How did the Russian bells get to Lowell House?

Charles U. Lowe

For almost three quarters of a century seventeen bells from the Danilov Monastery in Moscow have hung in the tower of Lowell House at Harvard. The story of the bells and how they made their way to Harvard is a tale that weaves through three continents, four national capitols, and numerous troves of documents. Following the trail is made needlessly difficult because snippets of information lacking a pedigree circulate as fact merely because of iteration. On stage are Charles Richard Crane, a man of affairs, Thomas Whittemore, archeologist and historian, and A. Lawrence Lowell, an educator, scion of an ancient Boston Brahmin family, who was blessed with determination turning at times to stubbornness, and the intellect, as well as the strength of character needed to dominate and lead Harvard University.

Only in a fable would the lives of three such different men intersect. That story would then go on to tell that they had made common cause to hang Russian monastery bells in the tower of Lowell House. In real life each was a busy professional, and the episode of the bells a mere staccato event and hardly remarked. But the bells are prominent in the history of Lowell House. They help form the image and even the character of the House, and accordingly a search into their origin seems justified. Till now, we have had only a casual chronicle which records that Charles Crane purchased the bells of the Danilov Monastery in Moscow, used Thomas Whittemore as his agent in that transaction, and then gave the bells to Harvard. That tale while true, fails in its simplicity to acknowledge a story considerably more complex and skirts the key question of how this all came to pass. A more complete story probably begins in 1916 in Boston where funds were being sought to help desperate refugees, victims of a Russian army retreating eastward across Galicia, and it ends fifteen years later on Holyoke Street in Cambridge where the masterpiece of architect Charles Allerton Coolidge is under construction. By reviewing the careers of Crane and of Whittemore we could hope to learn the reason these men sought the bells, and by searching archives we expect to find out why the bells came to Harvard.

Charles Crane, industrialist, humanitarian and diplomat, was, at the turn of the century, a respected political figure in the United States. By 1904, he had established himself as a widely traveled and knowledgeable specialist in Middle Eastern and Russian affairs. President Taft hoped to appoint him his minister to China (1909) but the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations disagreed. As early as 1900, Crane had become involved in urban and national politics. He was, in 1912, the largest single supporter of the Wilson campaign for the presidency. Early in his second term (April 2, 1917) Wilson had severed relations with Germany but not yet declared war, and hoped that the Russian
Provisional Government under Kerensky, would maintain the Eastern front and
give the United States time to arm. For that purpose he formed in May of that
year the Special Diplomatic Mission to Russia headed by Elihu Root and asked
Crane, who was already in Petrograd (St. Petersburg), to serve on the
Committee. By August, it was clear that the mission was futile and accordingly
the Committee was dissolved.

At Versailles Crane was at the side of President Wilson and following the Peace
Conference, Crane served on the “Inter-Allied Commission on Mandates in
Turkey,” a committee charged with deciding the fate of Palestine. Early in 1920,
Wilson appointed Crane the US minister to China. With the election of Harding
the following year, Crane resigned his post and in 1921 began his trek home from
Peping (Beijing) across Asia to Paris. Traveling in two railroad cars he had
purchased and furnished, he was accompanied by his son John and Donald M.
Brodie, who later became his office manager in New York. Their route across
Manchuria passed through Harbin where he chanced to meet up with his friend
Thomas Whittemore who was assisting a population of Russian refugees. From
Harbin, Crane headed toward Moscow. In his trip diary Crane commentated on
the mysterious and compelling sounds of Russian bells that he heard as he
entered the Russian city of Rostov. This memory stayed with him for the rest of
his life. Crane visited Russia many times, the first when he was just 19 years of
age, and he had a profound feeling for Russian culture, Russian bells, and the
Russian Orthodox Church. He maintained friendships in Russia even after the fall
of the Tsarist government and when possible, sent funds to friends surreptitiously,
frequently through the agency of Thomas Whittemore.

Thomas Whittemore, Tufts College '94 and Harvard Graduate School,'98 was a
peripatetic archeologist, and a student of Byzantine art. A friend of his had
written: “Whittemore is never in a place; he was, he will be, he comes from and is
going to but never will be here.” A professor of history at Tufts University, he also
taught at Columbia University and at New York University. By some reports he
was a man of independent though modest means and was certainly a member of
that brotherhood of adventurous archeologists that peopled the first quarter of the
20th century. He seemed to acquire access wherever he moved and attracted the
friendship of the wealthy as well as of statesmen, artists and writers. On the other
hand his reputation as a scholar was indifferent, an assessment believed by his
admirers to be in large measure a reflection of his reclusive tendency, and to
those less friendly he had an air of worldliness and even superficiality in his work.
During the first weeks of World War I he found himself in France apparently near
the front lines and was able to bring succor to French families stranded by the
war. It is reported that in the French port cities of Calais and Boulogne he came
upon wounded soldiers waiting for transport across the Channel. They were cold
and hungry and Whittemore managed to bring them “tea and biscuits.” In 1915 he
was in Galicia, a section of Eastern Europe with indeterminate boundaries,
covering parts of Poland as well as the Ukraine, Hungary and Austria. Battles had
seared the countryside and a retreating Russian army commanded by Archduke
Nicholas practiced a scorched earth campaign, leaving little food or shelter for the indigenous population. Whittemore was there with the hope of alleviating suffering. He cabled to America to raise money and in 1916 returned to America and solicited funds on the lecture circuit where he spoke to the desperate plight of the refugees in Galicia.

Having been successful in gaining resources, he headed back to Europe through Russia. Although the allies had placed an embargo on all goods destined for Russia, Whittemore was able to enter via Japan and then Siberia. With him he had “60 cases of provisions and thousands of dollars.” He arrived in Petrograd two days before the Russian revolution broke out on March 14, 1917, and witnessed the carnage of these first days. On March 17 he wrote to Crane with details of what he had seen.

In the fall of 1921, he was in Harbin, and then an exit city for terrified White Russian refugees, who, fearing for their lives, fled Soviet Russia. Bereft of clothing, money and food, they congregated in Harbin hoping to reach a safe harbor. As recorded in Crane’s memoirs, Whittemore was there and had found a way to help. He commandeered a railroad car, filled it with milk and chocolate, which he then proceeded to distribute to hungry children. In 1921, with support from Crane, Whittemore had founded “The Committee for the Education of Russian Youth in Exile in Europe,” a program to assist White Russian émigrés. The Committee survived until 1930. In that year (1930), he founded the Byzantine Institute with offices in Boston, Istanbul and Paris with funds from Crane, as well as from a carefully chosen group of wealthy Americans. Among this group was Seth Gano, (Harvard ’08) a Boston based businessman, who managed Whittemore’s affairs during his many trips abroad. In 1930, Gano assumed the role of intermediary between Whittemore and Harvard during the process of securing the bells and he was to be, along with Boris Ermoloff, a Russian expatriate, an executor of Whittemore’s estate. Ermolov in later years became the librarian of the Byzantine Institute in Paris.

In between his many acts of mercy, Whittemore participated in archeological digs in Egypt, the Balkans and the Near East. The year 1931 witnessed his crowning achievement. He gained permission from Mustafa Kemal Attaturk, the Turkish dictator, to close the Great Church, (Hagia Sophia) and the Chora Monastery in Constantinople and let him work in them. There he uncovered and consolidated mosaics dating from the 6th century when Justinian built the great church. They were obscured and covered with plaster and lime. A friend to Harvard, he donated his priceless assembly of Byzantine coins and medals to the Fogg Museum, a gift Harvard acknowledged by making him a non-salaried curator of the collection. Whittemore’s professional commitment was to the art of Byzantium but his emotional allegiance was to Russian culture, the Orthodox Church and Russian intellectuals trapped in the Soviet state. From their first meeting till the death of Crane in 1939, Whittemore apparently enjoyed the romantic nature of the clandestine help these two men gave to Russian nationals. Crane had the
cash and Whittemore the daring do.

It is unclear from the available documents when Crane and Whittemore met for the first time. Certainly it was before March 1917, when Whittemore in Petrograd wrote a rather formal letter to Crane describing events he had witnessed at the beginning of the Russian revolution. He addressed Crane as “Mr. Crane” whereas in later letters his salutation is more informal and he uses terms of affection. It is most likely that they met in Boston at some time during 1916, when Whittemore had returned to America to raise money for refugees in Galicia.

What Crane, Whittemore and Lowell had in common were bells. Crane and Whittemore, steeped in Russian culture and religion, were anxious to preserve both, and Russian bells, religious and cultural icons, were surely appropriate candidates. Though hardly interested in preserving Tsarist artifacts, President Lowell, as reported in Time magazine in 1931, had a deep interest in bells and bell casting and was familiar with the literature on campanology, a knowledge that did not, however, include Russian bells. He is said to have had among his books the primer “De Tintinnabulis” by the 16th century Bell-Master, Hieronymus Magius.

The story of the bells of the Danilov Monastery picks up in 1927. In February, Whittemore had written to Crane, “I am secretly trying to go to Russia” and in May Whittemore, now in Paris, sends a cable to Crane in New York: “Just arrived from Athos, find waiting for me extraordinary opportunity [Stop] go Russia [Stop] advantageous denouement of our work [Stop] could Friendship Fund make it possible for me to go [Stop] please reply Bankers Trust Paris.” (Figure 1) The Friendship Fund seems to have been a resource established by Crane from which cash could be withdrawn to support a number of ventures. These frequently involved Whittemore. Crane had supported a monastery at Mt. Athos and for two years during the Great War assured that the monks had food.
We don’t know whether Whittemore got to Russia in the summer of 1927 but on June 26, 1928, a year later, matters seemed to have firmed up, for Whittemore sends another cable from Paris to Crane saying: “Go Russia July first to get bells.” (Figure 2) And then, two days later, he asks for “one thousand [dollars] for bells,” “credit Barings London.” (Figure 3) Which bells? Did Crane know before Whittemore set off for Russia that the bells of the Danilov Monastery were available? It is logical to speculate that the “extraordinary opportunity” referred to in the 1927 cable was the availability of the Danilov bells and furthermore a fair conjecture that Crane and Whittemore had discussed “the bells” when Whittemore was a guest in the Crane home during the winter of 1928. On February 28, 1928 Crane had written to his son, John, “Hope Whittemore can get into Russia.” He was doubtful because of Whittemore’s continued, overt as well as clandestine support for the White Russians both inside and outside of Russia.
WESTERN UNION
CABLEGRAM

Received at: 465 E 46th St., N.Y.
1228 June 26, 1955

WA31 CABLE=PARIS 36
LCD CHARLES CRANE
FIFTH AVENUE NEW YORK

UNUSUAL FACILITIES GO RUSSIA JULY FIRST ONE MONTH TO GET
BELLS AND MATERIALS FOR LECTURES CAN FRIENDSHIP FUND MAKE
IT POSSIBLE BARINGS & BISHOPSCATE LONDON AFFECTIONATE
GREETINGS BOTH WHITTEMORE.
Probably Whittemore did get to Moscow the summer of 1928. The evidence is indirect though tantalizing. In early July, on his own account at Barings Bank London he made a substantial draft to Thomas Cook, a travel agent in Paris. In late July, Barings Bank sent a cable to him in Berlin where one might guess that he was enroute to Russia. The archivist of Barings Bank recently offered the following opinion: “It was in fact unlikely that Whittemore [in 1928] would have paid [for the bells] with a check or bankers draft in Russia since it would not have been [at that time] accepted by a Russian bank . . . the transaction would have been in some other currency [neither dollars nor pounds] for example gold.” Did Whittemore or Crane have access to gold?

There is no record I can find that either Crane or Whittemore ever asked President Lowell, or anyone else, whether Harvard would accept “the bells.” It comes as a surprise, therefore, that at some time in December 1929, Harvard has knowledge of the gift, either accepted or proposed. President Lowell seeks
advice about “Russian bells” through A. T. Davison, of the Harvard Department of Music. This generated several responses, for example from Serge Koussevitsky among others. (Figure 4)

Late in December (1929) the architect orders the contractor now building Lowell House to stop construction on the clock tower. Nevertheless the architect’s plans of early January continue to show a clock tower. On January 22, new building plans emerge and now show the steel girders to be placed in what has been reconfigured as a bell tower, “the bell deck to support a load of about 35 tons.” There is an undated slip of paper among the Lowell papers in the Harvard Archives with a cryptic message, perhaps written by Lowell’s secretary, “Mr.
Whittemore’s message – 67, 727 pounds – He will be in Boston Thursday, and again the 26th and the 27th.” In Lowell’s distinctive cursive there is noted a single word at the top of the page, “Carillon.” The number on the document in pounds is 33.8 tons, obviously the aggregate weight of the bells. At the end of January 1930, Whittemore is given an architectural drawing of the space available in the proposed bell tower and he takes off to Russia in order to measure the bells and determine whether they will fit in the tower. He tells Crane by letter (January 30, 1930) that “if the bells will not fit in the tower, Harvard has agreed to provide another tower,” a promise of doubtful validity, but probably a necessary reassurance since in all probability Crane now owns the bells.

By late February 1930 President Lowell knows that the zvon (the Russian term for an aggregate of church bells) will entail 18 bells. But only in June 1930, five months later, Whittemore, now in Moscow, sends a letter to Gano in Boston for forwarding to President Lowell, saying, “I have bought the bells.” Are these the same bells he identified in his cable to Crane in June 1928? Did Lowell redesign the tower before the bells had been bought? Did Crane buy the bells before he had a place to hang them?

In June or July 1930, Whittemore now in Moscow hires a Russian architect to design machinery for lowering the bells from the campanile. At the request of Crane, Whittemore engages Konstantin Konstantinovitch Saradjev, a well known campanologist (not a monk as several histories of the bells incorrectly maintain) who is to certify that the bells are intact after their descent to the ground, and if they are, to accompany the bells to America. Saradjev gets an exit permit from Russia, which is contingent upon obtaining an entry visa from the United States. This presents a significant stumbling block since in 1930 there is no American Embassy in Russia. This restriction frustrates Whittemore as well as Lowell. Whittemore (August 6) suggests that in order to obtain a visa for Saradjev he be admitted to Harvard as a “music student” but Francis Hunnewell, Secretary to the Harvard Corporation, being privy to this correspondence, advises against such action. He points out “it might get us into difficulties with the immigration authorities and imperil the admission of other foreign students.” He is particularly concerned because Saradjev would be entering the United States as a Russian national.

Lowell seeks intervention by the Assistant Secretary of State, William Castle, at one time Lowell’s Dean of Students at Harvard, and whom Lowell addresses as merely “Dear Castle.” By letter, Lowell asks Castle to help get Saradjev into the United States and to request that the German embassy in Moscow issue a transit visa. Lowell, obviously wishing to let Gano know that he (Lowell) is on top of matters, sends to him a copy of the letter to Castle with an attached memorandum. Castle is indignant, scolds Lowell, and says that the Department of State never instructs foreign embassies. Although Lowell has initialed the memorandum forwarding the letter to Gano he nevertheless assures Castle that the letter was sent from his office without his knowledge, as he was out of town.
Crane now learning of the problem with visas intervenes and dispatches his office manager, Brodie, to press this cause at the State Department in Washington. Brodie returns to New York empty handed. Having failed to generate any action by Castle, Lowell in the meanwhile is forced to deal with Whittemore in Moscow through Seth Gano. Finally, three weeks into August, and the bells presumably in transit, Lowell, impatient, cables directly to the German Embassy in Moscow and the American Consulate in Hamburg (Figure 5), and thereby Saradjev obtains a transit visa through Germany and an entry visa to America but too late for him to accompany the bells on their voyage to the United States.

Harvard University will appreciate your giving a six months’ visa to Constantine Saradjev, Russian bell expert accompanying crate of bells from Russia to the University at Cambridge, Massachusetts and necessary for their installation.

A. Lawrence Lowell
President

German Consul General
Moscow.

Harvard University will appreciate your giving a transit visa to Constantine Saradjev, a Russian bell hunter of Moscow to accompany a set of bells to the University at Cambridge, Massachusetts. Reference Epistle antiquarian 26 Fevrestia, Moscow.

A. Lawrence Lowell
President.
Whittemore has also engaged the services of “Epstein,” an antiquarian at 26 Tevestia St., Moscow, to ship the bells, which leave Moscow overland to Leningrad and then Hamburg for an ocean trip at some time after the 20th of July 1930. (Figure 6) The port of entry is uncertain, either New York or Boston. Meanwhile, Crane writes to Harvard that he will pay any duty at the port. Notwithstanding, as early as February 1930, six months earlier, Lowell begins to seek duty free entry into the United States. He variously claims that there are 33 bells in the zvon, the number required to escape duty, or antique bells since “all Russian bells are antique” (antiques also escape duty). In addition, he has also been busy trying to arrange intervention through his senator (Frederick H. Gillett) and congressman (Frederick W. Dallinger) to permit the bells to enter the United States duty-free. Dallinger promises to help by inserting an appropriate clause in pending tariff legislation. This he proves unable to accomplish. Although only some of the bells qualify as “antique,” Harvard certainly paid no duty, but whether or not duty was exacted I have been unable to determine.

In the fall of 1930, students are now living in Lowell House, and the tower is incomplete, awaiting the arrival of the bells. The first shipment of 12 bells arrives at Lowell House on October 12, with the remaining six arriving shortly thereafter. To mark the occasion, a news release from Harvard Information Office reads as follows: “A carillon of twenty three bells purchased, for Harvard College, and
intended to hang in the tower of Lowell House, reached Cambridge this morning. They are a set of Russian bells of bronze, 25 tons in weight. It is hoped that they may be put in place about February 20th.” What happened to five bells? Were they lost in transit? Probably, simply an error made by the Information Office. Saradjev now in residence, is supposed to instruct the contractor on the method of hanging Russian bells, which are stationary; and are tolled, by swinging the clapper. Who pays for Saradjev’s travel?

The architect appears to have obtained his first comprehensive information on the dimensions and weight of each bell only after the bells arrived at Lowell House. The first architectural drawing is dated October 22, 1930. On this plan there are two lists. One labeled, “Our List” comprising 18 bells and a second list labeled “Bellringer’s List” comprising 34 bells (the number could also be 32 or 33 depending on how the notation is interpreted), 18 of which are also on “Our List.” Only 18 bells arrived, 17 placed in the Lowell House tower and the 18th sent to the business school. The fact that the drawing contains two lists invites speculation. The “Bellringer” is of course Saradjev. He arrived later than the bells, perhaps around October 22. His list represents the number of bells in the bell tower at the Monastery, 18 of which were “sold” to Whittemore, and are on “Our List.” In January 1930, when Whittemore received the revised architectural plan for the bell tower, he wrote to Crane saying he was taking it to Russia to measure the bells and determine whether they would fit in the space allotted by the architects. There probably were 34 bells in the Monastery tower and Whittemore chose a selection of 18 that would fit in the Lowell House bell tower. And that is the number shipped to Cambridge. This would also explain why President Lowell in early February thought his zvon would consist of 32 bells.. Four months after arrival at Cambridge and $250,000 later the bells are hung and tolled for the first time on February 22, 1931.

I can find no record that Harvard was ever formally or informally offered a gift of the bells or accepted the bells. Yet President Lowell certainly expected to get the zvon as early as December 1929 even if at that time he knew neither how many bells were coming or the founding dates. There seems to be no record at Harvard or in the Crane archives of the transaction by which Whittemore acquired the bells. Did money change hands? If so, who got it? Was the transaction a proper government arrangement or was there someone with dirty hands? There seems no reason to hide the transaction since certainly by 1929 and perhaps a year or two earlier, the Soviet government formally “approved that the most reasonable resolution for liquidation of unique bells is to export them abroad and sell them.” Obviously it would have been impossible to take down the bells without government consent. In a recent interview Blochin Alexander Nikolaevich, currently Executive Manager of the Monastery said that the Monastery has no record of a transaction involving the bells. Considering the circumstances in Russia at the time, it would have been surprising if the Monastery had been involved in what we can assume was a government approved transaction. It has not been possible to learn whether Whittemore ever got $1000 from Crane. It is
reasonable to assume, however, that Whittemore bought the bells from the government. How much he paid and in what currency remains unknown.

Harvard maintains an inventory of all property, and although the list is considered to be both extensive and comprehensive, it makes no mention of Russian bells. Since the bells don’t “exist” the Office of the General Counsel can have no document attesting to ownership. A memorandum from the General Counsel of Harvard dated July 29, 1985 states “It was practice during this time [1929] for the Corporation to accept gifts and provide commentary when there were unusual conditions or uses attached.” The minutes of the Corporation 1927-1931 list innumerable gifts both large and small, and though a gift of 18 Russian bells would certainly qualify as unusual, there is no mention of such a gift. The Annual Report of the President often listed gifts. There is no record of a gift of Russian bells in the reports of 1928-31 nor is there such a record in the minutes of the meetings of the Overseers.

Were there two sets of bells, one bought in 1928 and one in 1930? This seems highly unlikely for among the Crane typescript papers is a handwritten note to the effect that “Crane gave Russian bells to Harvard in 1931” and there is no reference in his papers to any other gift of bells. This note appears to have been written by an executor of the estate since Crane had all of his memories typed before he died. There is no record in the archives of Barings Bank, London of an account in Crane’s name or that of the Committee for the Education of Russian Youth in Exile. Nor is there a record in the bank of any transaction by which Whittemore got $1000 in June-July, 1928. Notwithstanding, is it possible that Whittemore somehow acquired the bells in June 1928 at the time he asked Crane for the $1000, and then allowed them to remain in the campanile until July 1930. This would have been a risky decision in 1928 because of the precarious state of church and monastery property. If Crane owned the bells in July 1928, and being a prudent man, he would probably have tried to get the bells out of Russia promptly.
A note on Russian bells. By the decree of June 30, 1918 ringing of bells was prohibited and considered counterrevolutionary probably because of their religious symbolism, and “revolutionary tribunals” tried guilty parties. Four years later removal of bells from isolated churches and monasteries had begun and some were melted for “industrial purposes.” In 1929 the Soviet encouraged selling church bells to foreigners to raise cash. At that time it was estimated that the weight of all the bells in the USSR was 2 million tons. Only in 1929 did bell melting begin on a large scale, and in the year 1934 a total of 190,000 tons was melted. One can assume that the bells of the Danilov Monastery were at risk, but there is no reason to believe that they were immediately threatened. What Whittemore learned in 1927 was in all probability the knowledge that Russian bells from churches and monasteries could be bought. Being a man of taste and discretion, he chose to acquire an important zvon, bells belonging to a monastery with tremendous cultural importance and religious significance. It has been asserted, incorrectly, that Crane was in Russia in 1928, saw the Danilov bells on the ground and took steps to rescue them. That legend has no basis in fact.

Another note, this one on the mosaics of Hagia Sophia. How did Whittemore know where in the church to look for the lost mosaics? It appears that he learned
of the work of the Fossati brothers, architects and engineers, from Bellinzona in the Swiss Ticine. Hired in 1847 by Sultan Abdul Medjid to clean and restore Hagia Sophia, they came upon the first mosaic by chance while cleaning plaster from a wall. The Sultan, dazzled by the golden cubes in the mosaic, ordered removal of plaster from all the ancient mosaics. When cleaning was complete, the Sultan realized that the human figures in all the mosaics conflicted with Muslim customs, and ordered that the mosaics again be covered with plaster. Before complying, Fossati made drawings and watercolors of the mosaics. Some of these paintings were published as lithographs in London in 1852 and the originals remained in the Fossati archives in the Bellinzona archives. Whittemore probably visited the Ballinzana archives and obtained enough information to formulate a successful work plan. What he found in Istanbul was mosaics covered with plaster and lime, and what he left was the Justinian mosaics largely in their original splendor.

Why did Crane give the bells to Harvard? He was not a Harvard graduate. (Crane did get an honorary degree from Harvard in 1921). Among the Lowell letters, there is no correspondence with Crane until after the bells were in Cambridge. Four months before Whittemore writes, “I have bought the bells” and on April 30, 1930, while Lowell House was being built, Crane, in the company of President Lowell, looked approvingly at the site where the bells would be hung. In the Crane archives there is no correspondence relating to the bells of the Danilov Monastery until April 1930.

On January 15, 1929 Julian Lowell Coolidge was appointed Master of a House later called Lowell House. Between that day and the date when students first occupied the House, Coolidge participated in all aspects of building the House and there are innumerable items of correspondence between him and President Lowell and between him and the architect, yet among all those documents I have been unable to find any referring to the bells with Coolidge’s name on it. Why was Lowell so secretive?

In favor of the purchase in June 1928 rather than June 1930, is the fact that in January 1930, Harvard altered the plans for the Lowell house tower to accommodate the bells. This is five months before the Whittemore letter to Gano in June 1930 saying, “I have bought the bells.” The text of that letter could be misleading for it did not say, “I have ‘just’ bought the bells.” If bought in June 1928, Crane could not have obtained the bells with the intention of placing them in Lowell House since the money for the Houses came only five months later, after the first meeting between President Lowell and Harkness on October 24, 1928. There were neither Houses nor plans for houses in June 1928. Which meant that Crane had to peddle the bells after he bought them. Under these circumstances, why is there no correspondence about the bells as he sought a place to hang them outside Russia? He was not the sort of man to get on the phone and call friends. He wrote letters.
Though we learn much about the bells, in the end we are defeated. The secret of the bells remains intact. We know neither the transaction by which the bells were acquired or how they came to reside in a bell tower in Cambridge.

When Whittemore died in 1950, by his will, he left correspondence to the Byzantine Institute in Paris, the organization he had established in 1930. His letters apparently were moved several times and ended up in the Byzantine Bibliothèque (part of the Bibliothèque Nationale) in Paris, where Ermolov, the surviving executor of the will, worked until his death in 1985. Scrutiny of these letters should have helped unscramble this riddle. A recent search for them has proven futile. They have simply disappeared. His diaries went to Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, now a part of Harvard University by virtue of a gift, but they contain only professional materials, no letters.

An Internet search identified a grandson of Seth Gano living in the Gano summer home in Maine. He informed me that he had an extensive correspondence between Gano and Whittemore, which he would share. For reasons as yet unexplained, further correspondence was not possible.

P.S. A manuscript in Russian without a date or author begins in translation as follows: “In 1930, two Americans turned up at the door step of Konstantin Solomonovich with an offer for his son, Mr. Saradjev, to travel to the United States. They promised to purchase bells in the Soviet Union and then transport them to America where a bell tower was being constructed at Harvard.” Could the two men have been Crane and Whittemore? Attractive as that idea seems, it is manifestly untrue since we know during the period 1927-1930 Whittemore was communicating with Crane in New York by cable. In this same document, the American visa for Saradjev is reported to have read as follows: “Citizen of a country which is not recognized by the United States of America is hereby permitted to temporarily enter the country for a period of 12 months in the capacity of a bell expert.” The remainder of the text makes little sense to me, but seems to be an excerpt from a biography of Saradjev. This manuscript was mailed to me as an attachment to e-mail by my correspondent in Moscow. I have been unable to reestablish contact with him.

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William L. MacDonald, Historian, Byzantine art; Biographer of Thomas Whittemore

Illustrations:

Figures 1, 2, 3, & 6
From the Charles Richard Crane Papers, Bakhmeteff Archive of Russian and East European History and Culture, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia
University, New York, NY.

Figures 4, 5, & 7
From the Harvard University Archives, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
How did the Russian bells get to Lowell House?

Continued

Copies of letters, cables and memoranda recently found, increase our understanding of the events between the years 1929 and 1931, the period during which the bells of the Danilov Monastery were sought, acquired, shipped to Cambridge and hung in the bell tower of Lowell House. Though these documents help eliminate many of the inaccuracies perpetuated by printed versions of this history and correct much of the oral tradition, mysteries remain. It is now possible to confirm some of what was speculation in the report posted on the Lowell House web site on January 8, 2004, and correct an error. “Epstein” was not an independent antiquarian hired by Whittemore. Rather, he was an employee of the Soviet Union Combine for Export and Import of Antiquaries and Art Goods (known as “Antiquariat”), assigned to facilitate the purchase and disposition of the bells of the Danilov Monastery. The text, which follows, should be read as a continuation of the 2004 history of the Lowell House bells.

On May 29, 1930, Thomas Whittemore stopped in Berlin on his way to Moscow. Once there he sent a cable (Figure 1) on June 8, to “ONAGS,” the wire address of Seth Gano, the man who managed Whittemore’s personal affairs. Whittemore instructed Gano to “Ask University transfer by cable $10,000 to Guaranty Trust Co New York.” The meaning of the remainder of the cable is unclear. Who or what is CEBLUDER ARONS? Did Whittemore have two accounts, one in New York and one in Berlin? What is clear is the imperative: Whittemore wanted access to $10,000 from Crane. In this cable, Whittemore used Crane’s pseudonym “University” as in all cable traffic originating in Russia lest the Russian government discover that Crane was involved in the transactions for the bells. Indeed, Crane was able to remain anonymous until March 9, 1931 when Time magazine broke the story, and put Crane’s picture on the cover.
Six days after requesting funds from Crane (June 14th), Whittemore concluded an agreement with “Samueli,” Vice-Chairman of the Board of Directors of Antiquariait, to purchase the bells. (Figures 2 & 3) Three days later Whittemore wrote to Crane: “I have bought the bells in the great Gate House of the Danilovsky Monastery in Moscow. You remember, it is a famous “zvon”; although of the XIX century. I have examined them with an expert and find them in perfect condition.” He continues, “I shall wait perhaps a fortnight to see the bells taken down before I leave Russia.” He addresses Crane as “Dearest friend” and closes the letter: “love.”
Счет

Профессору Т. Уиттмору.

Prof. Thomas Wittmore - 712 Score Building, 118
Washington Street, Boston Mass.

За стоимость корнелов согласно условия от 14/11-1930 г. ............... $13,966.7

За расходы производства по снятию колесилов и доставке на жел.дор...................... Р.1,718.97

Расходы Соратранса за жел.дор. тариф до Ленинграда ...................... Р.4,263.25

Расходы Ленинградского порта по погрузке колесилов на п/х. Р. 687.85

Расходы через Сараджево и м.д. билет до Ленинграда............ Р. 78.61

Расходы за вывозку для гр-на Сараджево .................. Р. 149.25

Руб. 6,097.03 $ 3,545.90

Стоимость м.д. билета от Ленинграда до Бостона ......... $ 210.46

для гр-на Сараджево.

$ 17,725.91

Получили задаток ...................... $ 7,000.-

Следует к получению $ 10,725.91

(Десять тысяч семьсот двадцать пять ак.долл. и 91 цент.)

Зам. Предправления
Объединения "Антиквариат"

(Сымузди)
TRANSLATION

U.S.S.R.
Peoples Commissariat of Foreign and Domestic Trade
All-Union Combine for Export and Import of Antiquaries and Art Goods
"Antiquariat"
Moscow Regional Branch
Moscow, Tverskaya, 26
October 24th, 1930

Invoice

To Prof. Thomas Whittemore - 712 Sears Building,
192, Washington Street,
Boston, Mass.

Cost of Bells as per agreement of 6/14/30 $ 13,966.75

Expenses in connection with removal and delivery of bells to the Railroad depot roubles 1712.07

Expenses of Scyaxtransport for freight to Leningrad 4263.25

Cost of loading bells on steamer in Leningrad port 687.85

Expenses incurred by Mr. Saradjeff and railroad fare to Leningrad 76.61

Purchase of Foreign Currency for Mr. Saradjeff 149.25

Roubles 6897.05 - $ 3,548.90

Cost of fare from Leningrad to Boston for Mr. Saradjeff 210.25

Deposit received 17,725.91

Balance due 7,000.00

$ 10,725.91

Vice-Chairman of Board of Directors
"Antiquariat"

(signed) Samueli
The bill of sale for the bells is available in both Russian and English. In both versions the cost of the bells is denominated in dollars and Whittemore presumably made the down payment in that currency from a dollar draft in Berlin. The presumption that Whittemore paid in dollars is based on the observation that the price of the bells on the bill of sale is not rounded. It must have been calculated from the selling price of the bells in rubles and the dollar exchange rate. There was no need to post a price in dollars if payment was expected in some other currency. In addition the down payment is exactly $7,000. In correspondence several years ago, the archivist of Barings Brothers Bank, London, said that in 1930, since Russia had no dollar trade, the Soviets would find payments in greenbacks unacceptable, let alone a personal check denominated in dollars. Nevertheless, the evidence seems clear that Whittemore paid in dollars. In addition, at the time the bells were shipped to Cambridge, substantial costs remained on the books. These were eventually paid by Whittemore, again in dollars, to Amtorg Trading Corporation, the organization that had shipped the bells from Moscow and incidentally translated the Russian bill of sale into English. In this instance he paid from his bank in Boston, using an account frequently replenished by Crane.

Whittemore appears to have remained in Moscow only “a fortnight.” On July 29th, it was Epstein not Whittimore, who sent a cable to Gano advising, “Bells Lifted.” The bells began their trip to Cambridge on August 11th. Whittemore informed Gano by a letter written from Paris on July 18th, on the shipping plan for the bells – overland to Leningrad and Hamburg, then by sea to Boston. He added, “I expect to be in Boston when they arrive.” His expectations for Saradjev, the bell ringer he had hired, were unqualified. He noted that, “As a musician, he is the greatest master in bell ringing in Russia to-day.”

On September 25, 1930, eighteen bells arrived at the port of New York, (not Boston, as Whittemore had written), on the “Chickesaw” and reached Cambridge by rail and road in two shipments. (Figure 4) Seven bells arrived on October 6 and the remaining bells a few days later. Not long afterwards, it became obvious that the third largest bell was not part of the same register as the other 17. A Mr. Andronoff, who had been a bell ringer at the Donilov Monastery and later assisted in hanging the bells, informed Gano that only 17 of the bells had hung together in Monastery. How did Whittemore make a 4974-pound mistake? (The odd bell now hangs in a tower at the Harvard Business School.) Although it was expected that he be at Lowell House when the bells arrived, Whittemore was off to Addis Ababa for the coronation of Haile Selassie. It has been said that while there, he met up with Graham Greene, the British author, who, in a novel he was then writing, created a caricature of Whittemore.
Although Crane had agreed to pay all duty and shipping costs, Harvard aggressively argued for the lowest possible duty. (Figure 5) The negotiations were stalled as Harvard awaited word from Epstein on the age of the bells (late 19th century) and their value ($13,966.75). The English translation of the Bill of Sale became available only on November 12th. The bells would enter the country duty...
free, as antiques, if they were more than a century old. Otherwise, the duty would be calculated at 20% of value if they constituted a carillon, at 40% if they were considered musical instruments and at 50% if they were new bells. Harvard’s Purchasing Agent, William Morse, having been convinced that the bells did not qualify as antiques persuaded the customs inspector to admit the bells as a carillon rather than a musical instrument, notwithstanding that a carillon required a minimum of 23 bells. This concession saved Crane a grand total of $2445.10.
October 25, 1930.

Mr. Seth Gano,
199 Washington St.,
Boston, Mass.

Dear Mr. Gano:

I spent an hour yesterday at the Appraisers
Stores with Mr. Cuffe who has been delegated to appraise our
Bells and assess duty upon them. I found Mr. Cuffe eager to
be reasonable and to assist us in any way that he can but
there is not much that he can do without laying himself open
to criticism from the Treasury Department. The Tariff act
states:

Par. 384. Bells (except church and similar bells
and carillons) - 50% ad valorem.
Par. 1541 C. Carillons and parts thereof, 20% ad
valorum.

Cuffe read a decision of the Treasury Depart-
ment made after much evidence taken from American manufact-
urers to the effect that bells cannot be called Carillons un-
less there are 23 or more to a set. It is impossible for
Cuffe to classify our bells as Carillons. He must classify
them as "church or similar".

These are classified under Par. 387 which
reads -

"Articles or wares not specially provided for -- -- --
if composed wholly or in chief value of iron,
steel, lead, copper, brass -- -- -- -- or
other metal -- -- -- 45% ad valorem"

It is impossible to purchase five more bells
as you have suggested as there is an unfortunate and perhaps
unfair ruling of the Treasury Department that each entry must
stand on its own feet, be classified accordingly and cannot be
considered as a part of some other entry.
So far as assessment of duty is concerned Mr. Cuffe must assess 45% duty on such portion of the bells as are less than 100 years old but he will make every effort to make the appraisal low. This appraisal brings up the following points:

1. Apportionment of duty must be made on a basis of weight. There are Treasury rulings to this effect. We tried to take the position that our 18 bells were a musical instrument and that as the loss of any one bell would ruin the set, each bell was equally valuable and should be appraised as worth 1/18th of the total regardless of its weight, but this cannot be done.

2. We failed also in our claim that these bells were an antique musical instrument more than 100 years old. That parts of it were lost or broken and had been restored but that the instrument should still be classified as antique. Here also there have been decisions against us.

3. Mr. Cuffe showed us appraisals of English bells at a rate that would make ours worth $36,000.00. He expressed a willingness, however, to grade ours on a par with French or Belgian bells which have been appraised in 1905 at 40¢ per lb., and he is willing to bear in mind:

   a. That copper in 1925 was 22¢ to 26¢ per lb. and is now 16¢.

   b. That in 1870 to 1904 when our three biggest bells were made wages were much lower than they are now.

   c. He has taken note of the fact that there is no basis for the rumor that these bells cost $30,000.00 and lacking any definite invoice has noted the fact that the donor has appropriated only $17,000.00 to date which so far as we know is expected not only to cover the original cost of these bells but also the duty, the erection charges and Saradjeff's expenses.

   The matter has been left in abeyance until we are ready to move the bells. They are now stored at Harvard under our verbal agreement not to use them or move them until they have been cleared and released by the Custom House. This will be in about two weeks.

   Now these bells according to the schedule enclosed, and which is not final but sufficiently accurate for estimating, weigh as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lbs.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New</td>
<td>43,864</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old</td>
<td>6,762</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doubtful</td>
<td>1,246</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>51,872</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In November 1929, eight months before Whittemore concluded an agreement to purchase the bells, Charles Coolidge, the architect overseeing the building Lowell House, was instructed to stop construction of the clock tower and convert it into a
bell tower instead. On January 30, 1930 Whittemore received a preliminary
architectural drawing of the proposed bell tower, which he planned to take to
Russia, and, as he wrote to Crane, “to determine whether the bells can be hung
either together in the second story or separately in two stories.” Originally,
Whittemore had expected to buy 23 bells; at some point the number became 18. In
the same letter he noted: “The president [Lowell] feels that the crown of the
building which bears his name and of the new University venture, will be the bells.”

Whittemore left the United States on February 7, 1930. On his way to Russia, he
planned stops in London, Paris, Marseilles and Alexandria and left a mailing
address in Cairo. From Santa Barbara, Crane, aware of the impending trip to
Russia sent a wire to Whittemore at the Cairo address, “I hope you can bring the
bells back with you in your bag.” Coolidge also hoped to reach Whittemore in Cairo
to let him know: “I am going ahead and building the tower, leaving the space for the
bells as large as is possible.” Although there must have been some sort of
commitment in Russia to sell the bells, the architect had very little knowledge of the
dimensions of the zvon. By June, Wittemore returned to Paris before taking off to
Moscow.

On February 3, 1930, before he sailed for Europe, Whittemore wrote to Coolidge, “I
have made three successive visits to Russia in the last three years.” During one of
the three trips Whittemore must have secured a commitment to allow him to
purchase the bells. From the evidence available, it seems most likely that the
concession was obtained in the summer of 1928. In June of that year he had sent
two cables to Crane, the first saying “Go Russia July first to get bells,” and in the
second he asked for “one thousand [dollars] for bells.” No documents as yet
available shed further light on the events in Moscow during the summer of 1928,
two years before Whittemore actually purchased the bells. If Crane sent the $1,000
Whittemore had requested, perhaps that was the “sweetener” he used to contract
for the bells. It is strange that the bill of sale says: “Cost of the bells as per
agreement of 6/14/30.” Perhaps the “agreement” refers only to the cost of the bells
and indeed, the commitment to sell was made as early as the summer of 1928.

On April 17, 1930, Crane was in Cambridge and President Lowell showed him the
steel skeleton of the Lowell House tower where he planned to hang the bells. How
could Crane or Lowell for that matter, have been so confident that despite the
unsettled conditions in the Soviet Union, Whittemore would successfully acquire
and then dispatch the bells to Cambridge in the summer of 1930?

One sympathizes with President Lowell for what must have been his anxiety during
the 12 months from November 1929 through November 1930, the critical period in
the “Bells” scenario. He was committed to a bell tower a year before the bells were
bought. He appears to have been the only person at Harvard overseeing the
acquisition, shipment and installation of the bells. At the same time, he must have
been intensely occupied with construction of the first two houses, Lowell and
Dunster, acquiring land for the third, Eliot, and making plans for the remaining four
Houses. Forced to use Gano as his intermediary, he had to “chase” Whittemore
around the world: Paris, London, Moscow, New York, Cairo, Alexandria, Djibouti and Addis Ababa, as well as on the high seas and on the Red Sea. To make matters even more complex, it is obvious from the cable traffic and letters that Whittemore had at least four or five balls in the air at once. In addition to masterminding the acquisition of the bells, he was “negotiating with Halil Bey for a concession to clean the mosaics In Sancta [Hagia] Sophia,” and, at the same time, he was seeking a lectureship on Russian art from the Lowell Institute, and assembling an exhibit of Russian antiquities for the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, all while raising money for his several overseas projects, managing his Byzantine Institute in Paris and Boston, and directing the Committee for the Education of Russian Youth in Exile in Paris, Berlin and Belgrade.

Lowell had to contact Crane through his New York office manager, Donald Brodie. Sometimes Crane was at his home in Santa Barbara, sometimes at Woods Hole, and sometimes in New York. At one point Crane was in China, at another time in Cairo and then again visiting Abdul Aziz Saud (soon to become the first monarch of Arabia). At the same time Lowell had to secure German and American visas to enable Saradjev to come to the United States in October, find lodging for him in a Russian home in Cambridge, and in December obtain a transit visa through Poland in order to send him back to Moscow. Before proceeding with this decision, he had to locate both Crane and Whittemore and get their approval, and get Gano to send a cable in French to Saradjev pere, advising him of the return of his son. Then he had to find a new bell ringer, deal with importation of the bells as well as run a large university. He seems to have handled all of this with remarkable sang-froid.

A final thought. Crane sent a cable to Lowell from Cairo requesting that the first official ringing of the bells take place on Easter Sunday, April 5, 1931. (Easter carries special significance in the Russian Orthodox Church.) Neither Crane, nor his son John was able to attend the event. The bells were tolled on schedule but proved to be if not a disaster, at least a major disappointment. Gano who was in attendance wrote to Whittemore: “As a protection against too much ‘noise’ President Lowell had ordered the tongues of the large bells muffled in leather so they sounded like an alarm clock which had been wrapped in a handkerchief.” Brodie was present to represent the family. He wrote to Gano: “The matter of the leather mufflers is rather embarrassing and will have to be worked out by the Harvard authorities and President Lowell in some way.” Things must have changed significantly by July 18th when Crane drove to Lowell House from his home in Woods Hole. Accompanied by his own bell ringer, Crane came to inspect and listen to the bells. He commented on the occasion in a letter to his son John: “The bells are magnificent, installation is beautifully and perfectly done...it is possible that this little installation may be the last and almost sole morsel left in the world of the beautiful Russian culture.”

Cambridge, MA
April 9, 2005
Sources

Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University
  Crane Archives
  Whittemore Archives
  Committee for the Education of Russian Youth in Exile, Archives

Harvard University Archives
  Lowell Archives

Margaret Picher, Historian

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  Bibliothèque Byzantine