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Eastern Bank unveils 150 year-old "mystery bell" outside Lowell office

December 09, 2009 - Financial Digest

A 19th century bell, discovered partly buried in a city neighborhood yard and used as a flower planter for nearly 80 years, is the centerpiece of a new memorial unveiled today in a dedication ceremony before about 100 people outside the Eastern Bank office in downtown.

City and bank officials, along with community leaders, gathered around a 500 s/f, triangular-shaped lot at 50 Central St. to officially open the memorial, which honors those who built early Lowell.

"Eastern Bank is proud to play a modest role on a special team of people from all walks who brought this unique, local historical preservation project to fruition," said bank president Bob Rivers. "Lowell is a leader in preserving history and this latest attraction is another reason to visit this great city."

When it was first discovered, it was unclear whether the bell was used in a mill building, clock tower, church, fire station or police barracks. Nonetheless, it was restored by the Lowell Heritage Partnership (LHP), which sought permission to display it outside the bank's office at the corner of Central and Prescott Sts. in Lowell. Since that time, local historians revisited the bell's history. They now believe it originally resided at a building known as the Old Market House at 40 Market St., which served as a market and later a police station, but housed this bell as a fire alarm before Lowell's first fire station was erected on Palmer St.

The Draper Family, many of whom attended today's event, donated the bell to the LHP about five years ago before they sold their longtime family home at 116 Jewett St., which housed the bell for nearly 80 years in the city's Centralville neighborhood. It is believed that a previous owner of the Jewett St. address had the bell transported to the home in 1923.

Warren and Ann Draper, who are now deceased, purchased the home about 50 years ago and the bell remained there until it was donated to the LHP by their children: Kathleen, Edward and Warren, Jr. The bell was featured in The Sun as a "mystery bell" in a photo taken as it was being raised by a crane and donated to the LHP.

"The Lowell Heritage Partnership would like to sincerely thank everyone involved in this effort to preserve another important artifact in Lowell's history," said Dick Lockhart, president, LHP. "We are dedicated to preserving and enhancing Lowell's natural, built, and cultural heritage through community partnerships. The memorial dedication is a perfect example of our mission."

The bell memorial was created with help from the Rotary Club of Lowell, the Theodore Edson Parker Foundation and others, added Lockhart.

"The Rotary Club of Lowell began work on this project about five years ago," said Joanne Souza, of the Rotary Club of Lowell. "We are so pleased to see the end result, a beautiful and historic piece of history for all to see in downtown Lowell."

The bell was manufactured around 1859 by the Naylor Vickers Company of Sheffield, England just prior to a period of growth and expansion for Lowell's mills. The bell is constructed of steel, rather

than the more expensive bronze, and was struck by an exterior mechanical hammer. Local historians believe that this particular bell possessed a sharp tone designed to alert the populace in emergencies.

Lowell, known as the "Bell City" during much of the 19th century, used bells to toll the hours of the day; sing songs of worship; alert fire crews of fires; and summon mill workers.

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