A Tale of Two Bells: Nauvoo Bell and Hummer’s Bell

Ronald G. Watt

The Nauvoo Bell

On 1 July 1845, the Millennial Star published a letter from Brigham Young asking the British Saints to furnish a bell for the Nauvoo temple, then nearing completion. He commented that he had little acquaintance with the weight of bells, but “we have thought of 2000 lbs. weight.” Wilford Woodruff, president of the British Mission, added an addendum stating that the Liverpool Saints wanted to provide not only a bell but also a clock and requested that all branches send their money to him.1

Young sent Woodruff a letter on 17 December 1845 stating that Woodruff should forward the money raised for the bell to him, because he “intended to purchase the bell in this country.”2 In January, with Woodruff planning to leave, he reported that “some 220 has been donated since we called for assistance for the bell and clock” and again encouraged the Saints to continue their efforts for the bell.3 Probably Woodruff brought the donations with him when he returned to the United States.

The bell arrived in Nauvoo, probably early in June 1846, and the men had great difficulty hoisting it into the temple belfry.4 On 14 June, the temple bell rang to summon men to defend the temple against a threatening mob, which dispersed upon seeing the gathering of armed Saints.5

By September, most of the Saints had left Nauvoo, but a small group of primarily indigents persisted in living in the town. The opposing force, eager to obtain Mormon property, decided to drive the remaining Saints from the community. On 10 September, during what was called the Battle of Nauvoo, someone rang the bell to notify the Mormon forces of the coming battle and to call

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The Nauvoo Bell.
Courtesy of LDS Historical Dept., Archives.
the men to gather with their rifles for a possible encounter. The besieged Mormon forces successfully kept the invaders from taking over the city, but rather than suffer losses, they left their city and crossed the Mississippi.

In late September, Thomas L. Kane ventured into an abandoned Nauvoo and commented that those individuals who were now in possession of the city took him into the belfry where he saw a drum and what he called a steamboat signal bell, the temple bell.7

By this date, Brigham Young had successfully led the main group of Saints to Winter Quarters. On 28 September, Young requested that the trustees in Nauvoo forward the bell to him at Winter Quarters, “for we have much need for it at this place.”8 There is no record of when the bell was taken out of the belfry. The temple bell arrived in Winter Quarters sometime in December, and President Young placed it in the public square where it was used to call people to worship services and other meetings.9

When Young left Winter Quarters in April 1847, he instructed Charles C. Rich to bring the bell in his company. Rich at first presumed that his group would leave in the first company after President Young, but Rich did not leave until the third company.10 Rich attached the bell to a wagon where it could be rung to wake the company, to notify them to begin their day’s journey, and also to warn the company about possible Indian attacks. On 21 June, the company departed for the Great Salt Lake Valley, arriving in mid September 1847.11 When the Rich company arrived in Salt Lake, the bell was placed in the fort in the city and later was moved to the bowery on Temple Square, where “the Nauvoo bell pealed forth its silvery notes.”12 During the severe winter of 1849–50, the bell cracked, and sometime thereafter it was melted down, recast, and enlarged to 782 pounds.13 In 1860, President Young erected a schoolhouse for his children east of the Beehive House, and the recast Nauvoo bell was put in its belfry where it remained for the rest of the century.14

Hummer’s Bell

In 1841, the Iowa City Presbyterian church appointed Michael Hummer as pastor. His special assignment was to raise money to help fund Des Moines College at West Point, Iowa, a Presbyterian college or seminary, and to build his own church in Iowa City—with the agreement that he was to receive his expenses and 10 percent of the money collected. He journeyed three times to the East, finding donors in several congregations. In 1844, he contracted with Andrew McNeeley in West Troy, New York, to make a bell for the church in Iowa City, for which Hummer paid $500.15 He also acquired some spiritualistic ideas that were strange to a frontier community.

The Iowa City presbytery, fearing that Hummer had appropriated church money for his own use, cited Hummer to appear before them for questioning.
Hummer became enraged and left the group with the declaration that the presbytery was a “den of ecclesiastical thieves.” He continued as pastor for a short time; but finally, in 1847, the trustees stripped him of his authority and expelled him from their midst. The church trustees, however, agreed that he could take some movable property and be given $650 for his unpaid salary, although they never fulfilled the agreement. He later secured a new position in Keokuk, Iowa.

Meanwhile, the Presbyterian church in Iowa City continued its construction project. In 1848, the parishioners hoisted the bell into the partially finished belfry. Hummer, who had never been paid, remembered the bell he had left in Iowa City and decided to take what he perceived as his rightful property—the bell. Leaving wagon and horses a short distance away so as not to attract attention, he and Dr. J. W. Margrave hauled a rope, ladder, and tackle to the church. While Dr. Margrave went after wagon and team, Hummer climbed the ladder and rigged the rope and tackle and then lowered the bell. In the meantime, a growing crowd removed the ladder and captured the bell. Hummer vented his rage with a few expletives but remained on his perch until Margrave returned. With team and wagon, Eli Myers, David Lamoreaux, James Miller, A. B. Newcomb, and others took the bell and sank it at the junction of Rapid Creek and the Iowa River, thus hiding it from Hummer and Margrave. At the time, the participants intended to retrieve the bell eventually and rehang it in the belfry of the church.

On 15 April 1850, Myers, Miller, Newcomb, and Lamoreaux retrieved the sunken bell, boxed it, loaded it into Newcomb’s wagon, and left Iowa City for California. Because Lamoreaux was a Mormon, they transported the bell to Kanesville, Iowa, where they joined with Shadrach Roundy’s Salt Lake City-bound freighting company. The travelers left 22 June and arrived in Salt Lake City in mid September. Newcomb’s wagon left an ox near Laramie. A few days later, the other ox died, so Newcomb transferred the bell to Rust Mott’s wagon for the rest of the journey. The men wintered in Salt Lake with the bell still in their possession. In the spring, needing funds for travel to California, the group’s spokesman approached the tithing clerk, Asa Calkin, about purchasing the bell. After negotiations, Calkin purchased the bell for $600.

In Iowa, a few men who had helped transport the bell to the Iowa River returned to the river tomb only to find the bell was not there. They assumed it had “washed down the river, or sunk to China.” After Hummer had searched for the bell, his spiritualist inclinations told him it was buried under the Iowa statehouse. Hummer, unable to collect on his $650 note, began court proceedings against the church trustees for his lost wages. In 1853, the court awarded him $450 but held him responsible for the loss of the bell—and therefore deducted the missing bell, giving him nothing.
The tale of Hummer's bell inspired an artist and others to break forth into song. A young man by the name of George Yewell, who stood behind the crowd in Iowa City during the attempted theft, with a crayon and an old sheet of brown paper drew a seven-section cartoon of the event labeled “The Outbreak.” In Iowa, the Hummer’s bell incident was discussed for several years in numerous bars. One evening in a bar, John P. Cook, a young lawyer, sang a song about the bell, and the next evening, William H. Tuthill added three more verses:

Ah Hummer’s Bell: Ah Hummer’s Bell:
How many a tale of woe ’twould tell
Of Hummer driving up to town;
To take the brazen jewel down
And when high up in the belfre-e
They moved the ladder, yes sir-e-e;
Thus while he towered aloft they say
The bell took wings and flew away.

Ah Hummer’s Bell: Ah Hummer’s Bell:
The bard thy history shall tell,
How at the last by Hummer’s sleight
Donations, gifts, and widow’s mite;
Made up the sum that purchased thee;
And placed him in the ministry,
But funds grew low, while dander riz,
Thy clapper stopped, and so did his.
Hummer’s Bell,

Ah Hummer’s Bell: Ah Hummer’s Bell:
We’ve heard thy last, funeral knell,
And what an aching void is left
Of bell and Hummer both bereft,
Thou deeply sunk in running stream,
Him in a Swedenborgian dream,
Both are submerged, both to our cost;
Alike to sense, and reason lost.

Ah Hummer’s Bell: Ah Hummer’s Bell:
Hidden unwisely, but too well,
Alas, thou’st gone; thy silver tone
No more responds to Hummer’s groan
But yet remains one source of hope
For Hummer left a fine bell rope
Which may be used, if such our luck,
To noose our friend at Keokuk.
Which may be used, if such our luck,
To noose our friend at Keokuk.
Samuel Magill wrote another little ditty that ended with the following verse:

Some sordid men then stole the bell  
And took it to Salt Lake,  
And sold it to the Mormon Church  
For filthy lucre’s sake.  
And it is in their temple now,  
As every Saint can tell,  
For they have heard the ringing sound  
Of the great Hummer Bell.  

About 1855, Brigham Young heard a rumor that the bell had originally been cast for a church in Iowa City, so he asked Asa Calkin, the tithing clerk who had resided in Iowa City when Hummer tried to take the bell, to write to the Iowa City church informing the trustees that he was willing to pay the original owners a reasonable price for the bell or return the bell to them for the amount he had paid for it. Instead of writing to officials at the Presbyterian church, Calkin wrote to his brother Charles, who was then living in Iowa City. He described some of the history of the bell to his brother and stated that it had no inscription and weighed 745 pounds. Charles inquired about the bell and discovered that its ownership was in question.

In 1857, Milton Cochran, president of the board of trustees of the Iowa City church, wrote to Brigham Young concerning the whereabouts of the bell, but there is no extant reply to his letter. Correspondence halted between President Young and the Iowa City Presbyterian church until 1868 when someone of the California group returned to Iowa City and told his story about disposing of the bell in Salt Lake City. S. M. Osmond, the minister of the Presbyterian church, wrote to Brigham Young about the whereabouts of the bell. President Young replied that the bell had indeed come to Utah and had been lying idle ever since its arrival. Furthermore, he indicated that he would gladly part with it if the interested parties would pay the expenses for shipping it back to Iowa accompanied with sufficient evidence that they were authorized to receive it for the congregation. Osmond responded that the trustees of the church would remove the bell as soon as possible and inquired what the expenses would be. He anticipated paying the transportation costs, but the congregation failed to raise the money for the bell.

In the meantime, the Presbyterian church authorities published a notice in the New York Tribune stating they had received a letter from Brigham Young asserting that President Young would return the bell to Iowa City providing the trustees would pay transportation costs. Reverend Michael Hummer, now in Kansas City, Missouri, avidly read the notice and sent a missive to President Young declaring Hummer was the rightful owner of the bell, which he had purchased from Andrew McNeeley in 1844 in West Troy, New York, whose name
was inscribed on the bell. To satisfy her own curiosity, Hummer’s niece, Mrs. M. Wheeler, also wrote Brigham Young about the bell. She said Hummer did not believe the bell to be in Utah, and she would rather “the bell was sunk in the Lake than to hear it had gone back to Iowa City.” Besides, “My poor uncle has had much to contend with.”

President Young replied to Hummer that he would give up the bell to the “first properly authorized person who will produce bona fide proof of ownership & authority to receive it, & who will refund the money expended thereon which is between six and seven hundred dollars.”

To ascertain all the information about the true ownership of the bell, President Young wrote to Asa Calkin, his former clerk, who was then living in St. George. In two letters, Calkin reviewed with President Young the problems of the bell’s ownership. Hummer asked what proof was needed, and President Young said he would need expenses and affidavits from two or more reliable persons “whose veracity is not likely to be a subject of question.” He never received another reply from Hummer.

Back in Iowa City, the community remained silent until February 1870 when Charles H. Berryhill, although not a member of the Presbyterian church, felt “an interest in having the bell restored.” A little more than a week later, Daniel H. Wells, writing for President Young who was journeying to southern Utah, responded to Berryhill that Brigham Young needed expenses for the bell and proof of the bell’s true ownership, repeating the statement made to Hummer. Berryhill replied to Wells stating he desired to know “the nature of the claim that Prest. Young holds on it.” He also believed the Union Pacific Railroad would transport the bell to Iowa without charge. While waiting for President Young’s return, Wells did not reply immediately to Berryhill. Impatiently, Berryhill wrote Orson Pratt stating he needed to know why Brigham Young wanted six to seven hundred dollars for the bell. “It certainly cannot be possible that your church with its professions of Christianity can be the possessors and holders of stolen property knowingly, but you will perceive that it looks suspicious in Mr. Wells failing to advise us as to the nature of the claim against the bell.”

After returning to Salt Lake City, Brigham Young wrote Berryhill, telling him the request for six to seven hundred dollars was the amount of money he paid for the bell. He also informed Berryhill that the bell was boxed, safe, and in good condition. “The bell we have never used, & probably never should use it, it is not such a one as we want.” Now tiring of the whole ordeal, President Young stated, “I am still writing to let you know all that I can concerning it, and now if you are disposed to prove the property, pay charges, and take the bell away, I shall be very glad to have you do so, if not, you will do me a great kindness not to trouble me any more about it.” There is no more correspondence in the Brigham Young papers about the bell.
The Confusion

After the death of Brigham Young, the histories of these two bells have become intertwined. In 1927, the Des Moines Register recounted the story of Hummer’s bell and also related an account of General Charles W. Irish. Although the story lacked credibility, Irish claimed he was traveling through Utah in 1895 with his daughter, Elizabeth, where he became friends with some early Mormon pioneers. After telling these unnamed Mormons the story of Hummer’s bell, Irish was shown a bell housed in a building in the tithing yard. He was told that the bell had been in Brigham Young’s “old school house” until the new schoolhouse had been built, at which time the bell had been retired to storage. They then took him to the stored bell, and when all of them examined the bell with magnifying glasses, they found the name of the foundry and the city of the creator of the bell that Irish had previously told them. These older men promised General Irish that after a few years, the bell would be forgotten or of little interest and that they would give the bell to him so he could return it once again to Iowa City.

General Irish’s story combines elements of the history of Hummer’s bell with the Nauvoo bell, which was in the Brigham Young schoolhouse even in 1895, but there had never been an earlier Brigham Young schoolhouse, as implied by the Iowa newspaper. Also, earlier, Calkin had told President Young that Hummer’s bell had no inscription, and yet General Irish claimed it did.

In 1981, the Ensign published a story of how David Lamoreaux rescued the Nauvoo bell from a Protestant church in Nauvoo and then hid it by sinking it in the Mississippi River. He and his brother Andrew Lamoreaux later “were chosen” to bring the bell to Salt Lake, carefully concealing the bell in their wagon with their provisions. On the way, they rang the bell “to awaken the herdsmen at dawn, to signal morning prayer, to start the day’s march, and to sound during the night watches to let the Indians know that the sentry was at his post.” All of these activities sound plausible except Lamoreaux did not come to Salt Lake City until 1850; and the Nauvoo bell came in 1847. Also, the story of hiding the Nauvoo bell in a river sounds strikingly similar to the stealing of Hummer’s bell, of which Lamoreaux was one of the participants. The story of Lamoreaux’s connection with the Nauvoo bell lacks plausibility and sounds like the relating of an oral tradition, changed over time.

Meanwhile, the recast Nauvoo bell continued to hang in the belfry of the Brigham Young schoolhouse until 1902. That year, Mrs. Edwin F. Holmes purchased the schoolhouse with plans of razing it, so she presented the bell to the Utah Historical Society, and pictures of it were taken. The historical society had no room to exhibit the bell, and although there were no records of any transaction, the society probably gave the bell to the Deseret Museum, which was owned by the LDS Church.
In 1938, the Relief Society general presidency began making plans to celebrate its one hundredth anniversary. In October 1939, the presidency met with the First Presidency, Presiding Bishopric, and Joseph J. Cannon, president of the Temple Square Mission, about the Relief Society general presidency’s plans. Cannon recalled a statement made by Brigham Young about building a tower with a bell on Temple Square. The committee approved Cannon’s idea, and Lorenzo S. Young made a model of the campanile. However, because of World War II, the First Presidency postponed the plans. It was not until 1965 that the First Presidency reopened the plans for building the campanile to house the recast Nauvoo bell, which was finally finished in September 1966.43

The search for Hummer’s bell continued. In 1895, Henry Lathrop from Iowa City wrote to E. Sells, probably from Salt Lake City, asking him to see if the bell was still in Utah and whether it could be returned to Iowa. He sent Sells a history of the bell by Captain F. M. Irish, entitled “Hummer and His Bell.” He also sent him two poems written, he claimed, by Samuel Magill and W. H. Tuttle, both with the title “Hummer’s Bell.” It is not known whether Sells located the bell.44

In 1936, a Des Moines librarian inquired of Salt Lake librarian Johanna Sprague of the whereabouts of Hummer’s bell. According to the librarian, the Iowa Historical Society in 1910 had traced the bell to the “Mormon Ladies Relic Chamber.” Sprague checked with the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, the Church Historian’s Office, and the LDS Bureau of Information but found no such bell. The Deseret News helped with the search, requesting anyone with information about the bell to communicate with Sprague.45 In the last sixty years, nothing more has been heard of the bell.

In 1998, the LDS Church Historical Department received an inquiry about the bell from Iowa City, asking for at least a picture of the bell and “if the bell does still exist and whoever owns it would be willing to part with it we would be willing to negotiate and would be more than willing to come and get it or pay to have it shipped.”46 After the 1998 inquiry, the author began an investigative search for Hummer’s bell. He found three large bells in Salt Lake City with their origin to Brigham Young’s period. The Nauvoo bell hangs in a campanile on Temple Square and is what it has always been—a large, bronze bell. The Daughters of the Utah Pioneer Museum has a large bell but has no record of how they acquired it, and it purportedly dates from the Brigham Young era and supposedly had connections to him. It is a clapperless, cast-iron bell, on a frame that would allow it to be rung, weighing about five hundred pounds with no inscription of place or maker. There is no documented evidence that this is Hummer’s bell. Because the DUP Museum bell is on a frame built for the purpose of being more easily rung, it is probably not Hummer’s Bell, which would have been frameless. The Church Museum has a bell that dates from 1873 when it was
placed on the Fourteenth Ward meetinghouse. It weighs approximately 350 pounds. The bell is on a frame and has no inscription. There is no documented evidence that this is Hummer’s bell, either.

Thus ends the story of two bells: the one, the Nauvoo Bell, very conclusively; the other, Hummer’s, inconclusively because no one knows where it is. Although nothing can be documented, further speculation would lead one to believe that Hummer’s bell, shortly after Brigham Young’s death, left Salt Lake City for an unknown destination.47

Notes

1. Millennial Star, 1 July 1845, 6:42–43.
2. Brigham Young to Wilford Woodruff, 17 December 1845, Brigham Young papers, LDS Church Archives.
4. Willard Bean said that about two weeks before his father, George Washington Bean, died, he told Willard about a large bell transported up the Mississippi which he believed came from England. They hung it in the belfry of the temple with great difficulty. See “Temple Square Topics, Official Organ of Temple Square Mission,” 3 (August 1939), No. 3. According to his reminiscences, George Washington Bean worked on the temple beginning in 1845 until about 20 February 1846. He then left with other pioneers for Iowa. He returned to Nauvoo on 6 June 1846 for a few days. It is not known where Brigham Young purchased the bell or even how it was shipped. It is possible that the bell was shipped up the Mississippi, which would have been the quickest and least expensive route.
5. Thomas Bullock journal, 14 June 1846, photocopy of typescript, LDS Church Archives.
6. George Morris, autobiography, typescript, BYU Archives and Manuscripts; Alexander Neibaur journal, 30 August 1846, LDS Church Archives; Curtis Edwin Bolton reminiscences, 1846–53, LDS Church Archives.
11. Charles C. Rich diary, 23 June 1847, LDS Church Archives; Sarah P. Rich reminiscences, LDS Church Archives; Charles C. Rich to Brigham Young, 18 August 1847, Brigham Young papers, LDS Church Archives.
15. Ruth A. Gallaher, “Hummer’s Bell,” The Palimpsest, 3:155–64; M. Hummer to Brigham Young, 26 January 1868, Brigham Young papers. We do not know whether Hummer’s bell was bronze or cast iron.
17. F. M. Irish, “Hummer and His Bell,” LDS Church Archives.
18. Shadrach Roundy diary, LDS Church Archives; History of Johnson County, Iowa, (Iowa City, Iowa; 1883), 433–34. In his diary, Roundy comments that Lamoreaux had to leave an ox. Later, the other ox died, and he received help from Mott. Because Brigham Young was not there when Calkin purchased the bell, President Young might not have known for some time afterwards that the Church had possession of the bell.
20. Millicent Smith, “Veil of Mystery Shrouds Hummer’s Bell,” Des Moines Register, 22 May 1927. The cartoons are published in the above cited Des Moines Register. Smith writes that the cartoon appeared in a shop window in Iowa City, which attracted the attention of a “lawmaker” who noticed Yewell’s talent and provided him with an education in art—even sending him to Italy. Yewell later became a “noted portrait painter.”
21. Gallaher, “Hummer’s Bell,” 162–63; History of Johnson County, 434. The Annals of Iowa published the Hummer’s bell verse in 1864, so it was written sometime before then.
22. Annals of Iowa (Des Moines, Iowa: Historical Department of Iowa, 1893), 2:333.
23. “Hummer’s Bell,” LDS Church Archives.
24. A. Calkin to “Dear Brother,” Brigham Young Letterbooks, 31 July 1855, Brigham Young papers, LDS Church Archives.
25. A. Calkin to Brigham Young, 20 January 1869, incoming correspondence, Brigham Young papers, LDS Church Archives.
26. Milton B. Cochran to Brigham Young, 21 April 1857, incoming correspondence, Brigham Young papers, LDS Church Archives.
27. Jacob Van Der Zee, History of Presbyterianism in Iowa City, 9–23.
28. Brigham Young to S. M. Osmond, 30 November 1868, Brigham Young letterbooks, LDS Church Archives.
29. S. M. Osmond to Brigham Young, 22 December 1868, incoming correspondence, Brigham Young papers, LDS Church Archives; Jacob Van Der Zee, History of Presbyterianism in Iowa City, 15–17.
30. M. Hummer to Brigham Young, 26 January 1869, incoming correspondence, Brigham Young papers, LDS Church Archives. Asa Calkin thought the inscription had been removed by the sellers of the bell.
31. Mrs. M. Wheeler to Brigham Young, 16 February 1869, incoming correspondence, Brigham Young papers, LDS Church Archives.
32. Brigham Young to M. Hummer, 24 March 1869, Brigham Young letterbooks, LDS Church Archives. President Young was basing his amount of the bell on Asa Calkin’s letter to him.
33. Brigham Young to Rev. M. Hummer, 15 May 1869, Brigham Young letterbooks, LDS Church Archives.
34. Charles H. Berryhill to Brigham Young, 21 February 1870, incoming correspondence, Brigham Young papers, LDS Church Archives.
35. Daniel Wells to Charles H. Berryhill, 3 March 1870, Brigham Young letterbooks, LDS Church Archives.
36. Berryhill to Daniel Wells, 14 March 1870, Brigham Young letterbooks, LDS Church Archives.
37. Berryhill to Orson Pratt, 8 April 1870, incoming correspondence, Brigham Young papers, LDS Church Archives.
38. Brigham Young to Berryhill, 29 April 1870, Brigham Young letterbooks, LDS Church Archives.
39. There was no old and new Brigham Young schoolhouse. The Brigham Young schoolhouse was built in 1860; and, in 1895, the recast Nauvoo bell was still hanging there.

40. *Des Moines Register*, 22 May 1927.
43. [Campanile project history], Relief Society records, LDS Church Archives.
44. Henry Lathrop to E. Sells, 25 March 1895, LDS Church Archives.
45. “Library in Iowa Seeks Whereabouts of ‘Hummer’s Bell,’” *Deseret News*, 10 August 1936. Jacob Van Der Zee in *History of Presbyterianism in Iowa City* mentions that the Presbyterian church sent an inquiry to Joseph Fielding Smith in 1911 and was told by a secretary that President Smith did not know the whereabouts of the bell.
46. Mike Bobo to Dear Friend, 18 November 1998, Public Services Sections correspondence, LDS Church Archives.
47. To the author's knowledge, the Iowa people have not inquired about Hummer's Bell with other archives or museums, including the DUP Museum. The DUP bell is probably a bell made by the Public Works.