



THE TALL CASE CLOCK

Presented by Leslie Chiarello

August 11, 2010

Dumbarton House

Washington, D.C.

Welcome to Dumbarton House! Thank you for coming to this Collections Conversation. It is my privilege today to tell you about a treasure in the Dumbarton House collection – a circa 1800 Aaron Willard tall case clock. The more I learned about this endearing form, the easier it was to understand the significant role clocks like this played in the relatively small number of early 19th Century households able to afford to them.

During the next half hour we'll discuss a few of the intricate details of this special piece, but more importantly I want you to leave here knowing that tall case clocks were cherished, that they were the most prized of all furnishings in a circa 1800 home, and that determining the attribution of a 210 year-old clock is at best an extremely inexact science.



One of the most important principals of interior design is that every room needs a focal point. But if ever something could be defined as the focal point of an entire house – circa 1800, that is - chances are it would be a tall case clock.

In addition to being coveted objects in places of honor adorning best parlors and staircase landings of Federal period homes, tall case clocks possessed certain anthropomorphic qualities that allowed them to be viewed as a treasured member of the family. In the January, 1923 issue of *The Magazine Antiques*, Mr. Eben Howard Gay wrote “that unlike other antiques, the clock is peculiarly **alive** – its friendly face, peaceful tick and faithful record of the hours over generations of time” created a vital bond between past and present. Indeed, the form of the tall case clock more than alludes to the form of the human body – having feet, a waist, hands and a face framed by a bonnet, as well as an audible voice. And, like pets, children, and even certain spouses, clocks required constant care to stay functional.

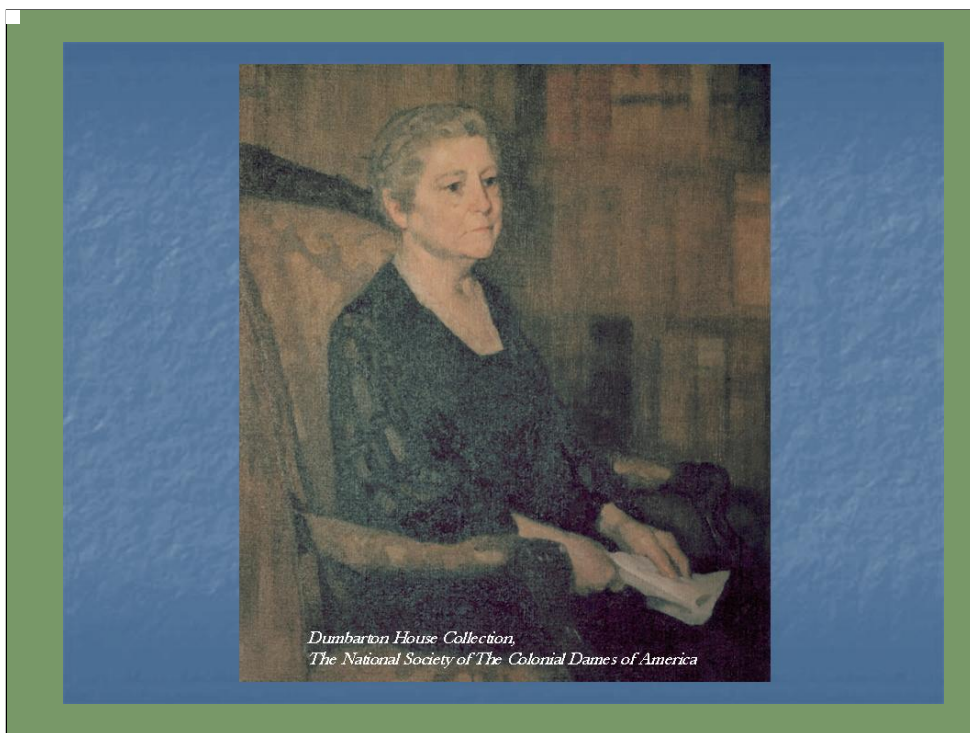
Tall case clocks were considered to be luxury items – the most expensive object that could be found in an 18th or early 19th Century household. And little attempt was made by most clock artisans to appeal to the masses – at least until around 1820. As an example: a group of ten inventories taken of prosperous New York households from 1800-1820 containing 482 chairs listed but one clock.

Though not that many were made – those that were tended to remain in families. According to Thomas Michie, “like family portraits clocks conferred ancestral legitimacy and, if wound, provided both audible and tangible continuity to future generations of owners.”



Before we continue – just a brief description of the Dumbarton House clock: it has a Roxbury type case – “Roxbury” type cases are characterized by pierced, spaghetti-like fretwork ornamenting the hood, and three brass steepletop finials, above an arched glazed door, flanked by fluted colonettes on the hood, and fluted quarter columns on the waist, both set with brass stop-fluting. There is maple and string inlay on the waist, and checkered inlay on the plinth base. Roxbury clocks are named after the Boston neighborhood where they were produced, and where Aaron Willard and his brother Simon both had shops.

Here we can better see the fretwork, finials, and plinth base with checkered inlay. On the right is a detail of its brass stop-fluted quarter columns.



This clock is part of the Dumbarton House collection today because of the generosity of Mrs. Joseph Rucker Lamar. From what I understand, Mrs. Lamar's role in leading the National Society of Colonial Dames of America during the first decades of the 20th Century, as well as her vision in both identifying and acquiring Dumbarton House for the Dames' national headquarters in 1928 cannot be overstated.



In 1908, a round of golf at a country club in Augusta, Georgia between former Georgia Supreme Court Justice Joseph Rucker Lamar and President Taft led to Justice Lamar's nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court two years later. Following swift Senate confirmation, the Lamars moved to Washington, where the clock graced their New Hampshire Avenue home for the next five years. After Justice Lamar's death in 1916, at the age of 58, Mrs. Lamar returned to Georgia but her beautiful tall case clock was to become one of the original objects on view here, when Dumbarton House first opened to the public as a museum in 1932.

Digging just a little deeper into the lives of the Lamars, I found an article published in the May 24th 1914 New York Times that described the Lamar residence as comfortable and handsome, and a place where a great deal of entertaining took place. The article went on to say that "despite the formalities of the social life they are obliged to lead in Washington, Justice and Mrs. Lamar remain extremely simple in their manner" and that the Lamar's old Georgia friends unanimously agreed that "neither the Supreme Court Justice nor his wife is the least bit spoiled on account of the former's high station."



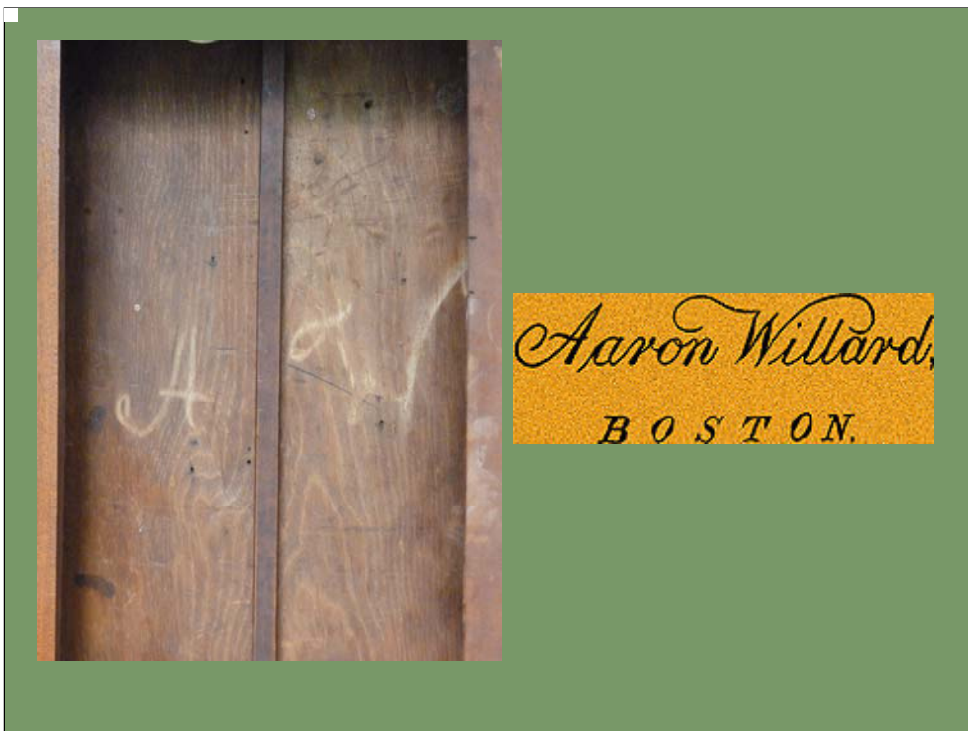
Aaron Willard
1757 - 1844



Willard Family Homestead
circa 1718
North Grafton, Massachusetts

As I mentioned a minute ago, the Dumbarton House tall case clock is attributed to Aaron Willard. Simply put, Aaron Willard and his brother Simon were two of the most esteemed clockmakers *ever*. Before we delve more into the lives of the two brothers, I wanted to give you just a bit of background on the American clock making industry. By 1750, skilled clockmakers were working in and around Philadelphia, and between 1750 and 1800 Central Connecticut grew into a clock making center. From Central Connecticut, the clock making art gravitated to Massachusetts, and to be more specific, to the town of North Grafton, where Aaron and Simon as well as their brothers Benjamin and Ephraim were raised and apprenticed as clockmakers.

It is important to keep in mind that although the clock we're discussing today is said to be attributed to Aaron Willard, and though his name is on the dial, it took at least three artisans to make a tall case clock: a complete clock required a great deal of specialized labor – the clockmaker who needed to be a skilled metalworker produced the movement, another specialist painted or engraved the dial, and then the cabinetmaker who made the case. There also would've been an extra charge for glazing, or the addition of glass to protect the clock face.

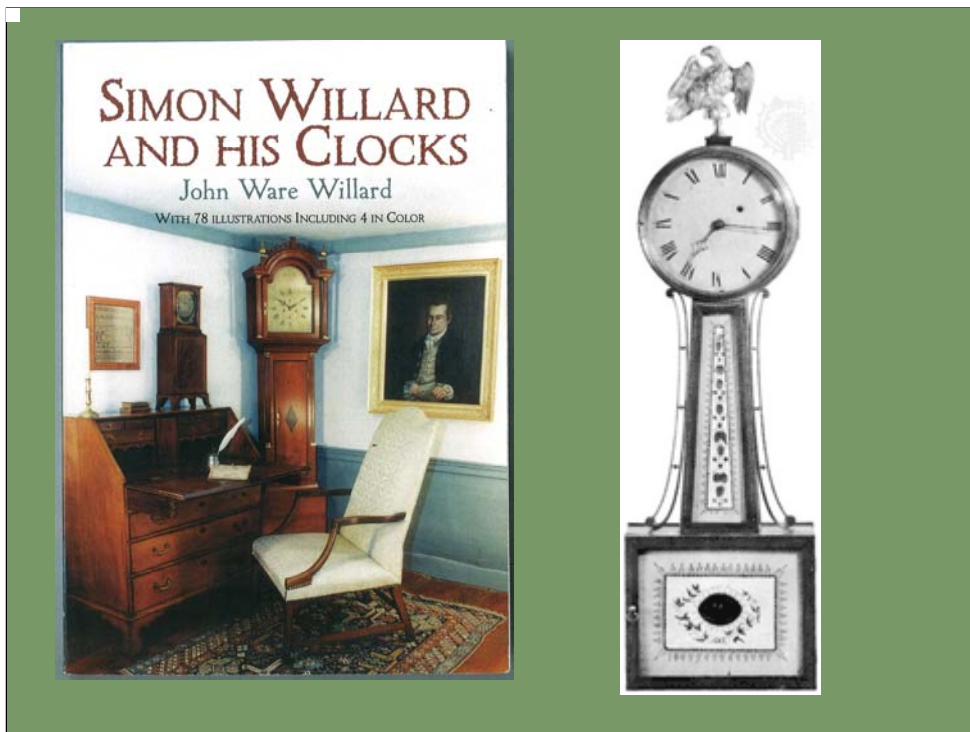


Early in their careers, both Aaron and Simon pedaled their clocks door-to-door around Boston – Aaron taking the South Shore, and Simon the North Shore. The brothers established their businesses independent of one another. Slightly older Simon opened shop in the Roxbury section of Boston in 1780, and Aaron followed suit a short time later – opening his own shop near Simon's, in Roxbury, but later moving to Boston where he started a small factory.

The Willard brothers quickly developed a stellar reputation for creating extremely high quality clocks – so much so, that Willard clocks invited widespread counterfeiting. Meanwhile, in both Aaron and Simon's shops, little if any attempt was made to produce an inexpensive clock with wooden movements, as had become the trend in Connecticut.

It is written that Aaron Willard was known to have been the less inventive, but with a greater business sense than brother Simon. Aaron sold more clocks than Simon, which is why more of them survive today.

Aaron Willard remained active making clocks until 1823, when his son Aaron Jr. took over his shop.



In 1802, Simon patented a new style of clock – commonly known as a “banjo” clock. His invention led to an invitation by Thomas Jefferson to make a clock for the University of Virginia, as well as three clocks for the U. S. Capitol building. And if looking elsewhere in this city for an Aaron Willard tall case clock, one can be found in the White House, outside of the family dining room.

26 PINE CUPBOARDS.

	£.	s.	d.	£.	s.	d.	£.	s.	d.
Single pine cupboard, about four feet high and three feet wide				2	0	0	0	15	0
The prices to any of the cupboards, are without painting or glazing									
CLOCK CASES.									
Clock cases with square head and corners	6	0	0	4	0	0	1	15	0
Ditto, with scroll pediment head, without fret, dentils or carved work, and square corners	8	0	0	5	0	0	2	5	0
Ditto, with column corners	10	0	0	7	0	0	3	0	0
Ditto, with fret, dentils, shield, roses and blazes	12	0	0	9	0	0	4	0	0
Ditto, without fret or dentils	11	0	0	8	0	0	3	5	0
The above prices without glazing.									

CRADLE PLAIN without carving	2	15	0	1	10	0	0	12	6

The basic form of tall clock cases changed slowly. Here we see a page from the 1772 Philadelphia Furniture Price Guide, listing options available for clock cases and the cost connected with each option: the first column lists the cost for cases and details made from mahogany, the second column – walnut. The third column lists the journeyman cabinetmaker's wages for each line item. This book was a very early example of price fixing, as it reportedly minimized competition – both among master craftsmen, as well as between the masters and their journeymen.

Looking at the price list and keeping in mind that the clock movement was the most expensive part, those in the market for a tall case during the 18th Century would've been able to choose between a less expensive flat head case or a scrolled pediment head, and from details including with or without fret, dentils, shields, roses and blazes. We can also see that quarter columns added significantly to the cost.

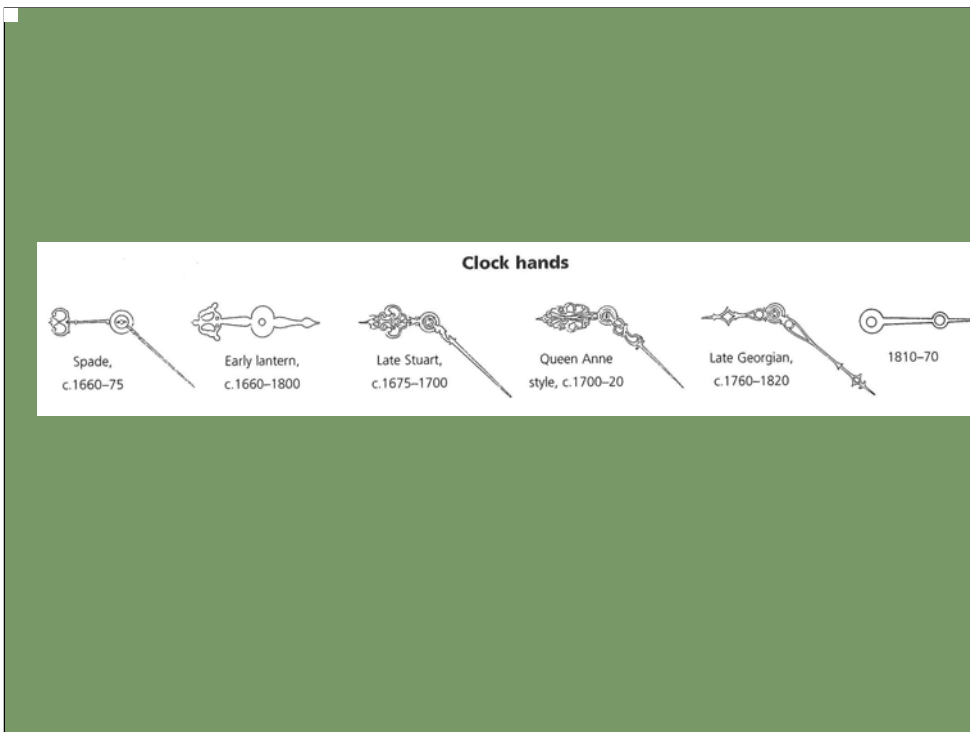
The fact that design elements evolved at a snail's pace is something that can be traced to the English guild system, which highly discouraged innovation. So when the first clockmakers arrived in the colonies from England in the 17th Century, they brought with them not only their technical expertise in clock movement mechanics and clock case construction, but also a deep-rooted resistance to change.



Further reinforcing the notion that design elements of American clocks changed more gradually than they did in other types of cabinetwork, an article in *The Magazine Antiques* August 1935 issue summarized this apparent aversion to following the latest trend this way:

“Major forms and proportions, as well as the contours of moldings, may remain virtually unaltered throughout a long succession of years, sensitiveness to current modes being betrayed only in minor details of ornament. At the same time it should be observed that clock cases tend to exhibit, more or less distinctly, certain local characteristics whereby the general source of even a tenantless specimen may be determined.” So while most design details remained essentially the same from the mid to late 18th Century, one noteworthy modification can be seen in the treatment of the base section. Here we see three New England clocks with very different proportions – from the base being shorter than it is wide, to the base growing considerably taller than it is wide. As we see with the clock in the middle compared to the clock on the right, this was done by adjusting the height of the waist case.

Some design components were universal, such as the employment of three finials, or in early examples, two finials and a central cartouche made of turned wood. Also, the use of colonettes, or diminutive columns, consisting of a base, shaft and capital, as an envisioned support system of the bonnet hood.



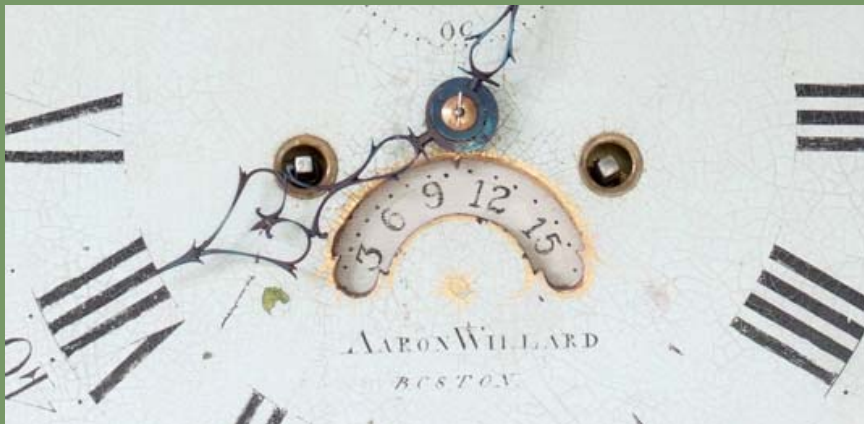
And here we can see the subtle changes in the style of clock hands . . . With our Dumbarton House hands fitting in nicely with the Late Georgian example.



Before 1770, most English and American dials were made of brass. After 1770 dials were made of iron plate, and either enameled or painted white. With a white background, the clock face transformed itself into an artist's canvas, as hand painting of clock faces became its own distinct art form. Clock face artists frequently signed their work on the back of the dial.

Early in the development of mechanical clocks, faces had only an hour hand. In actuality, the concept of keeping exact time wasn't all that important before the advent of train travel; train schedules made the synchronization of clocks a necessity. As clock faces became more sophisticated, first a minute hand was added – and then eventually a second hand – as we see here, below the XII.

Traditionally, tall case clocks were made with either an eight-day movement, or a 30 hour movement. Eight-day clocks as we have upstairs required winding just once a week, while lower priced 30-hour clocks had to be wound daily.

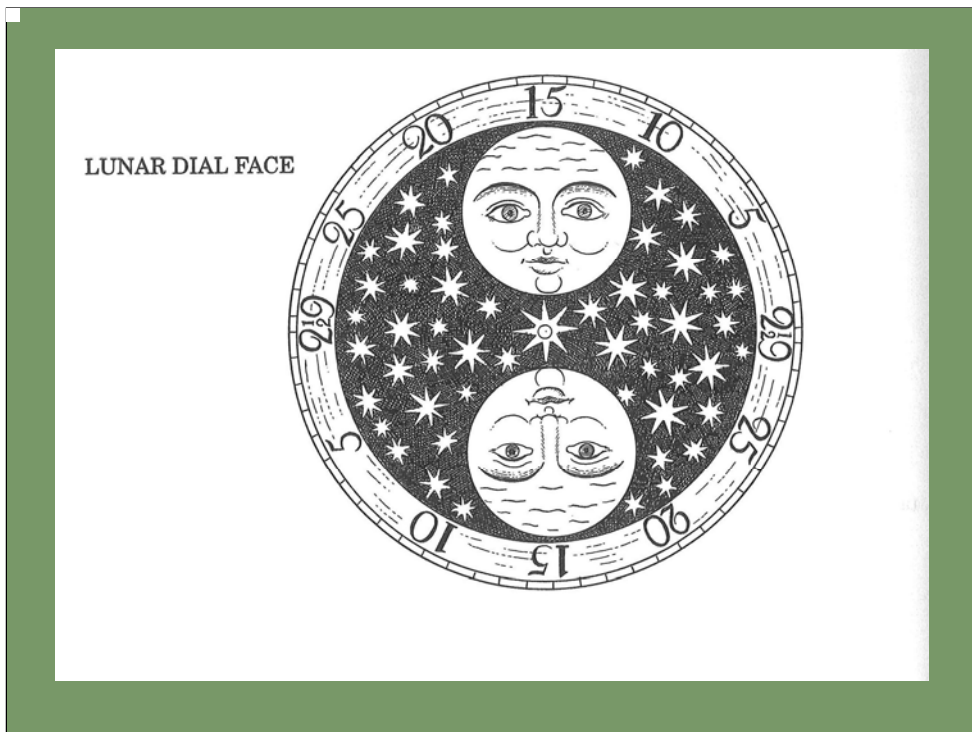


Taking a closer look at the lower half of the dial, we see two winding holes along with an opening to show the day of the month. One hole was for winding the weight that drove the pendulum, and the other was to wind the striking mechanism – normally a bell or chimes.

In some cases, 30-hour clocks – which required only one keyhole – were made with a false second keyhole. The purpose of the faux keyhole was to fool people admiring the clock into thinking that the owners of the clock were able to afford the more expensive 8-day clock.



The moon attachment was an English invention to illustrate the age of the moon, counting from the first day of the new moon. Farmers used the lunar calendar to determine the best time for planting new crops, and sailors used the lunar calendar to estimate the movements of the tides. And of course, fancy movements such as this, showing dates and phases of the moon were far more desirable than their plainer counterparts . . .



Here is an illustration of the moon attachment without the clock face – it was just a sheet of metal that made one complete revolution every two months.



Here we see that one of the moons emerges from behind the disk on the left; it then revolves and sinks behind the disk on the right . . .



. . . Rotating the dial we find a star filled sky.



. . . And on the reverse side is the the seldom seen barn.



Handmade movements of federal period clocks differed little from earlier prototypes.

Most tall case clocks are cable-driven, meaning that the weights are suspended by cables wrapped around a pulley mounted to the top of each weight . . .



. . . And here we see the weights and pendulum. Early clocks were often made with a small wooden case that was mounted on a high shelf or bracket, with the weights hanging below the clock, out in the open. The form of the tall case then developed organically, to protect the movement from damage and dust, and to house the weights and pendulum. In general, it was the clockmaker who had control of the proportions and dimensions and general aesthetics of a case.



One of the main reasons for my research of this clock was to see if just possibly, the Dumbarton House case could've come from the Boston cabinetmaking shop of John and Thomas Seymour.

With this in mind, and for the purpose of comparison, I've placed an image of our unidentified-maker tall case between two cases attributed to the Seymours' shop.

From the esteemed author and furniture scholar Dr. Oscar Fitzgerald, I learned that one's initial reaction to a thing is considered essential to the connoisseurship process. But perhaps to caution anyone from professing to have the dubious super human power of cabinetmaker identification, another revered author and furniture scholar - Charles F. Montgomery - wrote that "attribution of an object is at best *tentative*." Nevertheless, I decided yes – absolutely it was worth getting in touch with another noted furniture scholar named Robert Mussey to see if he might possibly be willing to offer an opinion on our piece.

In his book, The Furniture Masterworks of John and Thomas Seymour, Mr. Mussey lists several construction details unique to tall cases made by the Seymours . . .



Number 1 – Each side board of the bonnet is joined to its corresponding base board with two wide, double through tenons, each wedged securely.



Number 2 – Support blocks for the works are rabbeted into the upper ends of the case sides.



Number 3 – Sound holes in the bonnet sides are arched at the top.



Number 4 – glue blocking. Inside the waist case, three layers of blocks, rounded on projecting interior corners, and cut in 4 ½ inch segments.

The reason for looking at details like these, instead of decorative exterior case details, such as string inlay, fretwork, finials or stop-fluted quarter columns is this: master cabinetmakers tended to use the same method of construction for each piece. *So it is absolutely in these details that clues hide.*

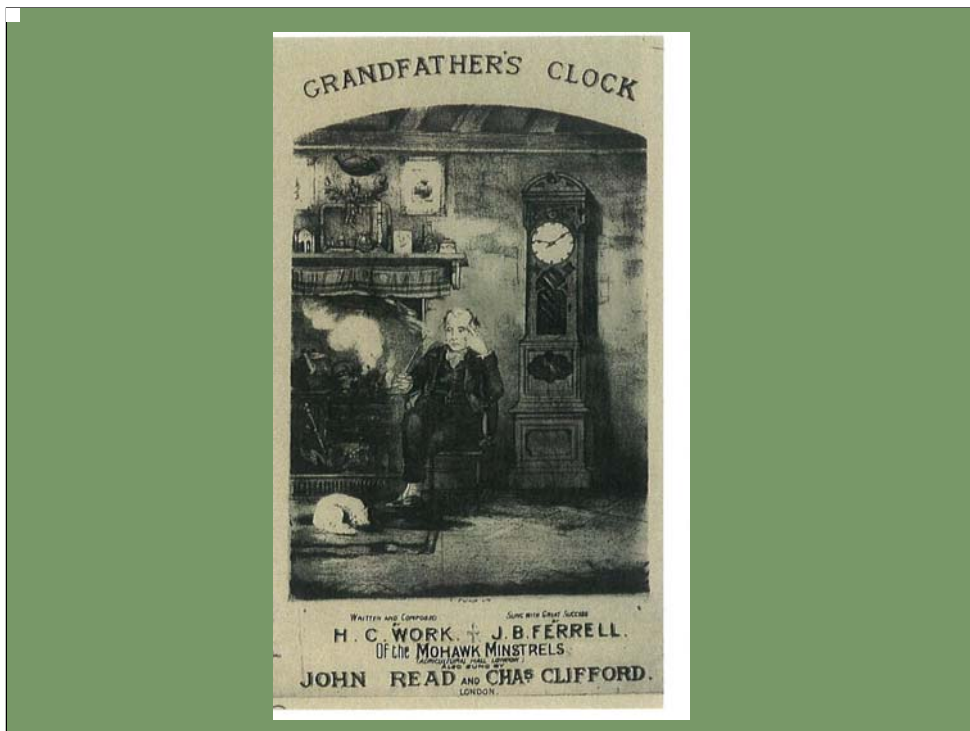


Restoration work done to the clock's ogee bracket feet in 1996 hindered my investigation – as feet on Seymours cases provide perhaps the most important clue. Feet on tall cases like this made by John or Thomas Seymour were invariably angled at eight degrees. Because the feet of our subject case were restored, we don't know if they were angled or not when this case was new 210 years ago.



And although the Dumbarton House case is constructed of crotch mahogany - just as any tall case coming from the Seymours' Boston shop most certainly would've been - according to Mr. Mussey, the use of crotch mahogany veneers was universal among Boston cabinet makers making tall cases. Mr. Mussey agreed that the use on the bonnet of through tenons was definitely characteristic of the Seymours' work, as were the arched side lights. But without a template or pattern of the exact method used by the Seymours, there just wasn't enough information for Mr. Mussey to conclude that the Dumbarton House case was, or *wasn't* from the Seymours' shop.

And this is the bottom line with the problem of attribution in general! Without a label, or bill of sale or inscription, it's next to impossible to pin a piece to a particular cabinetmaker with certainty.



Lastly, the more common terminology of Grandfather clock for the tall case clock form stemmed from a song written by Henry Clay Work during the Victorian era: "My Grandfather's Clock" was one of the two most popular songs of 1876. As for the story behind the song, two brothers were managers of an English hotel during the mid 19th Century. When the first brother died, their beloved tall case clock began to lose time, and when the second brother died at the age of 90, the clock stopped ticking all together. Another well-known allusion to this form can be found in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem of 1845, *The Old Clock at the Top of the Stairs*, in which a tall case clock is described as a very vocal witness to eternity. As you will notice when we take a look upstairs in just a few minutes, from an interior design standpoint, Mr. Longfellow's placement of the tall clock in his poem could not have been more astute! Thank you and I hope you'll be able to stay to take a peek at our clock, which just returned from conservation this morning . . .

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