

NORTH OF THE JAMES®

COVER STORY

Dianne Watkins

The Voice Of Virginia Union's Bell Tower

BY CHARLES G. MCGUIGAN

A bell tower without bells is like a larynx without vocal chords. It is without a voice, mute, speechless. Back in 1939, at the New York World's Fair, the Belgian Pavilion bell tower was downright garrulous with the full-throated voice of a 35-bell carillon. But as the Fair came to an end, the carillon sounded with less frequency. By the early 1940s the bells in the tower were silenced.

They were surgically removed, and the tower, a hollow core, was shipped, along with a good portion of the building, to an African-American college in the South.

THAT COLLEGE WAS VIRGINIA UNION University in Richmond, Virginia and the structure with the voiceless bell tower would come to be known simply as the Belgian Building, and would serve as a trademark of sorts for this traditionally black college of the South. A few years after the Belgian Building arrived, a four-year old girl by the name of E. Dianne Nelson Watkins came to live at the University. Her mother had recently died while giving birth to the little girl's brother. And the father, a barber in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, didn't know how he was going to work while tending the new-born, the four-year-old and his other two children. His wife's only sister, Elizabeth Ellison, agreed to take the two youngest children and raise them in Richmond. Her husband was Dr. John Malcus Ellison, one of the very first African-Americans to receive a Ph.D. and the first African-American presi-

dent of Virginia Union University. He was a highly respected academician, writer and minister.

The Campus As A Playground

"That's how I happened to come to Richmond at age four," says Dianne Nelson

Watkins, who sits next to me on a couch in the living room of her Ginter Park home. "David Nelson, my brother, was the baby. And we lived in the President's House, that beautiful stone building adjacent to the Doug Wilder Library."

Before integration came to Richmond (and it arrived here at a snail's pace), many noteworthy African-Americans, who could not find accommodations at hotels in the city,

stayed with the Ellison's in the President's House. Dianne ticks off a list, a veritable "who's who", of famous people—from Marian Anderson to Langston Hughes.

As a girl, Dianne and other children who lived at the University, used the campus as their playground. Students at the college would flip the helix ribbons of jump ropes for the children, and the kids would explore every nook and cranny of the grounds. Dianne remembers venturing into the old bell tower,



PHOTO: JOHN MACLELLAN

ABOVE: Dianne Watkins revisits the home where she grew up, the president's house at VUU. LEFT: Four year old Dianne unveils a portrait of her uncle, Dr. John M. Ellison, Sr. On the left is former VUU president and VUU graduate Dr. Thomas H. Henderson and on the right is Dr. Miles W. Conner, also a VUU graduate and first president of Coppin State University in Maryland. (Photo courtesy Dianne Watkins)



the interior of which was dark as night. She would make her way up the cast iron stairs, eight or nine steps, but never more. In the darkness she could hear the cooing of pigeons high above her.

Finding The Bells

In those days, the 165-foot tower was sheathed in slate-black schist and lined with glass brick windows. Some years later, as a gift to Virginia Union, Reynolds Metal, replaced the deteriorating slate with a corrugated armor of aluminum, almost identical to the same exterior the company had installed on Thalhimer's Department Store in downtown Richmond. It was a nice gesture, but it diminished the architectural integrity of the bell tower, made it seem less than it was, in a way emphasized the fact that it was without a voice, was just a long, hollow chamber of metal.

Two years ago, Dianne unearthed information that would lead her on a quest to restore the bells to the Belgian Building. She had read an article that stated there had been bells in the original tower of the Belgian Friendship Building when it stood at the New York World's Fair, but that had been more than 60 years ago, and about all anyone seemed to know was that the bells had been given to former President Herbert Hoover. She discussed her findings with her brother, Alan Nelson, a body guard who lives in Trenton, New Jersey. He started web-searching and in short order made a discovery.

One day, he called and said simply: "I found the bells."

What he discovered was that the bells, for the past 65 years, have resided in the Hoover Tower at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. Dianne almost immediately called Elena S. Danielson, director of the Hoover Library and Archives at Stanford, who confirmed Alan's findings. But the director knew nothing about the whereabouts of the Belgian Friendship Building itself. "She had no record that Virginia Union had the Belgian Building bell tower," Dianne remembers.

Herbert Hoover's Carillon

A little bit about the Belgian Friendship Building, the bulk of which now resides at Virginia Union University. It was designed as the Belgian Pavilion for the 1939 New York World's Fair by the I.M. Pei of his day—Belgian architect Henri van de Velde, regarded as one of the greatest international architects of his time. The Belgian Building is the only known van de Velde structure on American soil, and is undoubtedly one of Richmond's foremost architectural gems. The exterior walls are adorned with massive bas-reliefs blasted from sandstone and depicting life in both Belgium and the Belgium Congo.

Belgium had every intention of dismantling the Pavilion after the World's Fair and shipping it home where it was to become the

nucleus of a new university. But that never happened. By the time the World's Fair was over World War II was beginning in earnest and the Nazis occupied Belgium.

The Belgian government, then in exile, decided to give the bells from the tower to Herbert Hoover. The former president was revered by Belgium for his administration's relief efforts during and after the First World War. Hoover in turn gave the bells to Stanford University, his alma mater.

When it was made public that the Belgian Pavilion would not be sent home, some 27 colleges—Virginia Union among them—voiced substantial interest in obtaining the building. Virginia Union won out.

That, in and of itself, was remarkable. For in that segregated era, it was unusual that African-Americans got much of anything. Dianne suspects the decision to give the building to a black college may have had something to do with the theme of that year's World's Fair, which was Peace Through Understanding. "To see this building coming



The Belgian Pavilion in its setting at the New York World's Fair in 1939, from a vintage postcard. (Courtesy BellsForPeace.org.)

to a black college during integration was a miracle," says Dianne.

But receiving this largesse was only the first step. In order to bring it South and rebuild it at Virginia Union a substantial sum of money would be needed—about \$500,000, a large fortune 65 years ago. And the man who raised the money to bring the Belgian Pavilion to Richmond was Dianne's uncle, John Ellison.

Uncle John Ellison

"He struggled tirelessly to get that money in the forties to pay for the building to come to Richmond," Dianne says. "I can remember going to churches and they would take up a special collection and they would give him the money in a paper bag and it would be on the back floor of the car. That was the money that was to go back to the university for the Belgian Building."

It was during John Ellison's tenure as

president of the college that the Belgian Building was finally constructed. But John's legacy consisted of much more than stone and mortar. He left behind one of the greatest African-American institutions of higher learning in the country.

Born February 1889 in Northumberland County, John Ellison came from the humblest of beginnings. At age 14, he was hired out as farm hand for seven dollars a month. The labor and lack of intellectual stimulation caused him great anxiety. He thirsted for knowledge. And when he was 17 entered the Normal Industrial Institute, which later became Virginia State College. He then transferred to Virginia Union and there earned a bachelor of arts degree.

By 1927 John earned his master's in theology from Oberlin College and later his Ph.D. from Drew University. Dianne remembers that her uncle told of how when at Oberlin—a progressive college for that time—one of his professors there was convinced that John because he was African-

After completing high school, Dianne attended Riverside Junior College just south of Los Angeles, California. She toyed with the idea of studying interior design, but after returning to Richmond and entering Virginia Union, she set her sights on the field of education. After receiving her bachelor's from Union, she went to work on her master's at Columbia University in New York. For the next 40 years, she worked in the field of education, retiring last year as coordinator of professional development for the Richmond Schools.

Bells For Peace

Since that time, she has devoted herself full-time to the restoration of the bells in the tower of VUU's Belgian Building. Not long after she had learned about the bells existence at Stanford, Dianne created a not-for-profit organization called Bells for Peace.

This group's purpose is straightforward enough—to secure funding for the casting of 14 bells at the same Dutch foundry where the original 35 bells for the Belgian Pavilion were made. In time, she would like to see a full carillon of 35 bells recast, but for the time being a 14-bell chime will be sufficient. The cost for the manufacture, the shipping and the installation of the bells is about \$600,000. Along with this, Dianne hopes to raise an additional \$200,000 for an endowment.

And somewhere down the road, she would like to see the entire Belgian Building renovated, a costly endeavor at an estimated \$20 million. But this price tag seems scant, considering the significance of the building and the bells.

"The Belgian Building is a national landmark," says Dianne. "It's a Virginia treasure. It was a gift from an international entity. And it was my uncle who raised the funds to bring it to Richmond."

Restoring the bells to the tower, so long mute, will, Dianne believes, spark a revival of the University. "It's the bells, but it's beyond the bells," she says. "It's the bells, the building and using that leverage to help promote a renaissance in educational excellence at Virginia Union."

And that, of course, would continue the legacy of her uncle, the University's first African-American president, Dr. John Ellison.

Dianne Watkins invites me to imagine the bells ringing from the tower at Virginia Union on special occasions. She asks me to imagine the Carillon at Byrd Park responding to the chimes, and other bells across the city from church towers, chiming in, a choir of bells speaking to one another, uniting the community. And somewhere aloft in the tower of the Belgian building will be a very large bell with the following inscription: *Una pro pace sono, which means, "For peace alone do I ring."*

What a sentiment—particularly in these divisive times. **■**

American would never achieve great success. John, of course, proved him wrong. "My uncle did everything he needed to do such that that same professor wanted Dr. Ellison to preach his eulogy," says Dianne.

She remembers her uncle with great fondness and admiration. "He was a very serious man," she says. "And I remember his coming home after a hard day's work having dinner. And then after dinner he would go right up to his den to study and to write and he would help me out sometimes if I stumbled over math problems. He tutored me."

Education And Culture

He also imparted to his niece a love of education, just as his wife, Elizabeth, gave the young girl an appreciation of culture. "My mother, Elizabeth Ellison, was the one who made sure Dr. Ellison understood that fine arts had to be included in the academic environment," Dianne says.