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## America's First Family of Clockmakers

by Jeanne Schinto



A Book Review

## Stretch: America's First Family of **Clockmakers**

by Donald L. Fennimore and Frank L. Hohmann III

The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum and Hohmann Holdings LLC, 2013, 376 pp., hardbound, \$75 plus S/H from the Winterthur bookstore,

(www.winterthurstore.com), (302) 888-4707, or 1-800-448-3883, ext. 4707; or from ACC Distribution,

AMERICA'S FIRST FAMILY OF CLOCKMAKERS DONALD L. FENNIMORE TRANK L. HOHMANN III (www.accdistribution.com) or 1-800-252-5231.

In the clock-collecting world the name "Willard" brings people to attention. The brothers Benjamin, Simon, Ephraim, and Aaron Willard, along with subsequent generations, who lived and worked in Grafton, Massachusetts, and later Lexington, Roxbury, and Boston, are justly famed as the preeminent clockmakers of 19th-century America. There is, however, an earlier group of clock folk—a father, his three sons, two grandsons, and a nephew—who lived and worked in 18th-century Philadelphia. Wallace Nutting, in his Furniture Treasury, called them America's first family of clockmakers. That's the source of Donald L. Fennimore and Frank L. Hohmann III's subtitle for their comprehensive new work, Stretch. The name Peter Stretch (1670-1746) may be familiar to readers who

don't ordinarily have a great interest in clocks, because a tall-case example

premium). The price was a world record for any American clock, and the

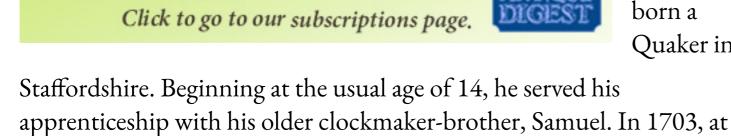
record still stands. The clock's consignors were members of the Walter

made by him was big news on October 28, 2004, when it sold at

Sotheby's in New York City for \$1,688,000 (including buyer's

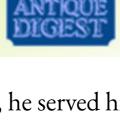
M. Jeffords family. The buyer was the Winterthur Museum.

Fennimore served as metalwork specialist at Winterthur for 34 years. His title there now is curator emeritus. Hohmann is a retired Wall Street executive who collects American furniture with a concentration on brassdial clocks and serves on Winterthur's board of trustees. After the hammer fell at 2:08 p.m. on the day of the Sotheby's auction, the pair decided to research the clock's provenance. From there, they went on to the largely unexamined life and work of its English-born maker and his American-born progeny who carried on the business. That led to their mission of finding and documenting all known clocks by the Stretches. Almost ten years later, Stretch is the result of their labors. It is not only a catalogue raisonné, so to speak, but an engaging narrative that puts patriarch Peter and his horological heirs into a rich historical context i.e., a time when Colonial Philadelphia's citizens were introduced to and eventually embraced clocks and timekeeping.



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Quaker in age 33, Peter, his wife, and four children immigrated to Philadelphia, the

Stretch was

Peter

born a

urban center of their fellow English Quaker William Penn's province of Pennsylvania. The timing of the arrival was fortuitous. Philadelphians of all kinds were just then, in the authors' words, "choosing to live by the clock." Often it's easier to know who made a clock than who owned it, but through researching the inventories of wills, Fennimore and Hohmann were able to name an array of Philadelphia clock owners, including a baker, bricklayer, weaver, butcher, blacksmith, physician, innkeeper, rector, brewer, sailmaker, and peruke maker, all of whom had clocks and need of a clockmaker in order to live the kind of orderly and productive life that accurate timekeeping made possible. Stretch was destined to become even more to clock owners than a specialist craftsman, however. From 1708 until his death 38 years later, he was a member of the common council. In his dual roles, he was one of Philadelphia's most respected residents. Like virtually all clockmakers, Stretch and family made their clocks' movements only, employing fellow artisans to produce other components. Information about many of those who made the Stretches'

found in the catalog, which takes up almost exactly two-thirds of the book. Amazingly, Fennimore and Hohmann accomplished their cataloging task without locating account books, daybooks, professional correspondence, or much Stretch family "paper" of any other kind except real-estate transactions and wills. "With such materials at a premium," the authors wrote, "we have recounted the story of the Stretch clockmakers largely through the products of their profession." The authors identified 133 Stretch clocks. Ten additional clocks were brought to their attention after submission of the manuscript. Eightyfour of the clocks have been cataloged and illustrated with color photos of the case, movement, and dial, along with detailed commentary. The

clock cases, carved their woodwork, and engraved their brass dials can be

horologically inclined readers will find the technical information about such things as seconds-beating pendulums and anchor recoil escapements that the non-clock collecting world can find intimidating or dull. If that describes you, just skip those parts and remember that you don't need to know how a light bulb works in order to love Tiffany lamps. Reading about Peter's grandsons Isaac and Thomas, one gets the sense that great cultural changes were afoot and playing themselves out in personal histories as the Colonies moved toward independence. For instance, Isaac's Quaker brethren were not pleased when he enlisted in the local militia in 1751 and "lately [that same year] joined himself in

majority are being published for the first time. It is in this section that

Profession with members of the Episcopalian Church." As for Thomas, he was cited in 1765 at a Philadelphia Monthly Meeting for having "given way to Drinking Strong liquors to Excess keeping loose & Idle Company & the neglect of his Business, to his own great Injury & the reproach of our religious society." He never did amount to much; there are no clocks in the catalog by him, only ones made by his namesake uncle (1697-1765), which are now in such esteemed collections as those of the Daughters of the American Revolution, Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Independence National Historical Park. The record-setting Peter Stretch clock now at Winterthur is a 1730-40 eight-day arch-dial tall clock in a case characterized by the *Stretch* authors as being the "grandest" known to house a Stretch clock. It is a case whose maker is unknown, but its carving is attributable with certainty to Samuel Harding (d. 1758). The clock's probable first owner was Clement

Plumstead (1680-1745), a merchant, one-time mayor of Philadelphia, and Peter Stretch's across-the-street neighbor. Plumstead's coat of arms was incorporated into the case. The clock remained in the Plumstead family until the 1940s, when it was acquired and advertised by Joe Kindig Jr. in the December 1943 issue of *The Magazine Antiques*. After Mr. and Mrs. Jeffords bought it, the clock stayed in the Jeffords family until the 2004 Sotheby's sale. Now a detail of it is on the cover of this book, a major contribution to American horological scholarship that also brilliantly illuminates a watershed moment in Colonial Philadelphia history, when clock time replaced sun time. Many private collectors of Stretch clocks are named in this catalog; many others chose to be anonymous. If any of these clocks come to market, it will be interesting to see how they fare. The sale at Sotheby's hit a veritable sweet spot, when rarity, provenance, desire, funding, a strong economy, and more than one willing bidder all came together. More

Peter Stretch clock sold to Philip H. Bradley Company on April 18, 2008, at Pook & Pook for \$32,760. A 1715-25 square-dial eight-day Peter Stretch clock sold at Freeman's on April 20, 2010, for \$43,000. And a 1730-40 Peter Stretch arch-dial eight-day clock sold at Sotheby's on January 21, 2011, for \$12,500. Speaking of money matters, *Stretch* must have been a very costly undertaking. It was co-published by Hohmann, among whose previous books is Timeless: Masterpiece American Brass Dial Clocks, which he self-published in 2009. The Stretches merited the treatment. What other comparable early American clockmakers do? Gawen Brown (1719-1801), Boston's leading clockmaker of the second half of the 18th century, comes to mind. So does William Claggett (1696-1749) of Boston and Newport, Rhode Island, among whose known surviving clocks are ones

recently and perhaps more typically, a 1710-20 square-dial eight-day

in Boston-made cases with japanning by Robert Davis (d. 1739) and Thomas Johnston (1708-1767). Thomas Harland (1735-1807) of Norwich, Connecticut, is another, stellar possibility. Harland's sons Thomas Jr. and Henry also became clockmakers in a workshop that spawned something of a dynasty. Daniel Burnap (1759-1838) was trained there, and he in turn trained Eli Terry (1772-1852), the first to establish a clockmaking factory in America. Scholars, get busy! Tempus fugit.

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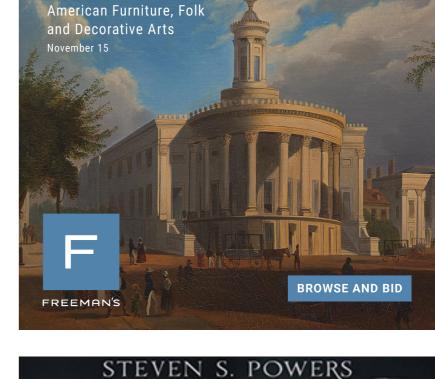
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