

A Bell's Journey through Texas History



The importance of this object lies not only in its history, but also in the way in which it has been remembered and valued.

What is it about bells that fascinates us? Few other objects generate such interest among the public and inspire so much poetry, song, and art. Their peals communicate emotion and information, while a glimpse of their form might bring to mind freedom or faith. At the same time, they embody contradiction, representatives of both authority and revolution; the sacred and the secular; joy and sorrow. In *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America*, historian Mark Smith noted that “bells and their distinctive sounds anchored people to place and time, and emotion was invested in campanological soundmarks.” My ongoing research about the 250-year journey of one bell from a Spanish mission to a museum highlights the symbolic nature of bells and prompts questions about how and why objects are valued by individuals and groups.

On September 17, 1874, the *Galveston Daily News* ran a front-page notice about a recent acquisition of the local historical society. Members heralded the transfer of “the celebrated garrison bell of the Alamo” from Fort Bend County Judge William Kendall into their care, although the judge explained that he

could not recount the precise history of the item. Over the next month, the newspaper received several replies narrating the bell's travels. Today it rests in a display case on the second floor of Galveston's Rosenberg Library Museum.

Standing two feet tall, with a 46-inch circumference at its base, this bell looks much the same as its 1874 description. Time, weather, damage, and use have aged it to a mottled green-gray color. Raised lines encircle the bell at its top. Geometric designs embellish its waist above the rim, and a studded cross adorns one side. Faint traces of letters and dates are scratched on its sides. No clapper hangs inside to strike the bell's interior and the eyelet from which it once hung is broken. The documentary record provides an inconclusive story of this bell's journey. Even so, this object, like many others, has much to tell us. Stories about its past reveal much about how an object's value shifts over time and space, as well as what communities choose to remember and celebrate about their history.



Figure 1: Mission bell, courtesy of the Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.

The bronze bell was created from copper and other metal, heated and cast in a process that has changed little over centuries. An artisan created it around 1750, fulfilling a request from Franciscan missionaries working in the far northern reaches of Spanish claims in the Americas. Bells played a vital role in the sparsely settled mission-presidio communities in the frontier territory claimed by Spain. Their casting and transportation from Spain or Mexico City were significant endeavors. Omnipresent and insistent reminders of the newcomers, they rang daily, compelling residents to attend mass and labor, reminding them to pray the Ave María, announcing baptisms, marriages, and deaths, warning of imminent Apache attacks, and celebrating Catholic feast days.



Figure 2: *Spanish Dominions in North America* (Philadelphia: s.n., 1804). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

San Antonio, a small frontier settlement, was populated by Spanish and mestizo soldiers and settlers, *isleños* from the Canaries, and native Pajalats, Tacames, Siquipils, Tilpacopals, Patumacas, and Coahuiltecos gathered around the

missions. A 1772 inventory from Mission Concepción lists two bells, one of which could be the colonial bell in possession of the Rosenberg Library. The same year's inventory from Mission San Antonio de Valero (the Alamo) lists three large bells of unspecified weights, and Mission San Francisco de Espada's friar inventoried bells in both 1746 and 1772. Additional research might uncover receipts, transportation records, or additional information about the bells that rang in eighteenth-century San Antonio, while spectrographic analysis could help determine the bell's metal composition, possibly connecting it to other extant bells or to a particular place or region. The studded cross provides one clue to its birthplace; this design is similar to other mission bells cast in Seville and Mexico City.



Figure 3: Edward Everett, Mission Concepcion, near San Antonio de Bexar, 1847. Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Gift of Anne Burnett Tandy in memory of her father Thomas Lloyd Burnett, 1870-1938. Public domain.

In 1794, with the secularization of the missions and the transfer of control to diocesan priests, some bells were relocated to newer missions, while others were repurposed or remained in place. During the waning years of the Spanish empire, they continued to mark daily and special occasions for San Antonio's residents, as well as the Anglo-American newcomers. By 1835, Tejano militias joined with Anglo newcomers to declare independence against a Mexican state they considered oppressive.



Figure 4: Map of Texas With Parts of the Adjoining States. Philadelphia, H.S. Tanner, 1836. Courtesy of Texas State Archives Map Collection.

Late nineteenth-century sources tie the bell to the Texas independence struggle. Texians removed the bells from Mission Concepción and transported them to camp, where they unsuccessfully attempted to melt and mold them into ammunition. One bell was left hanging in a tree. Sam Damon, connected by marriage to descendants of Daniel Boone, brought it by wagon to his land grant in Brazoria County. Some accounts state the bell was torched when Santa Anna's Mexican Army burned Damon's barn months later.



Figure 5: Historical Marker, gravesite of Samuel Damon, Brazoria County, Texas. Photograph by David R. Mann.

The bell's original Texas home isn't clear, but the possibility that it "tocsined the alarum that called to their last battle the spirits of Travis, of Crockett, of Bowie and their followers," and "sounded the last knell of the murdered patriots, the sacrifice of whom gave to this great empire State its watchword liberty" was too tantalizing not to report in the 1874 press. They were written by men who pined for the past, elite white former Confederates who saw themselves as victims of occupation by an oppressive United States government during Reconstruction. Nostalgic rhetoric oozes from their recollections of the bell, which emphasize the bell's connection to Anglo-American Texas, not its Spanish colonial past.



Figure 6: Lewin & Brown, *The Fall of Bexar* (New York: s.n., between 1844 and 1849). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

One of these accounts, written in October 1874, states that after the Texas Revolution, Samuel Damon rang the bell to start and end the workday at his sawmill in the 1840s. He later gave it to David Randon for use at his nearby plantation. The account also offers a prosaic celebration of its role in antebellum plantation life. Our bell leads the way out of the wild tangle of darkness to the culture and civilization of Randon's home:

How oft, in the olden time, when treading the narrow and winding paths through the dense canebrakes, oppressed with the profound solitude of the jungle, and anxious to reach the hospitable roof of my friend Randon before the darkness came upon me, have I listened for the soft peal of that bell, calling the then happy laborer from his work to refreshment and repose, and . . . directing lost ones to safety and deliverance.



Figure 7: Cotton Field, Fort Bend County, Texas. David R. Mann.

The author continues his journey to his friend's porch by walking through the cotton field, where a "stentorian voice" sings upon hearing the bell, and the voices of humans enslaved on Randon's plantation respond. In this telling, the bell was a protagonist in the happy, productive life on Randon's cotton plantation, bringing about the melodies of content humans and birds as the sun set on a tranquil workday. It actively shaped a strict hierarchy of race-based class and power, not so dissimilar from the way in which it functioned in San Antonio under Spanish religious and colonial authorities.

We have reached the gate of the cotton field, and our ears are saluted, first with a prolonged whoop, quickly followed by "the loud laugh which speaks the vacant mind." We see the negroes mounted on their harnessed mules converging to the "turning row." A stentorian voice is heard above the clamor chaunting,

"De sun am down and my day's work am ober,
Dis am de chile what libs in de clober."

The refrain is taken up by a dozen throats, and the welkin rings with the wild yet mellow chorus, such as negroes alone can sound. The blue hills of Alabama and the rich valleys of Mississippi once resounded with these notes of happiness and contentment, but they are heard there no more. The cloud of Northern hate and fanaticism hangs over the land like a funereal pall, and from it issue mutterings of political rancor or the demoniacal ravings of voodooism. We thank God that we lived in the good old times of "corn songs and stage coaches," before John Brown's spirit had commenced its journey or locomotives had polluted the air and corrupted the morals of the South. But that is old fogyism, and don't suit the times. Well, the times don't suit us; so honors are easy on that deal. Our bell calls us off from this unpleasant subject.

Mr. David Randon gave the bell to the Richmond Academy, and for years it called "the school-boy with his satchel and shining morning face, creeping like snail unwillingly to school." It rung out the declaration of Southern independence, and then burst with grief in tolling the knell of Southern freedom. We are not positive in this last assertion, but we have an elderly citizen who will "swear point blank" to the fact, if it is considered a historical necessity. After the war for Southern independence the old Academy was found in dilapidated sympathy with all other ante-bellum institutions around it. Our community was too poor to repair it, and it fell into the possession of a wealthy civilian, who converted it into a comfortable residence for his family, and gave the old bell to the Historical Society, the very best disposition that could have been made of it. This is our story of the bell, and for any other information relating to it, we refer to Saml. Damon, of Brazoria county; Emory Darst, H. M. Thompson and R. J. Calder, of Fort Bend.

EQUUS.

Figure 8: Excerpt from "About that Historical Bell," *Galveston Daily News*,

October 11, 1874. Portal to Texas History. Public domain.

Sometime in 1854 or 1855, Randon gave the bell to Richmond Academy, where "it called the school-boy with his satchel and shining morning face" to his studies. While there, it "rung out the declaration of Southern independence" when Texas seceded. The school closed in 1862 and the property was sold to Judge William E. Kendall, who converted it into a family home. In its final public act, the bell "burst with grief in tolling the knell of Southern freedom" at the Civil War's conclusion.

After being approached by a prospective buyer who wanted the bell for its ties to the Texas Revolution, Judge Kendall gifted the bell to the Texas Historical Society, which had been formed by elite families involved in finance, trade, and cotton. By 1893, it was stored safely in Galveston's Masonic Temple, just as elite interest in preservation of the Alamo and the other four San Antonio missions had begun. In 1895, the group's secretary took the bell to a chemist to see if it could be restored with an acid wash. It was the subject of an inquiry by the state in 1897, when a commissioner sought to relocate it to the new state museum in Austin. Although a large part of the Historical Society's collection was damaged or destroyed in the Galveston Hurricane of 1900, the bell survived. In 1931 the Historical Society donated its artifacts and papers to the Rosenberg Library.



Figure 9: *First, or Mission de la Concepcion 1721. San Antonio, Texas* (San Antonio: R.P. Daniel, I.P.E., ca. 1900). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

In the first half of the twentieth century, women like Adina de Zavala and Clara Driscoll worked to preserve San Antonio's Spanish colonial past. De Zavala, granddaughter of a Tejano participant in the Texas Revolution, introduced Bessie Lee Fitzhugh, a fellow educator and author, to the bell in the 1940s. Fitzhugh included it in her 1955 book *Bells Over Texas*. The Star of the Republic of Texas Museum requested the bell on loan in the last decades of the twentieth century, during which Texas celebrated the sesquicentennial of its independence; after which the bell was returned to the library, where it is currently on display.

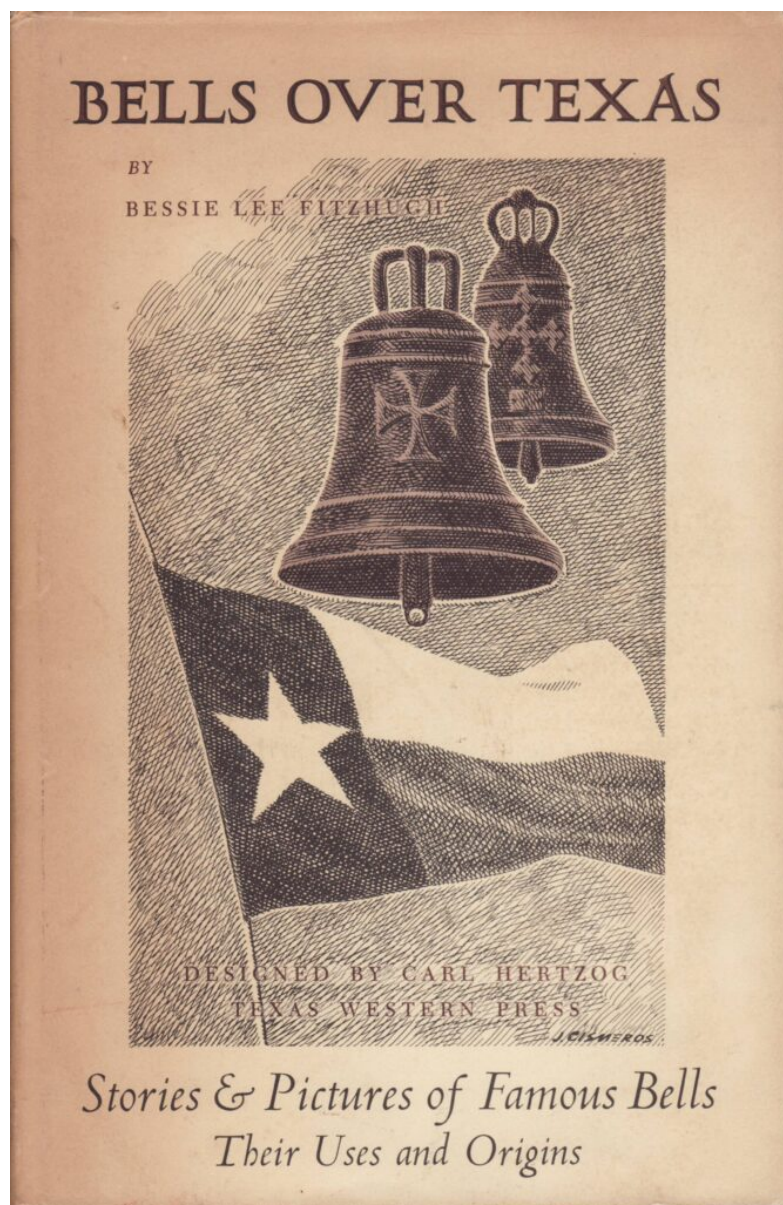


Figure 10: Cover of *Bells Over Texas* by Bessie Lee Fitzhugh, 1955. Courtesy of Texas Western Press.

What can we learn from considering the way in which this bell was valued by the range of individuals and groups who owned it? Before it was cast, its value was as metal, which had the potential to be converted into a variety of items for quotidian, ritual, military, or commercial use. Friars valued the finished object for its power to sanctify space and organize time. In Texas's independence struggle, the bell's value was in its metal, but when melting other bells failed to produce the desired result, it was useful enough to save and transport out of the melee. As Texas's economy shifted to capitalism, the bell's value was in its regulation of laborers. For those in later years, the bell's value lay not in its powerful sound, but in its visual representation. The now-silent object was tied to its role in a glorified past: hardworking friars of the imagined collaborative mission community, heroes of the Texas Revolution, antebellum plantation owners, Texas's version of the liberty bell.



Figure 11: Detail, Bell at Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas. David R. Mann.

Although its origin and path to the display case in the second-floor hallway of the Rosenberg Library remain murky, this resilient object is intimately tied to the exercise of power. In Texas's Spanish colonial period, it rang out to restructure daily and ritual time, reminding all within its sound of the Spanish economic and cultural presence and the balance of power between the friars and indigenous residents. Perhaps the native inhabitants of the region

resented its aural intrusion. Surely its funereal tolls were a grim reminder of the powerful smallpox and measles epidemics. It changed hands and locations along with power shifts in Texas that marginalized Hispanos and Mexicans and privileged Anglo-American settler colonists. In the antebellum period, it signaled the start and end of mill work and cotton harvesting, sounding control over laborers, including those enslaved by David Randon. Changing hands again, its sound structured the daily lives of students. After the Civil War, the bell passed into the control of the white male political and economic elite who formed the Texas Historical Society. They argued for the bell's centrality in Texas's foundational myth—the larger-than-life Battle of the Alamo with its Anglo-American protagonists—instead of viewing its importance as a record of the Spanish colonial past. Then, as cities like Houston, Austin, and Dallas began to replace Galveston as the center of economic activity in twentieth-century Texas, the Rosenberg bell was briefly contested by politicians in Austin, who argued “it serves a higher purpose now; resting after years of service it is eloquent of what has been, teaching lessons of patriotism and pride to each succeeding generation.” In the twentieth century, the colonial artifact was resurrected to represent a benign and pastoral vision of Texas's past, by preservationists, then as part of sesquicentennial celebrations, which emphasized the state's multicultural past, in the 1980s.



Figure 12: Rosenberg Library, second floor, with bell in display case, July

2023. Photograph by David R. Mann.

We may never know the precise history of this bell's journey through Texas history. In the silent spaces and gaps, we should try to understand the ways in which this bell was understood, and perhaps sometimes ignored or even challenged, by the people it summoned on a daily basis. These actions are more difficult to piece together from the documentary record. Although my search for evidence about the bell's journey continues, I recognize that its importance as an object lies not only in that history, but also in its transition from an aural to a visual object, remembered and interpreted by those who have used it to tell their versions of Texas history.

Further Reading

Bessie Lee Fitzhugh, *Bells Over Texas* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1955).

Bessie Lee Fitzhugh Papers, The Texas Collection and University Archives, Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

Galveston Daily News articles in [Portal to Texas History](#).

Kristin Dutcher Mann, *The Power of Song: Music and Dance in the Mission Communities of Northern New Spain, 1590-1810* (Stanford: Stanford University Press and the Academy of American Franciscan History, 2010).

Rosenberg Library Museum and Archives, Galveston, Texas.

Mark Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

Texas State Historical Association, [Handbook of Texas](#). See entries on Mission Nuestra Señora de Purísima Concepción, Samuel Damon, David Randon, William Kendall, Texas Historical Society, Texas Revolution, and Adina de Zavala.

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