Part I of IV

James Arthur and His "Temple of Time": A Cautionary Tale for Collector-Donors and Their Beneficiaries

by Jeanne Schinto
Photos courtesy Maude Arthur Brown Family Archive

If asked to name an example of the thwarting of what is called, in philanthropic and legalistic circles, "donor intent," many people in the collecting world would cite what was perhaps the most widely publicized case in recent memory. I'm referring to the protracted and deeply polarizing dispute over the art collection of Albert Barnes (1872-1951) and the outcome: its eventual move from its longtime home in a residential neighborhood in Merion, Pennsylvania, to new quarters in downtown Philadelphia. Yet there are scores of other little-known instances of deceased benefactors' wishes for their collections being ignored, neglected, subverted, or jettisoned by their beneficiaries over time.

What happened to the legacy of James Arthur (1842-1930) of Brooklyn, New York, at the hands of New York University (NYU) is a good case in point. In 1925 Arthur bequeathed his horological collection—more than 1900 sundials, hourglasses, clocks, watches, and a related library—to NYU. When he died five years later, the university got an endowment of approximately $111,000 for its upkeep. An equivalent gift today would be about $1.4 million. For the next four decades the objects were under the care of a succession of appointed curators, all but two of them affiliated with NYU as a professor, former professor, emeritus professor, alumnus, or a combination thereof. There were exhibits, acquisitions of more clocks and watches, donations of still more by other collectors, publications, and a lecture series on "Time and Its Mysteries." One of the curators even had an architect produce a sketch for a "Temple of Time," i.e., a stand-alone Neoclassical building designed to permanently house the collection at NYU's (now erstwhile) uptown campus in University Heights in the Bronx.

In the early 1980s, however, a court ruled that the collection could and should be dismembered and dispersed. Now numbering close to 3000 objects, it went in three different directions, while a smattering remains at NYU. The most significant portion—indeed, the bulk of it, about 1900 objects—was given to the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, headquartered in Columbia, Pennsylvania. The second-largest portion, some 650 objects, was gifted to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. (Twenty years earlier, that part of the collection had been moved there on a permanent loan arrangement.) A third, small portion was sold to a private entity, the Time Museum of Rockford, Illinois. (Those 37 items were subsequently resold after the Time Museum closed in 1999.) Items from the fourth and final portion—a selection of about a dozen clocks, mostly tall-case examples—are currently being used by NYU to decorate various administrators' offices and other spaces around the university's downtown campus on Greenwich Village's Washington Square or are in storage. NYU also got to keep the library and the endowment.

How did this scuttling of a bequest happen? Who is to blame? Was it preventable? Events that took place in the six decades between the time of the gift and its dispersal can easily be portrayed

How did this scuttling of a bequest happen?

as chapters in a straightforward cautionary tale pertinent to all would-be donors and their families. But the reality is much more nuanced. Forces of cultural and societal change came into play as the Arthur gift made its curtailed journey into the so-called forever. They included such things as the gargantuan growth in New York real-estate values that altered the socioeconomic contours of the city; the explosion and complete remaking of higher education; and the evolution in ideas about the purpose of institutional collections, the role of their curators, and the choices of objects we should or shouldn't preserve. Particularly relevant, curatorial ideas about mechanical devices like clocks and watches metamorphosed completely. And so while the ignominious fate of one man's horological bequest is the ostensible focus of this four-part series of articles, more complicated themes will necessarily be explored.

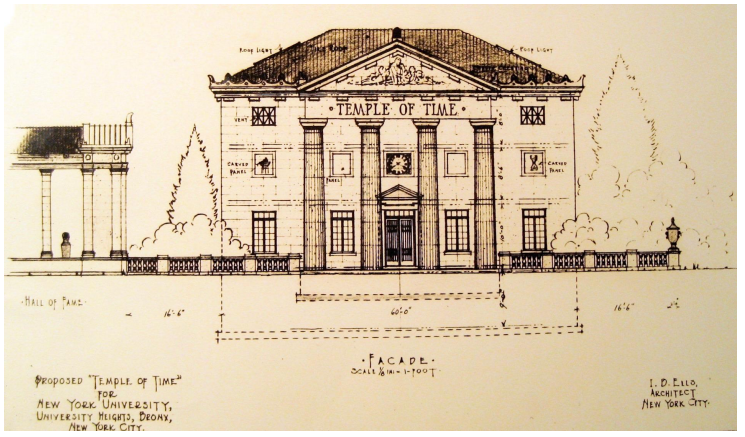
The first part will present biographical information about the benefactor, tell why he chose NYU for his largess, and explore what in hindsight were the gift's golden years, i.e., the 1930s. The second part will examine why, between the World War II era and the mid-1960s, the collection lost its champions, such as they were by then, and its initial dismantling occurred. It will describe the missteps, missed opportunities, and the inevitabilities. The third part will discuss the legal interventions of the 1980s, clarifying bits of speculation that have been floating around the horological community for years about the Arthur legacy and its demise. The fourth and final part will be an assessment of the current situation as it pertains to Arthur objects. It will give an accounting of where many of the collection's best timekeepers are today. It will explain why items with Arthur provenance appear on the secondary market. It will conclude with a review of the status of the James Arthur lecture series, one of the few ways that his legacy is still being honored today.

Irving Husted Berg (1878-1941), James Arthur's son-in-law, was the one who convinced him that NYU was the ideal place for his collection. It was the Roaring Twenties. The United States was in the midst of a period of unparalleled growth, and so was NYU, where Berg, an ordained minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, was university chaplain. Arthur was enticed with talk of plans for a museum of timekeeping to be established on the school's growing University Heights campus, with his collection as its core. And yet, right from the start, there were both financial and logistical problems with that vision. On February 25, 1926, just a few months after Arthur signed the papers to make his gift official, NYU chancellor Elmer Ellsworth Brown (1861-1934) wrote to Berg apologetically: "Now that you have succeeded, to the gratification of all of us, in securing to the University the James Arthur collection of clocks and watches, your patience must be nearly at the end because of our inability hitherto to make arrangements for the safe removal and installation of the collection at the Heights." The problem, Brown said, was "the tedious problem of securing special funds to move the collection."[1]

University Heights was just ten miles from the New York suburb of New Rochelle, where Arthur, a widower who had reached his early 80s and was in declining health, had gone to live with Berg and his wife, Arthur's youngest child, Bessie (1875-1948). The collection was still at Arthur's house, a mansion on Brooklyn's fashionable and exclusive Clinton Hill, where men who had made fortunes in wallpaper, coffee, oil, flour, and lace had been his neighbors. Arthur's own fortune had come from the metals business, specifically the Arthur & Company Machine Works, established in 1885, the same year he started collecting timepieces in earnest.

As a boy Arthur had collected sundials; he'd constructed some too. This was in Ireland (in a part known since 1921 as Northern Ireland), then Scotland, where his parents had been born and where the family moved when he was still young. Arthur studied at a technical school in either Glasgow or Edinburgh—reports vary. He was trained in

James Arthur in 1885 at age 43, the year he established his business, Arthur & Company Machine Works. A popular photographic trick of the period made use of a so-called duplicator, which allowed a studio photographer to create an image of two Arthurs. He is pictured with a walking cane from his collection.



An architect's sketch for the never-built Temple of Time.

mechanics, metalworking, woodworking, and machine design, and he became an expert in gear cutting.

According to some versions of his life story, he was a pupil of astronomer William Herschel's grandson, Alexander S. Herschel, who was known as a natural philosopher, forerunner of the modern scientist. Either from him or other teachers, or as a result of his own predilections, Arthur developed a philosophical bent along with a lifelong interest in the cosmos. No ordinary collector of clocks and watches, he was captivated by the mystery of time itself.

In 1871, at age 29, James Arthur moved to the United States. The husband and father of three called for the family to join him shortly after he got settled in New Jersey. Arthur worked as foreman for the Steam Pump & Valve Works of Adam Carr in New York City. In 1878 he started his own machine works, taking Carr's son William as a partner. Seven years later, the partnership of Arthur & Carr was dissolved, and Arthur & Company was established on John Street in a section of Manhattan that became part of Brooklyn when New York's borough system was created in 1898.

Besides clocks and watches, Arthur also collected firearms, ivory, glass, china, furniture, and walking canes. One of his canes was made of shark vertebrae, perhaps by a sailor. Another was a "deacon's cane" with a hidden vial designed to hold an alcoholic nip. A third was an Irish shillelagh, which Arthur, who became a U.S. citizen in 1876 while still living in New Jersey, often carried in New York City's St. Patrick's Day parade.

Arthur's business was an undeniable success. In 1893, less than a decade after opening the business, he bought his own building at 188-190 Front Street. Four years later he was able to leave the operation in the charge of his sons, John and Daniel, and take a world tour by himself, collecting clocks and watches all over Europe and in parts of Asia. By this time he was living on Clinton Hill, where he filled his residence with his collections. As he bought more and more, the overflow filled his place of business. He also lent pieces to family ☞

Maude Arthur Brown, James Arthur's granddaughter, with some of her own collection, in the 1950s. Born in Cranford, New Jersey, she was the daughter of Arthur's son John Forbes Arthur. Her daughter, Sarah Brown Caudell, remarked recently in an e-mail to this reporter, "Mother always said, 'Watch out for clockmakers and certain types of collectors. They are geniuses and/or a bit eccentric!'"[16]

Arthur's Brooklyn residence, showing a 40-drawer watch case, each containing 20 watches. In 1908 his son Daniel did an inventory for him, noting 99 clocks at the residence and 97 at Front Street, along with 1125 watches split between the two locations. The numbers inevitably rose from there, since Arthur collected for another nearly 20 years, and by his own account he never sold a thing.

Arthur & Company, 188-190 Front Street, Brooklyn, New York.

Closeup of inset of apothecary.

Interior of Hoffmeyers (possibly Hoffmeyer's) apothecary, Brooklyn, New York, showing a clock lent by the Arthur collection on display. When the collection got split up, this clock was among the dozen or so retained by NYU. The exterior is shown in the inset.

members, friends, neighbors, even neighboring businesses. An exceptionally large example went on loan to a Brooklyn apothecary shop.

Timepieces appealed to Arthur's technical interests. A serious tinkerer, he was making his own clocks at least as early as 1874, according to his great-granddaughter, Sarah Brown Caudell, who has an example of his work with that date on it in her living room in Clearwater, Florida. The tinkering began before he started collecting in earnest more than a decade later. Nor was he primarily interested in the antique value of what he collected. Original condition, provenance, rarity, and other antiquarian values meant little or nothing to him. He freely restored, took apart, adapted, and invented.

He was so proficient that in 1904 (some sources say 1906) he made a year clock, i.e., one that runs for 365 days or more on one winding. Each year thereafter a different member of the Arthur family would wind it, and the name of the winder and the date were engraved on a brass plate set in the clock's case. Arthur liked to boast that the clock, which was kept at Arthur & Company, would last forever.

Some of his innovations, e.g., a fabrication of a "remontoire" or rewind mechanism, which he used in several of his big clocks, are impressive. Others, e.g., his use of aluminum for gears, are not to be recommended. In all cases he was applying his machining skills creatively. To be sure, in no instance was there anything delicate or aesthetically beautiful about his work—especially the cases—but he was in that rare class of collectors who want to emulate the makers of what they collect. He wanted to understand his clocks and watches, and the only way he knew how to do that was to be "hands-on." The likes of J. Pierpont Morgan, whose clock and watch collection was bequeathed to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, can't be imagined doing the same.

Arthur wasn't a great record keeper. He kept no orderly list of what he purchased or even what he made. What he did like to do, besides collecting and tinkering, was write. In 1909 he published *Time and Its Measurements*, a compilation of articles previously published in magazines such as *Popular Mechanics*. Looking to the past in these pieces, he still professed a love for sundials. "Astronomy, geography, geometry, mathematics, mechanics, as well as architecture and art, come in to make 'dialing' a most charming scientific and intellectual avocation," he wrote.[2] He believed no one should be without a sundial, for setting one's watch or clock. Looking ahead, he predicted that gear-wheel clocks and watches would prevail until 2000 A.D., but after that, they would be superseded by some other technological advancement. He was absolutely right, of course, although quartz technology happened 30 years earlier than he had envisioned such a radical change.

In writing his book's conclusion, he grew philosophical—his inclination. "The mystery of time encloses all things in its folds, and our grasp of its infinite bearings is measured by our limitations," he observed. "As there are no isolated facts in the Universe, we can never get to the end of our subject; so we know only what we have capacity to absorb.... our clocks do not—in the strict sense—measure time; but are adjusted to *divide* periods which they do not determine. We are constantly correcting their errors and never entirely succeed in getting them to run accurately to *periods of time* which exist entirely outside of such little things as men and clocks."[3] (Emphases his.)

In 1912 James Arthur turned Arthur & Company over to his son John. Daniel had been killed by a train two years earlier. In 1923 Arthur & Company closed its doors, and the giant Arthur-made public clock above its entrance, which people who lived or worked near Front Street had been using to tell time for nearly two decades, went to John's upstate New York farm. By then Arthur, age 81, had lost not only Daniel but his wife and two of his four daughters. He was ready to retire and think about what to do with his collection. Two years later, he struck the deal with NYU.

An NYU memorandum dated January 7, 1926, states that the deed of the gift was accepted by Charles H. Sherrill, chairman of the Committee on Fine Arts. Under its terms Arthur expected the university "to have and to hold forever and to exhibit my collection of clocks and watches…subject to the following stipulations: First, that the collection shall be known as the James Arthur Collection of Clocks and Watches; Secondly, that this collection shall be kept together as an entity; Thirdly, that it be housed and exhibited in a dignified and satisfactory manner."[4]

Arthur elsewhere decreed that an unpaid curator be appointed to oversee it. He didn't say why he wanted a volunteer for the position. Maybe he wanted to ensure that the keeper of the timekeepers would be motivated purely by passion. In any case Daniel Webster Hering (1850-1938) was the first to take on the task. Hering had been a member of the NYU faculty since 1885. He was now an emeritus professor of physics, having reached the mandatory retirement age in 1916. His research career had spanned a variety of subjects, from X-rays to "so-called rain making and rain-controlling devices."[5] By his own admission he brought neither horological nor curatorial knowledge to the job. "I am not conscious of any especial fitness to be a Curator," he wrote NYU's chancellor Brown, who had extended the invitation, but Brown's hope was that the "casual occupation..., far from proving onerous," would afford Hering "no little interest and pleasure."[6] To which Hering replied that, despite his greenness, the curatorship was something he thought he would enjoy.

The *New York Times* reported the news of the Arthur gift, calling it "one of the largest historical collections of clocks and watches in existence."[7] According to the *Times* story, NYU claimed that the bequest was the "nucleus for a proposed museum." The collection was indeed large, but was it distinguished and museum-worthy? Of the 1092 watches that came with the collection, 188 were in cases that Arthur had designed and made or had made. Many of the other watches were without cases, movements only. Not many of the clocks were particularly distinguished, either. It didn't matter; in fact, it was preferred. This would be a study collection, believed to be of value to students of the sciences and of the arts, i.e., to the School of Engineering "as an exposition of mechanical development" (in the words of NYU) and to future artists and art historians by virtue of its case designs and other forms.

Sarah Brown Caudell with the Arthur-made clock that the family calls "Round Head," in her Clearwater, Florida, living room. On the brass dial, it states "Case & Dial by James Arthur, Jersey City, 1874." Underneath that, it says, "Restoration & Movement No. 18, by him, 1906," then next to that in tiny letters, "at works of the Arthur Co. New York." Schinto photo.

The *Times* continued to report on the gift, announcing on May 22, 1927, that the collection would "soon be opened to the public." However, in a memo to chancellor Brown dated about six weeks later, Hering said he still had not unpacked 65 boxes. Writing his memoirs a decade after that, he revealed that he'd had more concerns and misgivings despite his initial, cheery letter of acceptance. "After a brief survey of the Collection I realized that proper care and treatment of it was not possible without a considerable enlargement of space," he recalled. At that point, the collection was "stored in a room and several closets in the Gould Memorial Library" on University Heights. Hering said he told Brown that he could not undertake the curatorship "without a reasonable prospect" of a better arrangement. Hering eventually capitulated, however: "[Brown] asked me… to assume the curatorship tentatively anyhow, and I proceeded upon that basis."[8]

In 1930, when Arthur died at age 89, NYU received the endowment that it had expected.[9] The money was intended to keep the collection "in perfect condition" and to fund the annual lecture series. It was also meant to be spent on acquisitions.

Hering got busy lining up his lecturers. The first was Robert A. Millikan, an experimental physicist teaching at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena who had won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1923. The next three were equally eminent. John C. Merriam was a paleontologist and conservationist best known for his taxonomy of vertebrate fossils at the La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles, as well as his work to extend the reach of the National Park Service. He spoke about the Grand Canyon. Harlow Shapley, head of the Harvard College Observatory, was an astronomer who performed groundbreaking research on stars, broadening our view of the Milky Way and the sun's position within it. James H. Breasted, known as America's first teacher of Egyptology, began working when professional archaeology was in its infancy. Featured on the cover of *Time* magazine on December 14, 1931, he gave his lecture on May 16, 1935, the year that he died.

During the same four-year period, Hering wrote *The Lure of the Clock: An Account of the James Arthur Collection of Clocks and Watches at New York University*. Published by New York University Press in 1932, the slim volume, designed to help celebrate NYU's centenary, was essentially a selective catalog of the collection. Two years later, Hering followed it up with a supplementary pamphlet, *Key to the Watches in the James Arthur Collection of Clocks and Watches at New York University*.

As for the acquisition aspect of his job, throughout his tenure as curator, Hering regularly expanded the collection. In 1933 he bought 14 Japanese clocks to add to the eight that James Arthur had acquired during his Asian travels. In 1934 he bought a circa 1690 Joseph Knibb tall-case clock from dealer Percy Webster in London. In 1935 he bought a replica of an Aztec calendar stone from a museum in Mexico City. In 1936 he bought what he believed to be a clock made by France's Henri de Vic (circa 1599-1671)—to name just a few of his purchases. Some of what he bought was new. While he was in London, a model of Galileo's pendulum clock in the Science Museum at South Kensington caught his eye. When he saw another replica of it at New York's Museum of Science and Industry, he sought out its maker, a local mechanic named Arthur Lindig, who subsequently made one for the Arthur collection.

As word of the collection spread, Hering got offered donations of objects too. In 1928 Caroline Coventry Haynes of Highlands, Monmouth County, New Jersey—a painter, who also had a place on Park Avenue—gave the collection a circa 1700 Friesland musical clock. In 1929 a "Radio World-Time Clock" was donated by its inventor, George B. Gardner of Brooklyn. In 1930 European pocket watches were gifted by Mrs. L.M. Segee of New York, in memory of her husband, Louis Moore Segee. Edward J. Abbott, an NYU alumnus (class of 1894), gave a large gift to his alma mater in 1930: 93 watches, mostly European. Eight were in their original cases; the remainder were movements without cases. Only a few were remarkable, e.g., a circa 1800 automaton watch. Through an opening in the dial, one could see a deer in flight, pursued by a dog and hunter. The three figures whirled past the slot once every minute.

Yet, more than half a dozen years into his tenure, Hering was still in dire need of space and pushing the university to make good on its promise of a building. To this end, in 1935, he commissioned an architect to draw up a "Temple of Time" on University Heights.

A word here about that campus. Most people today think of NYU as being situated downtown, in and around Washington Square in Greenwich Village, not uptown in the Bronx. Washington Square was indeed the university's location in the years immediately following its founding in 1832.[10] But in 1893 the chancellor who preceded Brown—Henry Mitchell MacCracken (1840-1918)—decided that the university should have a real campus with dormitories, green space, and playing fields for sports teams—i.e., "a collegiate atmosphere."[11]

Acquisition of land in the vicinity of 181st Street and above, a "semi-rustic suburb" of the city—on the highest natural point in all of the Bronx—was one bold manifestation of his mission. Another was the massive construction project that took place on the former farmland for the next three decades. The campus's designer was none other than Stanford White, of the legendary architectural firm McKim, Mead & White. Conceived by MacCracken, the plan was inherited by Brown after MacCracken retired in 1910, and he fully embraced it.[12] Meanwhile, in the surrounding borough, a complementary building boom occurred that, in the words of the *Times*, was "breaking all records."[13] Neither MacCracken nor Brown had anticipated it, and, in the words of its centenary history, the university would struggle from Brown's tenure forward into the early 20th century with how to cope with its desire for a secluded campus and "the overwhelming forces of the new city and the new nation surrounding it."[14]

The university was growing its student population too. By the late 1920s it was the largest urban university in the United States in terms of enrollment, surpassing 40,000 in the 1929-30 academic year and destined to grow even more during the Great Depression.[15] Given the numbers, a museum devoted to a collection with relevance to many aspects of university education did not seem like asking too much. In 1933, however, Brown resigned (then shortly died in 1934), and the new chancellor, Harry Woodburn Chase (1883-1955), expressed no interest whatsoever either in the collection or in constructing anybody's vision of a Temple of Time on University Heights or anywhere else.

Parts II, III, and IV will appear in subsequent issues of *M.A.D.*

The clock that once stood in the Brooklyn apothecary, as seen through a window of a building at NYU. Photo courtesy Bob Frishman.

Interior of James Arthur's residence, 357 Clinton Avenue, Clinton Hill, Brooklyn, New York.

Notes

1. New York University Archives, New York University Libraries, Papers of Chancellor Elmer E. Brown, RG 3.0.4., Box 29, Folder 1.
2. James Arthur, *Time and Its Measurements* (Chicago: H.H. Windsor, 1909), p. 18.
3. Ibid., p. 53.
4. New York University Archives, New York University Libraries, Papers of James Arthur Collection of Clocks and Watches, RG 42.1, Box 1, Folder 1.
5. "Dr. Daniel Hering at N.Y.U. 53 Years," *New York Times*, March 25, 1938.
6. New York University Archives, New York University Libraries, Papers of Daniel Webster Hering (hereafter Hering Papers), MC 74, Box 1, Folder 3.
7. "Historical Clocks Presented to N.Y.U.," *New York Times*, December 19, 1926.
8. Hering Papers, MC 74, Box 1, Folder 3.
9. "N.Y.U. Lists Gifts of $258,793 in Year. Largest Sum, $111,342, Comes from Estate of James Arthur," *New York Times*, June 28, 1931.
10. Theodore Francis Jones, editor, *New York University 1832-1932* (New York: New York University Press, 1933), p. 41.
11. Ibid., p. 123.
12. Ibid., pp. 216-17.
13. "Building Boom in Bronx Borough is 'Breaking All Records,'" *New York Times*, March 30, 1924.
14. Jones, op. cit., p. 221.
15. Themis Chronopoulos, "Urban Decline and the Withdrawal of New York University from University Heights, the Bronx," *The Bronx County Historical Society Journal*, Vol. XLVI, Nos. 1 & 2, Spring/Fall 2009, p. 7.
16. E-mail to author from Sarah Brown Caudell, April 8, 2018.