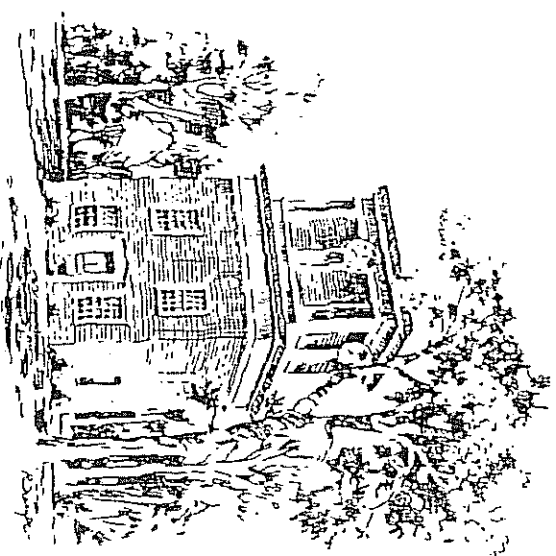


# REFLECTIONS BY THE BELL TOWER

1845-2011



## THE BELL TOWER

*Stalwart, it stands at the Park's edge.*

*Once it stood in another place beside, "Old Union."*

*It has witnessed the onslaught of the movers,  
the ravages of time, and periods of neglect.*

*It has been a family home,*

*an educational classroom, and a storage place.*

*It has seen, "Picnics in the Park,"*

*the joyful play of children,*

*and the thoughtful strolls of adults.*

*Proudly it stands at the Park's edge.*

*Its' bell calling all to recall.*

*I AM HISTORY, I AM TRADITION,*

*I AM 'THE BELL TOWER.'*

Have you ever thought of something that you could ask a parent or grandparent, but they are now gone? Today imagine that the Bell Tower could speak and relate accounts witnessed over 166 years. Let's begin with some reflections of the Bell Tower.

It is believed I was built in 1845. Now that I look about my surroundings one can see that the early pioneers of this village have made great progress. In 1802 Calvin and Percilla Clark were the first settlers of Clarks Mills to settle land just outside of what today we call Belleville on County Route 75, Lake Road.

My structure is twenty-four foot square with three floors, plus the bell chamber area at the top. Inside stairs lead from the first floor up through each level to the Bell chamber. It took the greatest devotion on the part of my caretaker as he manually rung my bell on the hour during the early days of my being.

At a house in Mathers Mills is where academic instruction began in 1824 with H.H. Haft, male teacher. In 1825 instruction continued in a church located where today gas pumps are at Farm Pride Store.

The Baptist church to my west was built in 1823. Let's note that the Baptists parishioners have not always got along that well and history notes that there was another Baptist church on this same site that was torn down after of only a few years of service and the current church structure was rebuilt. This is now owned by the Masonic Lodge members.

Just to my north I remember a stone building. It was local citizenry that erected this institution for their children's advanced education. It was called the "Union Literary Society", with a study system more in language and vocational training.

One day, while observing my caretaker in his motherly devotions, I learned that my location was selected because of its proximity to church and the institution. Wasn't this wonderful planning, educational calling during the week and spiritual calling on the Sabbath day while at all times a calling to everyone in case of fire or peril?

I should note here, that from 1837 to 1840 there was no instruction as the economic depression of the time caused the mortgage to be called. Calvin and Percilla Clark redeemed the mortgage and the Union Literary Society reopened in 1840.

About 1854 I watched with amazement while a church was being built by the Presbyterians at my south. About ten years later the Methodist church society purchased the structure and have held services there to this day.

Since my birth I have been witness to tremendous growth of student enrollments at the institution. Under the helm of Rev. J. Dunbar Houghton, in 1855-56, there was a 96 foot, 3 story wooden structure built across the front of the stone institution. It housed classrooms, offices, a library, students and teachers boarding quarters as well as living quarters on the third floor for the principal and his family. After construction my bell tower was only 12 feet away to the South.

During this time the name, 'Union Literary Society', was changed to, 'Union Academy, Belleville,' a much more appropriate title and identity.

For about seven years in the 1850s a railroad between Pierrepont Manor and Sackets Harbor traversed through Belleville. This allowed students to travel to Union Academy without hiring a horse and carriage

coach service from Adams.

About 1858, the year after the new addition was completed I experienced my first move and received my first bad injury. I was too close to the new academic building and the trustees decided to move me a short distance further South. Ten dollars was appropriated for this move and twenty dollars to make some structural repairs. During the move I rolled off my skids causing me to sway violently. My bell made a loud clang and inspection later showed that my bell had received a crack.

It was a few years before a new bell was cast in Troy, N.Y. During the winter of 1862 the new bell was shipped by rail to Pierrepont Manor and carried by sleigh to Belleville where it was placed in my tower.

As the years passed the method of ringing my bell changed many times. At first it was all by hand. Then there was a system of weights, which would allow me to toll out the hour without hourly attention by man. Once a day my caretaker would wind the weights back up for my continued tolling operation.

It was during the Civil War when I witnessed grief and sadness. Most gentlemen students and male teachers joined the service to preserve their country. We lost one of our teachers and Major Andrew Jackson Barney to this war. The funeral services for Major Barney drew over 3000 mourners at the Fair Grounds where today is our current Belleville Henderson School District buildings. Ensuing years after the war saw hard times for the academy as well for the whole country.

For a time I housed a destitute lady and her children who took in washings to provide for her family. I also housed the village common school district during

the 1870's. Over the years I've been used for many other duties in addition to my bell tolling service.

The Mather families established the 'Mather School of Agriculture' in 1901. This was the first academic school in the United States to teach a course of agriculture instruction. I housed class for the same for a time.

The most tragic day that I have witnessed during my life at Union Academy was in the early morning hours on Monday, January 23, 1923, when I began to see smoke pouring from the institution. A fire was spreading in the partitions before being discovered. Due to the time of the year, and having very little equipment for fire fighting, little could be done to stop its progress. All to soon, everything lay at a complete loss. I however escaped whole and without harm but I was left very desolate and lonely.

Immediately classrooms were established throughout the village. Insurance money and the generosity of everyone's donations enabled rebuilding. Commenced in the spring of 1924 and the new brick institution was opened in the fall of 1925. All of these donors are recorded in the 'Book of Memory' memorial book. Once again I lived to witness students, teachers, parents and friends attending our local institution.

Centralization of the common school system commenced in the early 1930's. The Union Academy building then become leased to the Belleville Central School District. School was no longer funded by tuition but by property taxes and New York State support. A six room addition was added in 1934-35 for the grades one through six. These six rooms housed the former common school students as their country schools closed. It also housed a new gymnasium facil-

ity. Student required busing and a former milk creamery became the institutions bus garage.

It was the addition of these classrooms that brought about my second and final move to my present location at the entrance to the 'Williams Park.'

'Williams Park' was the inspiration of Fredrick Williams, a farmer with a seed house business on the Tiller road. Mr. Williams purchased the land for our park and his hired men spent untold hours for several years planting, nurturing and watering trees that today makes my setting so precious. After he had the park secured and growing he gifted it to the Union Academy.

During ensuing years I have witnessed growth of additional campus grounds and saw more building growth in 1954-55 to my West. Added were a foyer, classrooms, cafeteria and a new gymnasium with amenities. The old gymnasium was widened and converted into a theater style auditorium.

Again in the 1980's there was a period of great change following the merger of the Belleville Central School and the Henderson School Districts. In 1982 the ownership of the Academy building and grounds was transferred to the Belleville Henderson School District. Maurice L. Herron was president of the Union Academy Board of Trustees at this time.

A complete new educational institution was built north-east of the William Park. Not many years later there was extensive conversion of the old Academy facilities into a bus garage with service and storage facilities. One of the four saved classrooms now houses the UAB files, memorabilia and display repository.

From time to time I have had attention to some of

my needs when I was beginning to sag. This called for drastic preservation measures just to save my existence. It was the Union Academy, as administered by the UAB Board of Trustees, that arranged for these repairs and modifications. My structure has been electrified to enable my bell striking hourly. Repairs now have been made to two clocks faces that show the time. A few years ago my outer supporting beams were replaced and siding repairs made along with a new coat of paint.

In the summer of 2009 my care taking overseers from the UAB Building and Grounds Committee arranged for Simmons Construction to replace my decaying clapboards on my West side, painted the whole tower, made some additional repairs to the clocks and added new outside lighting.

As we reflect now, in retrospect of my 166 year of service as the sentinel for this community, I have been witness to a tremendous revolution in life and education. Today I stand here in wonder what the future will behold? I'll be here, will you be here too?

My Bell Tower one-room classroom repository needs memorabilia donations. Do you have any you can spare? It would be most appreciatively received.

I welcome & congratulate the achievements of all the students that I've observed over the years. Keep me in mind at future events and help my existence by giving memorabilia for my one or two rooms exhibits!

*I BID YOU ADIEU FOR NOW, UNTIL WE MEET AGAIN!*

*Thank you for your attention and interest. I'll report again as events happen. I remain, Maurice L. Herron, author, graduate, Class of 1953, member and past president of Union Academy Board of Trustees.*