Side by Side®

Tall Clocks Then and Now

BY GORDON S. CONVERSE & GREGORY LEFEVER

A tall clock ticking in the parlor meant the same to a colonial homeowner as it does to a modern one: status. Telling time wasn't the issue because time was different in the 18th Century, before time zones, before standard time, before every hour was the same and not changing with the sun and seasons. A towering clock signified wealth and prestige, like parking a Jaguar in the garage and never driving it.

In the late 1600s and early 1700s tall clocks were intended as a beautifully crafted case that housed the most advanced technology. Telling time exactly was more scientific curiosity than necessity since the whole of society operated on loosely constructed timetables. A lunch meeting might be set for mid-day, and being as much as half an hour early or late would be acceptable when few had reliable clocks or watches. (In the cities most relied on the town clock with its hour strike to set the standard for timekeeping.)

The Industrial Revolution and social changes such as the advent of railroads gave urgency to coordinating methods of keeping time. By then clocks had become both widespread and reliable enough to be universally used. Prior to that, few

Clocks from Andersen & Stauffer Furniture Makers are strict reproductions of period antiques. Among them is this c. 1775 walnut case, made in Philadelphia, with works by Thomas Crow of Wilmington, Delaware. The well-executed rococo carving is heavier than later high-style examples. The original clock is at Winterthur Museum, which has licensed the firm to reproduce four clocks from its collection. Pennsylvania artisan David Lindow made the clock works.

households had mechanical clocks. They were considered a luxury for only the wealthy.

Today we have come full circle. The stately tall clock in the parlor is still cherished more as a status symbol than timepiece, but not because keeping precise time is unimportant. Quite the opposite. Think how often we are exposed to clocks in a day: by our bedsides, on our cell phones, in our automobiles, in all public places. We spend thousands of dollars on an antique or reproduction clock regardless of how accurately it keeps time.

We might buy a reproduction from a living craftsperson or an old clock from an antiques dealer to celebrate our love and respect for the finely crafted case and the mechanism within. We are captured by the mystery of the object in much the same way as our ancestors. Most intelligent people of the 18th Century did not understand how a clock ticks unfailingly, just as I cannot understand how an Ipod holds thousands of musical notes that sound off in perfect time. We admire the beauty and serenity a clock lends to the household, reminding us of the past when things were perceived to be better and more secure. We cherish the ticking and the reliable chime or strike.

Chris Harter patterned his Chippendale flat-top tall clock after similar examples made in Pennsylvania around 1760. Harter used tiger maple for the straightforward case, typical of early-18th-Century English design. The moon dial has a calendar wheel and graceful filigree-cut hands.

TALL CLOCK TERMINOLOGY

A tall clock is a standing clock that we now more commonly call a grandfather clock, a term coined from Henry Clay's song "My Grandfather's Clock," one of the two most popular songs of 1876. It described a clock that belonged to "my grandfather," comparing it to the revered elder who symbolized solidarity, mystery, and beauty.

Before Clay's work, most would have used the term *tall clock* or *coffin clock* to describe a standing clock whose pendulum would tick and tock every second. Some believe the coffin name derived from either the case's resemblance to a funeral casket or its ungainly long, narrow shape. On the continent Europeans called them *long clocks*.

The first tall clocks came to America as English imports as early as the late 1600s, but the first American-made clocks appeared in the second decade of the 1700s. Fittingly for a symbol of status, wealth, and stability, tall clock cases displayed superb craftsmanship. No cabinetmaker would do a quick-and-dirty job making a clock case because it was so expensive when fit with a handmade mechanism. An eight-day bell-strike clock (one that you wind weekly and that strikes the hours on a bell) cost about $75 in 1810, a princely sum and more than a year's wages to many Americans whose incomes primarily paid for food, clothing, and shelter.

The clockmaker often relied on some standardization when order-

ing the case, usually made by a local joiner to specifications. He also worked from standard sizes when installing the mechanisms, many of which were comprised either entirely or partially of imported English components. Dials were also imported and then finished with the maker's signature and perhaps some custom decoration by a local artist. A limited number were made and decorated entirely in America.

Clocks are an art form unto themselves, more detailed than most other furniture because of the cabinetmaker's attention to detail: the small but creative added carvings, the quality of the cast brasses and their finish, the hands and the fine dial decoration.

THREE PERIOD STYLES

If you own an antique that's signed by the maker in the dial, you can check the signature against listed makers to deduce the clock's age. But many knowledgeable antiquarians can tell the age of a clock by examining the case style or the dial decoration. Case styles fall into three periods.

The earliest era, called Queen Anne, ran until about 1760. The American Chippendale era lasted from about 1760 to 1795. The Federal style then dominated until 1820. After that few tall clocks were handmade, and their styles became fragmented. Most period tall clocks have eight-day movements, meaning they can run a little more than a week between windings, but clockmakers supplied 30-hour clocks in quantity as inexpensive alternatives. When following English trends in style, remember that American culture is often as much as 20 years behind. Likewise, rural makers lagged behind their counterparts in metropolitan areas such as Philadelphia, Boston, and New York.

Queen Anne style is associated with the plainest of cases, almost always made from solid woods. American makers used the plentiful solid black walnut, and occasionally cherry or other hardwoods. The more refined English makers chose exotic veneers. The bonnet tops may be flat or have a molded sarcophagus top—a combination of steps and solid wood moldings

OLD STURBRIDGE VILLAGE

Cherry tall clock with a double-molded base and removable arched hood, made c. 1760-70 by Gawen Brown, Boston. The sarcophagus bonnet is typical of the Queen Anne style. The arch of the dial has an engraving of Father Time.

tapering towards the top. Many waist doors were tombstone shaped without such finishing touches as quarter columns or chamfers. Any feet would have been plain bracket or short ogee feet. Although these cases were carefully crafted, utility trumped beauty at a time when colonists would rather spend two dollars on an axe head than a highly decorated clock case.

Clock dials, or faces, present as many interesting decorative features as the cases, often revealing the clock's age and origin. Painted dials were not introduced into America until about 1785, so all dials prior to that were engraved and cast brass. Painted dials quickly became popular, but it took decades for them to completely replace the older style engraved dials. A Queen Anne era clock will virtually always have a brass dial, although some are square rather than the more traditional tombstone or broken-arch shape.

American Chippendale clocks follow the style derived from the English cabinetmaker Thomas Chippendale's 1754 design book. (It is believed that only one copy of his book existed in the colonies at the time of the Revolution, owned by Philadelphia cabinetmaker Thomas Affleck.) The lack of real documentation by the colonists of what the Chippendale look was explains why the American version of the style only dimly resembles its English counterpart.

Overall, American Chippendale has a more imitating and massive appearance, with larger bonnets and thinner waists. The bonnets usually had bold scrolled horns, often festooned with large carved rosettes and finials. Makers used choice crotch-grained figured woods for the waist doors. High-style examples might have such decorative elements as inset or raised panels, dentils, baroque carvings, and cast-brass accoutrements. Few cabinet-

grew and clock cases showed it.

Dials of Chippendale clocks were likely to be both tombstone shaped and of engraved brass, although there are some painted examples. I have never seen a square painted dial on an American tall clock. Often popular moon dials,

OLD STURBRIDGE VILLAGE

The earliest American tall clock cases had simple designs, such as this plain pine case with a flat top and a molding at the base instead of feet. Isaac Blaisdel of Chester, New Hampshire, made it c. 1763. The case was probably originally painted or stained dark.

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OLD STURBRIDGE VILLAGE

Tall clock with a painted wooden dial, c. 1803, was probably made in northern Massachusetts. It retains the original blue paint on the pine case.

which first appeared in the early 1700s, filled the broken arch section of a Chippendale clock.

Federal clock cases are most notable for their inlay and veneer. The bonnets retained their scrolls, but inlay patterns replaced carved rosettes. Some, such as the Roxbury-style cases, had lacey cutout crests on top of a round-topped bonnet separated by smokestack plinths and brass finials. The quarter columns on the sides of the waists and bases evolved into a simpler chamfer during the Federal era, while the fluted Romanesque pillars on the bonnet beside the dial doors became lighter turned columns. Bold ogee bracket feet of the Chippendale style gave way to light "French" bracket feet with a gentle outward curve. Overall Federal-era clocks have a more feminine design than Chippendale.

Dials on Federal clocks are painted. Some have especially colorful decorations, moon dials, or an automated device such as a rocking ship in the broken-arch area. Those dials made and painted in the United States add to the value of the clock.

After about 1815 newer styles evolved. Case styles represented the Empire style, Hepplewhite designs, or evolutionary offshoots of the Federal era. Wooden-works clocks emerged with their own case styles, joining the mainstream of mass production. Into the first decades of the 1800s America's clock making art became fused with the inexorable pressures of mass production, competitive costs, and redundant design.

AGE AND VALUE

Antique clocks cost more than comparable quality reproductions even though the best reproductions are every bit as painstakingly crafted and skillfully made as those of the past. For example, a circa 1810 Pennsylvania tall clock with a standard case would probably sell for more than $15,000, while a quality reproduction might bring about half that.

Even inexpensively made 19th-Century tall clock cases with surviving grain painting are eagerly sought by today's collectors. Many have their original wooden clockworks (which may no longer run) and hand-painted wooden dials. Better examples of these wooden-geared clocks bring astonishingly high prices in today's antiques market.

This seems illogical on the surface, but collectors will often pay more for those details that mark an antique: the wood's flaws, fading, scars, and a deteriorated finish all contribute to the surface patination; the smell of a combination of old oils, old musk, or even mildew; the feeling on your fingertips as you rake them slowly over a hand-planed surface.

MODERN MAKERS

About a dozen traditional artisans make truly outstanding tall clocks in America today. Most also build other case pieces and have earned a reputation for exquisite handcraftsmanship using period methods. But there the similarity ends. We talked with four well-known clock makers and found diversity in pricing and philosophy—especially on the issue of "reproduction" versus "interpretation."

Alan Andersen of Andersen & Stauffer articulates the traditionalist position: "A number of them [fellow clockmakers] will take a feature from one region and put it on another clock—take a New England clock and put a Pennsylvania base on it. It doesn't make much sense to us."

Offering a counterpoint is Chris Harter, who thrives on the spirit of interpretation. He contends that his creations and the quality work of his peer interpreters will be tomorrow's treasures. "The fact is, by interpreting the originals, we're creating a wonderful new market of original clocks for a totally new group of collectors."

Despite their differing approaches, both Harter and Andersen & Stauffer have been listed for many years in the annual Directory of Traditional American Crafts® because of their dedication to quality and traditional methods, as has a third clockmaker, D. R. Dimes.

COURTESY OF WINTERTHUR MUSEUM

Newport cabinetmaker John Townsend made the shell-carved mahogany case for this tall clock, c. 1770-85. It is in the collection at Winterthur Museum.

Price is another differentiator. Top-of-the-line tall clocks from two clockmakers range from about $15,000 to nearly $30,000, while Jack McGuire of Vermont Clock Company struggles to keep his prices below $8,000. There are trade-offs, such as the clockworks themselves. Two makers use only handmade brass movements by David Lindow of Pennsylvania, while the other two rely mainly on German-made movements.

You can order a clock from any of these four and receive it right away, but most likely you'll wait anywhere from four weeks to six months, a delay often stemming from backlogs for hand-painted dials or some other mechanism unrelated to the casework.

But people are willing to wait. Doug Dimes at D. R. Dimes said it best. "People have a real connection to these clocks. Sure, they look beautiful, but there's something inside of them that's working. It's sort of like they're alive, and people just love them."

ANDERSEN & STAUFFER

When it comes to his firm's clocks, Alan Andersen is clear on one thing: "We don't do any interpretations.

Andersen & Stauffer reproduction of a clock made by David Williams of Newport, Rhode Island, c. 1785. The original's mahogany case, which features an arched bonnet and flame finials, is by an unknown cabinetmaker.

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We try to copy the originals as accurately as we can. We try to pick clocks that are superior in design, and when we find something that's so well thought out, the last thing we want to do is start changing it."

That dedication to accuracy and top-notch workmanship recently resulted in a licensing agreement with Winterthur Museum & Country Estate to reproduce four majestic tall clocks from the museum's collection: a Simon Willard, Roxbury, Massachusetts, example circa 1790; a Thomas Wagstaffe, Philadelphia, clock, circa 1780; a David Williams, Newport, Rhode Island, clock circa 1785; and a Thomas Crow, Wilmington, Delaware, clock circa 1775. These join two models the firm always offers, a John Townsend Newport clock and a high-style Philadelphia model by an unknown maker. Prices start at about $15,000 to $26,000 for the intricately carved Thomas Crow model.

The company is the collaboration between Andersen, a specialist in 18th-Century antique restoration and conservation (who is also skilled at simulating antique surfaces) and Tom Stauffer, a master cabinetmaker and joiner. They first met in 1985 and today the company employs six people. The firm is "dedicated specifically to reproducing exact copies and providing them with finishes that allow them to slip into antiques collections and not stand out."

Located in Lititz, Pennsylvania, the company produces an extensive line of highboys, lowboys, cupboards, chests, beds, tables, and desks in the same woods as the originals, with mortise-and-tenon and dovetail joinery. Any carving is done by hand, and the finishes are hand-rubbed natural oil, shellac, and wax.

All of this holds true for the company's six tall clock models, constructed with weight-driven, handmade brass clockworks by David Lindow, hand-painted faces, and hand-engraved brass or silver dials, made in England.

For its sole clock offering, D. R. Dimes builds this faithful reproduction of an 18th-Century Simon Willard tall clock from Roxbury, Massachusetts. Available in tiger maple or cherry, it features Willard's characteristic molded tombstone waist door and detailed bonnet fretwork. It has a hand-painted face, hand-cast weights, and hand-filed hands.

"Clocks are simply another part of producing furniture, but a more interesting one," said Andersen, who has restored more clocks than any other type of case piece. "I've had a passion for clocks for as long as I can remember. They're just wonderful objects."

D. R. DIMES

One of the premier reproducers of 18th-Century American furniture, the firm offers an extensive line of Windsor chairs and early tables, cupboards, chests, desks, and beds sought by museums, collectors, and homeowners. But when it comes to clocks, the company makes just one.

The 18th-Century Simon Willard tall clock sells for about $14,000 and is, according to company literature, "perhaps our finest piece yet." The timepiece has a molded tombstone waist door, brass-stop fluting, and detailed fretwork on the bonnet. The D. R. Dimes version has hand-cast iron weights (instead of brass), delicate hand-filed hands, a moon-phase dial, and an elaborate hand-painted face.

Douglas R. Dimes founded his company in the 1960s in Northwood, New Hampshire. He soon earned a reputation for thoroughly researching original furniture and faithfully reproducing it with superior craftsmanship. His son, Douglas P. Dimes, now oversees the day-to-day operation of the company, which employs 30 people. Hundreds of furniture pieces a year are sold through about 80 dealers from Maine to Texas.

"There came a time when we set out to make a clock," the younger Dimes recalled. So, in his father's tradition, he launched into about six weeks of intense research. "I

went to the Old Sturbridge museum and studied the clocks there—we're partial to New England pieces—and then I went to Delaney's."

Delaney's Antique Clocks in West Townsend, Massachusetts, boasts the largest collection of antique tall clocks in the country, displaying about 120 models representing America's most famous clock makers. "I was able to really study about 30 different clocks," Dimes recalled. "At a place like Delaney's they're much more used to disassembly than in a museum setting because they do it all the time, when clients want to be sure of authenticity. And with the antique clocks, the joints tend to be looser, so I was able to determine things like the location of blind tenons in the construction. Without that kind of research, I never would have understood exactly how this clock should be made."

Chris Harter based this curly maple tall clock on those built by Thomas Jackson of Preston, Connecticut, one of the premier colonial clockmakers. The hood has three brass finials and a crest-board design thought to be inspired by the tails of whales.

With detailed drawings in hand, he huddled with his father. "We'd had a price-point in mind of about $6,500," Dimes said. "But I realized that, to do it right, we'd never be able to bring it in that low. Then Dad said, 'Just go make the best clock possible and then we'll deal with the price.' So I did." The son built the prototype, which the father proudly displays in his home.

"It takes time to get it right, but every detail is important if your intent is to make a masterpiece," the younger Dimes said.

CHRIS HARTER

Chris Harter is one of the top-ranked furniture craftsmen in America, known for an exceptional line of Windsor chairs and an assortment of tables, beds, chests, as well as three models of tall clocks.

"I'm still just a one-man operation," he said. "I decided 29 years ago to do it the hard way—by myself—even if it doesn't make much economic sense to the modern world." In the same vein, he does most of his work by hand, using traditional tools.

Yet Harter is something of an enigma. While embodying the committed traditionalist in most aspects

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Vermont Clock Company's Watervliet Tall Clock combines the best features of several Shaker clocks, maintaining an emphasis on simplicity of style. Shown here in tiger maple, is it also available in natural or stained cherry.

of his craft, he does not strictly copy the originals. "I chose right from the start to look at clocks and take what appealed to me," he said. To the casual observer, his three models could be easily mistaken for faithful reproductions, but the educated eye might detect a case's pinched waist here, a modified base there. But Harter won't stray far: "The traditional proportions, the traditional designs, and the traditional details are the perimeter I stay within."

His philosophy is evident in his description of his Pennsylvania Chippendale Tall Case Clock, which sells for about $7,500: "Although this clock does not reproduce a specific period clock, it incorporates a variety of period motifs that harmoniously blend with one another to form a handsome end result." And his top-of-the-line Thomas Jackson Tall Clock, priced at between $9,000 and $10,500 depending on type of wood, pays close homage to the revered 18th-Century Connecticut master.

Although he may tweak cabinetry to suit his taste, Harter emphasizes he makes no compromise on quality. He uses only the finest woods with expert finishes, handmade brass clockworks from David Lindow, and faces painted by the renowned Martha Smallwood of the Dial House—all assembled with a level of craftsmanship that has made him one of the longest-standing artisans in the Directory of Traditional American Crafts®.

"These pieces now being made by people like myself are tomorrow's antiques," he said. "There will still be people collecting the original 18th-Century pieces, but fewer and fewer, and there'll be the people collecting the original work of today's furniture makers. I think it's awesome."

VERMONT CLOCK COMPANY

Thirty some years ago, Ohio furniture maker Jack McGuire, his wife, Linda, and their children high-tailed it to the north woods. Settling on Lake Champlain near Vermont's uppermost border, Jack and Linda started the furniture company anew and launched a flourishing antiques business with operations in both Vermont and South Carolina. But dealing with employees and the travel and the demands of the businesses began to rob the McGuires of the joy they'd been seeking, so they scaled back to just making furniture and clocks in Vermont.

"It's just the four of us," McGuire explained. He and son Michael do the woodworking, Linda and daughter Meghan do the finishes. "So now we're down to just 70-plus hours a week," he said, chuckling.

For a small operation, output of the Vermont Clock Company and McGuire Family Furniture Makers is astounding. Aside from the current seven models of tall clocks, they make a line of reproduction Shaker furniture and a line of 18th-Century chairs, cupboards, tables, and beds.

"We strive to produce pieces that are authentic in style and construction," he said. All of the clock cases are solid wood—no plywood or veneers—with mortise-and-tenon pegged joints, locked-and-splined mitered corners, and dovetails. The company puts equal emphasis on finishes, offering hand-rubbed natural oil, stained, hand-painted, and lacquered treatments.

The McGuires do both strict reproduction tall clocks and some limited interpretations. Most of the latter result from customer requests. "Our knowledge of antiques is so thorough that even if we wanted to design a clock ourselves, it'd be

The Connecticut carved-shell clock, made in tiger maple or stained cherry, is Vermont Clock Company's top model. Decorative features include whale's tail molding on the hood, inset panels, and an ogee bracket base.

identical to an original," McGuire said. "We get into departures when a customer might want us to add height to a clock or shorten it, something like that."

The idea of interpretative design strikes a nerve with Jack when it comes to Shaker clocks and furniture. "Shaker is a style we pay close attention to in reproducing because there's so much stuff out there now that's not authentic Shaker design. Shaker has been unbelievably bastardized, and we want to stay true to it." Of Vermont Clock's three Shaker tall clocks, however, McGuire calls one—the Watervliet Tall Clock—a "close rendition."

Another sensitive area is price. That, along with authenticity of design and craftsmanship, is what McGuire considers a Vermont Clock differentiator. A quick comparison shows that his prices tend to be lower than many of his peers. His top model, the Connecticut Carved Shell Tall Clock, is $7,895, and the three Shaker-style tall clocks run about $2,500. The other three models' prices fall in between.

The challenge, McGuire admits, is to reduce cost without damaging quality. One way is to use German clockworks instead of the American ones, which cost about six times more, although the American works can be installed upon request. The McGuires also try to be as efficient as possible, making several clocks in one style at once and keeping a stock of assembled clocks awaiting finishes.

Customers buy direct from Vermont Clock Company and can designate finishes and custom details. ✻

Pennsylvania antiques dealer Gordon Converse has been restoring and selling clocks since 1979. He has been the clock authority for PBS's "Antiques Roadshow" since its inception. Oregon writer Greg LeFever is a contributing editor to *Early American Life*.

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