

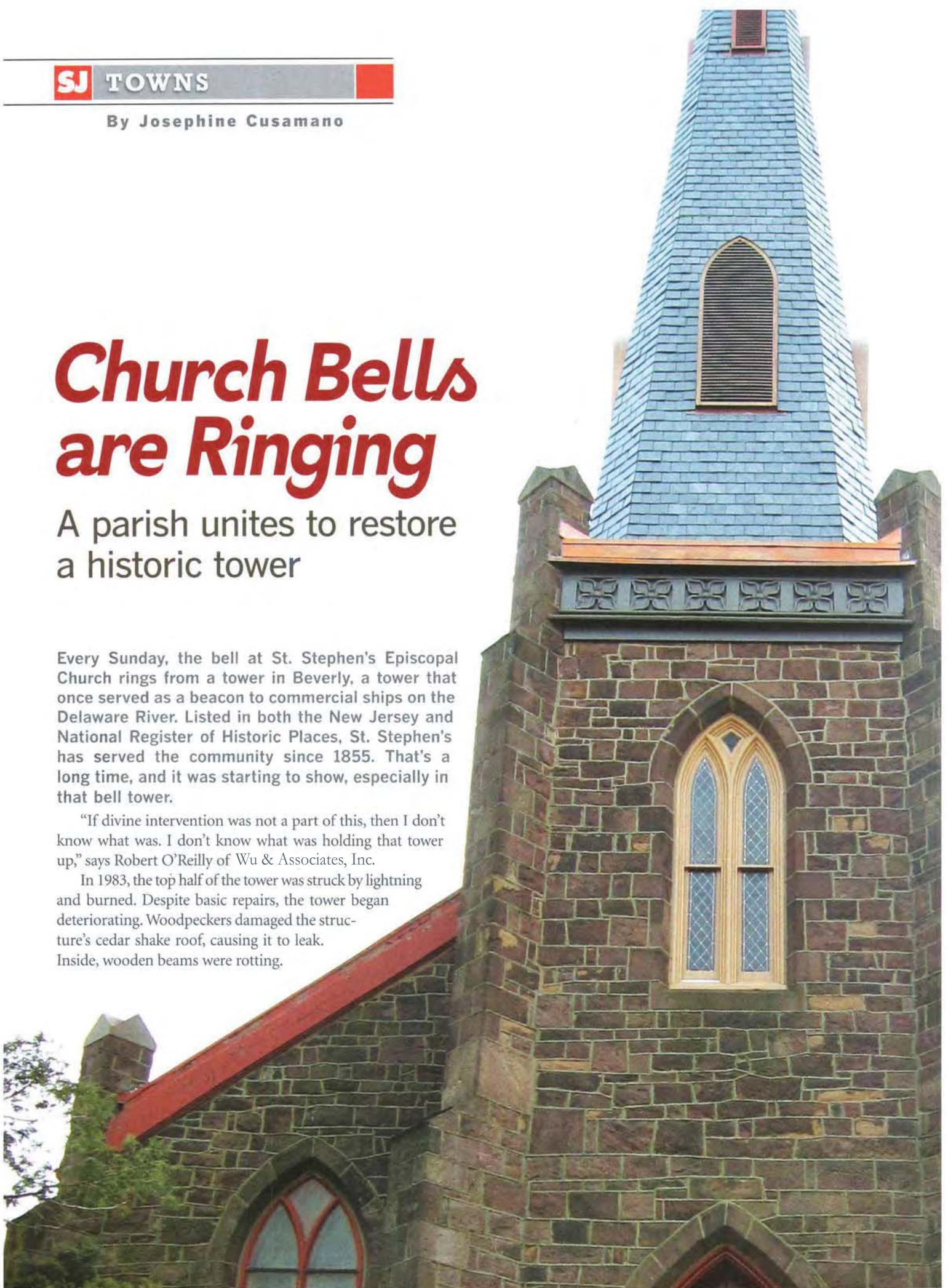
Church Bells are Ringing

A parish unites to restore
a historic tower

Every Sunday, the bell at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church rings from a tower in Beverly, a tower that once served as a beacon to commercial ships on the Delaware River. Listed in both the New Jersey and National Register of Historic Places, St. Stephen's has served the community since 1855. That's a long time, and it was starting to show, especially in that bell tower.

"If divine intervention was not a part of this, then I don't know what was. I don't know what was holding that tower up," says Robert O'Reilly of Wu & Associates, Inc.

In 1983, the top half of the tower was struck by lightning and burned. Despite basic repairs, the tower began deteriorating. Woodpeckers damaged the structure's cedar shake roof, causing it to leak. Inside, wooden beams were rotting.



Church officials applied for – and were awarded – a grant from the New Jersey Historic Trust (NJHT) to study the basic needs of the church and parish hall. It didn't take long for a structural engineering firm to identify the tower and steeple as being in need of urgent repair.

Costs of the repair were estimated at over half a million dollars, but parishioners rallied to complete the project. The first step was to apply for a construction grant from the NJHT for half the project's cost. The church received a bridge loan from the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey, and began a three-year capital campaign for the remaining funding. To date, the 270-member congregation has raised \$170,000, with \$4,000 of that coming from children in the Sunday School, who ran a "Miles of Nickels" campaign.

The restoration project began in July 2009 and was completed in six months.

To get started, church officials had to choose materials for the new tower. The NJHT grant stipulated the structure had to be restored using original materials. Father Robert Legnani, St. Stephen's rector for 22 years, recalls making the decision about materials by referencing a postcard picturing the church in about 1900.

"In the opinion of the architect, slate covered the roof and the steeple in that photo," says Legnani. "The congregation didn't want to have to go back in another 20 years and repair cedar shake damaged again by woodpeckers. So we opted to go back to about 1900, and use slate in the restoration."

The structure of the tower was deteriorating "to the point where all the cross timbers were ready to collapse and fall down" says O'Reilly, who worked as the field project manager. It was replaced with a steel superstructure and concrete masonry units, which had to be prefabricated and hoisted through a small 4' x 4' hatch in the ceiling of the vestibule, a challenge for the workers. Some of the steel girders being lifted through the opening weighed 600 pounds.

"It took a long time. Everything had to be hoisted up and put together as we went. We started at the top and worked our way down," says O'Reilly.

The bell, crafted and installed back in 1855, also had to exit and enter through that 4' x 4' hole. "The bell gong and



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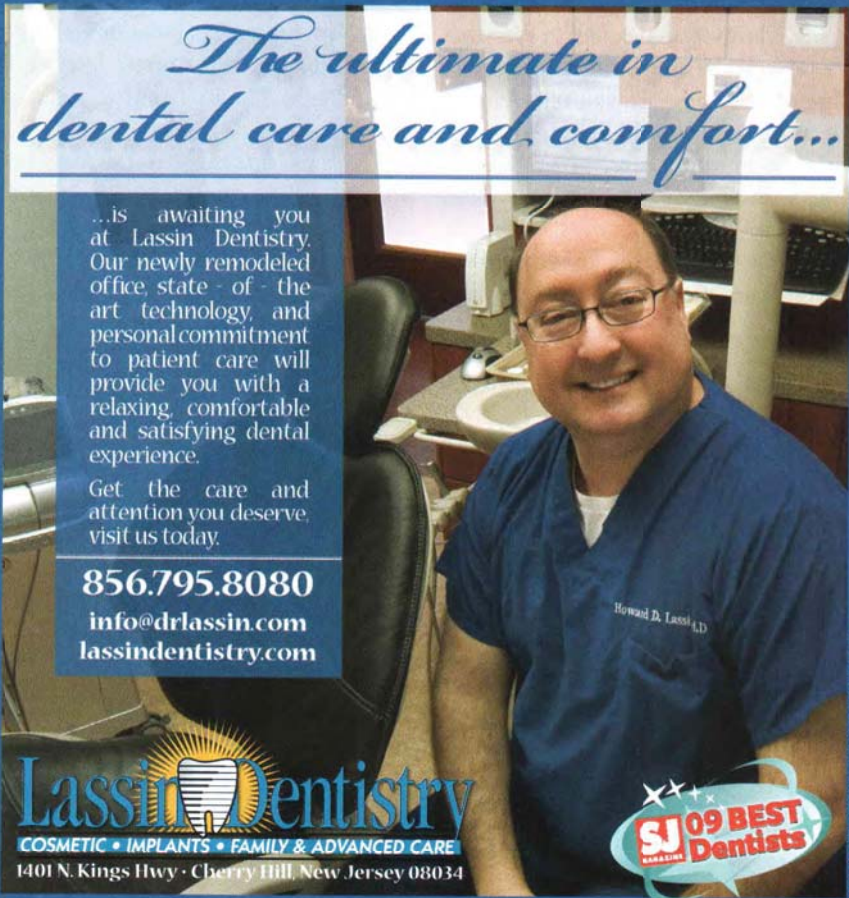
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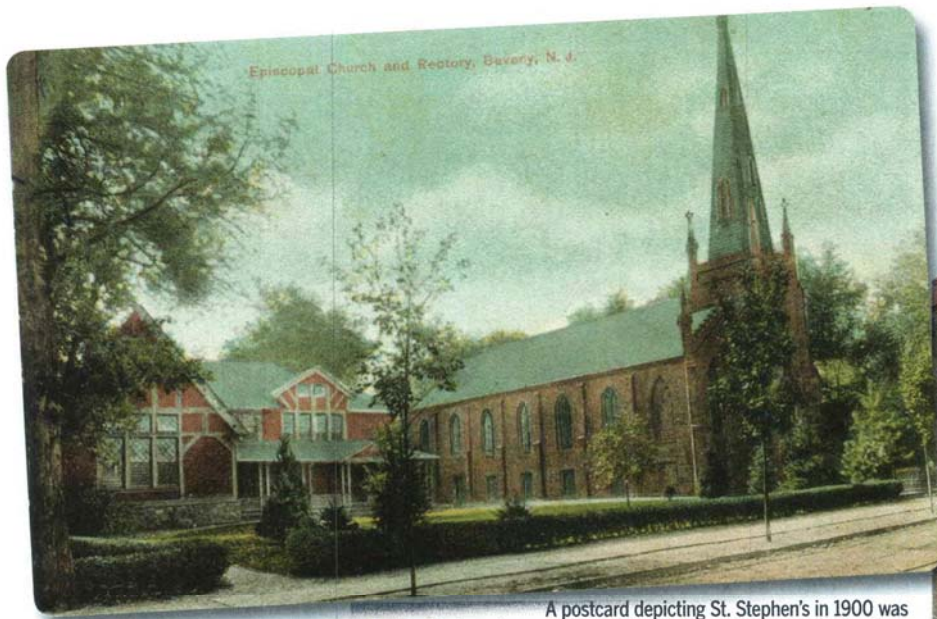
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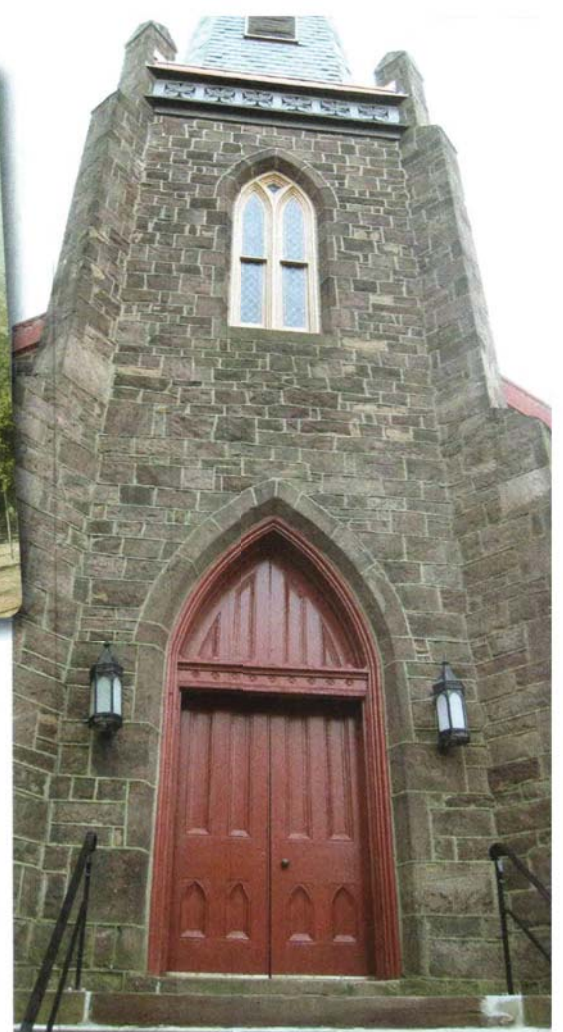
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A postcard depicting St. Stephen's in 1900 was used to plan the tower's new design. (Right) A decorative board at the base of the tower - which had been covered by aluminum siding - was restored.



outside hammer were removed first," says O'Reilly. "Then the bell itself. The bell supporting frame was taken apart and removed, restored and reinstalled. The bell was lowered on an electric pulley that was attached to the new steel frame."

For O'Reilly, placing the cleaned and restored bell was his favorite part of the project. "Being able to put that back in and see the whole thing coming back to life is pretty amazing," he says.

Wood louvers on the sides of the tower were replaced by copper to reduce future maintenance needs. "The louvers also add a lot more charm to the steeple than the regular wood would have," says O'Reilly.

A wooden board adorned with hand-carved petals sat at the base of each of the four sides of the original tower. Over the years, the wood had been covered

with aluminum siding. As part of the new project, workers restored one side of the board and constructed the three other sides to match the original.

Additional restorations include replastering the vestibule, cleaning and repairing the stained glass windows above the front doors, and rebuilding the granite front steps. While rebuilding the steps' foundation, workers uncovered mounds of coal that had been used to fire up the church's furnace. "That was something we discovered which was pretty interesting," says O'Reilly. "It was good to be a part of history."

With the first phase of the restoration now complete, the church is planning a second phase of structural work on the trusses inside the church. However "we have no definite date when we're

beginning that work," says Legnani.

With its restored bell and new tower, Legnani is still in awe of the repaired church. "I look at it whenever I walk down the street," he says. "I look at it from the rectory. I look as it catches the sun when I'm driving back from the Y in the morning and I think, I'm glad we did it. I'm proud of this congregation for doing it." ■



Church steps were demolished and rebuilt

