

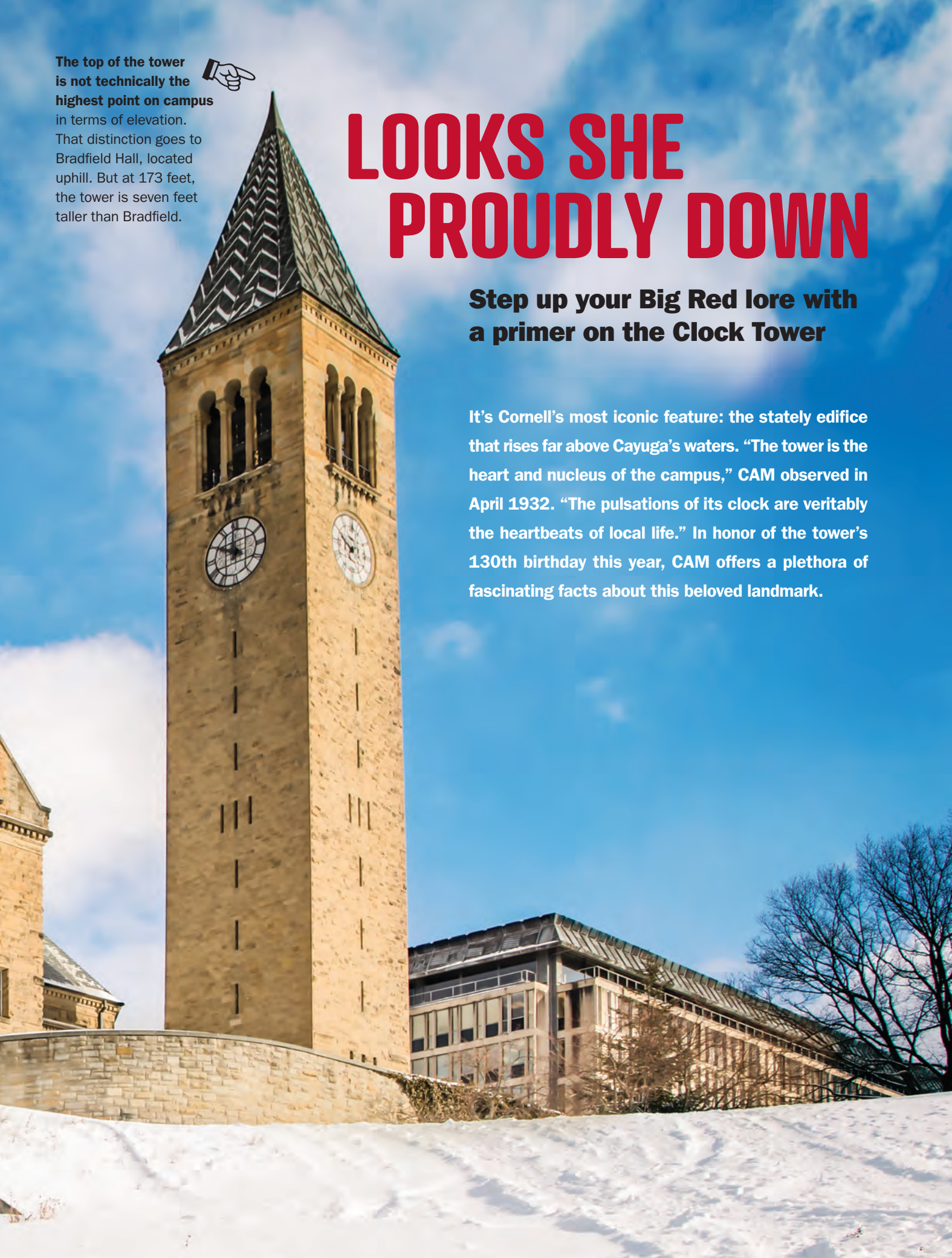
The top of the tower is not technically the highest point on campus in terms of elevation. That distinction goes to Bradfield Hall, located uphill. But at 173 feet, the tower is seven feet taller than Bradfield.



# LOOKS SHE PROUDLY DOWN

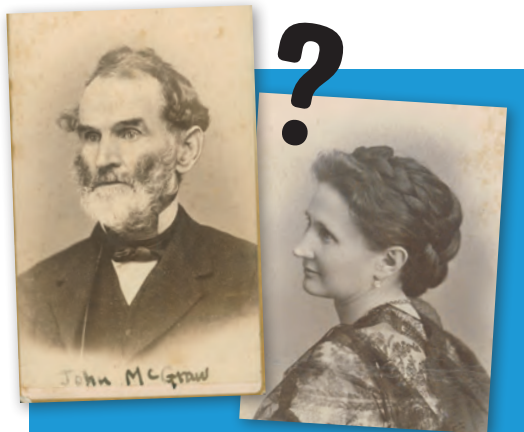
**Step up your Big Red lore with a primer on the Clock Tower**

It's Cornell's most iconic feature: the stately edifice that rises far above Cayuga's waters. "The tower is the heart and nucleus of the campus," CAM observed in April 1932. "The pulsations of its clock are veritably the heartbeats of local life." In honor of the tower's 130th birthday this year, CAM offers a plethora of fascinating facts about this beloved landmark.





**The tower originally sported a golden-hued clay tile roof.** It wasn't until the 1930s, when the tiles began to loosen and slide off—dropping perilously close to passersby and even crashing through the windows of nearby buildings—that it got its iconic lead-coated copper roof.



**Which McGraw benefactor does the tower honor?** It's unclear. The minutes of the trustee meeting during which it was named don't say whether it was for John (who gave the first building used as a library) or his daughter, Jennie (who gave the chimes). According to Big Red history guru Corey Earle '07, various sources claim that it's one or the other—but it's likely both.



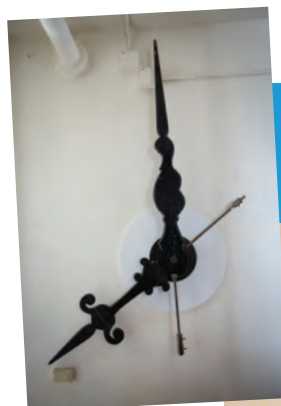
**The clock's accuracy took a major leap forward** in 1921, when physics professor emeritus George Moler 1875 designed a device that regulated it each hour, based on a wireless signal from a government station outside Washington, D.C.—making it accurate to within ten seconds. The clock was linked to the Global Positioning System in 1999.



**The faces get dressed up for a few key holidays:** green for Dragon Day and Veterans Day, red for Homecoming, pink hearts for Valentine's Day, and orange jack-o'-lanterns for Halloween. For years this was accomplished with colored plastic sheets; now it's done at the flip of a switch.

**The lighting system for the faces** has gone through many iterations, from light bulbs with reflective panels to fluorescents to fiber optics to its current LED.

**There's a Chimes Museum on the sixth floor,** displaying such items as a retired bell and the original clock hands (right), which were replaced in 1999.



**Though the identities** of those responsible for putting the pumpkin on the tower in 1997 have never been revealed, they inspired others to similar pranks: a disco ball appeared there in 2005 and a Santa hat in 2019.

**The University technically has two "McGraw Towers."** In Cornell's early days, that moniker was applied to the small tower of the Arts Quad's McGraw Hall; the Clock Tower was renamed McGraw in 1961.

**Each of the clock's four faces is ten feet in diameter;** the "big hands" are five feet long. The intricate ironwork adorning each face is slightly different.



**TO SCALE:** Workers with a clock face during the late Nineties renovation

Each of the clappers are different sizes, which means that it takes varying amounts of force to play each note. While the higher notes can be played with a gentle press of a lever, the lower ones require a powerful push.



In non-COVID times, the three daily chimes concerts are open to the public. The tower is currently closed to visitors, but fans can still request songs at [chimes.cornell.edu](http://chimes.cornell.edu), and some concerts are live-streamed.

The tower once housed the adjoining library's overflow book stacks. They weren't open to the public, so staff had to run up and down the stairs to retrieve requested volumes. The narrow wooden cart they used is in Cornell's Rare and Manuscript Collections.

Viewed from West Campus, a small rectangular hatch is visible at the base of the tower's roof; originally designed for maintenance access, it has been permanently sealed to deter future mischief-makers.

Copies of a "fold your own" paper tower, based on a design found in the Risley Hall print shop, were widely distributed during the Sesquicentennial celebration in 2014-15. It can be found at [rmc.library.cornell.edu/cornell150](http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/cornell150).



In October 1913, an owl took up residence. As the *Daily Sun* reported in an item headlined "‘Bird of Wisdom’ Perches in Library Tower": "Its mournful ‘Toowit, toowit, toohoo’ reaches the ears of the undergraduates as they toil up the slope to their eight o’clocks. What the omen signifies is a question which has been left to the members of the classical department."





**The Cornell Chimes**, a hardcover history published to mark the tower's centennial in 1991, and a CD of chimes tunes (*Music from the Tower*) are available at the Cornell Store.



## It takes . . .

- **2.5** towers to reach the bottom of Cayuga Lake and **1,157** to run its length
- **5,372** towers to travel from East Hill to Weill Cornell Medicine in Manhattan
- **7,289,910** towers to get to the moon



**The library building**—which includes Uris and the Clock Tower—opened on October 7, 1991, exactly twenty-three years after the University's opening day in 1868. Though the tower's masonry is cut smaller and is a different color than the rest of the library, giving it a distinct look, they're technically one building.

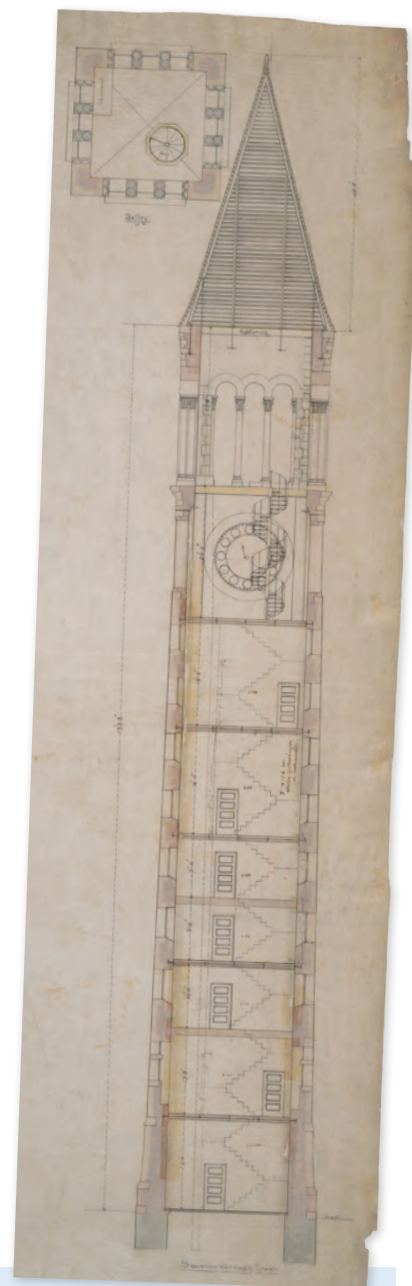
### A cornerstone was laid

at the tower's southeast corner in fall 1889. Inside was a box containing such items as copies of Ezra Cornell's biography, Jennie McGraw Fiske's (famously contested) will, and the university register for that academic year; a new time capsule was installed during a major renovation in 1999.



**Chimesmasters (above)** are paid a **modest** sum for their performances. The first to hold the post, James O'Neill 1871, got no wages but was compensated with room and board—which today would be worth more than \$15,000 a year.

**The tower got two important updates** in 1968–69: a fire alarm system and anti-pigeon screening.



**The tower was designed** by William Henry Miller 1870. Known as Cornell's first student of architecture—though he didn't graduate—he designed numerous other buildings on campus and in Ithaca, including Risley and Barnes halls.

**Women were finally allowed to officially compete to become chimesmasters** during World War II, when there were far fewer men on campus. Elizabeth Finlay Allen '45 (left) was among the first female winners.





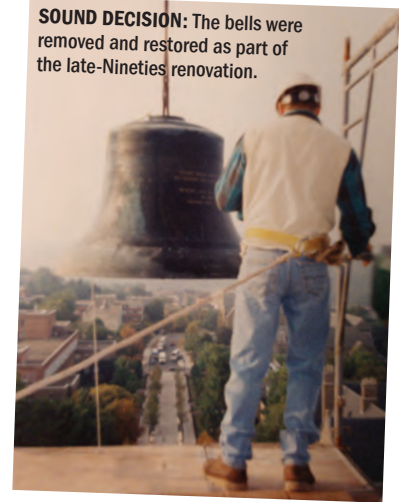
**Gingerbread versions** of the tower have long been popular with Cornellians. If you're still in the holiday spirit, the "fold your own" pattern can be used as a template for the walls and roof.



**The largest bell** in the tower, which plays a low C note when struck, weighs more than 5,000 pounds.

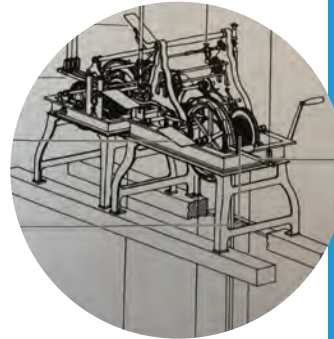
**For the first 100 years**, the tower had no bathroom. During the 1999 renovation, one was installed on the seventh floor, one level down from where the chimesmasters play.

**SOUND DECISION:** The bells were removed and restored as part of the late-Nineties renovation.



**During an anti-apartheid protest** in May 1985, three students locked themselves in the tower and randomly played notes for several hours to bring attention to their cause.

**When a bell needs tuning**, it's done by shaving a small portion out of the inside.



**The clock, a Seth Thomas**, was installed in McGraw Hall's tower in 1875; both it and the chimes moved to their present location in 1891. Though the clock was retired in 1957 when the first of a series of electronic systems was adopted, its restored mechanism (left) which boasts a fourteen foot pendulum remains on view.

**The tower has been emblazoned** on everything from pillows to jigsaw puzzle. New and vintage items are available from a variety of sources including the Corn Store, local Ithaca shops, Etsy, and eBay.



PHOTOS: GINGERBREAD, HGSKI; WORKER, RMC; MECHANISM, DEANNA BOWLES; PUZZLE, SUNNY DAYS OF ITHACA; SPOON, RMC; WOODEN CLOCK, PROVIDED; CANDLE, AFEWGOODBANANAS; PILLOW, CORNELL STORE; SNOW GLOBE, LINDSAY FRANCE/UREL