

OCTOBER 8, 2023

A BLESSING FOR THE COCKEREL

WITH A SHORT HISTORY OF THE
GREAT GILDED WEATHERVANE
CREATED BY SHEM DROWNE IN 1721
FOR THE NEW BRICK CHURCH IN BOSTON
AND MOVED IN 1873
TO FIRST CHURCH IN CAMBRIDGE,
CONGREGATIONAL, UCC
WHERE IT HAS PERCHED FOR 150 YEARS





A drone image made on May 1, 2023, showed significant erosion of the gilding, especially to the tail feathers, on this side of the cockerel weathervane.

THERE IS ONE ANIMAL at today's "Blessing of the Animals" service that is not like the squiggling dogs, cats, fish and other pets brought here for a blessing. This animal weighs 172 pounds. He is 302 years old. He only moves when the wind blows, and he is not in the sanctuary. He is atop the church tower.

Soon First Church's beloved cockerel weathervane is scheduled to come down – for his own safety. A drone video revealed alarming deterioration and other damage on one side of the cockerel's

gilded copper surface. Concerned about increasingly severe weather, pollution, risks to people and property, and the cockerel's own venerable age, church leaders voted to bring it down.

Executive Council's unanimous decision came after extensive consultation with nationally-recognized experts on American folk art and historic weathervanes, who strongly advised its removal as soon as possible. What happens next will be determined by the congregation.



THE COCKEREL has a long colorful history. He was made in 1721 by renowned coppersmith Shem Drowne, who also made the grasshopper on Faneuil Hall. For 152 years, the cockerel was perched atop a series of churches in Boston. He came to Cambridge in 1873 to top the newly-completed sixth meeting house of the First Church in Cambridge, at the corner of Garden and Mason Streets.

The cockerel is 5'5" high, 5'4" wide, and, unlike many weathervanes that are essentially flat, a plump 35" deep.

Sexton Benjamin Wyeth and the cockerel posed, almost eye-to-eye, before the cockerel took its place atop First Church in Cambridge, which at that time was also known as Shepard Memorial Church.

THE COCKEREL made his first appearance in 1721 on the New Brick Church on Hanover Street in Boston's North End. Sailors approaching Boston Harbor always kept an eye out for what they called the "Church of the Holy Rooster." Drowne made the cockerel out of two copper kettles in his workshop a few blocks away on Ann Street.



Shem Drowne was America's first documented weather-vane maker. He was also, in the words of art historian Robert Shaw, an artistic genius. "In their bold sizes, direct forms and simple unfussy craftsmanship, his vanes are the first unmistakable American works of their kind, and they set a standard that all future American artists could look to and build on!"*

This detail of a 1786 engraving by Paul Revere shows the Shem Drowne cockerel atop the New Brick Church (arrow) and the steeple of the New North Church nearby.

The New Brick had two nicknames: the Cockerel Church and the Revenge Church. "Revenge" came from an incident in 1720 when about 50 members of the New North Church objected to the calling of Peter Thacher to be that church's minister. So they walked out, built the New Brick Church one block away, and commissioned Shem Drowne to create a weathercock, that is, a rooster weathervane.

On the day in 1721 when the cockerel was to be installed, the New Brick's "malcontents...descended to puerility," according to one account. "They placed the figure of a cock as a vane upon the steeple, out of derision to Mr. Thacher, whose Christian name was Peter. Taking advantage of a wind which turned the head of the cock towards the New North when it was placed upon the spindle, a merry fellow straddled over it, and crowed three times, to complete the ceremony."



The New Brick Church, founded in 1721, became known as the Second Church in Boston when the two churches merged following the Revolutionary War.



Paul Revere made this engraving in 1768 not to show steeples filling the Boston skyline, but to protest British warships and soldiers pouring into Boston to crush civilian unrest.

WHEN THIS ENGRAVING WAS MADE, the cockerel had already been atop the New Brick Church for almost half a century. The cockerel, if it could see, would have had a clear view of many key events in American history: the arrival of British warships in 1768, the Boston Tea Party in 1773, the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775, and the evacuation of all British troops

in 1776. In 1777, the New Brick Church merged with (and took the name of) the Second Church of Boston, whose previous building British troops had destroyed for firewood.

ABOVE RIGHT: Workmen inspect the roof of the Methodist church where the Great Gale of 1869 toppled the steeple and sent the cockerel flying.



By 1817, forty years after the New Brick and Second churches merged, the congregation's theology had shifted to Unitarian from Congregational, but the cockerel stayed on the steeple. In 1845, when the original Greek Revival building was replaced by a Gothic Revival one, the cockerel moved to the new tower. When a Methodist congregation bought the building in 1849, the cockerel kept its place until September 8, 1869. On that day, the Great Gale of 1869 toppled the tower and the cockerel flew off on its own, crashing into a nearby building. One account said it "astonished a family nearby, by coming uninvited to tea."

FOLLOWING THE GREAT GALE, the cockerel was repaired but not returned to duty. He was placed in a closet where he stayed until 1873, when William A. Saunders, head of the building committee of First Church in Cambridge, bought him for \$75. Services began in the new First Church building in 1872, but the tower was not complete until the cockerel was placed upon it on June 28, 1873.

THE ORIGINAL FIRST CHURCH STEEPLE was made of stone and soared to a height of 170 feet. In the 1930s, however, mortar in the bell tower was crumbling, and there was concern the whole structure might collapse.

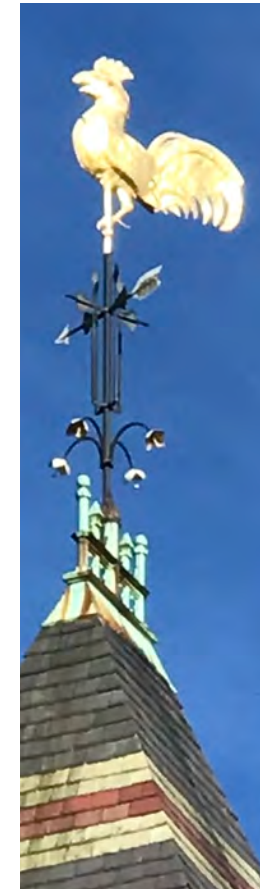
ABOVE RIGHT: Architect Abel Martin's preliminary sketch envisioned a tall steeple but not a cockerel weathervane.

RIGHT: This photo shows the cockerel high above a workman, who is preparing to bring it and the steeple down in early 1938.

LEFT: Sexton William Davin had his chance to pose with the cockerel. The timing of the cockerel's descent was fortunate because only months later, the notoriously destructive Hurricane of 1938 swept through Cambridge.



THE 170-FOOT STONE STEEPLE WAS REPLACED with a stubbier pyramid-shaped roof. The cockerel resumed his place, though at a lower altitude, on a spindle enhanced with directional arrows and metal flower petals.



RIGHT: Steeplejack Steve Quinn brought the cockerel back to its perch following a complete regilding in 1998.

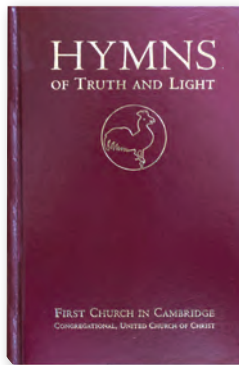
THE COCKEREL HAS BECOME AN ICON of First Church. He is part of the logo on our stationery, our Annual Reports, our hymnals, even our water bottles.

People with no connection to First Church can also feel connected to the cockerel. They may glance up at him every time they walk across Cambridge Common. Or notice when he appears at surprising angles from all over Harvard Square. At times the cockerel turns sharply right or left as thunderclouds gather. Sometimes he glistens in the sunlight. He is Cambridge's cockerel too.

During the Depression, the Works Progress Administration hired artists to paint important objects from America's past. Marian Page made this beautiful watercolor of the First Church cockerel in 1939. It is in the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington.



10 CREDIT: NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART



CREDIT: LEE PROUTY

ONCE THE COCKEREL is safely down and securely stored, many may be sad, but most will agree we must now consider next steps in our stewardship of this national treasure.

The priority right now is to give the First Church community a chance to reflect on, ask questions about, and consider next steps for the cockerel. We may consider selling it. If it is to be sold, decisions need to be made about whether to replace it with a replica or another design.

For a close-up view of the damaged and less damaged sides of the cockerel, please scan these QR codes to see drone videos made last spring. You can also see the magnificent views to be had from the highest point of First Church in Cambridge.



Less damaged



More damaged

FOOTNOTES:

PAGE 4: Robert Shaw, *American Weathervanes: The Art of the Winds* (Rizzoli/Electa in association with the American Folk Art Museum, 2021), 74.

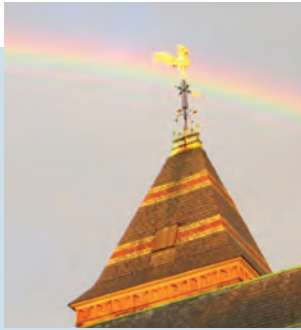
PAGE 4: Paul Revere, "A view of part of the town of Boston in New-England and British (sic) ships of war landing their troops! 1768."



CREDIT: KATE JUDD

PAGE 5: Ephraim Eliot, *Historical notices of the New North Religious Society in the town of Boston* (Boston: Phelps and Farnham, 1822), 15.

BROCHURE CREDITS:
Text: Lindsay Miller
Design: Chris Reynolds
Images: First Church Archives, except where noted.



A BLESSING FOR THE COCKEREL

LOVING GOD, with grateful hearts, we ask a blessing
upon our cockerel.

Let your spirit guide us to be good stewards of this
302-year-old treasure.

Give us imagination to take the long view of history,
to see a wide horizon, to greet each new day!

We thank you for the hands that made and
cared for the cockerel,

for the passage of time it has witnessed, for how it has
lifted our heads and spirits, reminding us of the wind and
breath of your Spirit.

May this absence be cause for gratitude and
wonder and communal connection as we discern together
what comes next.

By your grace, God, bless us too,
and show us the way forward.

