



SW Chapter 15

The Legacy of the Ogee Clock ©

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Today we consider the history of the ogee clock. Experts have written countless articles in the trade magazines describing the many varieties and differences of ogee clocks. They have catalogued the cases, the wood and brass movements, weight driven and spring driven, the tablet designs, the dials, and the inside labels.

This presentation will place ogee clocks and their makers in the perspective of historical events. The clock making industry did not operate in a bubble, a vacuum, or in isolation from the rest of the world. Indeed, the clock industry was a driving force in the engine of economic development throughout America and the manufacturing industry.

Ogee clocks. You either love them or you hate them. When you've seen one, you've seen them all. They are boring, uncomplicated, noisy, and by today's standards, are poor time keepers. But, they represent a pivotal moment in the history of clock making, and ushered in vast changes in the way each human being in America experienced the passing of time. Time shifted from being a commodity of the wealthy and educated few, and became a tool for social mobility and productivity for all Americans. Today, the ticking clock holds sway over modern life in such a way that it causes us to make the most of each moment, or it drives us to frenzy in the rat race of meeting deadlines.

In 1966, Roger Burlingame, author of Dictator Clock, asks the question, "Are we completely free to do whatever we want when we want to do it?" Admitting the obvious, he continues, "The fact is, like it or not, a dictator rules the land. He

regiments our lives as rigidly as any king or emperor or president who ever lived. This dictator controls the behavior of men, women, and children. He never lets us alone. He keeps after us day and night, saying: 'Do this now; this very minute!' Yet none of us would want to get along without him. Without him in this modern world, we should be lost. The whole structure of our civilization would collapse. That dictator is the automatic machine we use for the measurement of time. We call it a clock, a watch, or a chronometer. Perhaps nowhere in the world has Dictator Clock become more powerful than in the United States. Today everyone is time-conscious. Everything has to be done exactly on time. When do I do this, and when do I do tha...?"

Wait a minute! Hold everything, Mr. Burlingame! You are far behind the times. Mankind was obsessed with time long before you, or I, were a twinkle in Father Time's eye. Take a look back in time to the middle of the eighteenth century of early American colonial life. Dictator Clock was relentlessly driving the colonists toward a revolution of historic proportions. Turn back the hands of time and hear our fore fathers invoke time to mark moments in their march for independence.

Benjamin Franklin declared, "It's high time we unfetter ourselves from the apron strings of Mother Britain!" There was growing outrage over the audacity of the British Parliament to pass notorious acts of taxation without representation. "It's time for a Boston Tea Party," Samuel Adams exhorted thirty men dressed as Mohawk Indians. When Paul Revere learned that the British were coming, time was of the essence as he raced to light two lanterns in the church tower.

Independence from British tyranny over everything from tea, to time, and tea-time was fanning the flames of industry in the manufacture of American goods which would challenge the European imports. British supremacy in the making of fine clocks for the wealthy few had remained unchallenged in the colonies. However, immigrant clockmakers would establish their position as purveyors of excellent timepieces and usher in a great American industry to supply colonial demands for affordable clocks. Yes, Dictator Clock was alive and well in the population centers of colonial America.

"Made in America" became a driving force in the development of factories in cities throughout the thirteen fledging colonies learning how to become the United States of America. The westward migration meant that tools, cloth, shoes, spinning wheels, pots and pans, candle holders, wagons, and muskets would have to be manufactured on a larger scale to supply the great demand for domestic goods. We call it mass production.

Before 1798, muskets were made one at a time by skilled craftsmen. Eli Whitney, inventor of the cotton gin, changed all of that when he developed machines, powered by a water wheel, that could turn out identical parts by the thousands. Whitney sought out and was granted a government contract to make 10,000 muskets with interchangeable parts to be delivered in two years. He set about to make his own machinery for the manufacturing processes. Although he fell short of meeting the

terms of the contract, he accomplished far more in the development of a manufacturing system that would transform how we make things.

Industries grew out of public demand for products. One group of men who had given up farming altogether, had gone into the business of peddling. These Yankee peddlers, as they were referred to, sold goods produced in the cities to the frontier settlers throughout the colonies. They peddled brooms, buttons, pins, coffee grinders, tin ware, copper pots; everything that might be needed in the frontier wilderness. In the lonely cabins where settlers rarely had visitors, Yankee peddlers from Connecticut were a welcome sight. These circuit travelers, riding on horseback and dragging rickety carts or wagons, brought much needed goods to the colonists. As they gathered around the hand hewn tables and fireside hearths of hospitable cabin families, they brought news of the outside world, gossip, tall stories, friendliness, and cheer.

When the Yankee peddlers came home after their long travels, they brought back news of what the wilderness settlers wanted most. One fall day a returning peddler announced that the thing the people in the lonely frontier cabins wanted most was clocks. Clocks! They want clocks? How could poor cabin dwellers possibly want an expensive clock? Clocks were considered luxury items. Only city folk need clocks. Farmers don't need clocks. The rooster crows. The sun rises, the sun sets. In between there is high noon and the occasional full moon on a cloudless night. There is a time to cultivate, a time to plant, a time to harvest, a time for babies, a time to celebrate, a time for praying, a time for dying, and yes, a time for mourning. Who needs a clock to govern the processes of natural events or human emotions? Yankee peddler, did you truly say, "They want clocks?"

There was a clockmaker in Windsor, Connecticut, named Eli Terry who responded, "They want clocks? Then they shall have clocks!" Terry was a firm believer in the precepts of the Declaration of Independence. If the words, "All men are created equal," meant anything, then everyone in America is entitled to own a clock. If a rich Boston merchant could own a clock, why not a poor frontiersman?

After the American Revolution, brass was in short supply and difficult to obtain. George Washington, leading the colonial armies, had fought tough battles against the British from 1776 to 1783. The fight for independence depleted the resources of brass, silver, zinc, copper, and iron. Only a few clockmakers from the old country had these materials to ply their trade. Their clients were men of wealth who could afford expensive clocks made from cast brass. These clocks were individually crafted by artisans in Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and New York. Men like the English clockmaker, Thomas Harland, had come to America and set up shop in the town of Norwich, Connecticut. He hired young men to apprentice in the trade; gave them food and lodging. One of these young men was Daniel Burnap, who, when he finished his five year apprenticeship, set up his own shop and became one of America's earliest and most celebrated clockmakers. It was to Mr. Burnap that Eli Terry, age fourteen, was apprenticed. After working for Burnap and others for six years, Terry launched his own business and made his first wood works clock entirely by hand when

he was twenty. Even so, his time had not yet come. The poor settlers living in frontier cabins would not have clocks until after 1792.

William J. Bennett, in his best-selling book, America, sub-titled, The Last Best Hope, sets this scene in New York: “George Washington stood on the north portico of Mount Vernon overlooking the majestic Potomac River, where, on April 14, 1789, he received word that the Electoral College had unanimously chosen him to be the new republic’s first president. On April 30, 1789, George Washington took the presidential oath of office.” Bennett briefly summarizes, “The newly independent nation had struggled to shape a durable form of government that would maximize every citizen’s liberty and protect their unalienable rights.”

This was the historical backdrop when Eli Terry began to implement his plan to mass produce clocks. In the decade following the inauguration of the first president, Terry had been developing his business of making clocks for city dwellers. By 1792, he had learned of Whitney’s use of water wheels to power machinery for making interchangeable parts for thousands of muskets. Terry’s declaration to the Yankee peddler, “They shall have clocks,” would soon be fulfilled. In 1803, Eli Terry bought a mill which was powered by a waterwheel and installed a set of machines adapted to the production of clock parts. These parts were not to be made of expensive brass, but rather wood, iron, and a small bit of brass.

The New England countryside was heavily forested with oak, cherry, and laurel trees, the chosen woods for clock plates, wheels, and pinions. While some plates were made from imported mahogany, by and large, Terry’s plates would be made from quarter sawn oak which was less prone to warp. Plain sawn oak was notorious for its instability in the humidity of the colonies. Seasoned cherry had a tight grain for making wheels, and laurel was dense and hard for making pinions. Drawing on this relatively cheap and plentiful supply of raw materials, Terry, in 1807, confidently took on a contract with a Yankee peddler to manufacture four thousand clocks in three years. America had its first clock factory, tooled for mass production. Wilderness cabins would finally have the comforting steady beat of a clock ticking out the seconds and clanging the hours. Never mind that setting the clock to the “correct” time was hardly possible. When the rooster heralded the rising of the sun, it must be close to the hour of six.

1792 not only marked the beginning of industrial expansion toward mass production, it marked the beginning of George Washington’s second term as President. This important correlation helps to explain the American free spirit in building factories and making products for the ever growing market on the frontier. The transition from colonial infancy to a new born nation in the Washington era brought a sense of stability, a surge of energy, and a search for opportunities to exploit the new found liberties. By the time Eli Terry had forged the beginnings of clock manufacturing, Thomas Jefferson had become the second president of the republic. Lewis and Clark had been dispatched to map the Great Northwest Passage. The War of 1812 is looming on the horizon.

Enter Chauncey Jerome, a native of Canaan, Connecticut, the son of a poor blacksmith. Chauncey Jerome was eleven years of age when his father died. He wandered about Connecticut doing odd jobs for farmers. Dissatisfied with the life of a wandering field hand, he landed in Plymouth, the leading clock center in Connecticut. Jerome apprenticed with a cabinet maker for a few years, trimming out home interiors and making clock cases. Soon after the end of the War of 1812, he was employed by Eli Terry to learn the business of clock making. Together, this team of clockmakers became the foremost producers of inexpensive clocks for the ever growing market. Terry and Jerome were innovators. Their success sparked the success of sub-industries in forestry and lumber milling; foundries and sheet metal. Ultimately, however, Terry's great achievement in the mass production of wood works clocks would be overshadowed by the monumental successes of Chauncey Jerome and his cheap brass works clocks.

Lumber mills and cabinet shops became thriving industries. The great demand for household furnishings and interior moldings for home building propelled the skilled cabinet makers into lucrative arrangements with clock makers. Chauncey Jerome had early on seen the need for a simple clock case that would depart from the ornate pillar and scroll design of Eli Terry. Jerome invested in a mill that produced moldings which were used in framing looking glasses and paintings. By 1825, Jerome had convinced Terry to introduce a new clock design for his wood works clocks. This ushered in the era of the clock style known as the ogee clock.

Ogee clocks. Here we are at last. As we have seen, they came into being because men like Terry and Jerome had a vision for bringing affordable clocks to the common people. We also know that they were seeking their fortunes in the business of making good clocks. Ogee clocks began as thirty hour, weight driven, wood works clocks. Growing demands for eight day clocks compelled the clock industry to modify the works to achieve eight day running times. Nonetheless, thirty hour wood works clocks far out number the eight day versions.

Jerome's investment in the molding mill paid off in modest profits as a result of the need for ogee molding. Ogee clocks were made in various sizes from 15 inches high to 34 inches high. Most were 26 inches high. To make a 26 inch ogee clock case required six feet of ogee molding. The mills produced up to 12 foot lengths of walnut, mahogany, oak, and rosewood veneered ogee molding. The base wood under the veneer was generally the cheaper and more plentiful wood, poplar. The measured molding lengths were cut at 45 degrees for joining at the corners to form the front of the case.

The ogee is an architectural feature. It is a double curve with the shape of an elongated S; a molding having in profile an S-shaped curve. It is found the world over in all manner of applications. So pleasing to the eye is its shape, that often it is compared to the beauty of the Queen Anne form found in the legs of fine furniture. The use of the ogee shape in clock cases was an instant success.

Meanwhile, America is almost crippled from its growing pains. The Lewis and Clark expedition is highly successful. The Louisiana Purchase adds great land mass which must be settled and protected. Alexander Hamilton is killed in a duel with Aaron Burr. The Battle of New Orleans propels “Old Hickory”, Andrew Jackson, into national prominence and ultimately to the presidency. These exciting events in American history set the stage for a burgeoning clock industry. Pillar and scroll clocks, along with Chippendale, Sheraton, and Federal style furniture will give way to the emergence of the Empire Period; a period of heavy, conservative lines in furniture design which would fit well with the style of Jerome’s durable ogee clock.

Wood works clocks made by Silas Hoadley, Elisha Hotchkiss, Chauncey Ives, Seth Thomas, and others would follow the lead of Eli Terry and Chauncey Jerome in the use of the ogee clock case. However, the advent of rolled brass from a foundry in Waterbury, Connecticut, would soon bring about the demise of the delicate wood works movements. Jerome had learned from Eli Whitney that clock parts could be punched out by the hundreds with waterwheel powered machinery. Foot peddle lathes were used to cut teeth in a stack of 12 wheels. In assembly line fashion, a thousand brass clock movements could be made in a day. Jerome would sell his ogee clocks at retail for \$1.50 a piece. Yankee peddlers would distribute these inexpensive clocks to thousands of poor cabin dwellers. While the colonists were establishing independence from imported commodities, entrepreneurs, like Chauncey Jerome, would export ogee clocks by the boat load to England and points beyond.

The late British writer, F. J. Britten, in his colossal work on horological history, Old Clocks and Watches and their Makers, provides insight on what clockmakers in England thought of Chauncey Jerome’s contribution to the clock industry. Mr. Britten makes a point of praising the work of Eli Terry and the pillar and scroll shelf clock when he writes, “The finest development of the shelf clock, as made by Eli Terry, had a quality of unsophisticated gracefulness.” Mr. Britten goes on. “Later, in Chauncey Jerome’s bronze and looking glass clocks, the proportions became coarse and heavy and the swan-neck deteriorated into horns. (Britten is referring to steeple clocks that have horns.) Jerome’s subsequent ogee clock was an even less graceful variant of the shelf clock.” This opinion by a distinguished member of the Worshipful Company of Turners from across the Atlantic is not very flattering.

Jerome’s brass works ogee clocks proved to be far more durable than their wood counterparts. They would run in any climate, how ever damp and soggy. This was especially evident on shipboard where the sea air was fatal to wood movements. Jerome enlisted his son, Chauncey Jr., to oversee the export of a large shipment of ogee clocks for sale in England. He set a value of \$1.50 on each clock, which was considerably more than it cost to make them. When the cargo arrived in England and was inspected, the revenue inspectors told Chauncey Jr. that he had undervalued the clocks in order to escape the customs duty. They could not believe that such clocks could be made for less than a pound sterling, let alone what was then about six shillings, or 75 cents. They confiscated the whole shipment and paid Chauncey Jr. the

stated evaluation of \$1.50 per clock. Chauncey Sr. was so delighted with the deal that he sent another boat load. By the time the third shipment arrived in port, the customs officers realized what the clever Yankee peddler was up to. Chauncey Jerome was making a good profit without any of the trouble and expense of marketing the clocks.

The popularity of the inexpensive ogee clock helped pull the clock industry out of the 1837 depression. Steam power will thrust industries into a new age of mobility. Factories may now be located away from the crowded streams where dependence on the water wheel for power was no longer feasible. Several clock and case manufacturers began to emerge from various joint ventures and bankruptcies. Clock movement makers bought cases from cabinet makers. Cabinet makers bought movements from clockmakers. Third parties formed their own companies and bought clock movements from clockmakers and cases from cabinet makers. Therefore, the labels inside the cases were not necessarily accurate as to the origins of the clock components. While the case cabinets were not usually marked, except of course, the pasted on labels, the movements often carried the manufacturer's logo on the plate. Thus a New Haven movement might be found in a clock with an inside label which stated the following: "Thirty hour two weight Brass Clock Manufactured for the Carson Clock Company." Other third party clock companies would paste their label over the original label. Where the case and movement were made by the same clock factory, the label is often found to have been applied before the back was installed to the frame of the case. All versions are important in tracing the development and distribution of the prolific ogee clock.

From 1835 to 1860 the brass movement ogee clock dominated the industry and provided an inexpensive alternative to the more expensive decorated pillar and column designs. Most were weight driven thirty hour clocks in 25 and 26 inch cases. Eight day clocks were 30 to 34 inches to allow more room for the weights to drop.

There are clocks designated as ogee clocks that are not really ogees. These clocks have rectangular cases, but have a flat front panel instead of the ogee panel. They are called "flat ogees". This is a contradiction of terms much like if one calls a flat disc a flat ball. Other cases have reversed ogee panels. That is, the lowest point of the ogee is toward the outside edge of the case instead of the inside edge next to the door.

The development of the spring driven movement would transform a good clock into a better clock. Thirty hour and eight day spring driven movements could greatly reduce the weight and the size of the clock. Nonetheless, many full size ogee cases built to accommodate weights would be used for spring driven clocks. The inside labels made great claims by adding words like, "Improved", or, "Patent Improved". Alarm and calendar versions were added to the inventory of various clock manufacturers, but essentially, the evolution of the ogee clock was now complete.

On April 23, 1845, Jerome's clock movement factory in Bristol, Connecticut was destroyed by fire. Choosing not to rebuild in Bristol, Jerome relocated his movement

factory to New Haven, Connecticut. He now had his entire manufacturing facilities in one place.

During the ensuing years leading up to the election of Abraham Lincoln as President, a major threat to the highly successful ogee clock was about to descend on the whole clock industry and the cultural views of what was good and proper in decoration.

Queen Victoria ascended to the throne of England in 1837. She would influence the style of fashion in everything from clothes to jewelry; architecture to furniture. There would be a profound evolution of clock case styles away from the austere Empire lines to the ornate Victorian, “turn every which way”, renaissance of baroque forms. Victorianism would drive manufacturers of clocks to produce lavish styles of clock cases to meet the demands of consumers. Plain and simple was out. Highly decorated and gaudy was in.

However, the rising storm from 1849 to 1861 would portend an interlude in the business of making clocks. The slavery issue was driving the nation toward upheaval between the states. By the time the 16th president, Abraham Lincoln, took the oath of office, seven states had seceded from the Union. The Confederate States of America had chosen a president, Jefferson Davis, to lead their secession efforts. Fredrick Douglass would be a great influence for the abolition of slavery. The “Day of Jubilee” was at hand. At 2 p.m., on January 1, 1863, President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Eleven months later in the chill November air of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, the immortal Gettysburg Address is delivered.

The effects of the Civil War years brought on a period of scaled down production of clocks. The raw materials and factory facilities were needed for the war effort. A few clock factories produced ogees, mini-ogees, steeple clocks, and cottage clocks, but not nearly to the production levels prior to 1862. Other clock factories were retooled for the manufacture of guns, bayonets, knives, swords, utensils, shoes, buttons, belt buckles, uniforms, and surgical instruments. The energies of honorable men and women on both sides of the Mason Dixon Line were directed toward the preservation of causes they believed to be right and just in the eyes of God. John Wilkes Booth, one such man, took his personal vendetta to Ford’s Theatre in Washington. There, on Friday night, April 14, 1864, Booth assassinated President Lincoln. A nation is in mourning.

In 1869, the Golden Spike is driven to mark the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad. Symbolically, driving the Golden Spike ushers in a vigorous resurgence in peacetime industrial growth. The clock industry rebounds with great energy, although, not from the production of ogee clocks. Chauncey Jerome is dead.

The Victorian Era has supplanted the Empire Period. There would be a wide divergence of case styles to reflect the flamboyance of ornamentation. By the early 1870s, new catalogues from the clock factories featured a wide assortment of beautiful clocks. In 1874, only three or four ogee clocks could be seen among the hundreds

offered. Throughout the next four decades, the clock makers who offered a limited selection of second generation ogee clocks were: Seth Thomas, New Haven, Ansonia, Gilbert, Waterbury, and Welch. Notably absent from this list are Ingraham and Sessions.

After suffering a devastating fire in 1855, the Ingraham Clock Company never again made ogee style clocks. The Sessions Clock Company did not come into existence until 1903, after the collapse of the bankrupt Welch Clock Company. Sessions offered a wide assortment of clocks, but it would not include ogee style clocks.

Epilogue

In truth **The Legacy of the Ogee Clock** is the story of the clock industry. Chauncey Jerome was the leading figure behind a clock style that would endure for over 90 years. During his lifetime, Jerome became more universally known as the clockmaker who gave time to the world. He had made millions of clocks and millions of dollars. By 1856, his empire had crumbled. He died a pauper in 1868.

One final observation and strange irony should be noted. Except for Seth Thomas and Ansonia, the principle clock makers, New Haven, Welch, Gilbert, Ingraham, and Waterbury, evolved out of failed relationships with Chauncey Jerome. Seth Thomas and Ansonia had businesses independent of Jerome. They never merged with Jerome. They were fierce competitors and ultimately out lasted Chauncey Jerome.