

History and Inner Workings of the Harvard Coop Clock

It is pronounced “coop”—as in where chickens live—but it is the iconic Harvard Square store of the Harvard Cooperative Society (Figure 1). One of America’s largest college campus retailers, it serves Harvard students and the public with books and general merchandise, much of it donning the distinctive logo of this top-echelon university.

The society began in 1882 in a student dorm room; then it built and occupied its brick edifice in 1925. Within the top triangular pediment are counterweighted hands on a round marble and slate clock dial, the inspiration for Ray Comeau’s poem printed at the end of this article. Comeau encouraged me to discover and share the clock’s history.

On a sunny June 1, 2016, I connected with John Ciancio, the society’s facilities manager. In his office was a large copy of the original building plan by Boston architects Perry, Shaw & Hepburn, showing the dial in its place of honor. Not shown is the weathertight shed behind that dial and pediment, home of the Howard weight-driven electrically wound deadbeat escapement movement. Ciancio led me across a flat rubber roof to the shed’s door, opened the padlock, and allowed me to view the Howard at work (Figure 2).

Ciancio is a 40-year Coop employee, who took over the clock’s care around three years ago when his colleague retired. He oversaw the rewinding of the coils of the original electric motor when the motor failed, no doubt after drive shafts seized. He also refurbished those shafts and occasionally lubricates the movement’s

bearings. Regularly, he makes slight adjustments to the pendulum length, understanding that temperature changes affect the rate. He reported that the clock is entirely reliable, except when New England snowstorms stop it dead, probably because of ice and snow buildups on the hands.

While unsigned and no longer in its original and distinctive Howard green and gold paint, the movement clearly matches the illustration of the “small size Tower Timepiece” in the Howard catalog I own from those same years (Figure 3). That image shows additional attachments and accessories not needed on the Coop’s movement, which drives just a single pair of hands.

The Harvard Cooperative Society’s membership fee is \$1, the same as in 1882. I would gladly have paid that fee just for this chance to visit a landmark Harvard Square timekeeper.

—Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)

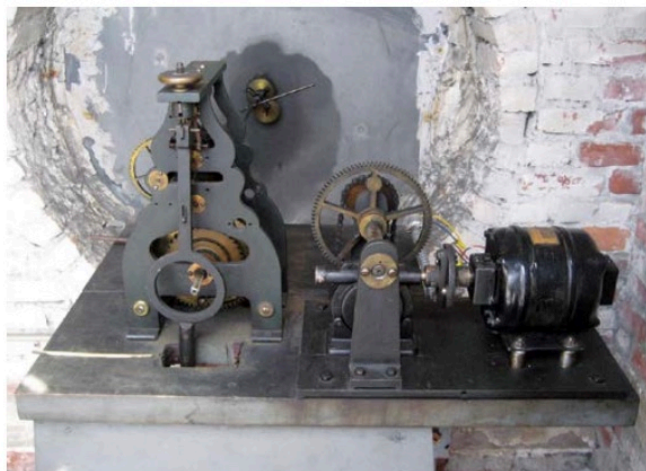


Figure 3. View through the roof shed door of the Howard movement, winding motor, and rear of stone dial.



Figure 1. Front facade of the Harvard Coop building in Harvard Square in Cambridge, MA.

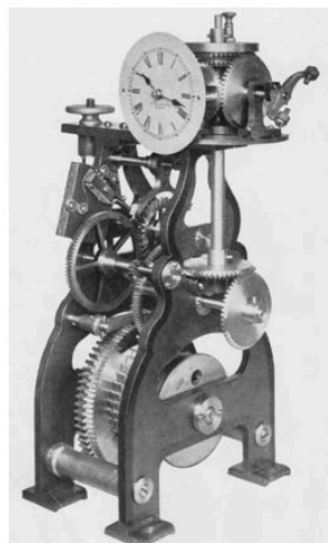


Figure 2. The “small size Tower Timepiece” as shown on page 20 of E. Howard Clock Co.’s Tower and Street Clocks catalog, ca. 1925.

The Ancient Harvard Square Clock

It’s a circle
 Within a triangle pediment
 Atop the Harvard COOP
 As if the Greeks
 Had built a temple there
 So high and almost
 Invisible
 That you wonder if any
 But pigeons have sensed
 Hands turning
 The spirit of Zeus

Although Ray Comeau has worked in Harvard Square for nearly 40 years, it was only recently, while sitting on the second floor in Starbucks, that he noticed an old clock high up in the center of the square and was inspired to write this poem. He is a former dean and current lecturer in Harvard University’s Division of Continuing Education and a loyal member of Chapters 8 and 87 in Massachusetts. His email is comeau@hudce.harvard.edu.

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