

## Half Staff – Eleanor L. Stevens, 78

July 12, 2007

Eleanor L. (Runkle) Stevens, 78, died peacefully in her home on Thursday, July 12, 2007, following a lengthy illness. She was the daughter of the late Lloyd O. and Helen M. (Tarr) Runkle. She was born in Tiffin, Ohio but was raised and educated in Gloucester. She was married for a brief time to the late Jack R. Stevens. In her youth, she was surrounded by music and learned to play piano at her mother's knee.

She had a wonderful voice and sang with Chorus Pro Musica and in the paid choir at Trinity Church in Boston for many years. Ringing handbells was a lifelong passion that began in 1938 when her mother Helen purchased eight bells from the White chapel foundry in London and founded the Bell Ringers of Cape Ann. When Ellie returned to live in Massachusetts, she formed a group of ringers among her co-workers at IBM in Burlington and later on a group on Cape Ann. More recently, she has been a part of The Bells of Harvey Park, and the handbell choir at the Rockport Baptist Church.

After graduating from Colby College in Waterville, Maine, she worked for many years at the Air France office in Boston. After residing for several years in Denver, Portland, Oregon and New York State, she returned to Massachusetts. She worked for IBM in administration for 22 years, and after her retirement, was a long-time secretary for St. Mary's Episcopal Church and the Sandy Bay Yacht Club in Rockport.

She is survived by a sister-in-law, Priscilla D. Runkle of Billerica; several nieces and nephews, Virginia R. Scott of Gilroy, Calif., Paul E. Runkle of Billerica, Dita Runkle of British Columbia, Emily Chorba of Aptos, Calif. She also leaves her great-nieces and great-nephews, James Scott of Olympia, Wash., Kendra Scott of Gilroy, Calif., and Scott and Kimberly Runkle, both of Billerica; and a wide circle of many loving friends who will dearly miss her loving presence.

ARRANGEMENTS: A memorial concert will be held at St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Rockport, in the fall. Donations may be made in her memory to the St. Mary's Episcopal Church, 24 Broadway, Rockport, MA 01966; or to the Thatcher Island Association, P.O. Box 73, Rockport, MA 01966. For more information and to send online condolences, please visit [www.grondinfuneralservices.com](http://www.grondinfuneralservices.com)

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## Boston Globe

Eleanor L. Stevens, 78, handbell-ringer

By J.M. Lawrence, Globe Correspondent | July 20, 2007

Last Christmas, Eleanor L. Stevens put on her green vest, packed her black gloves, and headed to a Rockport church to create the handbell harmonies she loved. Her quartet commanded a demanding four octaves of 49 bells for that holiday concert.

She began her lifelong passion for handbells almost 70 years ago, when her mother bought a set of

eight bells from the Whitechapel Bell Foundry in London.

Ms. Stevens performed a few more times before her death July 12 in her Rockport home at age 78. She had battled kidney cancer for several years.

“Ellie just loved music,” said Ruth Bowers, who played handbells with her at the Rockport Baptist Church. “She was a very kind lady, and that’s how she related a lot was through bell ringing.”

Friends and family described Ms. Stevens as a quintessential New Englander. She was frugal, self-sufficient, and loved to sail. She was secretary of the Sandy Bay Yacht Club in Rockport, where flags fly at half-mast this week in her honor. She enjoyed sailing on the boat of her late brother, James O. Runkle, and racing her good friend, Emily Wick, an avid sailor and friend for 55 years.

“She was very kind to everybody and always worked hard,” Wick said. Wick had to give up sailing recently because of knee problems, and Ms. Stevens often drove her to her doctor’s appointments.

Ms. Stevens, who was married briefly and divorced, nurtured many friendships. “We never worried about Ellie being alone, because she had a huge circle of friends,” said her niece, Virginia Scott of Gilroy, Calif.

Ms. Stevens was born in Tiffin, Ohio, where her mother, Helen (Tarr) Runkle, had moved from Massachusetts to teach at Heidelberg College and met her husband, Lloyd Runkle. The couple soon moved back to Helen’s native Cape Ann, where Ms. Stevens went to school in Gloucester.

Her mother was a church organist and had her daughter study piano as a child. In her living room, Ms. Stevens kept a painting of herself at age 9 sitting beside her mother’s piano, according to friend Ingrid Brown.

In 1950, she graduated from Colby College in Waterville, Maine, after majoring in Spanish and French.

After college, Ms. Stevens went to work for Air France in Boston and sang with the professional Boston choir Chorus Pro Musica, beginning in the 1950s. She also sang with the professional choir at Trinity Church. She later lived in Denver, Portland, Ore., and New York.

By the 1970s, she had returned to Massachusetts and worked 22 years at IBM as an executive secretary. After retirement, she worked part time as the church secretary at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Rockport for eight years and also at Brown’s insurance company, C.H. Cleaves in Rockport.

Brown said her friend’s secretarial devotion came from a lost era. “For the most part, people don’t want to make the commitments to keeping things together for other people the way she did,” she said.

Ms. Stevens’s great niece, Kendra Scott, 24, of Gilroy, Calif., recalled playing a handbell performance at age 14 with her aunt and her mother.

She said she was thrilled when her normally reserved aunt said she was proud of Scott for hitting her notes. Ms. Stevens later gave Scott the original set of Whitechapel bells her mother had given

her, plus an additional octave, as a graduation present.

“I was stunned and thrilled,” said Scott, who is a music teacher. “I was amazed she would choose me to get the bells. I have sort of made it my personal goal to widen people’s understanding of handbells.”

Ms. Stevens leaves her sister-in-law, Priscilla Runkle of Billerica, and several other nieces and nephews.

Her family is planning an October memorial concert at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Rockport. Burial of her ashes will take place at Beech Grove Cemetery in Rockport.