

## AN AMBITIOUS RESTORATION PROJECT COMES CLOSE TO COMPLETION IN NORTH ANDOVER

*By Andy Smith*

**A**s a frigid wind sweeps through North Andover's Old Center, Kim Adami and Deb Putnam stand perfectly still, gazing at the North Parish steeple. Their smiles appear frozen in place, but that is not solely the weather's doing.

"Look at that weathervane, it looks great!" notes Putnam. "It's actually moving. It's a real weathervane!"

You could be excused for finding their enthusiasm a bit odd. It's just a weathervane, after all. But it is a shinier weathervane. A functional weathervane. And more importantly, it represents one more step toward completion of the church's two million dollar restoration and renovation.

"This was a big, big project, made of lots of little details," Putnam says.

Putnam and Adami are part of the team that has obsessed over those details for more than five years. Both are members of the

Unitarian Universalist congregation that calls North Parish home. But they say the church's makeover is significant to the community at large, and not just the 360-member congregation.

"This church is an anchor for the historical section of town. It was not only a religious center, but a community and government center," Adami says. "When you see that steeple, you know you're in a historic New England town."

Indeed, the history of North Andover—and of Andover, for that matter—begins with the Puritans' establishment of North Parish in 1645. The first church structure was built near the Old North Burial Ground on Academy Road. Known then as the First Church of Christ, the church served as the focal point of Andover, the 23<sup>rd</sup> settlement organized in New England. As Adami notes, the church functioned as a gathering place for religious meetings as well as social, government, and business meetings.

In 1692, North Parish played a key role in one of the region's more notorious historical events. Salem, Mass., is most commonly associated with the witchcraft hysteria that resulted in the execution of twenty people and the imprisonment of hundreds. But more people were accused in Andover than

anywhere else. Stevens Pond was believed to be a site for the Devil's baptisms. Among Satan's alleged followers were North Parish's sexton and the daughters of Reverend Francis Dane. Dane was the church's second minister, who according to historical records, was paid in the hearty currency of corn and wheat.

His daughter Abigail served thirteen weeks in prison for witchcraft, and Dane emerged as a leading voice of reason in opposition to the witch trials.

In 1836, the current church was built next to the Old Center's Town Common. Soon thereafter, it hosted a town meeting that may have been less contentious than the witch trials, but had lasting implications nevertheless. In 1855, Andover residents gathered at the church and voted to formally split the town in two, with North Parish becoming North Andover and South Parish retaining the name Andover.

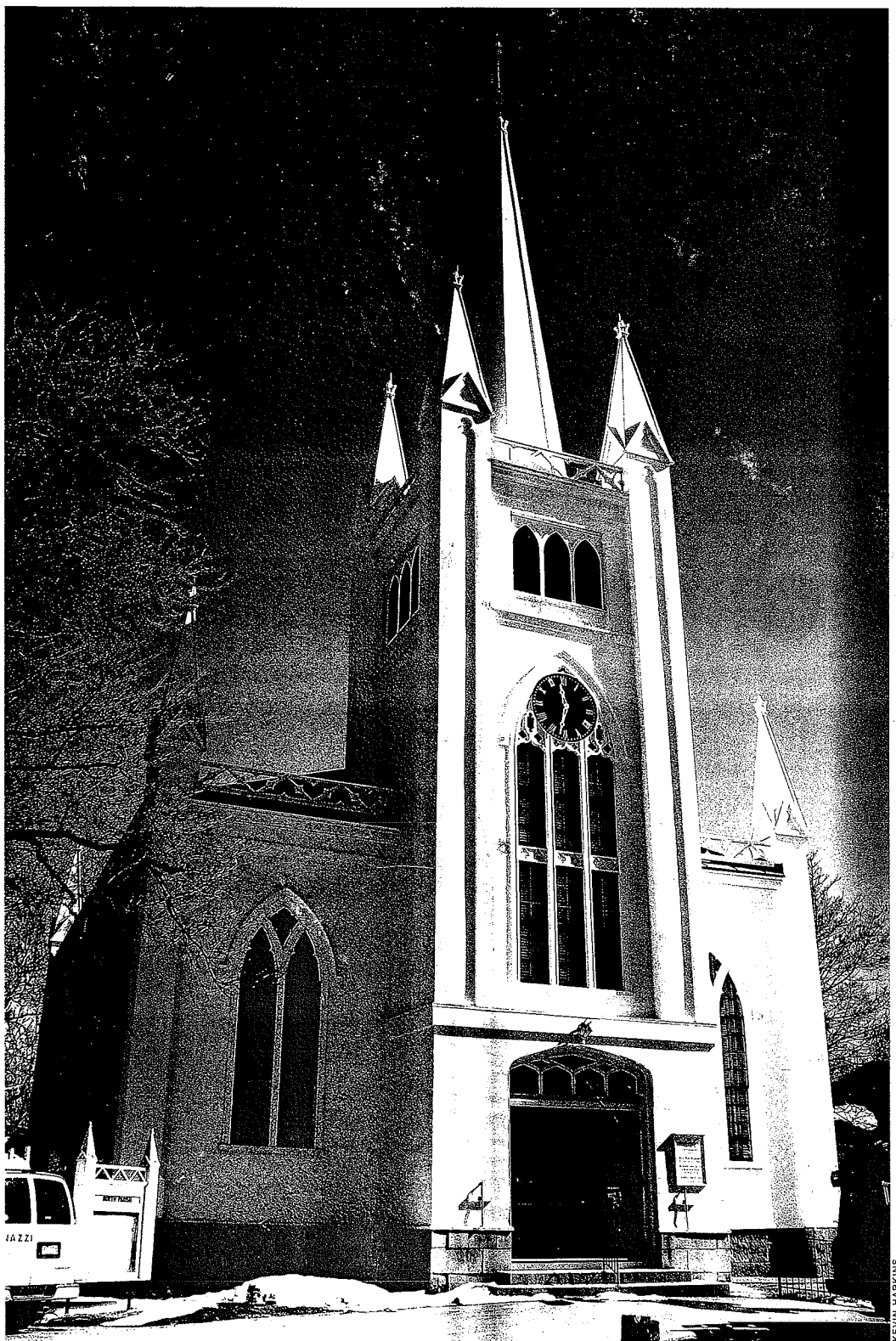
It's tough to imagine what those voters might think of a current Town Meeting in North Andover. Once held in that rustic church meetinghouse, Town Meeting is now held in the gymnasium of a state-of-the-art \$55 million high school. And that is one reason Putnam, Adami, and others believe it is so important to protect North Parish.

As McMansions and strip malls have become commonplace, North Parish has endured as a critical connection to the past. George Schruender Jr., chairman of the Old Center Historic District Commission, said the church's storied past makes it vital to the town's future.

"As generations come forward, we want them to be able to see some of the things that really made this community," he said. "That church started it. And if we ever lost it, we'd lose a real piece of history."

In 2004 the town showed its appreciation for that history by voting to grant \$142,000 of Community Preservation money to the project. The project also received a \$5,000 grant from the Essex National Heritage Commission. But that left a hefty bill for the congregation. As of March, fund-raising efforts had raised over \$1.3 million. An additional \$600,000 still needs to be raised for the project, which is expected to be completed by the summer.

That figure includes all sorts of costs. Putnam estimates that about sixty percent of the structure has been directly affected by the restoration and renovation. The expansive project covered minutiae like repairs to the clock tower's minute markers, as well as more



North Parish Church stands proudly at the Old Center Town Common with the scaffolding now gone.

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unwieldy problems like removing asbestos and improving handicap accessibility.

Throughout the restoration there has been a strict adherence to national standards for historic preservation. Materials are carefully selected, from nails to the white seasoned oak they're driven into. It is not enough to simply replace windowpanes. They must be specific window panes with the appropriately aged glass. Some of the labor has required specialists, such as American Steeple and Tower Co., which rebuilt rotted portions of the church's steeple.

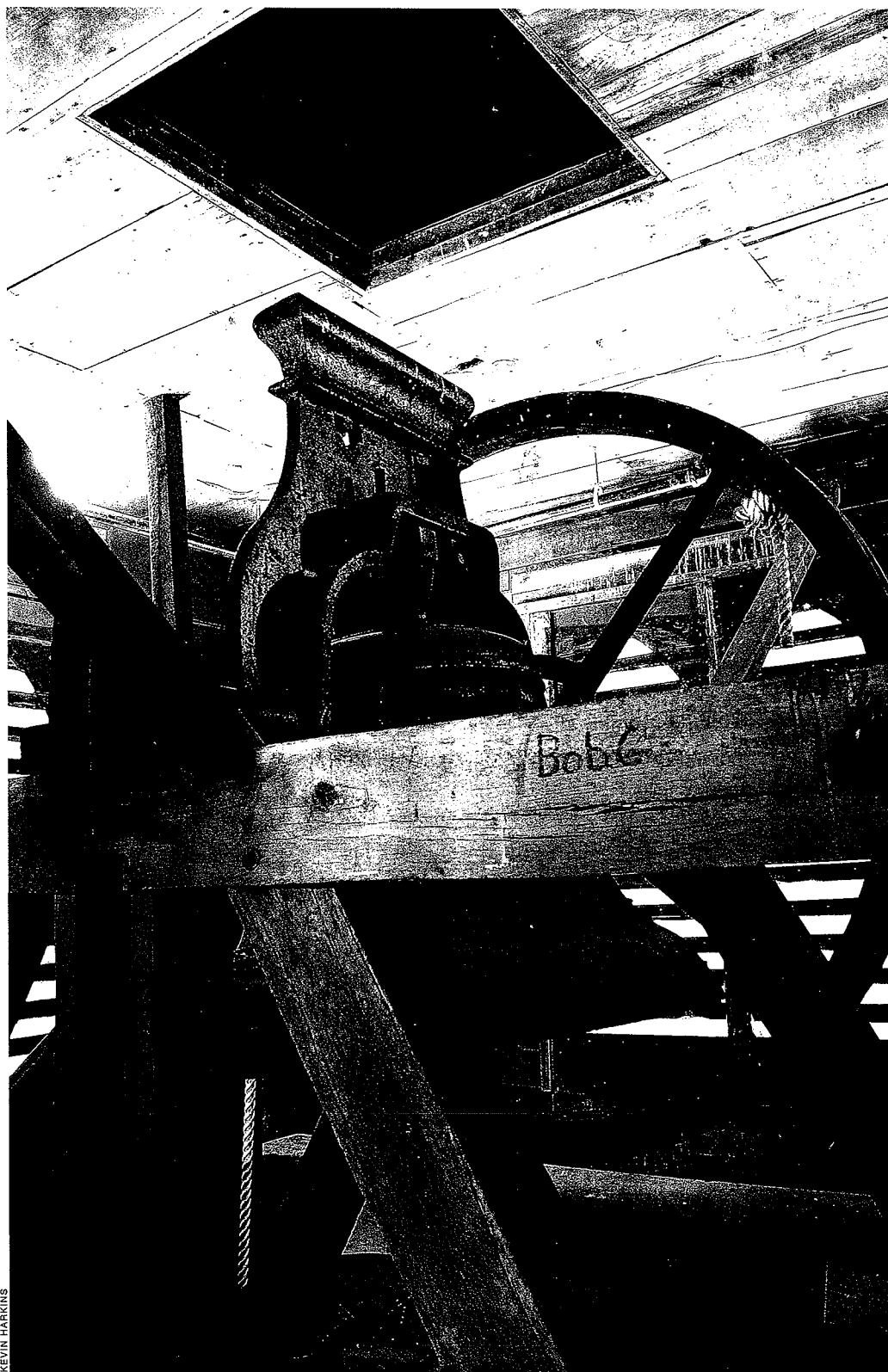
Since work commenced in April of 2006, Putnam and Adami say the project has revealed even more of the church's history. They were fascinated by the enormous rock foundation exposed during demolition. And when the floor was removed from the old minister's office, builders could see that at some point, the office had a toilet. Who knew? It may not match the historical significance of the witch trials or the town's split. But as Putnam said, every new piece of knowledge gives a greater historical context.

"Sometimes you find these things, and you don't know that they're history until well after the fact," she commented. "Who's to say what history is?"

One artifact certainly worth treasuring is the bell in the steeple, which is one of the original bells cast by Paul Revere in 1806. For years, church staff and volunteers have had to climb into the bell tower to ring that bell. But improvements to the bell's cradle will finally allow it to be rung from the church lobby.

Of course, the restoration and renovation is not simply driven by nostalgia. It is more than maintaining a connection to the good ol' days. The project will improve the building beyond aesthetics, by expanding space and adding multi-use rooms. In addition, church leaders hope to one day purchase the Old Center Hall across Great Pond Road, which is currently being leased and used as a sanctuary during construction.

While the project will preserve the building's historical presence in the town, it will also re-energize its spiritual connection to the community. North Parish Unitarian



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**One of the original Paul Revere bells; interesting to note is that another can be found at the Groveland Congregational Church.**

Universalist Church prides itself on its social outreach programs. The church hosts a nursery school, a food pantry, a coffee house, and meditation workshops, as well as meetings for Alcoholics Anonymous, Al Anon, Merrimack Valley People for Peace, and the Andover Artists Guild.

Walking through the bare, half-finished first floor of the church, Adami said the church will now have the capability to get even more involved in the community.

"It goes back to having the church as more than just a religious center. So that's pretty exciting."

**MVM**