

# Chelsea Clock Company Changes Ownership and Collectors Take Notice

by Jeanne Schinto

The last of the old-time American clock companies, the Chelsea Clock Company of Chelsea, Massachusetts, has been sold. The new owner is JK Nicholas of Concord, Massachusetts, who bought it from Richard "Rick" Leavitt for an undisclosed sum on June 30, 2005. The 38-year-old Nicholas, a collector of vintage Chelsea clocks, has been a business-strategy consultant to companies in the Boston area and an entrepreneur. He has no other current business ventures and will devote himself to Chelsea "one hundred percent," he said.

The sale is big news to vintage Chelsea collectors, many of whom were aware of the company's poor financial health. They didn't want to see it go under. Even if they aren't buyers of new Chelsea clocks, they cherish the longevity of the company, founded in 1897, almost as much as they do its most famous product, the Chelsea ship's bell clock, which is still being made today. They trace the horological lineage of that clock and of its originator, Joseph H. Eastman (1843-1931), to Simon Willard, the biggest name of all in American horology. That's because Eastman is believed to have been apprenticed to Edward Howard, who was in turn apprenticed to Aaron Willard. "And Simon begat Aaron," said James Dyson, a collector who lives in Portsmouth, Virginia, speaking figuratively. Aaron was actually Simon's younger brother.

The Chelsea factory is located in the same brick factory that Joseph Eastman built just across the Mystic River from Boston in 1894-96. There he housed Chelsea's precursor, his newly founded Eastman Clock Company. An earlier company that Eastman cofounded had already begun making his famous high-grade innovative clocks. Eastman had trained as a watchmaker as well as clockmaker. He fitted his clock movement with a watch escapement. That's why it was so much better than the other American clocks on the market of the day, which were comparatively crude and not always reliable.

It's a cliché of inventors' biographies that mechanical genius doesn't usually come coupled with good business sense. Was Eastman more concerned with quality than with profits? It's unclear. What can be said with certainty is that he soon was in debt, and the company along with its building was sold at a foreclosure auction in mid-1896. The buyer was Harry W. Bates, who formed a company with a different name that used Eastman's factory and clock designs. Little is known about Bates except that he didn't stay in business there long. In 1897 Charles H. Pearson (1849-1928) took over the factory and named it the Chelsea Clock Company. He, not Eastman, is considered the founder of the company that celebrated its 108th birthday on July 28.

Pearson made a success of it, only partly because Chelsea soon became the primary supplier of clocks to the U.S. Navy. While the company name became synonymous with "marine clock," and the ship's bell clock, patented in 1900, became its biggest product line, most Chelsea clocks did not go to sea and were never meant to. Its familiar yacht wheel clocks were designed as mantel pieces. Chelsea over the years has made many other types of timepieces for landlubbers' homes, offices, and automobiles.

New Chelsea owner Nicholas, whose additional title is CEO, said he was drawn to Chelsea because of its "authenticity." "It's teeming with it," he told us in a phone conversation. "My interest comes from a real desire to connect with the past." A few days later, he gave us a factory tour.

It is indeed a period piece, and Nicholas seemed to revel in it. He proudly showed us old clocks as well as scientific instruments that he had found in storage. He has put them for now in his office, a space that appears to have been the old wood-paneled boardroom of the company. On its walls are vintage photographs of famous people with their Chelseas, including President Richard M. Nixon and Aristotle Onassis. In the corner was his Dell laptop, and he found it ironic that its printer wasn't working properly, especially in light of the fact that his "peer set" was perplexed by his decision to veer away from high tech in favor of a throw-back company like this one.

Down in the basement we saw people at work making parts for mechanical clocks. They also do the milling and polishing of the cases down there. On the first floor we saw other people assembling clock movements and still others at clockmakers' benches repairing vintage ones. While Nicholas must necessarily be focused on the sale of new clocks, 80% of which have quartz movements, he seemed to understand very well that collectors feed the company's aura and can communicate it effectively to others.

He frequently spoke about the importance of the Chelsea legacy as the only old-time American clock company still in existence. (Seth Thomas, which claims to be "the longest established clock maker in the United States" on its Web site, is a division of the Colibri Group and retains only tenuous links with its past at best.) For the sake of that legacy, it was fortunate that an individual rather than a group of investors bought Chelsea, Nicholas said. Groups may have been reluctant because the company "defies categorization," he conjectured. "It doesn't fit into some larger empire."

In any case, its purchaser needed some "understanding of the pride and the passion that goes into this kind of product," he said. It's also true that a group may have wanted to pump up Chelsea's value and make a quick profit in a turnover. Nicholas claimed to have no intention of doing that. "My aim is to help create the next hundred years at Chelsea," he said.

In an office area we noted some old-fashioned hardbound ledgers. Chelsea clock movements are numbered, like the movements in Waltham watches, and for most of Chelsea's first 90 years, those numbers were written by hand. Returns for repairs or cleaning were also penned in ledgers through the decades. (Since 1985, the information has been kept by computer.)

When vintage Chelseas started becoming collectible, about 15 years ago, those records were recognized as a treasure-trove. By using them, one could discover the year that a clock left the Chelsea factory and where it went, if it ever returned, and why. Changes of ownership could also be tracked. Collectors could determine through them not only the provenance of a particular piece but the relative rarity of a model.

Jim Dyson became a serious collector of Chelsea clocks in 1992. Initially, the retired U.S. Navy captain had started looking into collecting chronometers and deck watches, until he realized that those areas were "pretty much saturated" by other collectors. The scenario is a familiar one. "All the good pieces were somewhere where you couldn't get them," said Dyson. In switching to Chelseas, he discovered that virtually no research had been done on the subject. So he began doing it himself.

Andrew Demeter of Middleton, Massachusetts, meanwhile, was starting his own serious collecting of Chelseas and his own research. Why had his interest been piqued by Chelsea in the first place? A family connection to the U.S. Navy started it. His mother had been a nurse at the Chelsea Naval Hospital during World War II on Chelsea's Admiral Hill, the place where an ensign named John F. Kennedy was laid up for six months after his PT boat was rammed by a Japanese destroyer. (The building has been converted to condos.)

Each man has since produced a history of the company, including the serial number information. Dyson's is available on his Web site ([www.chelseaclockmuseum.com](http://www.chelseaclockmuseum.com)). Demeter's was published in 2003 as *Chelsea Clock Company: The First Hundred Years*. His son, David, was coauthor.

Dyson and Demeter are also the recognized market makers of vintage Chelseas. "Through study, we figured out the significant ones to collect," said Dyson. "Unfortunately, when we started going out and shopping around, the prices got driven up. What has happened to Chelsea clocks happened to Howard clocks twenty or thirty years ago."

There is a hierarchy, of course. Perhaps it goes without saying that the older, the better. Beyond that, Chelsea ship's bell clocks with the biggest dials (10" and 12" diameters) are the most desirable and the most expensive, not only because they are so impressive in their cast bronze or brass cases but because they are among the rarest models. Demeter wrote in his book that perhaps as few as 1000 each size were made. Recently, he has revised that number downward, to 600 each. In any event, all 10" and 12" diameter ship's bell clocks by Chelsea predate 1928, because those sizes were eliminated from the line that year.

On average only one previously undiscovered 12" Chelsea comes to market yearly, according to Demeter, who deals as well as collects the clocks, but he has stopped taking names and addresses of would-be buyers of the larger models. Other seekers have taken themselves out of the competition, since prices now range from \$12,000 to \$20,000. In 1992 when Dyson and Demeter began collecting, the same timekeepers could be bought for under \$1000.

One can still find examples of the more plentiful, smaller Chelsea ship's bell clocks at affordable prices, which seem to have stabilized. A model with a 4½" diameter dial, in original condition, can be had for \$500 to \$1000, the higher prices being reserved for those with a special provenance or unusual engraving. Ones with 6" dials are regularly seen for \$700 to \$900.

Prices only for models with 8½" dials have decreased recently. The going price as of this writing is \$1500 to \$1700.

When Demeter was writing his history, he had unlimited access to the factory. Dyson said he has visited it ten or 15 times over the years. Other collectors without scholarly interests have not been given the same opportunities. And those seeking vintage parts have been frustrated by company policies.

Nicholas, in his third week on the job, didn't promise that any policy would change or change soon. He was wisely "just in the looking and listening phase." But it is considered a hopeful sign that he attended a regional meeting of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors in Orlando, Florida, last February. "I'm looking to be approachable," he told *M.A.D.*

For more information, contact the Chelsea Clock Company by mail at 284 Everett Avenue, Chelsea, MA 02150; by phone at (617) 884-0250; or through its Web site ([www.chelseaclock.com](http://www.chelseaclock.com)).

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## Ship's Bell Code

The ship's bell code was devised as a way for sailors to tell time by sound, in the dark, rather than by sight. Geared to a sailor's four-hour watch onboard ship, it's really not all that complicated a system to learn. What is more, theoretically it leaves less room for error, since its cadence is staccato, making it easier and faster to count its strikes than those of a so-called house-strike clock, i.e., one that strikes one through 12 twice a day.

one bell at 12:30, 4:30, and 8:30

two bells at 1:00, 5:00, and 9:00

three bells at 1:30, 5:30, and 9:30

four bells at 2:00, 6:00, and 10:00

five bells at 2:30, 6:30, and 10:30

six bells at 3:00, 7:00, and 11:00

seven bells at 3:30, 7:30, and 11:30

eight bells at 12:00, 4:00, and 8:00