

Church Replaces Tornado Tossed Steeple

Where were you when the steeple fell?

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Nine months ago, a tornado tore through downtown Bedford, leaving millions of dollars in damage to homes and businesses and plucking from Bedford Presbyterian Church part of its white steeple that had stood tall since the church was built in 1844.

On Monday, as spectators watched from the city's busiest downtown intersection at Main and Bridge streets, a crane hoisted the restored steeple back into place. In some respects, the steeple's demise in April may have been divine intervention.

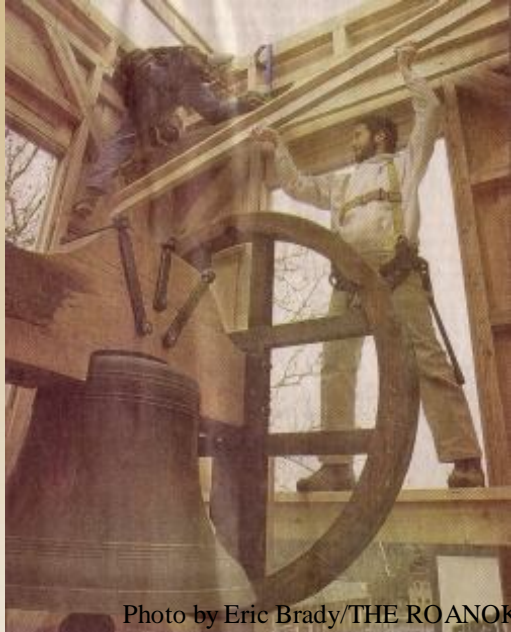


Photo by Eric Brady/THE ROANOKE TIMES

Hugh Saunders, 44, who has attended Bedford Presbyterian all his life, said the bell in the bell tower hadn't been rung since 2000 for fear that it would break free from the dilapidated wooden yoke that held it. The walls of the tower, fastened together with wooden pegs and handmade nails, also needed repairing.

The Rev. Joe Gaston said the church's insurance policy covered the \$104,000 restoration cost. Restoring a church steeple isn't a quick process, said David Crocco, the project's coordinator for Blue Ridge Timberwrights. Last year, the Christiansburg company replaced the steeple on the Lexington Presbyterian Church.

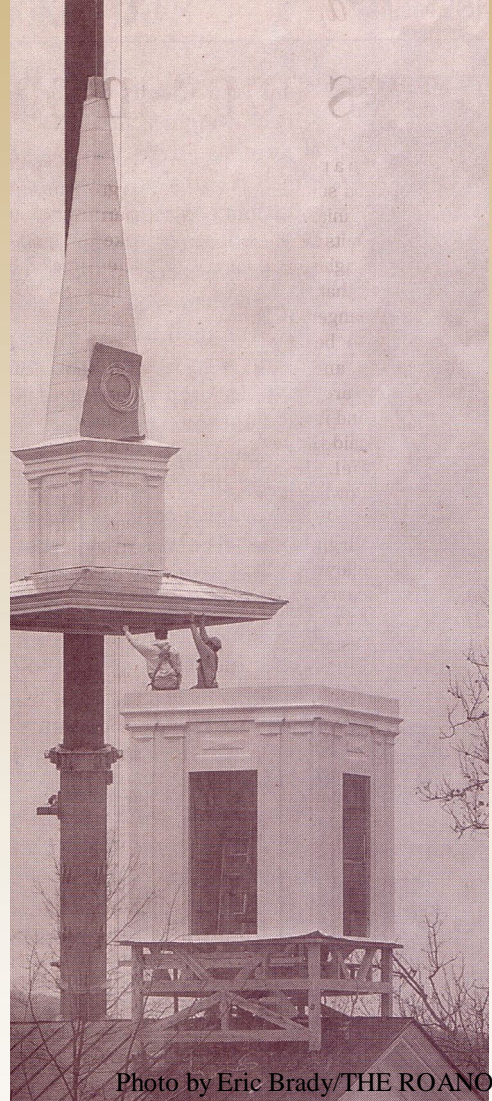


Photo by Eric Brady/THE ROANOKE TIMES

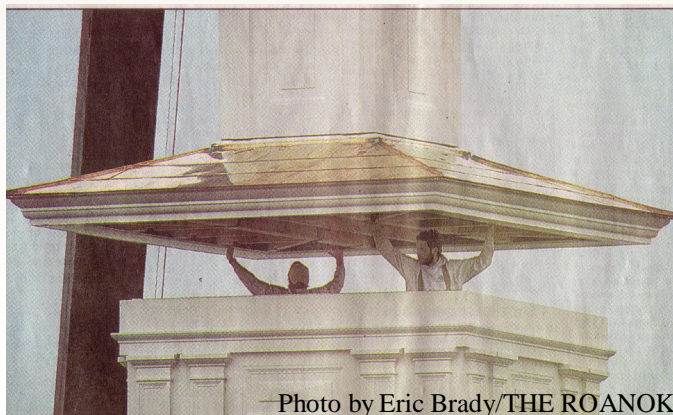


Photo by Eric Brady/THE ROANOKE TIMES

For the Bedford steeple, yellow pine in 28-foot lengths had to be specially ordered, then treated with bug repellent. Carpenters used poplar and Douglas fir for the trim. Crocco precisely carved the yoke that holds the bell.

The church's 375-member congregation had expected the steeple to be installed by Thanksgiving, but the project has been dogged by bad weather, Gaston said. Last week's snowstorm further postponed installation. Wet or cold weather makes the church's copper roof too slippery for workers to stand on.

The delays haven't daunted the spirits of the congregation, Gaston said. "In our situation, God's providence has worked well," he said. "There's a real anticipation to have the steeple back up. It points the way to God."

A service to dedicate the steeple will be held soon. Crocco hopes generations of parishioners will enjoy it. "My work on the bell yoke I intend to last for a thousand years," he said.



A work crew took most of the day Monday hoisting the steeple in three pieces into the air, then gingerly connecting them atop the pitched roof. When fully assembled, the structure weighs more than 10,000 pounds and is 54 feet tall.

