

A New Location for Chelsea Clock Company and a Second Edition of Its History

by Jeanne Schinto

The last of the old-time American clock companies, the Chelsea Clock Company of Chelsea, Massachusetts—a heavily industrialized little city just across the Mystic River from Boston—is moving. Its new home is well within walking distance of what soon will be its former address—a three-story brick factory at 284 Everett Avenue that was built by Joseph H. Eastman in the mid-1890s—but the move still feels momentous to those who take pride in the long history of the firm.

Perhaps no one has followed that history more closely than Andrew and David Demeter. In fact, they wrote it. Their definitive book, *Chelsea Clock Company: The First Hundred Years*, was self-published in 2003 in an edition of 1000. It was sold out in less than three years and now sells on eBay for an average price of \$250. (The original price was \$68.50.) Coincidental to the upcoming move, 1000 copies of a second, updated, and expanded edition of the book have been issued by the father-son team. In preparation, the Demeters reexamined the factory's records at a deeper level, unearthed more historical facts, gathered more photographs for illustrations, and discovered technical details not previously published by them or anyone.

They also hired a professional design team to execute their ideas, and it paid off. "I think by definition a 'second' edition should be a better product than the first edition," Andy Demeter said. "Otherwise, I guess it would be called a reprint."

About 25 years ago, vintage Chelsea clocks became highly collectible. The company continues to make new clocks, including its most famous product—the Chelsea ship's bell clock—but 80% have quartz movements. Mechanical models from the early to mid-20th century are the ones that enthusiasts covet, and the company still has an active repair-and-restoration department for them.

New to the second edition are many more pages of material designed to assist collectors, dealers, horologists, and other Chelsea enthusiasts in identifying and learning about the older models. Most impressive are the individual indices that list every clock that Chelsea made for the U.S. Light-house Establishment & Service, U.S. Life-Saving Service, and U.S. Revenue Cutter Service—by serial number, type, and date of issuance. This feature is the result of a year's labor. That's how long it took the authors to review over 260,000 individual entries in the factory sales ledgers from 1897, when the company was founded, through 1941.

In addition, ten vintage models have been added to the first edition's identification guide, along with color photographs from the best private collections. There is also an alphabetical listing of every movement model developed by the company. This list complements the manufacturing

serial number index that was in the first edition. Finally, there is a new index of clocks from Chelsea's subsidiary, the Boston Clock Company, in existence from 1909 to 1931.

Please note that there have been at least two other companies that went by the name Boston Clock Company. One of them, founded by Joseph H. Eastman, was in existence from 1884 to 1895. (Just to confuse matters, it had a previous name, from 1880 to 1884, which was the Harvard Clock Company.) The Everett Avenue factory in Chelsea was built for and housed Eastman's Boston Clock Company. When it failed, he formed the short-lived (1895-97) Eastman Clock Company, the Chelsea Clock Company's immediate precursor.

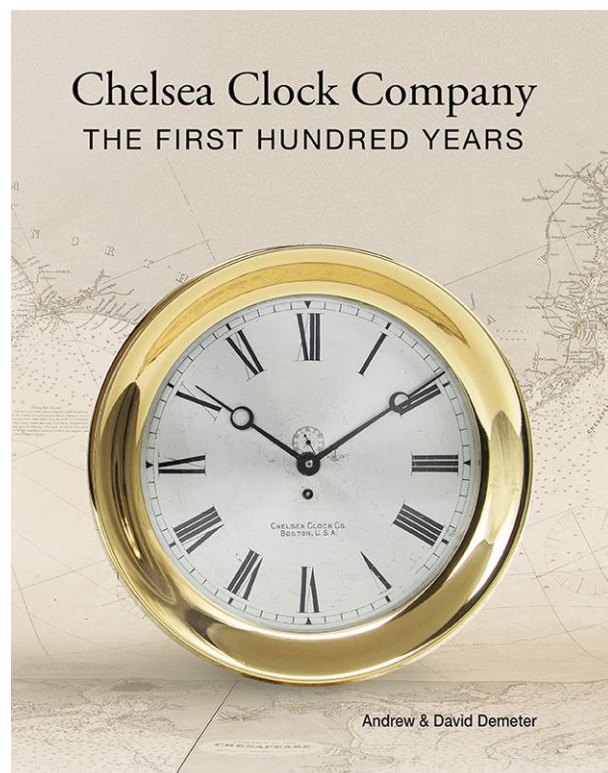
The Chelsea Clock Company proper was founded in 1897 by Charles Pearson, who owned the business until its sale to a Chelsea employee, William H. Neagle, in 1929. Neagle took it through the Depression, then switched almost exclusively to war work when World War II was declared. Chelsea soon became the primary supplier of clocks to the U.S. Navy. Subsequently, the company name grew to be synonymous with "marine clock," even though most Chelsea clocks did not go to sea and were never meant to. Its familiar yacht-wheel clocks were designed as mantel pieces, and Chelsea over the years has made many other types of timepieces for landlubbers' homes, offices, and automobiles.

After Neagle retired in 1945, he sold the company to Chelsea employees George J. King and Walter E. Mutz. They introduced electric Chelseas to consumers. King and Mutz sold the company in 1970 to a California-based defense conglomerate, Automation Industries. Two years later, Automation Industries sold it to the Bunker Ramo Corporation of Chicago for \$650,000. In 1978, Bunker Ramo agreed to sell it to Richard "Rick" Leavitt for \$800,000. Leavitt operated it as the Chelsea Instrument Corporation, introducing the quartz movements in 1984.

In 2005, Leavitt sold the company's assets and its name to JK Nicholas of Concord, Massachusetts, for an undisclosed sum. Nicholas was previously a business-strategy consultant to companies in the Boston area and an entrepreneur. In a foreword to the Demeters' second edition, he writes that he himself is a longtime collector of vintage Chelsea clocks, having been given his first one, a U.S. Navy model, by his father when he was a boy. (The elder Nicholas is Peter Nicholas, cofounder of the medical-device company Boston Scientific.) In that same essay he recounts that his paternal grandfather served as a captain in the U.S. Navy aboard several submarines and that he grew up hearing stories of the heroism and courage of those who served under the man. "Of course, I could envision...



One of the new photographs in the second edition of the Demeters' book is a vintage image showing Joseph H. Eastman (1843-1931), founder of the Chelsea Clock Company's immediate precursor, the Eastman Clock Company. Eastman, who trained as a watchmaker as well as a clockmaker, fitted his clock movement with a watch escapement. That innovation was the key to Chelsea's (if not Eastman's) success, since it gave those novel timekeepers both accuracy and the portability that the absence of a pendulum allowed. Photo courtesy Jim Dyson.



Dust jacket of *Chelsea Clock Company: The First Hundred Years* (second edition). Just like the first edition, the book illustrates dozens of vintage Chelsea models, along with detailed information about them, including their special features, variations, and original price. There are also pages of serial numbers from which can be determined when—down to the exact day—that many Chelsea models were manufactured.



New home of Chelsea Clock Company, 101 Second Street, Chelsea, Massachusetts. Schinto photo.



A new stairwell and elevator were still under construction when this photo was taken on Thanksgiving Day 2014. Schinto photo.

Captain Nicholas looking up at his Chelsea while somewhere deep under the sea," writes the grandson, whose cell phone ring is a submarine sonar ping, "and so began my fascination with these elegant, amazing instruments made in Chelsea, Massachusetts."

When Nicholas took over Chelsea ten years ago, Leavitt retained ownership of the building and leased it to Nicholas for a decade. Nicholas said Leavitt sold it about five years ago to an entity that was "hoping to develop the whole area around the building." As part of that plan, when the lease was up, "We were asked to leave." Figuratively speaking, time at the old place had run out.

Finding a new place in Chelsea was "a very strong desire," Nicholas told *M.A.D.* He did look outside the area, but "only because we had to," since nothing appropriate seemed to be available in Chelsea. He said he considers it lucky that an opportunity to lease the building in the new location came along. When that happened, he said,

"Regret shifted to excitement."

Formerly used as a nail factory and later a clothing factory, the new place, like the old one, is more than 100 years old, but Nicholas anticipates that it will allow the company to operate in a much more efficient, 21st-century manner. The addition of a new stairwell and elevator, for example, will accommodate, in Nicholas's words, "modern-day ways of moving things and people up and down."

For more information, contact Chelsea Clock Company by phone at (617) 884-0250 or through its Web site (www.chelseaclock.com).

To order the second edition of *Chelsea Clock Company: The First Hundred Years*, e-mail <Andy@DemeterandSons.com> or send a check to Andrew Demeter, 4 Great Hill Lane, Topsfield, MA 01983. The price is \$128.50, including USPS priority flat rate shipping with tracking number and insurance. Payment can also be made via PayPal to <chelcol@yahoo.com>. 