

Rhode Island Clockmaking, from Claggett to Durfee

by Jeanne Schinto

It's often lamented that few young dealers are entering the antiques business. But plenty of young scholars have found academic riches in the field. One of them is Dennis Carr, a doctoral candidate in art history at Yale University. Carr was one of four featured speakers at the annual symposium of the New England chapter of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, Inc. (NAWCC) on Saturday, October 2. The event drew 40 participants to the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in Providence, Rhode Island. The topic was Rhode Island clockmaking.

Carr gave a lecture, illustrated with slides, describing his part in an ongoing study of the entire sweep of Rhode Island furniture making. The project is under the direction of Patricia E. Kane, curator of American decorative arts at the Yale University Art Gallery. The idea of the study, said Carr, is to "map out a landscape of the trade" and to put everybody into context, not just the name brands. A lot of objects are attributed to "a vague Goddard-Townsend school," but nearly 800 other cabinetmakers, joiners, and turners were at work in the state from the colonial period to the early 19th century.

Some of them were literal neighbors of the Newport block-and-shell deities. For example, Benjamin Baker lived down the street from John Townsend (1732-1809). Active in Newport in the 1760's and 1770's, Baker worked for a time in Townsend's shop. Baker is especially interesting because his 80-page account book has survived and is available for study at the Newport Historical Society. The account books of 18th-century cabinetmakers otherwise, no matter where they lived and worked, are scarce. Carr showed one slide of a page from Baker's book noting that he had made a clock case for Caleb Allen in 1765 at a cost of <156>150 (colonial Rhode Island currency).

Carr told the group he thought it fair to say that "a certain mythology has grown up around Goddard and Townsend." He told us in conversation later, "I don't want to diminish them. I just want to give others their historical due." Ironically, he said that the Yale project may lead to fresh knowledge about Goddard's and Townsend's cabinetmaking antecedents. It almost certainly will lead to new information about Rhode Island clockmakers and the predominantly anonymous craftsmen who were part of their enterprises.

Some members of the New England chapter made a point of staying away from this symposium. Their complaint was that the subject covered too much about the "furniture" part of clocks and not enough about clocks' innards. (Last year's topic was electric horology with plenty of technical content for most clock enthusiasts.) Symposium organizer Bob Frishman, the chapter's past president, made no apologies for the choice. "We're principally on the outsides of the clocks today," he said in his remarks to the group. In the wider world of antiques, clocks are furniture, and no one would argue that clockmakers in our smallest state have ever been given their scholarly due.

Certainly the clocks in the RISD museum are on display "in the context of furniture," said Thomas S. Michie, decorative arts curator of that museum. This is true particularly of the clocks in Pendleton House, a Georgian-style mansion built to comply with a bequest to the museum from Charles L. Pendleton (1846-1904). Pendleton was the man who enabled RISD to become a museum leader. When Pendleton House opened in 1906, it was the first museum wing dedicated to the exhibition of American decorative arts in this country. Pendleton's idea of a house for his collection logically followed another radical notion of his. He introduced to collectors a whole new way of displaying decorative arts. Rather than lining them up like so many natural history specimens, he put them in aesthetically pleasing arrangements. It is, of course, the way we're used to seeing them displayed today.

Pendleton, a Rhode Island native, was also famous as a dealer and a gambler. In some instances he may have combined the two skills. There are, to put it nicely, some questionable pieces in Pendleton House. "I don't rush to call them fakes," said Michie. Instead, he used the mitigating term "revivals." In his talk Michie compared "real" versus "revival" using slides for side-by-side comparisons. For example, he showed a real carved shell and a revival shell. His stated aim was "not to show how bad the revival is but how good it is."

Michie has concluded that Pendleton "probably" wasn't trying to deceive. "He probably commissioned these pieces, but we don't know for sure." Deciding whether something in the collection is genuine or a revival is difficult, said Michie, "so I'm glad that I can walk away and come back to take a look another day." Looking at the objects is virtually the only research methodology the museum has. "There are very few documents," Michie said. "The collection remains the best means to its interpretation."

One Rhode Island man who well understood that clocks are furniture—the bigger and heavier the better—was Pendleton's executor, Walter H. Durfee (1857-1939). Owen Burt of Rochester, Michigan, spoke to the group about Durfee's career. A former national office holder of the NAWCC, Burt is currently a team member of the NAWCC's "Answer Box," a column published in the organization's bimonthly *Bulletin*. Burt's talk was taken largely from an article he wrote about Durfee for the *Bulletin*. As Burt noted, although Pendleton and Durfee were briefly partners in the antiques business ("partners in crime" was Michie's phrase), Durfee alone reintroduced the tall clock to the American public.

Readers may be surprised to learn that the history of tall clock popularity in this country does not trace one unbroken line from David Rittenhouse to Howard Miller. After the patent timepiece (banjo clock) was invented by Simon Willard in 1802, the tall clock industry stalled. When wooden works shelf clocks came along in the 1820's, the tall clock business was virtually extinguished as people switched to the smaller and cheaper alternatives. Between the 1830's and 1890's, tall clocks were considered old-fashioned, even reviled, and many of them went into landfills.

When Providence-born Durfee revived the style, he did so by marketing a larger, grander, and more embellished version and by capitalizing on the nostalgia factor that the old timekeepers had come to represent. Their common nickname, grandfather clock, was coined just prior to the Durfee era when the sheet music for the song *My Grandfather's Clock* by Henry Clay Work was published in 1876. (Work's wife was the granddaughter of the original grandfather who owned a tall-case clock.)

Burt told symposium participants how to recognize a Durfee tall clock. They're hard to miss. In huge (often nearly 9' tall) ornately carved mahogany cases they usually have three-weight, moon-phase, British-made movements that chime on a five- or nine-tube system. "Durfee went to extremes," said Burt.

The tubes were patented by their British manufacturer, named Harrington. Durfee obtained the rights as sole agent in the United States for the Harrington tubes, but in 1904 he lost a court case that challenged his monopoly. "And by 1908," said Burt, "every clockmaker in America" (or so it seemed) "had gotten into the chiming hall clock business."

Yes, that's "hall" not "tall" clock, because most people put them in their foyers where ceilings could accommodate their height. In auction catalogs today they're usually described that way, and they are going up in value both at public and private sales. At Northeast Auctions in Manchester, New Hampshire, on March 6 and 7, 2004, a Durfee hall clock sold for \$29,900, an auction record. Within the same year, one sold privately for \$50,000.

Durfee exited the hall clock business after losing the court case. He was being hopelessly undersold. He began to sell reproduction banjos, lyre clocks, and girandoles. Shortly before Durfee died, his nephew joined the firm. Burt referred to Chester Durfee's tenure, 1930 to 1950, as a "gray area" and told collectors to be wary. Chester "had a tendency to paint Walter's name on a few clocks," said Burt.

Paul J. Foley was the only speaker of the day who went behind the dial, so to speak. Author of *Willard's Patent Time Pieces: A History of the Weight-Driven Banjo Clock 1800-1900* (2002), Foley presented a slide lecture showing how banjo clocks made by David Williams (1769-1823) of Newport differ from those made in Roxbury and Boston by the Willards and others. The Williams examples, made between 1815 and 1820, are not easily identified by a signature, because Williams usually signed on the throat glass, not the dial. If the glass broke, there went his name.

The cases of Williams clocks have wide frames, often made of flat mahogany but also gild and (rarely) reeded mahogany. They all have sharp-edged bezels. A wide, squat ogee chimney holds each clock's top finial in place. The clock's head cutout is heavy and of equal thickness all around. Its pendulum tie-down is mounted above rather than below the pendulum bob.

From Foley's perspective, however, the biggest difference of all lies with the movement. Williams's are in the shape of an "A." Virtually all other banjo movements are rectangular. Such a radical variation may have been an attempt by Williams to bypass Simon Willard's patent, Foley surmised. Or it could merely have been a manifestation of Williams's own genius.

What Foley could state emphatically excited those more interested in cabinetmaking history than horology. While no Willard clock case makers are known, Williams's cases can be attributed by way of Newport probate records to John Young (1797-1884) of Newport. In records for 1823 Foley found an unpaid bill signed by Young for "32 mahogany timepiece cases." Young left no signed furniture that has been identified, but the characteristics of his clock case making may lead new scholars to them in the future.

For more information about the NAWCC, its chapters, and its programs, call (717) 684-8261 or see the Web site (www.nawcc.org). For more information about the RISD Museum of Art, call (401) 454-6500 or see the Web site (www.risd.edu).