

# Robert C. Cheney's Dream Job

by Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)

When Robert Cheney was six years old, he made his first visit to the rural homestead in Grafton, MA, where members of the famed Willard family began making clocks. Privately owned and seriously run down, the home and workshop were endangered. Robert's father, clockmaker Bradford W. Cheney, was hoping that this historic horological site would not be lost forever. He tried unsuccessfully to have the building moved to Old Sturbridge Village.

As young Robert entered the room where the Willard brothers learned their craft, he plunged through the rotted floorboards, down to the scary cellar below. Only a bit battered, he emerged with a powerful memory that he carries with him to this day, 60 years later, as he takes on the job of Executive Director and Curator of the Willard House and Clock Museum. The home and shop still stand, back in fine shape, on the original plot. He claims that this is the only eighteenth-century clock shop remaining where it was built.

The road to what he calls his "dream job" seems perfectly planned, in retrospect. From those early days as a young boy learning the trade from his father, he had a strong foundation in clock repair. After graduating in 1974 from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where he earned a political science degree, he moved to Grafton to return to professional horology.

He soon felt that cleaning, bushing, and polishing everyday clock movements for customers passed along from his father was not sufficiently satisfying. With Bradford's blessings, he advanced to higher-level conservation and consulting work, principally for museums and better private collections. That was the beginning of his many associations with museums with horological collections, including Old Sturbridge Village where in 1977 he became Conservator of

Clocks, winding more than 100 every week and servicing them as budgets allowed. Other institutional clients were Historic Deerfield, the Worcester Art Museum, Peabody-Essex Museum, Concord (MA) Museum, American Antiquarian Society, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and more.

As Robert related to me during a day I spent with him recently in his upstairs office at the Willard House,

he began to realize during those early years of conservation work that it was not sufficiently profitable, despite his expertise and the importance of his clients.

He began buying and selling good clocks, which he already was beginning to collect himself, especially "vernacular" ones hand-crafted in pre-industrial New England. He sought out rare pieces by makers such as Mullikan, Blaisdel, and Richard Manning, in the best original form and condition, many of which had posted-frame movements and

just one hand. He became a strong auction bidder, and for a time held the record for the most money paid for a clock at public auction for an American tall clock. He also included important seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century English clocks in his inventory and was expert not just on movements but on their decorative wood cases and surfaces.

He received an NAWCC Fellow Award, and his life of conserving, consulting, and dealing proceeded successfully until 2006 when, like other antiques dealers, he began noticing and experiencing a downturn in the market. Sales to institutions and collectors slowed, and more of the action was turning to the auction houses. During that year, he took what was his first "real" job as head of the clocks department at Skinner, the major auction firm based in Marlborough, MA.

While at Skinner, his department that had expanded to watches and scientific instruments was quite



Willard House.

COURTESY ROBERT C. CHENEY PHOTOS.

successful and established several price records. He appeared many times on the PBS *Antiques Roadshow*. Sadly, however, it also was the time when cancer would first afflict him, leading to six years of intense treatments, which finally eradicated the disease but left him scarred and still struggling with periodic serious pain from damaged facial nerves and muscles. By 2017 he needed to end his Skinner job after his final sale on April 28. The department continues under the care of his former assistant, Jonathan Dowling.

Not ready for true retirement, Robert returned to consulting and advising and also cataloged and auctioneered for the October 2017 sale by R.O. Schmitt in Manchester, NH. But during all those years, and up to that time, his connections to museums were ongoing, including service on the boards of the NAWCC Museum and the American Clock and Watch Museum in Bristol, CT. At those places he earned a reputation for being straightforward, assertive, and even combative when he felt it necessary to promote good ideas and resist bad ones.

Most relevant was his longtime association with the Willard House and its Grafton founders, cardiologist Dr. Roger W. Robinson and his wife, Imogene. Robert was an early and active participant in the Robinsons' 1968 establishment of the museum, first sparked by Robert's father's sale to them of a Simon Willard brass-dial clock made in Grafton. This clock is illustrated and described on pages 8 and 9 of a classic



Cheney in the Willard House clock shop.  
COURTESY BOB FRISHMAN.

1972 reference, *Horology Americana*, by Lester Dworetsky and Robert Dickstein.

Robert was present as the Robinsons bought, generously restored, and enhanced the property, adding wings and structures for gallery space and lodging for resident staff. He also advised and assisted them on further acquisitions, which has brought the collection of more than 85 Willard clocks to world-class status. Both Robinsons lived more than 100 years but now are gone.

In the fall of 2017 the former director of the museum departed after seven years and the board, of which Robert remained a member, turned to him as a logical and excellent candidate. For the Willard House, there is no question that Cheney's history of work with more than 35 other museums, and his experience, connections, and passion for the Willards and their museum, all exceed the necessary qualifications.

For his success, perseverance, and victory over cancer, Robert gives much credit to Denise Johnson, the love of his life for the past 26 years. She continues her administrative job at Skinner, and on May 13, 2017, they were married by a justice of the peace in the backyard of their antique home in Brimfield, MA.

Cheney's job at the Willard House will be full time and probably more. Not only will he need to devote many hours to fundraising, but he will oversee an important eighteenth-century landmark, a building full of rare clocks—including the only known Willard musical clock—and artifacts such as the original Simon Willard document for his "patent timepiece," signed by both Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. He hopes to greet increasing numbers of visitors and to exceed the goals needed to preserve and enhance this hallowed place.

Robert Cheney will deliver the James Arthur Lecture at this year's NAWCC Ward Francillon Time Symposium, September 20–22, at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, MI. Conference details are at [www.carsclocksandwatches.com](http://www.carsclocksandwatches.com).