

**Providence Institution
for Savings**

Established 1819

A Mutual Savings Bank

where interest is allowed
from day of Deposit to
day of Withdrawal

MAIN OFFICE
86 South Main Street

OLNEYVILLE BRANCH
1917-21 Westminster Street
Olneyville Square

EMPIRE-ABORN BRANCH
Between Westminster and Washington Sts.

Open all business days and Tuesday evenings
5 to 8:30. Olneyville Branch open
Saturday evenings also.

"The Old Stone Bank"

HALEY & SYKES CO., PROVIDENCE

F
79
P971
#32

CURFEW



Presented by

"The Old Stone Bank"

Providence, R. I.

December 14, 1931



CURFEW

*"The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea;
The plowman homeward plods his weary
way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to
me."*

IN THE opening stanzas of his immortal elegy, Thomas Gray did more than begin to set the stage for all that was to follow. In brief lines and simple words that could hardly have been better chosen he captured a bit of English countryside just at that magic hour betwixt day and evening—dusk, perhaps—and left it for the quiet delight of generations to come, generations that might not always be familiar with such things as a "curfew," a "lowing herd," or a "plowman" but which would somehow feel the simple poignancy of his description and from it distill a large measure of enjoyment. In particular, it is the word "curfew" in Gray's very first line that has faded out of the average person's consciousness and vocabulary. It is a beautiful word, mostly because of its immediate connotation with the liquid notes of a church bell tolling in the distance, calling the hour of rest. The younger generations of today scarcely understand what it means, and care little enough if they do,

but those who are already full of years treasure its memory.

Gray's poem was written in the middle of the 18th century, evidence that the quaint custom of ending the day by curfew was then well recognized in rural England. As soon as the colonial churches of this country could boast of steeples and bells they introduced the same custom, partly because it was just one more of the things English from which sentimentality found it hard to part and partly because of necessity. Not everyone had a watch, and clocks in any town were few. The curfew bell served in place of both. It was not only at evening that it was heard, although nine o'clock was the curfew hour; it was rung at sunrise to call people from their beds and again at noon to send them home for dinner. For a while, too, it was rung at six o'clock to end the work of the day.

In Rhode Island, the townsfolk of Newport were going to bed by curfew as early as 1772 at least. Quoting from the town records we have the following:

"——— 12, 1772. Whereas ye church bell rings at nine of ye clock at night without any charge to ye town, that for the future John Simms, who rings Dr. Stiles' bell and had nine dollars a year for ye same, be not allowed anything for ringing the same."

When the fourth bell was installed in Trinity Church in 1804 it was voted "that the sexton ring her as usual at sunrise, one of the clock, p. m., and at nine in the eve-

ning; and that he be permitted to raise money by a general subscription to reward him for doing the same."

In Providence, the custom of the curfew was, by tradition, started with the installation of the first bell in the First Baptist Meeting House in 1775. From that year to the present the bell in that historic belfry has continued to toll at least three hours of the day, sunrise, noon, and nine o'clock at night. For a long while it was also rung at six o'clock in the evening, though now it tolls only three times per day.

Before proceeding farther with a discussion of the custom, it would be well to speak on the history of the bell itself. It was brought from England in 1775 and hung in the beautiful steeple of the First Baptist Meeting House, but twelve years later it was cracked by too enthusiastic ringing, and had to be recast. In this second casting, the quaint verses originally inscribed on the bell were not retained. They were as follows:

*"For freedom of conscience the town
was first planted,
Persuasion, not force, was used by the
people:
This Church is the eldest, and has not
recanted,
Enjoying and granting bell, temple
and steeple."*

Again, in 1844, the bell became cracked and had to undergo a third casting, this time with the following inscriptions:

"This bell was imported from England in 1775."

"Recast at Hope Foundry, R. I., in 1787."

"Again recast in Boston in 1844, by Henry N. Hooper & Company."

"This church was founded in 1639 by Roger Williams, its first pastor and first asserter of liberty of conscience."

"It was the first church in Rhode Island and the first Baptist Church in America."

To return to the subject of the bell ringing, we find that in all its long history it has been sounded at the three regular hours of the day with few exceptions. Occasionally when someone was very ill in the immediate neighborhood, or on the occasions of certain funerals, the sexton refrained from his task and the bell was not heard. In general, people used to count on its ringing and practically planned their days by its sound. At sunrise, with its tolling, everyone rose and started the day's work; at noon everyone stopped for a while and went home for dinner; and at nine nearly everyone accepted the pealing of the curfew bell as a distinct command to retire to his home, put out all lights and go to bed. After nine o'clock, no one, except the watchmen, was supposed to be out on the streets. It can readily be seen that such a bell, so carefully obeyed, could and did play a heavy part in regulating both the work and morals of the town.

From time to time people have objected to the sound of the bell, mostly of course at sunrise, but overwhelming popular opinion has always triumphed. Generally complaints were from newcomers to the vicinity near the Meeting House who rapidly got used to even the early morning tolling.

Perhaps one of the best known of the sextons whose duty it was to ring the bell was Noah C. Wesley who took up his duties at the First Baptist Meeting House in 1882 and continued them up to 1927, the year of his death. He was colored and was born in Baltimore in 1854, coming to Providence five years later. Day after day he rode to the church from his home on Calla Street, and never once missed sounding the sunrise bell, whether the season was winter or summer. In fact, the duty of ringing the bell became so much a part of his life that he did not have to consult the calendar, except on very rare occasions, for he had memorized the hours of the sun's rising for practically every morning of the year. About eight years before he became sexton the City Council voted an annual appropriation of \$125 for the man who had charge of the ringing of the curfew bell. However, as this only amounted to about 35 cents a day, too little even to pay carfare, Noah Wesley must be hailed as a man whose attitude toward this exacting duty was almost wholly altruistic. Of course he had his other duties as sexton of the church, but it was a devotion to something greater than the appeal of 35 cents

which made him arise at four or five o'clock every morning to go by car to the church.

During the 45 years he had charge of the ringing of the bell, he had ample time to observe the changing customs of Providence. It must have been with some feelings of sorrow that he saw the influence of the bell waning and the whole thing slowly but inevitably becoming little more than a quaint custom, kept alive by sentiment. Yet, though people might do no more than roll over in bed when they heard the bell ringing at sun-up and completely ignore its admonition to retire to their homes at nine o'clock, Noah Wesley followed his duty with the utmost faithfulness, and let the tolling that earlier generations obeyed with reverence, argue as best it might against the modern temper of today.

At one time the members of the City Council had a resolution for the abolishment of the custom before them for their judgment. To their credit—and it seems as if this is one of the rare times sentiment has crept into municipal legislation—they indefinitely postponed consideration of the resolution, and the bell still rings from the tall steeple of the First Baptist Meeting House. The present sexton, Robert Croaker, has taken over the duties of Noah Wesley with the same faithfulness that must be followed in preserving such a custom. He rings the old bell four times daily, once at sunrise, again at noon, and twice in the evening, at nine and five minutes past nine o'clock re-

spectively. The nine o'clock ringing, according to long tradition (now ignored), is a bed time signal for children under sixteen years of age, while the tolling that follows five minutes later should find them in their rooms and almost ready for sleep.

Few people take note of the curfew today. The city has too many harsh noises to drown it out, to choke its sound. Yet, like the First Baptist Meeting House itself, the custom of sounding the curfew still survives, reminding those who do hear it of the wisdom and regular habits of their forefathers.