

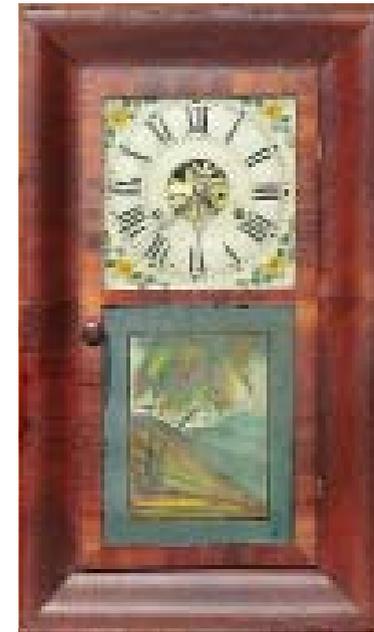
# AMERICAN CLOCKS

An Introduction

Tom Spittler

**Clocks Magazine Beginner's Guide Series N° 3**

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# PREFACE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## CLOCKS MAGAZINE GUIDES

- No. 1. Clock Repair, A Beginner's Guide
- No. 2. Beginner's Guide to Pocket Watches
- No. 3. American Clocks, an Introduction
- No. 4. A Price Guide to Clocks

I had two goals in mind in undertaking the task of compiling and writing this book, and those were to cover the subject of American clocks thoroughly, and to make the subject easily understood by someone with no or limited knowledge of clocks in general or, specifically, American clocks.

It is impossible to understand American clocks without understanding the country itself, its manufacturing methods, transportation, capitalization, communications, free enterprise and, most importantly, its people. All these factors are woven into the fabric of America ... and American clocks.

In writing this book, I have tried to keep the use of technical terms to a minimum. Those that are used are explained in the Glossary on page 125. For how a clock works, see Appendix 1 on page 121.

A book such as this requires the efforts of numerous people and I thank all of those who have assisted me in any way. Foremost, I thank Dr. Snowden Taylor, who never failed to "educate" me whenever I asked. He was untiring and I could never have completed the task without his assistance.

I would also like to thank Chappell Jordan Clock Galleries of Houston, Texas; Cowan's Auctions, Inc., of Cincinnati, Ohio; Delaney Antiques of West Townsend, Massachusetts; and Skinner, Inc., of Boston, Massachusetts, for all the wonderful photographs of clocks they provided.

I thank Chris Bailey, Bill and Rusty Bergman, Terry Brotherton, Chris Brown, Freda Conner, Robert Cheney, Doug Cowan, David and Brent Cox, Tom and Fran Davidson, Diana DeLucca, Paul Foley, George and Cathy Goolsby, Earl Harlamert, Carter Harris, Roger Huegel, Terry and Vanda Lawrence, Greg and Paul McCreight, Chris Peck and Ralph Pokluda, who all assisted me greatly, again mostly with photographs and/or access to clocks, and Doug Stevenson for his encouragement.

Finally, I would like to thank John Hunter, Editor of *CLOCKS* magazine, for giving me the opportunity and encouragement to write this book.

Tom Spittler, Ohio, 2011

# CHAPTER 1

## AMERICAN CLOCKS, COLONIAL TO 1900

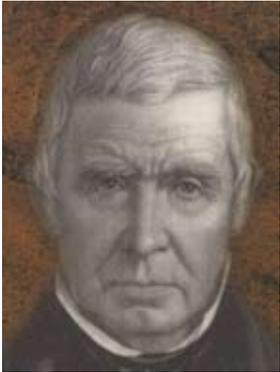


Figure 1.1 (above).  
Eli Terry (1772-1852),  
Plymouth, Connecticut,  
famous American  
clockmaker/industrialist.

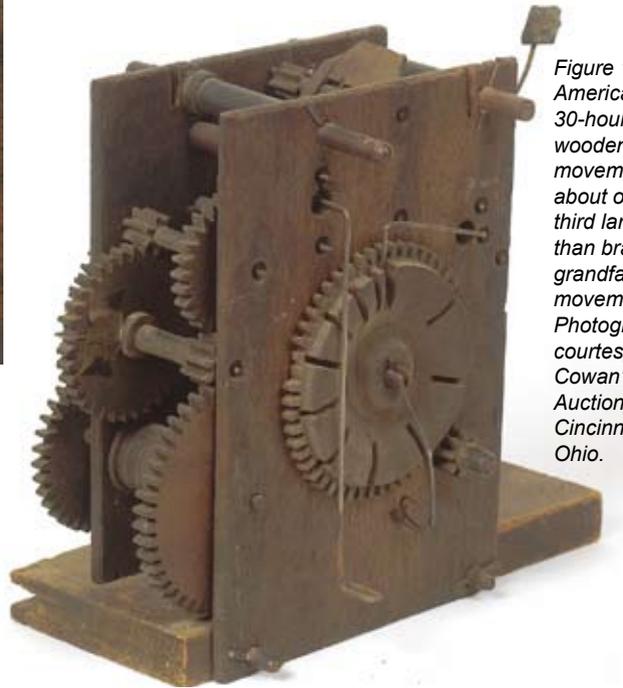


Figure 1.2.  
American  
30-hour  
wooden clock  
movement,  
about one-  
third larger  
than brass  
grandfather  
movement.  
Photograph  
courtesy  
Cowan's  
Auctions, Inc.,  
Cincinnati,  
Ohio.

To understand American clocks it is important to understand each wave of American clock type that broke over the country, as well as the storm that generated that wave. Unlike Britain and Europe, where longcase, table and wall clocks lived side by side for many years, in America each new clock type drove the previous favorite from the market. This book will explain the major reasons this occurred. It will also help the reader slot each type of clock into the period it was produced.

The first (and most important) factor affecting American clockmaking and clocks is the country's rapid move from the colonial system to the "freedom" allowed by the new nation in the late 1700s. The second factor is that Americans couldn't make springs. The final factor concerns what we will call the "unintended consequences of mass production."

The settlement of the original American colonies was largely done by the British, and therefore it is the British eighteenth century colonial system that must be understood in order to understand early American clockmaking. The colonies were supposed to develop the land and send raw materials and excess agricultural products to Britain to be developed into the manufactured goods needed by her and her colonies. Military protection would be provided

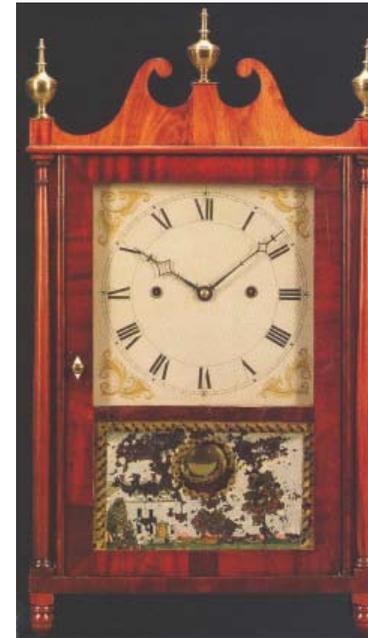


Figure 1.3. A  
Joseph Ives  
pillar-&-scroll  
shelf clock with  
turned feet, a late  
feature, ca. 1828.  
Photograph  
courtesy Skinner,  
Inc., Boston,  
USA.

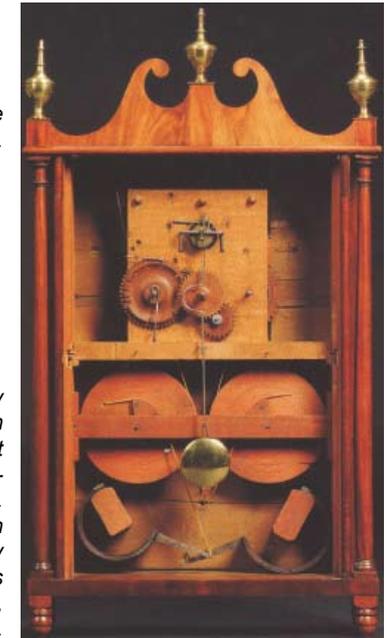


Figure 1.4. Very  
rare wooden  
Ives movement  
with "wagon-  
spring" power.  
Photograph  
courtesy  
Cowan's  
Auctions, Inc.,  
Cincinnati, Ohio.

### Factors Affecting American Clockmaking

The "freedom" allowed by the new nation  
Inability to make springs

Unintended consequences of mass production:

- Local market saturation
- Large amount of capital required
- Fragile clocks don't ship well

by Britain, assisted by the colonies. The colonists would build their own homes and could manufacture any of the simple household goods—chairs, tables, etc.—they required. They would obtain more complex manufactured items from Britain.

Like most systems, things never worked the way they should have. In fact, where it was advantageous to do so, such as with the sale of cotton, lumber, tobacco and indigo dye to Britain, the 13 colonies were all too glad to participate. When it came to the colonial rich purchasing fine British manufactured goods, including clocks and watches, they were also pleased to do so. However, when items that should have been manufactured in Britain could be made in the colonies and the skills and materials existed to do so, the colonists would make them and were not challenged.

Skilled workmen arrived from Britain, men such as clockmakers Peter Stretch, who came to Philadelphia in 1702, and James Batterson, who came to Boston in 1707 by way of Philadelphia. The arriving British clockmakers almost immediately advertised for "smart young lads" to become apprentices and soon there were enough American-born clockmakers to take care of the needs of the Americans, all well trained through the same apprentice system that



Figure 1.5. Marsh hollow-column clock. The hidden weights run in hollow columns at side. Photograph courtesy Cowan's Auctions, Inc., Cincinnati, Ohio.



Figure 1.6. Pillar-&-scroll clock, ca. 1825, an invention of Eli Terry. Photograph courtesy Cowan's Auctions, Inc., Cincinnati, Ohio.

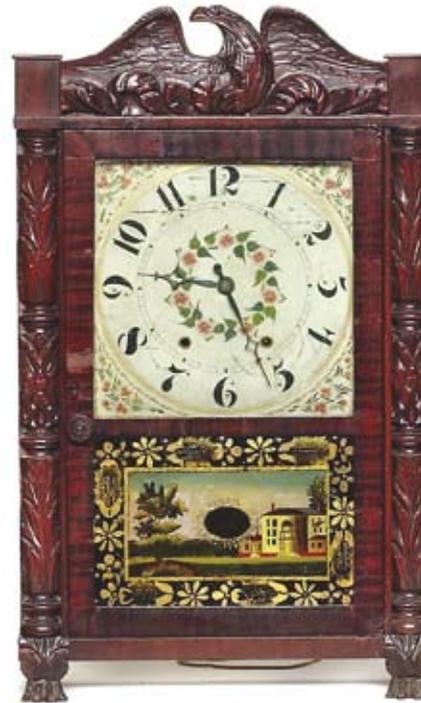


Figure 1.7. Carved column-&-splat clock showing American Empire period influence, ca. 1832. Photograph courtesy Cowan's Auctions, Inc., Cincinnati, Ohio.



Figure 1.8. Fully developed half-column-&-splat clock, ca. 1835, without feet. Photograph courtesy Cowan's Auctions, Inc., Cincinnati, Ohio.

existed in Britain.

That British apprentice system protected the clockmakers in two ways. First, it ensured that young apprentices whose parents had paid a huge sum—about a quarter of a year's income—were fully trained as clockmakers, apprised of all the secrets of the trade. Second, it ensured that once they were trained and established within a city or town, that city or town would not allow excess clockmakers “freedom” to practice their trade. It also protected the public by ensuring they were getting a quality clock made by a properly trained clockmaker who could service it when necessary.

This was the system in 1770. Then came the Revolution with its cries for liberty and freedom. After an eight-year war the Americans won their liberty and freedom, and to many this meant an end to the restrictions to practice any trade. An individual would not be prohibited from practicing a trade, regardless of the skills required, and that individual could practice it wherever he chose. The clockmaker without skills would be allowed to fail if his products weren't of good quality and no system would be in place to protect the customer from his shoddy goods. Likewise there was no system to come to the clockmaker's aid when he failed. That was the consequence of liberty and freedom.

Some cities such as Philadelphia did establish clockmakers' guilds to protect trade but had difficulty enforcing any restrictions on those who did not join. Philadelphia was only successful as long as the major supplier of clock and watch material, John Wood, would not sell to anyone within the city that was not a guild member.

There was, however, an even more sinister aspect of this new freedom to trade without restrictions. No longer were young workers protected. Young lads of little or no means would

find themselves serving apprenticeships to masters who would only teach them one aspect of the trade. With no limit on the number, a master could have many apprentices, each performing one of the operations—such as cutting wheel teeth—required to make a clock. These lads would never learn a complete trade and would never be able to become independent clockmakers. They were trapped in a system much like slavery except they were free to leave if they wanted to after they served their time.

One of the first clockmakers to take advantage of this new system was Thomas Harland, a British clockmaker born in 1735 and working in Norwich, Connecticut, by 1773. He claimed in December 1773 that he learned the clock and watch trade in London, but local sources say he spoke with a Scottish accent and was known as the “Old Scotsman.” He “trained” over 21 apprentices and had from 10 to 12 in his workshop at one time. According to Chris Bailey, Curator of the American Clock & Watch Museum of Bristol, Connecticut, the Harland clocks he has examined showed a very wide range in quality of workmanship from very good to very poor, some among the worst he's seen. Many of Harland's apprentices, however, went on to have great careers and produce excellent clocks. One in particular, Daniel Burnap, kept his apprentice journal which has been published. Dr. John Robey, author of *THE LONGCASE CLOCK REFERENCE BOOK*, says it is the best source of information on how longcase movements were made and, in fact, it is the only source he is aware of that gives step-by-step details of the process.

Daniel Burnap, in turn, trained Eli Terry, figure 1.1, who was famous for being the first individual to use mass production to produce complex manufactured items—a wooden tall clock movement, figure 1.2. (From this point, the term “tall clock” will be used to describe a