February 7th, 2011

Icon of American Horology Sells for \$539,500 by Jeanne Schinto

Skinner, Inc., Marlborough, Massachusetts

by Jeanne Schinto Photos courtesy Skinner

The star lot at Skinner's science,

technology, and

clocks sale in

Marlborough, Massachusetts, on November 20, 2010, was an astronomical regulator made in 1868 by Boston's William Bond & Son. Offered with an estimate of \$300,000/500,000, the clock, which measures 71" tall including its painted wood base, sold to a private collector on the phone for \$539,500 (including buyer's premium). Skinner department

head Robert C. Cheney called the clock "a horological tour de force" and "probably the most important regulator made in America."

That's because it

figured into the

first public time

service. Without

history of the world's

standard time, American railroad accidents were frequent, and American sailors had difficulty determining their longitude at sea, leading them into disasters of their own. The Bond firm, using this clock, disseminated standard time via telegraph across 19th-century New England. Accurate to .09 second, according to Cheney, the clock is a cultural icon too. Being in the vanguard of a series of

technological

helped lead

developments, it

Americans into the

consciousness, a mindset that rules us at our peril to this day. At a gallery walk the night before the sale, Cheney explained how the clock figured into the standard-time delivery system. "They had at the Harvard College Observatory a fifteen-inch refractor telescope with crosshairs. It was aimed at the sky, and

when a known planet

transited it, they knew

exactly what time it

moment they pressed

the telegraph key and

sent the exact time to

the Bond shop in

From there, they

would send out

downtown Boston.

standard time to New

was. So at that

England, again by telegraph. So Bond's was the first effort to get everybody on the same time schedule. This was the first answer." The Bond firm was

"This is the most important and technically elegant American-made precision clock that will ever be sold in the United States," he said. "I am in pursuit of the best possible horological objects. In my view, that's the best approach a collector can have, but in this case the person who acquired the clock wanted it more than I." The sale as a whole was a marked success, making it three in a row for Cheney, who took over the department in January 2009. On 695 items offered, 660 (95%) of which sold, the gross was \$1,784,165. That's not counting post-sale deals, which added another approximately \$150,000 to that total, Cheney said. Cheney came into this world the son and grandson of clockmakers; the 58-year-old was a clockmaker and dealer for decades. At Skinner he has learned to navigate a number of other specialties. "It's a very eclectic

The museum evolved over the decades into a showcase for pressed steel products of various lands and times, including modern ones. Upon Higgins's death, the building, collections, and an endowment were given to the public. The museum has been redefining its mission lately and

deaccessioning duplicates and other material. At this sale the castoffs

a couple of which were sale highlights.

included breastplates, back plates, swords, halberds, spears, and helmets,

One helmet, cataloged as a late 15th-century-style German-type jousting

described as simply "a medieval-style helmet," made \$13,035 on the same

helmet, sold to a phone bidder for \$8888 (est. \$200/300). Another,

penny-ante estimate. More typically they fetched prices ranging from

A graduated set of four 18th- and 19th-century cannonballs from the Wilbur collection was indeed part of the sale and sold for \$1126 (est. \$200/400). Another set of five, undated, brought \$415 on the same

estimate. The bulk of the collection consisted of pistols, muskets, rifles,

cannons to go with those Weight Watchers' cannonballs. The top lot of

that group by far was a 1780-83 French hanger sword, possibly used in

the American Revolutionary War. It sold for \$94,800 to a room bidder

Wilbur collected related ephemera too. Among those lots was a discharge

painted military drums, epaulets, gorgets, buttons, canteens, and

who did not want to be identified.

bayonets, scabbards, powder horns, revolvers, sabers, swords, tomahawks,

American Revolutionary history in western Massachusetts. He was passionate, and that's what collecting is all about." The clocks went up toward the end of the sale. They attracted numerous luminaries of the local horology world, among them Tom McIntyre of Harvard, Massachusetts; Bob Frascatore of Upton, Massachusetts; and John C. Losch of Holliston, Massachusetts. Some came from further away. Besides Jim Cipra, they included Tom Grimshaw of Cheshire, Connecticut; Joe Arvay of Mendham, New Jersey, and Sconset on Nantucket; and Charles Grichar of Houston, Texas. Clock prices before and after the Bond were generally strong—a departure from the last couple of years. The market absorbed 11 tall

clocks in succession without a hiccup, at prices ranging from \$1126 to

japanned-cased example, possibly American (est. \$200/300). The high

was the price an Internet bidder paid for an 1800-10 Simon Willard in a

\$24,500. The low of that group was for an "as-found" circa 1750

refinished mahogany Roxbury case (est. \$20,000/ 30,000).

Connecticut collection, and that owner consigned it to this sale. "The market sees a lot of Claggett clocks but doesn't see many real Claggett clocks, and this is a real one—that's the importance there," said Cheney, who identified its new owner, bidder 999, as a dealer. Bidders passed up a circa 1790 Aaron Willard tall clock (est. \$40,000/60,000). It wasn't Aaron's day. They didn't want his circa 1825 alarm shelf clock either (est. \$25,000/30,000). At least, they didn't want

them at those suggested market levels. The tall clock sold later for

Among other major lots aggressively estimated and declined at the

auction were a circa 1815 pair of 20" library globes in Hepplewhite

Thanksgiving Monday.

Joshua Wilder Mirror Clock:

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by Joshua Wilder of Hingham,

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\$30,000, and the sale of the alarm clock was pending, Cheney said on

A room bidder did buy Edgell's cartes de visite album containing 30 images of his fellow soldiers and officers, all but five identified with handwritten inscriptions. Estimated at \$700/900, the photos brought \$3851. For more information, contact Skinner at (617) 350-5400 or (508) 970-3000, or see the Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).

O'Brien, Sullivan located a total of five mirror clocks made by Wilder, including the present one, which sold at Skinner on June 8, 1997, for \$25,300. Robert Cheney recalls that he tried to buy it at that sale but was unsuccessful. A couple of years later, Cheney said he bought it at Christie's for roughly the same price. It went on from there to be owned

Southeastern Massachusetts, 1710-1850, with Brock Jobe and Jack

yet it sold well yet again. "It's such an outstanding example, both by way of condition and in terms of its unusual form," said Cheney. Sullivan intended to have an entry on Wilder's mirror clocks in Harbor & Home, but space would not allow it. He kindly shared his research for this report. "All of the Wilder mirror clocks I have examined are unique in that their cases have tombstone-shaped side windows," Sullivan wrote in an e-mail. "I believe the one that just sold at Skinner is historically significant because it is the earliest mirror clock-made by anyone-that I have ever seen. The style of the mirror itself would date the clock to circa 1810 or a

little earlier. All other mirror clocks I am aware of would post-date this

Sullivan continued, "Every New Hampshire example, as well as all the

observations led me to believe that Wilder likely developed the mirror

Connecticut-made Joseph Ives mirror clocks, are later. These

Considering that history, this clock is not what anyone would call fresh,

clock. It makes sense, given that Wilder was struggling to produce less costly clocks to compete with the more affordable banjo clocks, being manufactured in Boston, which were less expensive than his tall-case clocks, but which he did not have the right to produce. That business situation led him to begin making dwarf clocks. The rest is history." Joe Arvay added points from his own research. "In 1822, Connecticut clockmaker Joseph Ives received a patent for his looking-glass clock; the document, signed by James Monroe and John Quincy Adams, is in the collection of the American Clock and Watch

Wilder clock is likely the first mirror clock ever produced and is significantly earlier than Ives's. Not only unique, the Wilder clock is in untouched condition. Its diminutive size completes the package." Sullivan commented on that size. "It is at the smallest extreme of what you typically find in New Hampshire mirror clocks, which are often a few inches taller. The Connecticut mirror clocks are much larger, generally by ten to fifteen inches."

New Hampshire mirror clocks also generally incorporate split baluster mirrors, a later style than the gilt rope front design of this clock, Sullivan

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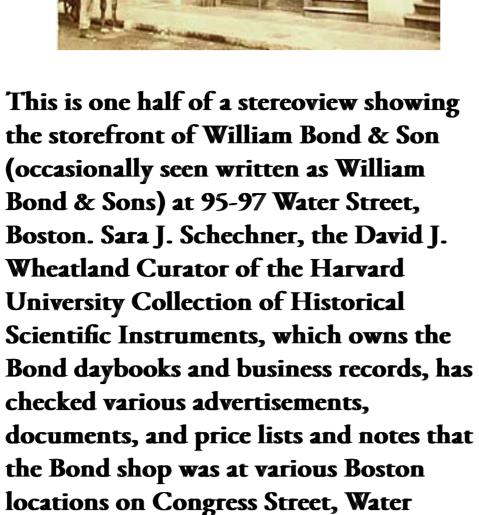


Harvard University's observatory, where William Cranch Bond was the first director. It is now in the Harvard **University Collection of Historical** Scientific Instruments. The other was made for the Bidston Observatory in Liverpool, England and is now in the Merseyside County Museum. This third example was used in the Bond shop.

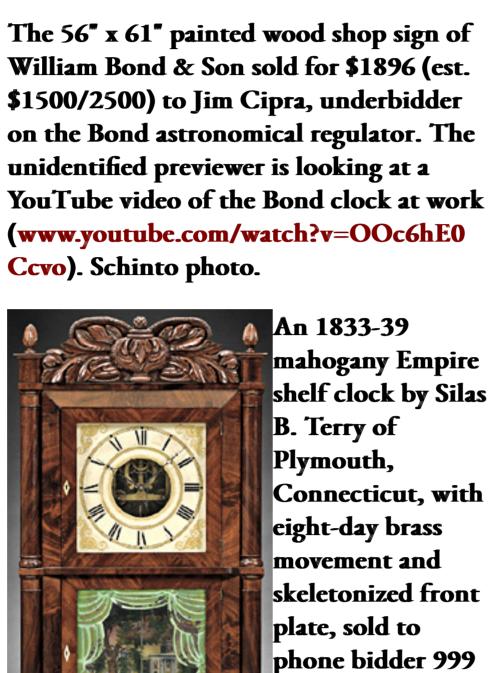
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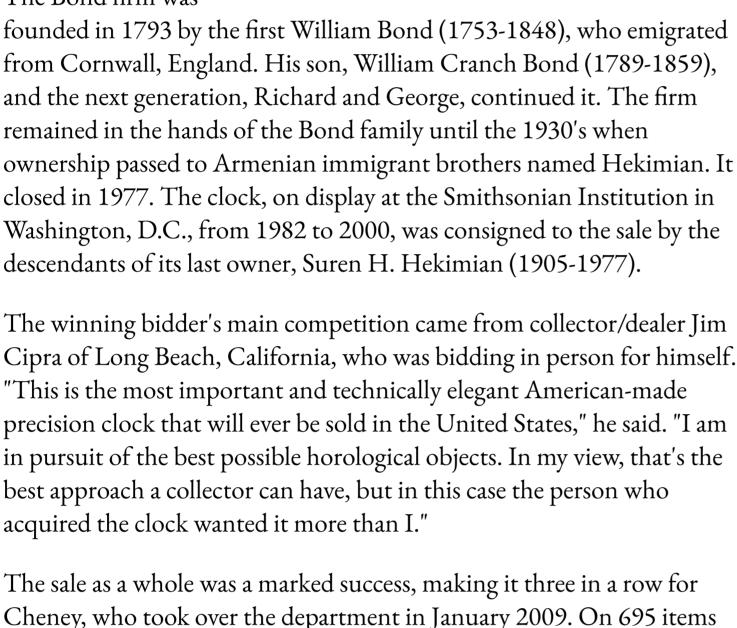
like it are known. One was made for

Richard F. Bond. Only two other clocks



Street, State Street, and Boylston Street through the 19th century. Considering her research, this photo dates to some time between 1876 and 1897. Judging from the stereoview mount, it's likely toward the early end of that period. For more information, see the Harvard Web site (www.fas.harvard.edu/~hsdept/chsi.html). Author's collection. era of heightened time





department," he told his gallery-walk audience. "Through the years it's been kind of catch-all for items that other departments either didn't want to handle or that didn't fit into their repertoires." Mechanical music and

for \$11,258 (est.

\$5000/8000).

spent a lifetime building a private collection of arms and armor from medieval and Renaissance Europe, feudal Japan, and ancient Greece and Rome. In 1929 Higgins, whose money came from the manufacture of pressed steel, constructed a four-story steel and glass Art Deco building in Worcester to house it. "He used to waltz around town giving away candy to children in the street while wearing his armor," his granddaughter, Hannah Higgins, told a reporter for Women's Wear Daily in 2009.

medieval armor are two of his non-horological responsibilities, but so are

such things as a coin-operated fortune teller, a gas-powered bicycle

"Certainly we capture all sorts of collecting personae," he said. "But

international attention that some of these categories generate. When

Some other sale highlights were consigned by the Higgins Armory

Skinner puts a sale like this on line, we are in essence selling to the world."

Museum (www.higgins.org) in Worcester, Massachusetts. The museum's

founder, Worcester industrialist John Woodman Higgins (1874-1961),

what's most interesting about this department is the kind of

searchlight, and the articulated skeleton of a chicken.

\$2015 to \$4740. A steel-engraved French-style half armor and helmet, cataloged as "likely Continental, 19th century," was the top lot of that section of the sale, selling on the phone for \$29,625 (est. \$500/700). A strong offering of early American militaria came from the collection of C. Keith Wilbur, who died in 2009 at age 86. Wilbur was a Northampton, Massachusetts, physician, and one of his special loves was the American Revolutionary War. (Skinner previously sold his antique medical collection.) "He was an amazing gentleman, and it was my pleasure to have met him," said Cheney. "Doctor Wilbur was just a local GP. He had his office in his home. If you were obese, he'd hand you a cannonball and say, 'That's how overweight you are. Now you set that cannonball down. Don't you feel better? Well, you need to lose thirty pounds because that's what you're carrying around."

document signed for Captain John Perry of the 8th Massachusetts Regiment by George Washington in 1783. Along with six pieces of early Massachusetts currency, the single 12½" x 7" (sight size) sheet went at \$8295 (est. \$6000/8000). "Every school group in Northampton had a turn through Doctor Wilbur's basement," Cheney said. "There was no stronger advocate for

A few dozen lots later came more tall clocks. A circa 1795 mahogany example by William Cummens-a Simon Willard protegé, who set up his own shop in Willard's Roxbury, Massachusetts, neighborhood—sold to a phone bidder for \$21,330 (est. \$20,000/25,000). Going to the same bidder for the same price was a circa 1810 tall clock by James Doull of Charlestown, Massachusetts (est. \$20,000/30,000). Very active throughout the clock portion of the auction, bidder 999 spent \$65,175 (just over the high estimate) for the top tall clock of the day. A circa 1725 Queen Anne walnut example by William Claggett of Newport, Rhode Island, it had previously been sold by Skinner in 1992 for \$25,300—to Cheney in his dealer days. It went from Cheney to a

stands by J. & W. Cary of London (est. \$80,000/100,000) and a Civil War campaign chest filled with the artifacts of 2nd Lt. John Davis Edgell (est. \$30,000/40,000). Later the globes sold for \$77,025. As for the chest, Cheney said, "We are talking to interested people about it, and I remain optimistic, because I consider it just such a wonderful thing."

time-and-passing-strike (i.e., just one bong on the hour), sold in the room for \$35,550 (est. \$25,000/35,000) to collector Joe Arvay. The underbidder on the phone was dealer Gary R. Sullivan of Sharon, Massachusetts. While researching the award-winning Harbor & Home: Furniture of

Museum, Bristol, Connecticut. Ives's patent application letter, dated 1817, is in my collection. Given those dates and Sullivan's research, this

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—J.S.

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