

Living History

The White Plains Carillon

By Elaine Massena

For more than 30 years, through all the changes in White Plains, the bells heard daily from atop the County Courthouse have been a delightful constant.

When Westchester County broke ground for its proposed 20-story courthouse, the fifth County Courthouse to be built in White Plains, Brian Wallach had already dreamt of the music, which would be heard from its tower. Wallach was the president and founder of the White Plains Beautification Foundation. He imagined how music played from atop the new courthouse would beautify the city for all: "Beautification is more than the physical, it is the audible. It is more than flowers and benches, it is music," he says.

In 1969, as Urban Renewal was about to change the face of White Plains dramatically, 32 members of the Beautification Foundation traveled at their own expense to visit eight cities in five countries in Europe. Their goal was to gather ideas, which could be related to their own city, and to have input into decisions, which would be made about the look of White Plains in the future.

The group included city officials, county officials, city planners, and others active in civic affairs at the time. They visited war-damaged cities such as Rotterdam and Hanover, Germany as well as Amsterdam, Stockholm and Helsinki. They toured and viewed public art and fountains, and saw how open space was incorporated into the flow of city life.

In Amsterdam the group heard the bells playing from the Royal Palace and learned that it was a Schulmerich carillon, made in the United States. They decided that this would be a wonderful way to beautify White Plains. A committee flew to the Schulmerich Company's home in Pennsylvania to learn more about the carillons and soon began raising funds to bring a carillon to our city.

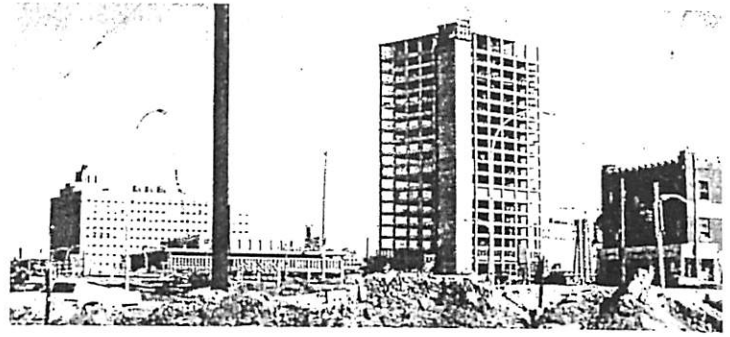
The idea for the bells was just one which the group succeeded in bringing to White Plains. Wallach recalls that there was no outdoor dining in White Plains at that time, and that fountains were not allowed because they were considered dangerous. Take a look around the city today and see how things have changed!

Carillon music has a rich history dating back to the 15th century. Traditionally, a carillon consisted of at least 23 large bells arranged in chromatic sequence and played from a keyboard, similar in design to an organ but larger. It has the largest dynamic range of any mechanical instrument. The Schulmerich Company is the world's largest producer of carillons and bells and one of only four producers of hand bells in the world. The Schulmerich Carillon, which the Beautification Foundation chose, was an electronic device, which amplified tones produced on small bronze rods. The Americana model had the equivalent of 111 bells and was a concert instrument with a playable console. The amplified tones were equal in volume to those produced by over 79,000 pounds of cast bells. After five years of fundraising, the Beautification Foundation had raised the \$25,000 needed to purchase the carillon. A bronze plaque in the courthouse names the chief contributors. After approval by the Westchester County Legislature, it was installed on the top floor of the courthouse and donated to the county by the foundation. The carillon was dedicated on Nov. 22, 1974.

By the late 1990s, the technology had changed, parts were no longer available for the original equipment, and it was replaced with a Tyme Stryke model from Schulmerich, again purchased by the Beautification Foundation and donated to Westchester County. The new carillon played for the first time as we welcomed the new millennium. This carillon is run digitally and can be programmed with up to 500 songs, which are encoded in groups on "auto-bel" cards, about the size of a credit card. Four speakers on the roof of the courthouse broadcast the chimes and concerts. A committee of Beautification Foundation members headed by Beth Wallach chooses the selections to be played which include seasonal and patriotic pieces. Our carillon also tolls for sad occasions; such as it did during the memorial for 9-11. It plays the Westminster chimes on the hour and half hour from 8 a.m. until 9 p.m. The Carillon plays concerts Monday through Saturday at 12:15, 3, 5, 6, and 7 p.m. and on Sunday at 4 and 7 p.m.

Wallach, justifiably proud of all the Beautification Foundation's many projects, says that he hopes the daily carillon music will "reach the soul and spirit of all the people of White Plains."

WPT



The Westchester County Courthouse under construction, 1972 (top). Members of the Beautification Foundation on their fact-gathering trip in the Netherlands, May 1969. White Plains City Archives

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