximity, the convoy's teamsters undoubtedly took the shortest route to Bethlehem which was sixty-odd miles via the Bethlehem Pike. Coincidentally, the Continental Army's baggage convoy of 700 wagons was dispatched from Pottsgrove, northwest of Philadelphia, that same day under guard of over 200 North Carolina cavalymen commanded by Col. Thomas Polk. The two convoys met south of Bethlehem on September 24. The wagon hauling the State House Steeple Bell broke down in Bethlehem, probably suffering a wheel or axle failure due to its heavy load. The record is silent about how the 2,080-pound bell was hoisted to enable the wagon's repair, but once those repairs were completed the bells' journey continued. The military stores already transported to Bethlehem had filled available storage space, so the bells were hauled to Allentown where they were inventoried on September 28 by Maj. Joseph Watkins, Assistant Commissary of Military Stores, and deputy to Colonel Flower. As mentioned above, Watkins must have used a list of the bells made by the carpenters in Philadelphia since he had no other way of knowing the origin of each bell.[11]

The bells were placed in the cellar of Zion Reformed Church in Allentown, where the space beneath the thirty-eight-foot by forty-four-foot floor was sufficient for all eighteen.[12] They remained undisturbed since the Lehigh Valley was not threatened by the British Army during their residence. No record has been found concerning their movement back to Philadelphia after the British evacuated in June 1778, but newspapers in the city recorded on August 22 of that year that:

The bells of this city, removed on the approach of the enemy, by the commissary general of military stores, are all returned safe, and again hung.[13]



*Figure 2: The recast State House Clock Bell, sister to the State House Steeple Bell. Originally of 3' 10" diameter, now about 1' 8" diameter. (St. Augustine Roman Catholic Church)*

Thanks to the foresight of Continental authorities and the exertions of Philadelphia's carpenters and the convoy's teamsters, at least eleven of those bells (accounting for nearly 90 percent of the weight of the eighteen) remain in Philadelphia 245 years later, the best known being the Liberty Bell. Its "sister bell," after being damaged and recast (Fig 2), is at St. Augustine Roman Catholic Church. Gloria Dei (Old Swede's) Church still has its bell and Christ Church has all seven of its bells, as well as the eighth that remained in the city during British occupation; it also owns the larger of the two bells that were in St. Peter's Church in 1777 (both had been given to St. Peter's in 1760 by Christ Church). The other bells may also exist, and the writer would be glad to hear from readers who know their location.

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[1]Journals of the Continental Congress 1774-1789 Vol. 8 (1777) (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1907), 711.

[2]Minutes of the Supreme Executive Council Vol. 11 (1776-1777) (Harrisburg: Theo. Fenn & Co., 1852), 278, 291, 294; Declaration of Col. Benjamin Flower, August 19, 1778, Papers of the Continental Congress, Papers of Paymaster Pierce, 642, fold3.com; John W. Jordan, et. al., "Bethlehem during the Revolution," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 13, No. 1 (April 1889), 74

[3]Valley Forge Orderly Book of General George Weedon (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1902), 39-40; Minutes of the Supreme Executive Council, 11:302, 304, 307, 309.

[4]Richard Henry Lee to Robert Morris, March 1, 1777, Papers of the Continental Congress, Miscellaneous Letters to Congress 1775-1789, 14:159-160, fold3.com. The concern may have been that the bells would be sent overseas and the metal used for other purposes. See Bonnie Young, "A Medieval Bell," The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin 11, No. 10 (June 1953), 296.

[5]Journals of the Continental Congress 1774-1789, 8:741.

[6]Minutes of the Supreme Executive Council, 11:306.

[7]Extracts from the Journal of Elizabeth Drinker from 1759 to 1817, A.D., Henry D. Biddle, ed. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1889), 49; Charles E. Peterson, "Carpenters' Hall," Transactions of the American Philosophical Society 43, No. 1 (1953), 97.

[8]"Return of Bells at Allen Town in Northampton County 28th Sept 1777 Belonging to the City of Philadelphia," Miscellaneous Numbered Record 21211, U.S. Revolutionary War Miscellaneous Records (Manuscript File), 1775-1790s, Records Pertaining to Continental Army Staff Departments, Record Group 93, National Archives Publication M859 (MNR); John C. Paige, The Liberty Bell of Independence National Historical Park: A Special History Study (Denver: National Park Service, [1985]), 26; Vestry minutes for October 29, 1753, Vestry Minute Book No. 1, 1715-1760, 144, Christ Church Historical Collections Online, [www.philageohistory.org/rdic-images/view-book.cfm/ChristChurch.MinuteBooks\\_v1](http://www.philageohistory.org/rdic-images/view-book.cfm/ChristChurch.MinuteBooks_v1).

[9]Vestry minutes for September 16, 1777, and November 6, 1777, Vestry Minute Book No. 2, 1761-1784, 356-359, Christ Church Historical Collections Online, [www.philageohistory.org/rdic-images/view-book.cfm/ChristChurch.MinuteBooks\\_v2](http://www.philageohistory.org/rdic-images/view-book.cfm/ChristChurch.MinuteBooks_v2).

[10]For most of the bells, weights were estimated using diameters from the inventory and the bell weight table of Meneely Bell Company, Troy, NY, [www.towerbells.org/data/BellWeightTables.html](http://www.towerbells.org/data/BellWeightTables.html). The weight of the State House Steeple Bell (Liberty Bell) is stated by the National Park Service to be 2,080 pounds. In aggregate, the bells weighed just under 14,000 pounds. The required number of wagons was based on these weights and a maximum load of 2,000 pounds except for the State House Steeple Bell. The news report is from Jacob Hiltzheimer, "Extracts from the Diary of Jacob Hiltzheimer, of Philadelphia, 1768-1798," The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 16, No. 1 (April 1892), 99. For an example of the Continental Artillery's wagon loading guidance, see "Estimate of teams 2d June 1781 to transport artillery & stores," MNR 26632.

[11]Extracts from the Journal of Elizabeth Drinker, 51; George Washington to Thomas Polk, September 23, 1777, [founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-11-02-0309](http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-11-02-0309); Jordan, "Bethlehem during the Revolution,"; "Return of Bells at Allen Town in Northampton County 28th Sept 1777 Belonging to the City of Philadelphia," MNR 21211. For the possible identity of some of the teamsters, see Charles R. Roberts, et. al., History of Lehigh County Pennsylvania (Allentown: Lehigh Valley Publishing Co., 1914), 1:137.

[12]Joseph Mortimer Levering, A History of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania 1741—1892 (Bethlehem, PA: Times Publishing Company, 1903), 463; Paige, The Liberty Bell of Independence National Historical Park, 28.

[13]The Pennsylvania Evening Post (Philadelphia), August 22, 1778. Note that the Church Warden of Christ Church informed the Vestry on October 22, 1778, that their bells had been replaced by Colonel Flower. This was the first vestry meeting since the bells had been returned in August. See vestry minutes of October 22, 1778, Vestry Minute Book No. 2, 1761-1784, 374, Christ Church Historical Collections Online.

Tags from the story

British occupation of Philadelphia, Christ Church, Gloria Dei, Liberty Bell, Pennsylvania State House, St. Peter's Church