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Pownal Bell Tower Swiveled To Safety

By **Susan Bush** - *September 28, 2006*

Pownal, Vt. - After a few false starts, an 11,000-pound Pownal Center Community Church bell tower was lifted from the building roof on Sept. 27 and swiveled to a wooden enclosure through the skills and labors of the Greater Heights Tree and Land Management firm and the Burgess Brothers Construction Co..

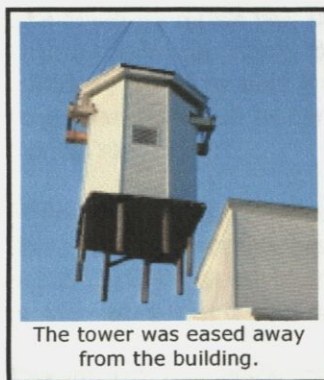


Lift-off: A Pownal Center Community Church bell tower was removed from its base on Sept. 27.

The removal project began on Monday, when Greater Heights owner David Dence Jr. and several employees initiated work to prevent the tower from falling or breaking apart when lifted.

"We cut holes through the side of the tower and added beams to shore it up," Dence said. "We used cable to reinforce the structure and we used special 10-inch screws. We had to secure the bell."

Up, Up, And Away



The tower was eased away from the building.

The task ended just after 6 p.m. on Wednesday, when crane operator Glen Sauer maneuvered a fully-extended boom into position and plucked the tower from its base. The tower was smoothly carried through the air and was set down inside a wooden "crib" built especially to contain the tower.

Current plans call for the tower to be enclosed or covered while anticipated repairs are reviewed.

The removal was delayed several times because the tower did not separate from the roof when lifts were initiated; workers had to cut additional joints and beams before the tower and its base parted company.

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The town office building abuts the church and was emptied and closed at mid-afternoon as a precaution prior to the tower removal.

Town Selectmen authorized \$5,000 be spent to remove the tower after an engineer with the Zaremba-Sopko firm of Troy N.Y. reported that the tower was in imminent danger of collapse. The tower is part of the church that was built in 1843 and once served simultaneously as a voting station, a town meeting hall, and a place of worship. Different religious denominations have traditionally been welcomed inside the church pews.

Town And Church Share Building Costs

Church Board of Directors Chairwoman Nicky Forest is a 45-year parishioner of the church. Plans call for the bell tower to be rehabilitated and placed back atop the church roof, she said.

The project may be costly; there are significant roof repairs to be made as well as the tower rehabilitation. Town residents Michael Gardner and David Thomas have volunteered to help repair the tower, Forest said. Dence donated his company's services for the tower removal project, she noted.

Forest said that the town and the church share ownership of the building and also share building costs.

"The town has always maintained the roof and the liability insurance," Forest said. "The church maintains the interior and the exterior of the building. We heat the church. We installed new wiring about four years ago"

The church budget totals between \$12,000 and \$13,000, which is used to pay a pastor salary and most of the upkeep costs. A new heating fuel burner was installed over the past couple of years and the church paid for that from its annual budget, Forest said.

Shared Tasks In An Unusual Arrangement

The town owns all the surrounding property, and in what might appear an unusual arrangement, the town maintains the lawn and the church clears the walkway of snow and ice. The church no longer serves as a polling place or a town meeting hall but numerous town records remain housed at the church, Forest said.

There is no bathroom or water available at the church because the church owns none of the surrounding property and is therefore unable to dig a well, erect a septic system or even, on its' own, connect to the town's new \$28 million wastewater treatment service.

The church has asked the town to give up its' claim to the church grounds numerous times over the past decades and the town has always refused to relinquish their portion of the property, she noted.



Greater Heights company employee Michael D'Agata was lifted to the tower's peak for removal preparation work.

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"Maybe now they will re-visit that," she said.

Very Much A Part Of This Community

Former church Pastor Gene Kemp recently left the church to lead another congregation after a decade spent at the community church pulpit. Interviews are underway for a new pastor, Forest said.



Crane operator Glen Sauer watched prep work unfold.

"People within this community know that we are very much a part of the community," Forest said. "People know about our strawberry festivals, our spring seedling and bake sale, our Christmas cookie swap. The town's bicentennial ceremony was held on this lawn. Community donations helped with the stained glass windows. The community has a big role here. Our carriage barn was built with church and community funds."

A church-affiliated Women's Fellowship group handles fundraising for the church, Forest said.

Sept. 24 services were held at the Pownal Valley Volunteer Fire Department fire house because of the engineer report, Forest said, and added that she believes the move marked one of the few, if not the only, time Sunday services did not go on at the church.

David Face volunteers his time as church organist and Sunday school teachers are volunteers as well, she noted.

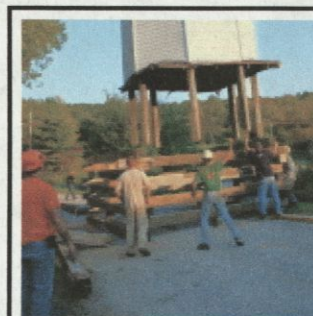
There is little building insulation and the heat must be turned up about 24 hours before cold season services, festivals, or weddings -Forest was married at the church 23 years ago- so that the building can warm up, she said.

But despite what might be perceived as hardships, the church is loved by those who worship there, Forest said. The church is also an integral part of the town history, she added.

Grants may be an option to help cover the costs of repairing the tower and the church roof but in most cases, historical grants require a municipal matching funds commitment, Forest said.

"There have been so many weddings here," she said. "People have had funerals here. I remember coming here with my parents as child when they voted. This church is a community church and it is part of this town and it's history."

Susan Bush may be reached via e-mail at suebush@iberkshires.com or at 802-823-9367.



The tower was maneuvered into a wooden "crib" through Sauer's careful crane operating skills and hands-on guidance from workers on the ground.