

CHARLOTTESVILLE'S (AND VIRGINIA'S) FORGOTTEN LIBERTY BELL REPLICA



SUMMARY:

- Nearly all Charlottesville residents would be surprised to learn that the city owns a full-size replica of the original Liberty Bell, which was given to Virginia by the U.S. Treasury Department as part of a 1950 national campaign to raise funds through the sale of Savings Bonds.
- Virginia Gov. William Battle, a Charlottesville resident, aimed to locate Virginia's bell within his city. To avoid a conflict of interest, he appointed a

committee of three prominent Virginians to decide on the bell's placement. The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation submitted the winning application to display the bell at Monticello.

- The bell was dedicated in October 1950 and placed in a covered area beneath Monticello's North Terrace. In 1959, the Foundation, ostensibly because the bell could not be "properly displayed," transferred it to the Charlottesville Fire Company (CFC), a fraternal, charitable organization founded in 1885. The CFC paid for the bell's installation at the then-new Ridge Street Fire Station, where it remains. It is rarely noticed and seems to be featured only during the 4th of July ringing ceremonies, which draw little attention.
- Out of the 50 bells given to states, 35 are found in statehouses, on statehouse grounds, or in nearby museums. Charlottesville's bell seems to be the only one on municipal property, and few others are in more inaccessible, forgotten locations.
- *The question before Charlottesville's Historic Resource Committee: Is the bell's current location the highest and best use of this significant historical resource? If the answer is "no," what role, if any, should the HRC play in raising the question generally, and with whom?*

THE REST OF THE STORY:

In 1950, the U.S. Treasury Department chose the Liberty Bell as the symbol for a major U.S. Savings Bond campaign. Since the original Liberty Bell's condition prevented it from traveling, Treasury Secretary John W. Snyder convinced six copper companies to fund the creation of 54 full-size replicas. These replicas were given to the then-48 states, the territories of Alaska and Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, plus the District of Columbia.

The plan was to mount the replicas on trucks that would tour each state and territory, after which the replicas would become the property of the state or territory. The Treasury Department set goals for how much each state was expected to raise during a national “Independence Drive” that ran from May 15 to July 4th, 1950.

Virginia’s goal was \$10.5 million, with smaller targets set for each community. In Virginia, the Liberty Bell replica traveled from town to town, stopping at schools, courthouses, and other public venues. In Charlottesville, Virginia’s replica was celebrated in a parade on May 20, 1950, that included members of the National Guard, a U.S. Marine color guard, and three cars carrying city and county officials. Schoolchildren were dismissed from school to attend a ceremony in front of Lane High School—now the Albemarle County Office Building—where the main speaker was Armistead M. Dobie, a U.S. judge on the Fourth Circuit of Appeals and a former professor and dean at the University of Virginia School of Law.

At the end of the campaign, most states prominently featured the bell in their state capitals. Virginia Governor John S. Battle appointed a committee to decide where it would be displayed. Battle evidently wanted to locate the bell in his native Charlottesville but felt he needed to distance himself from the decision. He appointed a three-member committee, led by Dr. Francis Gaines, President of Washington and Lee University, to review possible permanent sites. Serving with Gaines were Dr. Charles J. Smith, provost of Roanoke College, and Randolph Church, the State Librarian. The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation (now the Thomas Jefferson Foundation), which operates Monticello, expressed interest in housing the bell. The Foundation’s request was supported by Randolph H. Perry, the executive secretary of the Charlottesville Chamber of Commerce, who lobbied Battle and Treasury Department officials. The key Treasury official, Assistant Secretary John S. Graham, was a graduate of the University of Virginia School of Law, which may have influenced the decision. The committee reportedly considered other applications and suggestions, but on July 13, announced it had chosen Monticello as the preferred site.

The choice elicited mixed reactions from the Foundation's leadership. Local members of the Foundation's board of directors were excited about the chance to promote Monticello and Charlottesville by prominently displaying the bell. Board

Vice President Charles Barham, Jr., a Charlottesville businessman, led the effort. Barham joined the board in January 1950 as a “working” local member, and someone able to focus on the details of managing Monticello. He worked to arrange a Liberty Bell ceremony at Monticello featuring the governor and, in one proposed plan, the Virginia Military Institute’s marching band.

Opposition came from Fiske Kimball, a Foundation Board member and, for more than 25 years, chair of the Foundation’s Restoration Committee. Kimball’s extensive knowledge of Thomas Jefferson’s architecture, his role as director of the Philadelphia Museum, and his strong personality shaped Board debates on furnishing the house and restoring Monticello’s gardens and grounds. Kimball and Milton Grigg, a Charlottesville architect and Restoration Committee member who was instrumental in restoring Monticello, opposed any prominent display of the Liberty Bell on the mountaintop. Both considered it an inauthentic distraction—a relic with no real connection to Jefferson or Monticello. Grigg, writing to Kimball, was scornful about finding the right place to display the bell.

There will doubtless be those guided by the circus persuasion who think of it in terms of a dominating locations even a border of neon lights! I still regard it [the bell] as a white elephant which may best be placed outside the restoration area. The grade is not too favorable, directly opposite the cemetery where I thought a shrine, like a shelter, could be erected, and then we must remember that anything appropriate as a dignified housing would probably run us four or five thousand dollars.

Kimball agreed, suggesting the bell be kept in the carriage house beneath the North Terrace. “For God’s sake,” Kimball told Grigg, “let us leave it there until we can throw it into a quarry.”



Acceptance ceremony, October 22, 1950. Pictured, left to right, are: William S. Hildreth, vice president of the Foundation; John S. Graham, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury; Governor John S. Battle; Henry Alan Johnston, vice president of the Foundation; and Fiske Kimball, member of the Foundation board of directors and chair of the Restoration Committee. Behind them are members of a local National Guard unit, then known as the "Monticello Guard," which was locally famous for its Revolution-era dress uniforms.

Despite Kimball and Grigg's opposition, the bell was formally handed over to Monticello in a ceremony that featured members of the Foundation's board of directors, Governor Battle, Assistant Treasury Secretary Graham, and Kimball. In his remarks, Battle described Monticello as a fitting location for the Liberty Bell replica:

Thomas Jefferson, who designed this fine estate, was the architect of the American Revolution. His was the vision which the Declaration of Independence, and his hand was responsible, in great measure, for the writing of the Constitution, which is the foundation of this nation's laws. To Jefferson, the word 'liberty' was something profoundly sacred—because the idea of liberty, which he so thoroughly understood, was one that guided all his actions throughout his life. For this reason, I can imagine no spot more fitting to serve as the final repository of this Liberty Bell in the State of Virginia than Monticello, and I am proud and happy to see it placed here for the State and all her citizens. It is my sincere hope that the stream of visitors to this historic shrine will see this Liberty Bell not merely as a reminder of the stirring events of the early days of our Republic, but rather as the living symbol of an idea which the free people of the world are striving today.

The bell was placed in what was informally known as Monticello's "carriage house," an open space beneath the North Terrace. (Note: The North Terrace is the raised wooden walkway visitors see after their tour exits the mansion. The open space below is now occupied by the "Farm Shop," where visitors can buy refreshments.) Over the next ten years, Monticello appears not to have made any effort to publicize the bell's presence. It is not featured in brochures from that

period, not mentioned in guidebooks, and not part of any 4th of July celebration. Similarly, a search of local newspapers yielded no mention of Monticello's Liberty Bell replica. The only indication that it was on display in the carriage house during this time is a photograph taken by a tourist, which is part of the Foundation's collection of such photos.



In April 1959, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation board decided to consider donating the bell to a local organization. In the words of the minutes from the April 12, 1959, meeting:

Mr. Thacker reported that he was afraid the old Liberty Bell replica which was given to the Foundation by the State when Governor Battle was in Richmond would fall and hurt some one [sic]. It has absolutely no connection with Monticello. Mr. Barham moved, and it was unanimously agreed that Mr. Thacker dispose of this Bell the best way he can, giving it to a school, the City of Charlottesville, or the County of Albemarle.

W. Curtis Thacker, Monticello's Superintendent from 1950 to 1970, found that his effort to find a new home for the bell drew media attention. A June 20, 1959, article in the Charlottesville Daily Progress titled "Liberty Bell to Toll Curfew at

Firehouse,” noted that the bell had been kept in the carriage house and that the Foundation decided to give it “to Charlottesville and Albemarle County because the bell was not being used.” It also states: “Monticello officials at first thought the bell might be placed in front of the Albemarle Courthouse, but that was ruled out because the bell looks too new.” According to the article, City Manager James E. Bowen suggested placing it atop the firehouse tower. The firehouse in question was a new fire station under construction on Ridge Street. Its architect, Milton Grigg, had opposed installing the bell at Monticello in 1950 and may have helped facilitate the transfer.

The plan prompted one citizen to write a letter to the editor opposing the transfer. “It is most unfortunate, indeed, tragic—that the replica of the original Liberty Bell . . . should find its resting place in the belfry of the new fire house,” wrote Margaret Fowler Clark. “Because the bell ‘does not look old,’ a City Father claims, it is not appropriate to place it at the Court House. May the saints preserve us, that this precious symbol, as dear as the first breath of man, should be hidden from sight for its ‘new look’!” Clark concluded by urging that the bell be placed “where all may see it.”

In any case, the proposed firehouse tower was never built, and the Liberty Bell replica never rang at curfew. A year after the Foundation’s effort to donate the Liberty Bell replica, the board was informed that progress was being made, with the April 12, 1960, Foundation board minutes noting that:

The replica of the Liberty Bell was given to the Fire House unless Miss Emily Duke gets the Court House to accept it.

Duke served as President of the Albemarle Historical Society, but no record of her efforts to place the bell has been found in the Society’s archives.

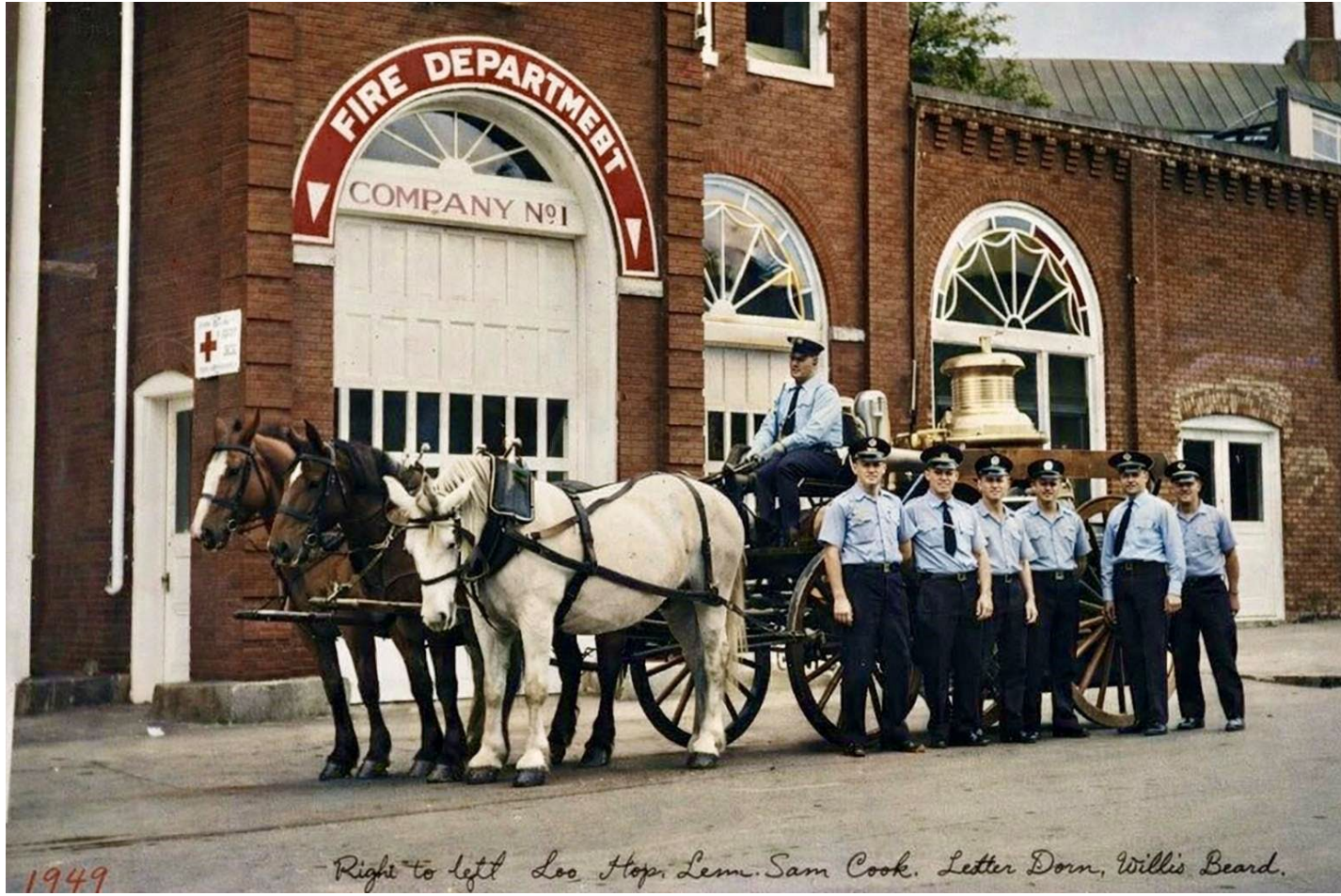
The details of how the bell’s ownership was transferred from Monticello to the city are unclear. It’s also unknown whether the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation owned the replica. An October 19, 1950, Richmond Times Leader article about the bell states that the Liberty Bell replica was “on indefinite loan” to the Foundation. A thorough review of the Foundation’s archives found no record of any formal document transferring ownership of the bell to the Foundation.

Regarding the 1959 transfer, found in the Thomas Jefferson Foundation's archives is a set of copies of the handwritten minutes of the Charlottesville Fire Company (CFC). The CFC was—and still is, at least on paper—named after the original all-volunteer firefighting organization established in 1885. While the record warrants further research, the CFC in 1960 consisted of 60 members engaged in charitable work and serving as auxiliaries supporting the Charlottesville Fire Department. In April 1960, the CFC minutes record that a committee had been investigating “placing and getting the Bell from Monticello” and had set aside \$500 for the “erection of the pedestal for the bell.” The transfer took place, and on July 7, 1960, the CFC's secretary wrote a brief letter to Thacker:

I have been requested by the Charlottesville Fire Company to thank you for the Liberty Bell. We appreciate your kindness very much.

The CFC funded a brick plinth for the bell and a metal plaque. The recently relocated Liberty Bell replica was dedicated in a 1963 ceremony that apparently did not receive newspaper coverage.

In July 1980, the Charlottesville City Council passed a resolution officially confirming that the CFC was “authorized to maintain a replica of the Liberty Bell in its present location in front of the Ridge Street Fire Station until further action of this Council.” The resolution also authorized the CFC to “store an antique horse-drawn [sic] steam fire engine” in a “location to be designated by the Chief of the Charlottesville Fire Department.” However, the CFC has apparently ceased to exist as a volunteer organization. A July 2024 resolution amending the city codes notes that the CFC would now be “under the umbrella” of the Charlottesville Fire Department. The fate of the antique steam fire engine remains unknown—the last newspaper mention of the engine dates back to 1995.



1949

Right to left Loc. Hop, Lem. Sam Cook, Letter Down, Willis Beard.



Since its dedication 63 years ago, Charlottesville's Liberty Bell has received little attention. Most news coverage since the bell was moved to the Ridge Street Fire Station has focused on 4th of July bell-ringing ceremonies. According to Daily Progress articles, various organizations have sponsored and organized the event. These include local chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Cub Scouts, the Sons of the American Revolution, and the Descendants of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence. More recently, local Boy Scouts appear to have taken over the event.

William W. Bergen

Member, Charlottesville Historic Resource Committee

March 19, 2026

NOTE:

My interest in this topic was prompted by an encounter with Tom Campbell, a guest at Monticello, where I worked for a decade as a guide. He told me he and his family were in Charlottesville to visit Monticello and the Liberty Bell. My stunned expression must have prompted him to tell me the story related here. My own research at Monticello on this topic formed part of the basis for this article about Campbell's visit to Charlottesville's Liberty Bell:

<https://tomlovesthelibertybell.com/virginia-liberty-bell-replica/>

Campbell's entire blog detailing his efforts to view all the Liberty Bell replicas is here:

<https://tomlovesthelibertybell.com/>

OTHER LINKS:

<https://www.29news.com/2024/07/04/fire-dept-rings-liberty-bell-replica/>

retrieved 1/14/26

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQPw9WbSuwI>

The Historical Marker Database: <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=73013>

retrieved 1/14/26

<https://www.29news.com/2023/07/04/bell-ringing-ceremony-held-charlottesville-fire-station/>

This online history of firefighting in Charlottesville gives some interesting details:

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/581530e890bc444d9ec2dc5e9b232c6a>