

Aaron Willard Tall Clock Makes Waves

by Jeanne Schinto

Auctioneer Peter L. Combs said no, when asked if there was a catalog or even a simple list of the 375 lots for sale by Landry Auctions on December 4, 2003, in Essex, Massachusetts. "This is just a country auction."

True, except for the Aaron Willard tall clock. With a case attributed to Stephen Badlam and a painted iron dial signed and numbered on the back by dial painter John Minott, it was sold by Combs for \$253,000 (includes buyer's premium).

It's not a record for an American clock, which stands at \$666,000 for the circa 1755 signed James Wady clock that sold at Christie's January 18 and 19, 2002, sale. Nor was it a record for a Boston clock. Among others, tall clocks made by Aaron's older brother Simon have gone higher, but this appears to be an auction record for a tall clock by the Willard brother known to have been less inventive but possessed of more business sense than Simon. In August 2002 Northeast Auctions sold one of Aaron's tall clocks with an engraved Paul Revere label for \$90,500. One year later, also at a Northeast sale, another Revere-labeled Aaron went at \$134,500. At this rate, the next price in the series should begin with a three.

The unofficial estimate was put at a conservative \$60,000/80,000 by auction house owner Robert E. Landry. Most of the dozen or so clock guys who came to the sale in the function hall of Woodman's, a locally famous fried-clam joint, guessed it would go for six figures. The few potential bidders among them tried not to appear prematurely defeated when they saw the arrival of another pair of brothers, Todd and Craig Prickett of C.L. Prickett, Inc., Yardley, Pennsylvania.

During the sale of lots preceding the clock, the Pricketts chatted in the back of the hall with John Delaney of Delaney Antique Clocks, West Townsend, Massachusetts, and Robert C. Cheney, the clockmaker and horology scholar of Brimfield, Massachusetts, but by the time the runners got the clock ready to bring forward, all hopefuls had retreated to their separate corners.

The clock case had been in pieces while men with flashlights, including the Pricketts, examined every crevice. Now it was back together, standing upright, a runner on each side. It looked a little like a rich old uncle, overdressed for a party at a clam shack, being steadied on his feet.

Combs opened the bidding at \$35,000. Delaney dropped out in the five-figure range. Cheney didn't bid at all. He usually doesn't bid until the end, but he wouldn't be a finalist in this contest. Gary Sullivan, a dealer from Sharon, Massachusetts, got only to the halfway point. Three people had arranged for phone bidding—one from an institution, a dealer who planned to bid for himself, and another dealer bidding for a client. But two of them "never opened their mouths," Combs said later. In the end, it was Todd Prickett against a single phone. When Prickett's \$210,000 was raised another \$10,000, he threw down his bidding card and walked out as Combs announced that the successful bidder was number 605.

The winner would not be identified otherwise. "The trouble is," said Combs, "you never know the whole story of who's behind them—or in front of them. The Pricketts? You don't know who they were bidding for. It could have been any one of three or four people. The same thing for Peter Sawyer [of Peter Sawyer Antiques, Exeter, New Hampshire], who was there for somebody, but he didn't get his hand up. And you don't know who Sullivan was there for, either. And Cheney was there with his client, a gentleman from Texas, who flew up out of the blue. They were interested up to about a hundred and sixty thousand [dollars]."

What made the clock special? Was it the case? The dial? (At record price levels a clock's movement seems almost irrelevant. The top pieces are furniture or decorative art first, timekeepers second.) And what about the provenance?

It had come out of a house in Boxford, Massachusetts, said Landry, who mentioned the Peabodys and the Lanes, good Boston surnames, as branches of this unnamed Boxford family. "Everything was moved into the house when the family moved in, in 1826. It has the original wallpaper in the parlor."

Because Landry is an old-timer, he still knows "rich little old lady consignors," one dealer said wistfully. But three of the five owners of the clock, who attended the sale, were youthful-looking middle-aged sisters.

"It's nice to see a clock like this come out of the woodwork," Sullivan said. "It was not completely unknown, however. I know some dealers had been in the house and seen it, but they were not able to buy it or it wasn't for sale at the time."

So, again, why did it go so high? "The condition of the dial was extraordinary," said Sullivan. "You do not find dials in better condition...it's mint mint, like you very seldom see. The name [of Aaron Willard, on the front of the dial] is not worn. It's still intact, and obviously to have the dial signed [on the reverse] by an important Boston dial painter just makes it a more important clock...That's the finest Aaron Willard to come up for public sale that I can remember." Sullivan said he has been on the auction scene for 28 years.

John Delaney, for his part, said, "Quite frankly, I don't know why it brought so much money. You know, a lot of American dials are signed. Most people don't recognize the fact that they are signed, and finding a John Minott signature is not as unusual as one might think. So I don't think that added a lot to the price. I tend to be conservative. I don't like to set records at auction. I think what happens is that you get commissioned buyers who are out there buying for clients, and then there are people like myself who buy for inventory, and there's a big difference in what they pay."

The bigger the price, the bigger the commissioned buyer's paycheck. "That's certainly true, and they tend to hype it up to their clients, whereas I don't like to take commissioned bids, and so I was bidding for myself."

Robert D. Mussey Jr., reached by phone at his workshop the day after the sale, was asked to characterize Badlam's cabinetry in general and to put him into context. He did not name him as the next Seymour.

"Badlam's name is certainly recognized," he said. "He did stamp his name on a lot of pieces. I had originally intended to include a chapter on Badlam in the book [The Furniture Masterworks of John & Thomas Seymour, 2003] as a way of comparing a provincial American cabinetmaker with an English immigrant, but there wasn't room. The Seymours took up the whole story. Instead, I'm going to write a major article about Badlam, along with my co-researcher Bill Maurer."

Mussey said that he and Maurer have concluded that "Badlam was a very good provincial Boston-area cabinetmaker. His work was solid but definitely provincial in terms of its design. He was not as good a craftsman or designer as the best Boston cabinetmakers. He was from the small cabinetmaking center in Dorchester Lower Mills. He trained with his older brother and grandfather in Lower Mills and in Dedham, and those were not major cabinetmaking centers, either one of them."

Mussey spoke to M.A.D. about two other craftsmen whose work was represented at the Landry sale, Paul Cermenati and John Bernarda. A Federal looking glass, 45 inches x 17 inches, with a Cermenati & Bernarda label on the back, along with a handwritten date of 1802, was the secondary highlight of the evening. Its églomisé tablet had a reverse painting of a gold vase and flowering vines cascading against a white background. Another lot from the house in Boxford, it went to Scott Bassett of Peter Sawyer Antiques, who prevailed against a phone bidder, at \$23,000.

"Cermenati and Bernarda were Italian immigrants to Boston via England," said Mussey. "We don't really know how long they spent there, but when they came to Boston they were working very much in the English style. And they were good, although certainly not of the skill that [John] Doggett was, for example."

In addition to the makers' names, the label read Salem, Massachusetts. A looking glass that sold for \$5462.50 at a James D. Julia sale on August 22, 2002, was labeled "Cermenati & Bernarda Carvers, Gilders, Picture Frame, and Looking Glass Manuf. No. 2 State Street Boston."

"They were peripatetic," said Mussey. "They had a short-term shop in Salem. For a while, one of them had a shop in Newburyport [Massachusetts]. And they had a bunch of shifting partnerships. Another was between Cermenati and Joseph Monfrino. We don't know a lot about them, but they did advertise quite a bit in the newspapers. The Concord Museum [in Concord, Massachusetts] has a couple. The person who has worked on the Italian immigrant artisans the most is David Barquist [associate curator of American decorative arts at the Yale University Art Gallery]."

The Boxford house yielded one other lot that brought significant money, a pair of 6 inches x 5 inches watercolor portraits, dated 1825 and 1830. Miniatures like these, commissioned by well-to-do families, are not particularly rare. What made these special was the documentation on the back of each of them. Mr. and Mrs. Joseph W. Jenkins were identified as the sitters. Thomas Edwards of Boston (1795-1869) was the artist who signed them. Edwards's work is included in the collection at the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C. When the portraits came up, it became clear why Cheney had hung around. He was the underbidder. The winner, at \$8050, was the same phone bidder who won the clock.

There wasn't enough information about the Boston schoolgirl needlework panel from that same Boxford house to generate any real excitement. A 1740-60 example in wool and silk, the 11 3/4" x 60 1/2" textile featured a central peacock flanked by mythological animals, birds, butterflies, and oversized squirrels in leafy trees. Its colors were muted blue, green, and brown against a cream linen background. Landry's estimate was \$10,000/15,000, but an absentee bidder bought it for \$4887.50 when the room bidders quit.

The rest of this extraordinarily top-heavy sale was mostly, as promised, country auction fare: a cement Madonna, a wooden model of a Viking ship under Plexiglas, a bronze bust of Napoleon that had once been a lamp, a pair of carved wooden elephants, each one being devoured by three lions, a monstrous rug—"Who says we don't take everything?" auctioneer Combs asked rhetorically.

"The things that look very rusticated came out of a barn in Ipswich [Massachusetts]," he said. "We had to chase some critters out of there to get the stuff. A coffee roaster was one. We didn't know what it was until yesterday. Apparently, people do collect these." It sold for \$207.

Also from that Ipswich barn were several wooden chests, green painted and otherwise. One was 11 inches x 37 inches x 12 inches and stenciled with a name, Captain Jordan. It was lucky to reach \$46.

An English letter holder and writing desk combination in oak had the misfortune of being the lot that came directly after the Aaron Willard clock. "Does anyone want a free letter box?" was Combs's way of opening the bidding. It sold for \$431.21.

Several years ago, Combs told his audience, he was the auctioneer for a one-lot sale. "It was a table that went for six hundred thousand dollars, and the coffee didn't even get cold." He referred to the auction of a marble-top Victorian mixing table that Landry and Baldwin's Book Barn, West Chester, Pennsylvania, sold in a New York hotel room on May 24, 1996, for \$594,000. Combs talked to M.A.D. about the aftermath of that sale. "We were called to look at every marble-topped table in New England. We've never seen one like it since. That marble-topped Vicky table was a curse."

Clock guys said the sale of the Aaron Willard in Essex would have its own aftereffects. "I've been on the phone all morning talking about this clock," Sullivan said the following day. "It's going to change the clock business...I've spoken to a couple of my collectors who have bought clocks of this caliber from me in recent years, and they're thrilled because it makes their clocks worth more. But, as I was discussing with John Delaney, it makes them much more difficult to buy, and unless you have an inventory of Aaron Willards...People assume that theirs is as good as the one that brought that money, but it doesn't make the average Aaron Willard really worth any more. Still, the prices are going to go up."

For more information, contact Landry Auctions at (978) 768-6233 or visit the Web site (www.landryauctions.com).