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Southern/Decorative
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USR-M Harriet Lane Bell
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Harriet Lane's Bell

During the 1850's "more than 200 of nearly a 1000 Naylor Vickers bells were imported to the United States" (Naylor). One of these cast steel bells was placed on the USR-M Harriet Lane, "which was launched in New York on November 19, 1857" (Bryant). Since the bell itself was not manufactured until 1859, it can be concluded that the Harriet Lane either did not have a bell prior to 1859, or that this bell replaced the original. While aboard the USR-M Harriet Lane, the bell was a part of many historical events. The ship itself was named after President Buchanan's niece, Miss Harriet Lane who served as his First Lady during his presidency due to his bachelor status. (Bryant). She was the "most admired and celebrated woman of her time" thanks to her brilliant social and diplomatic capabilities (Hampton).

The ship's bell would likely serve as a signal for many different occasions. Primarily, it would have been used for timekeeping, and would have been struck once to signal the beginning of a four hour watch. If the crew kept time in half-hour increments, the bell was struck once for the half-hour, twice for the new hour, three times for the hour and half mark, and so forth until reaching eight strikes to mark the fourth hour. If the crew kept time in hour increments, the bell was struck once the first hour, twice the second, three times the third, and four times the final hour (Bells). Due to the lack of technology, the Bell would also be used for safety and communication purposes, such as preventing collisions with other ships in heavy fog or conditions of poor visibility (Bells). Another crucial element for the ship's bell would be an alert for those on board to hazards or danger, and sailors would have utilized it to "sound the alarm"

in cases of fires, in the event of an attack, and even to “abandoned ship” (Bells). Among U.S. Navy ships, bells were often used for ceremonial purposes. The bell aboard the Harriet Lane was likely not, or very rarely, used ceremonially while aboard the Harriet Lane since the ship was technically not a part of the U.S. Navy.

The USR-M Harriet Lane was commissioned on February 25th, 1858 by the U.S Revenue Marine agency, a group known today as the Coast Guard (Hampton). It was their “first successful steam side wheeler” that cost a hefty \$150,000 dollars to build (Hampton). The Lane’s sleek 180 x 30-foot design and draft of only 10 feet allowed for a maximum speed of 14 knots which proved her to be a highly versatile cutter (Bryant). The ship’s success soon caught the attention of the U.S Navy who then acquired her for a mission to Paraguay (Bryant). While remaining with the Revenue Marine, the Navy had it attached to a “flotilla of 14 warships” (Hampton). The Harriet Lane was sailed by a crew of 82 men and 22 embarked Marines. She was equipped with “two 9. Inch guns, four 24, and one 12 lbs. howitzer” (Hampton). By autumn of 1859 the Harriet Lane was returned to her normal cutter duties. However, “the Navy liked the HARRIET LANE not only for her handiness and speed, but also for her husband commander Captain Faunce” (Hampton). When the Confederate Army attacked Fort Sumter, Harriet Lane sailed “off the bar at the entrance to Charleston Harbor” (Hampton). The confederate steamer Nashville was reluctant to engage with the USR-M Harriet Lane, so the esteemed vessel fired a shot across the timid Nashville’s bow. The shot proved to be effective and the Nashville surrendered. This encounter also gave the Harriet Lane credit for firing the first shot from a naval unit in the upcoming Civil War (Hampton). Throughout the first years of the Civil War, Harriet Lane would go on to serve in many naval missions and aid the fight against the Confederacy.

However, the USR-M Harriet Lane would finally see the end of her U.S Naval service soon after she sailed down to Galveston Bay accompanied by a flotilla. The Union fleet managed to capture Galveston utilizing a Union Army Detachment (Hampton). After the victory, the ship would remain in Galveston with a much smaller Army and Naval presence (Hampton). “On January 1, 1863 a large Confederate force of infantrymen and river steamers attacked the small Union contingent” (Hampton). The Harriet Lane put up about as good of a fight as you could imagine, filled with proper “Pirates of the Caribbean” cutlass sword and musket fighting. The brutal and blood-filled hand to hand combat eventually led to the heroic death of the commanding officer, Captain Wainwright (Hampton). The Harriet Lane had some success in the violent battle and was able to sink the confederate “cottonclad” Neptune before it could ram the union ship (Barr). One of the more tragic deaths that occurred aboard the Harriet Lane was when the executive commanding officer, U.S Navy Lieutenant Edward Lea, being mortally wounded, died in his father’s arms (Hampton). His father, Major A. M. Lea was one of the leading confederate officers in charge of the boarding party that killed his son (Hampton). After being struck by the Confederate ship Bayou City, the famed cutter USR-M Harriet Lane was captured by the confederate Army (Barr). The U.S flag ship, Westfield, that accompanied the Harriet Lane, was ran aground, and the Captain Renshaw, rather than seeing it fall into confederate hands, died while blowing it up (Barr). The Harriet Lane, after being captured by the confederacy at the Battle of Galveston, was now claimed by both the Confederacy Army, who captured her, and the Confederate Navy who wanted to utilize her as a warship (Hampton). However, she was eventually sold to a cotton merchant who sailed her to Havana and did not return until after the Civil War (Hampton).

After the battle of Galveston, the bell was taken off the Harriet Lane and mounted to an “elaborate, brick Classical Revival style bellcote in front of the Kellum-Noble House by the Robert E. Lee Chapter, United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC)” (Gottschling). The bell was later taken to a “Mission style bellcote” next to the Lamar Avenue entrance (Gottschling). It remained in the park for several years being utilized as a “time keeper” to signal the opening and closing times (Gottschling). After it’s time as “church bell,” it was relocated to Fannin School and used to “summon students to their classes” (Gottschling). After a fire severely damaged the building on December 3, 1900, “the bell fell into ruins” (Gottschling). Eventually the bell would be “rescued and placed in the Sam Houston Park by the UDC” (Gottschling). While in the Sam Houston Park, an iconic picture of it was taken and used as a Sam Houston Park postcard (Captured). When the Museum of Southern History was moved to Houston Baptist University the Bell went along as well, and it is now on display at HBU’s campus in the Museum’s “weapons room” “along with a cannon from the movie “Glory” and a large mural depicting the BATTLE OF GALVESTON” (Weapons).

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