

American Carillons: A Brief Introduction

Morris A. Pierce, PhD, Department of History

According to The Guild of Carillonneurs in North America a carillon is a musical instrument consisting of at least two octaves of carillon bells arranged in chromatic series and played from a keyboard permitting control of expression through variation of touch. A carillon bell is a cast bronze cup-shaped bell whose partial tones are in such harmonious relationship to each other as to permit many such bells to be sounded together in varied chords with harmonious and concordant effect.

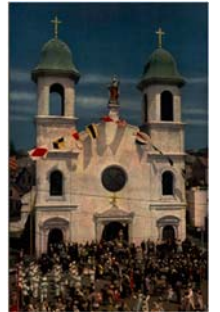
Carillons have a long history in the low countries of Europe, especially Belgium and the Netherlands. Four early carillons were installed in the United States: Notre Dame University (1856); St. Joseph's Cathedral in Buffalo (1869, no longer exists), Church of the Holy Trinity in Philadelphia (1883) and the Shrine of the Miraculous Medal in Philadelphia (1901).

New York politician William Gorham Rice often traveled to Europe with his wife, who got him interested in carillons. He wrote two books that introduced American readers to European carillons: *Carillons of Belgium and Holland; tower music in the Low Countries* (1914) and *The Carillon in Literature: A Collection from Various Authors with Some Notes on the Carillon Art* (1915).



Shortly after the end of the First World War in November 1918, Department of Agriculture plant artist James Marion Shull proposed that a National Peace Carillon be constructed with bells using the metal from captured German cannons. His idea received widespread press coverage, but it was never built. Tiffany Ng (MM'08) wrote in her 2015 doctoral dissertation that "Since 1919, every American carillon has been built in the imposing shadow of a carillon proposed as a memorial and monument to peace, to be built in Washington, D.C. from World War I shrapnel collected from around the world."

A small church in Gloucester, Massachusetts, Our Lady of Good Voyage, was the first modern carillon in the United States when it was dedicated on July 23, 1922. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was an early visitor and later installed two of the largest carillons in the country, including the one played by Alex Johnson '18.



Twenty-five carillons were built in the U.S. by 1930, including seven in 1928. All but two of these used bells made in Europe, with the Meneely Bell Foundry in Watervliet, New York providing bells for the St. James Church in Danbury, Connecticut and Trinity Church in Philadelphia.



The University of Rochester embarked on a project to build a new Medical School and Hospital in the 1920s and an agreement was made with the adjacent Oak Hill Golf Club to build a new golf course in Pittsford in exchange for their existing course, which would become new River Campus for Men. The largest building on the new campus would be a library with a dome that was seen as an ideal location for a carillon.

George Eastman, who had a strong interest in music, took the lead in contacting every bell foundry in the U.S. and Europe in late 1926 to gather information and pricing for carillons. Much of this correspondence is in library's Rare Books collection. Although several proposals were received, the cost to modify the library tower to house a carillon was unknown. Eastman had already donated several million dollars to the University and given the pressure of building a new campus a decision was made to only include a single bell above the library dome.

Arendt Willem Hopeman had been born in the Netherlands in 1843 and came to Rochester in 1868. He founded the A.W. Hopeman & Sons Construction Company, which built the River Campus buildings. Shortly after his February 1928 death, his three children donated a chime of bells to be installed in the tower of the new library. Their gift included modifications to the library tower to house the bells. The bells were cast by the Meneely Bell Foundry in Watervliet and weighed 34,850 lbs. The bells cost



\$29,095 and were installed in October 1929. They were played during the summer of 1930 and dedicated when the new campus opened in October.



John Rothwell Slater came to the University of Rochester in 1905 as an assistant professor of English. In 1908 he became a full professor and head of the English Department, a position he held until his retirement in 1942. He was the first University bellman and taught many students to play the chime. He also collected and composed chime music.



The 17 bells were played from a modified piano keyboard that was connected to electric solenoids on each bell. The bellmen (and they were all men until 1955) could not vary the force of the stroke. Despite this limitation, a good bellman could produce quality music for the audience.

The University Bellman's Society made their public debut on May 16, 1954. The Men's and Women's Colleges merged on River Campus in October 1955. That same month five women tried out for the Bellman's Society: Norma Izard '57, Maureen Buschman '59, Juliette Herman '59, Donna Rauch '59 and Ann Palko '59.

Another gift from the Hopeman family paid for two new bells that were installed in 1956 and to establish an endowment for the continued operation of the instrument. The two new bells were cast by Petit & Fritsen in the Netherlands and were displayed in the lobby of Rush Rhees Library before being raised into position.

A 1973 study revealed that the 1930 chime was beyond repair or tuning. The Hopeman endowment had grown enough by 1973 to replace the 19-bell chime with a 50-bell carillon. The new bells were cast by the Royal Eijsbouts Bellfoundry Ltd. of Asten, Holland, and weighed 6,668 lbs, much less than the original Meneely chime. Six of the Meneely bells were donated to Christ Church on East Avenue and the rest were returned to Royal Eijsbouts for remelting.

The 50-bell carillon cost \$39,022, with an estimated \$20,650 to be recovered from the metal in the old bells, for a net of \$18,372. Extras included a Westminster encoder for four bells, an hour strike coder and a playing cabin. The new carillon was dedicated on December 9, 1973 by Arie Abbenes, city carillonner for Eindhoven, Asten and Tilburg in Holland. It is one of seven carillons in New York State and the 112th installed in the United States.

The carillon is played from a traditional clavier in a room just below the bells in the library tower. Each baton and pedal on the clavier is connected by transmission wires to a clapper on each bell. The force on the baton determines the loudness of the tone.

The history of the Hopeman Chime and Carillon can be found at facilities.rochester.edu/history/RC/Carillon.htm

A copy of this presentation and the handout are also posted on this website.

Visit carillonhistory.us for more information about American carillons. The site includes many carillon resources and information on 177 traditional carillons built in the United States.