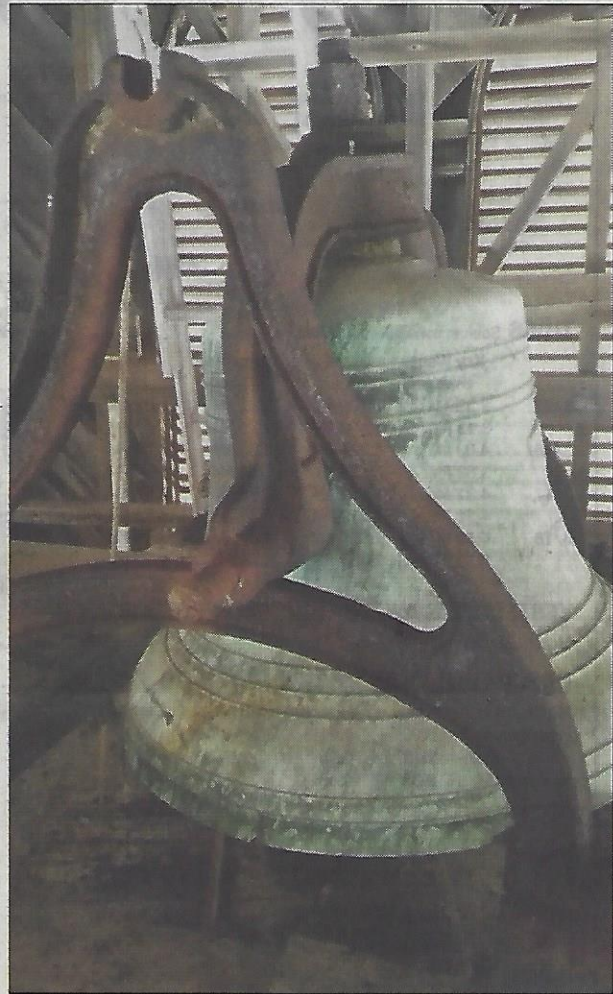


SAVED (FROM) THE BELL



Photos by Robert Crow

The First Congregational Church's 600-pound bell became unseated during Hurricane Irma. Seen at the center of the photograph at left, the bell's yoke was dislodged from its resting place atop the cradle at upper left. After discovering the damage recently, crews from Conch West Construction lifted the bell and rebuilt the foundation, shown in the photo at right.

Hurricane-damaged church bell will ring again

BY MANDY MILES

Key West Citizen

Robert Crow credits divine intervention — and his wife — with saving his life from a falling 600-pound, church bell.

“Oh yeah, one pull of the rope would have pulled the whole, 600-pound bell down on top of me,” said Crow, the sexton at First Congregational

Church on William Street.

Until Hurricane Irma blasted through the church's bell tower, Crow had rung the historic bronze bell every Sunday morning before the church service.

“We had already planned to be away in New England when the hurricane came,” Crow said. “So after the storm, when I could get through to someone, I asked him how the church

had fared, and he said it had come through just fine,” Crow said.

And it had — from the outside.

When Crow and his wife got back to town a few weeks later, he went inside the church and found that the roof had failed in three different places of the 125-year-old church.

“I let the congregation know that I

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ROB O'NEAL/The Citizen

Robert Crow, sexton at the First Congregational Church, describes the damage during Hurricane Irma to the building's 65-foot bell tower.

Bell

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wasn't sure if we could have services here that Sunday, but I was still planning to ring the bell," Crow said. "Since joining the church back in 2015, I have always rung the church bell promptly at 11:00 every Sunday morning. It's something I would look forward to and that the neighborhood seemed to enjoy as well. But my wife suggested that I wait to ring it until we had checked things out in the bell tower. Thank God I did. God is good."

Crow and his wife finally found time a few weeks ago to climb the two 24-foot ladders and additional steps that brought them up to the 65-foot height of the bell.

"To our amazement and surprise, the 600-pound, McShane Foundry bell was out of its cradle and teeter-

ing precariously on a rotten beam 65 feet above the right entrance," Crow said. "If anyone had so much as moved the lanyard that's connected to the bell, it would have come crashing down with disastrous results. I can't imagine how strong the updraft must have been inside the bell tower to have unseated that bell."

When Crow reached the tower, the bell already had fallen about a foot and had landed on a single, rotted piece of wood that acted as a trap door providing access to the bell.

"You can see how rotten and already splintered that wood is that the bell is sitting on," Crow said on Wednesday morning, scrolling through photos on his phone and iPad. "I couldn't believe it. What a close call. Someone easily could have died with a single pull of that rope."

Crow, who volunteers

daily at the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Ingham, quickly enlisted the help of four friends and used some rigging equipment from the Ingham to secure the bell.

The bell was originally set in place in 1894 with no visible modifications since, Crow said.

"It took four of us to rig the loft, raise the bell and reset it in its original solid steel cradle," he said. The crew made modifications to the base and cradle to ensure the bell would remain secure, hopefully for another 125 years.

The church, whose congregation has dwindled over the years and is down to just 12 members, stays afloat thanks to an agreement with the nearby Haitian church, The Church of God of Prophecy.

"They have an 800-square-foot building and 200 members in their congregation," he said. "So they use our church and

fellowship hall, and we use their pastor for our Sunday services. And the Haitian church makes donations for the use of our space."

The First Congregational Church started on William Street in 1892, and most of the original church building appears as it did 125 years ago.

"We're currently raising money for a new roof later this year," Crow said, adding that donations — and members — are always welcomed and appreciated.

"But rest assured, if you are in the vicinity of the 500 block of William Street at 11 a.m. this Sunday or any other Sunday, you will hear our wonderful bell chiming again."

For information about the church or to make a donation, visit <http://www.firstcongkw.org> or find them on Facebook or call 305-296-8633.

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