

THE CATHEDRAL BELLS

Grace Cathedral's bell carillon was the gift of Dr. Nathaniel T. Coulson (1853-1945), a British-born orphan and seaman, became San Francisco dentist and investor. Coulson gave his fortune to build the north or Singing Tower of the cathedral (1939-1941), and to supply it with a carillon of forty-four bronze bells from the Gillet and Johnston bell foundry in Croydon, England (cast 1937-1938). During his last years he lived on a dollar a day to realize his goal. He lived to see the tower and carillon dedicated by Dean Thomas Wright in 1943. Coulson wanted his ashes be placed in the tower crypt, but his wish was delayed. In 1990, on the fiftieth anniversary of the bell installation, his ashes were moved from nearby Cypress Lawn columbarium to the new cathedral columbarium, located below his carillon, in his own Singing Tower.

The carillon was cast and ready well before the tower, so it was arranged to lend it to the 1939-1940 Golden Gate International Exposition (GGIE) on newly-created Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay. The steel cage and bronze bells were placed in the lantern of the soaring Tower of the Sun, the centerpiece of the fair. Fairgoers were delighted to hear familiar tunes pouring out of the tower, or complex Bach fugues played on the linked keyboard by blind virtuoso Alec Templeton. On Christmas Eve, 1940, the carillon was first heard from the Singing Tower, its new and permanent home. At first the hour ring was heard every hour, but neighbors soon complained. Today the hour ring is from 9 am to 6 pm, with the angelus added at noon and 6 pm. Organist-choirmaster Richard Purvis composed the four-part hour ring, "Grace Chimes", although the carillon does not sound the quarter hours. The bells have rung on many historic occasions; D-Day, VE and VJ Days, the funeral of William Randolph Hearst, the centenary of the cable cars, numerous weddings, and all the church festivals. At important funerals, each year of the departed person's life is tolled by the Bourdon bell. The carillon has marked the number of Golden Gate Bridge suicides and World Series and Super Bowl triumphs, even pleasing visiting Nikita Khrushchev, who sent a thank-you note saying they reminded him of the Kremlin's many cathedral bells.

The Grace Cathedral carillon is non-traditional, rung electronically rather than mechanically or by hand. It is the oldest and largest non-traditional carillon in the western United States, and one of only two in America made by Gillet and Johnston. The hour ring and tune are rung electronically, but the bells can also be played from a small piano-like console in the nave gallery. Forty three of the bells are "hung dead" while the clappers move inside each bell. The largest bell, the bourdon bell, is rung by an external disk-shaped hammer. It is the only bell that can also be tolled, or swung, on a huge wheel and yoke, so that its internal clapper strikes the inner surface. The bourdon bell rings the hour and when the last strike is heard, the bell will continue to vibrate for over a minute. At 6 tons, and about 6 feet tall, it is the largest carillon bell in the west. The bells range in weight from 11 ³/₄ pounds to 6 tons and cover 3 ¹/₂ octaves. Silver coins were added to the bell metal during casting, in the now-discredited legend that silver improves a bell's tone. Maintenance of the bells and frame is a long term project. During the latest renovations in 2010-2011, new clappers and a new keyboard from the Royal Eijsbouts Foundry in the Netherlands were installed.

For further information contact the cathedral archivist Michael Lampen at michaell@graccathedral.org.

Carillon Specifications

Key: Number in carillon, (foundry casting number), name if any, and scriptural text (bells #33 and #35-44), musical note, [weight in pounds], mouth diameter in inches. Total weight of bells is 40,472.75 lbs (20.236 tons).

1-(5962), G, [11.75], 7; 2-(5963), F#, [11.75], 7; 3-(5964), F, [14.5], 8; 4-(5965), E, [16], 8; 5-(6015), D#, [18], 9; 6-(5967), D, [19.5], 9; 7-(6041), C#, [21], 10; 8-(5969), C, [28.5], 10; 9-(5970), B, [33], 11; 10-(6056), A#, [38], 11; 11-(5972), A, [48.25], 12; 12-(5973), G#, [51], 12; 13-(5974), G, [50.5], 12; 14-(5975), F#, [62], 13; 15-(5976), F, [64], 14; 16-(5977), E, [86], 15; 17-(5978), D#, [92], 15; 18-(5979), D, [109], 16; 19-(5980), C#, [123], 17; 20-(5981), C, [124], 17; 21-(6017), B, [140], 18; 22-(5983), A#, [161], 19; 23-(5984), A, [189], 20; 24-(5985), G#, [221], 21; 25-(5986), G, [271], 22; 26-(5987), F#, [298], 23; 27-(5988), F, [341], 25; 28-(5989), E, [404], 26; 29-(5990) D#, [459.5], 27; 30-(5991), D, [517], 29; 31-(5992), C#, [589], 30; 32-(5993), C, [684], 31; 33-(5931), Sympathy, Abigail Santo* - "Jesus Wept", B, [770.5], 33; 34-(5995), A#, [869], 34; 35-(5996), The Golden Rule- "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye also unto them.", A, [1023.5], 37; 36-(5997), Benevolence- "Let us do good unto all men.", G#, [1178], 38; 37-(5998), Prayer- "Hear my prayer, O Lord.", G, [1405.5], 41; 38-(5999), Thanksgiving- "It is a good thing to give thanks.", F#, [1682.5], 43; 39-(6000), Wisdom- "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.", F, [2080], 45; 40-(6001), Joy to the World- "Let the nations be glad and sing for joy.", E, [2469], 48; 41-(6002), Loving Kindness- Saint Francis of Assisi, D#, [3001], 51; 42-(6003), Isaiah ("Peace")- "Nation shall not lift sword against nation.", D, [3570], 54; 43-(6004), Paul- "Love never faileth.", C, [5126], 61; 44-(6005), (bourdon bell, quote is a self-description of Christ)- "I am the way, the truth and the life.", G, [12001], 82*.

*Abigail Santo (Waters) (1850-1941) was organist at Lostwithiel Methodist Church, England, where the future carillon donor, the young orphan Nathaniel Coulson (1853-1945), worshipped with the village children. Noting his workhouse clothes, they refused to sit near him, and he noticed a tear on the organist's cheek.

*The hour tune, *Grace Chimes*, is (middle) c, d, e, c/ g, d, e, c/ d, e, c, g/ e, d, e, c. The hour ring, which follows the tune, is on low g (bourdon) and the noon and six pm angelus ring is on (middle) c (3 triple rings, followed by many single rings).