

Skinner, Inc, Marlborough, Massachusetts

Willard Skeleton Unearthed at Halloween Clock and Watch Auction

by Bob Frishman
Photos courtesy Skinner, Inc.

Not human bones, a Simon Willard, Jr. skeleton clock, 1825-35, earned the fifth-highest price at the October 31, 2015, Skinner, Inc. auction of clocks, watches, and scientific instruments in Marlborough, Massachusetts. Selling at \$19,680 (including buyer's premium) from a New Hampshire collection, it is just one of five of these unusual clocks known by Skinner's clock department director, Robert

Watches contributed strongly to the sale total.

C. Cheney, who is a nationally acknowledged expert on Willard timekeepers.

Overall, the Saturday sale totaled \$887,937 with 91.6% of the 501 lots sold. Post-auction sales have elevated those statistics even higher.

Unlike the few other Willard skeleton clocks that Cheney has viewed in the past decades, including one owned by the Willard House and Clock Museum in Grafton, Massachusetts, this 30-hour two-weight timepiece (no hour striking) featured a thermometer mounted on a signed engraved plate. Although there is no "Jr." in the signature, Cheney is sure that the son, not the more famous father, was the source. This plate and a partially legible French maker's stamp finally settle for Cheney some longstanding questions. He now is convinced that the clocks were made in France, imported by the younger Willard, probably after he had relocated from Roxbury, Massachusetts, to New York City, and sold along with other instruments that the Willards are known to have retailed but did not make. Cheney no longer worries that later owners or sellers simply affixed the high-value Willard name, a familiar practice that continues to haunt Willard collectors today.

Skeleton clocks, in their more common forms, are admired for their visible brightly polished movements, protected under fragile oval glass domes, with their frames "skeletonized" by eliminating all but essential strips of brass. Produced from the mid-1800s and manufactured mostly in England, these clocks are popular with collectors, but, depending on form and features, they usually sell for one multiple down from this Willard.

Bidders decided that four lots were worth more than the Willard skeleton clock, although these were somewhat less rare, exotic, and controversial. A circa 1875 E. Howard & Co., Boston, No. 61 carved walnut regulator made \$52,275, selling to Charles Grichar. The Houston collector, one of the few bidders actually in the salesroom that day, has amassed one of the most impressive private collections of American clocks anywhere. He has paid far more in the past for this same model of Howard precision floor-standing regulator.

Watches contributed strongly to the sale total, although only two were among the top ten sellers. In a tie for second place was a Tiffany and Company highly complicated open-face Swiss pocket watch, one of the many valuable watches from the collection of the renowned William Bond shop in Boston. According to Cheney, the most recent owners, a family who owned and eventually closed the store, were very pleased with the sale's results. This 18k gold minute-repeating split-second chronograph, circa 1900, brought \$24,600 and was in the same fine condition as the others, which had been carefully restored and locked away more than 40 years ago. Many collectors approve of such restorations, believing that important artifacts left in their "original" dirty and damaged condition are more likely to be overlooked or discarded.

In fourth place was another circa 1900 Tiffany and Company 18k gold open-face minute-repeater pocket watch from the Bond collection. Reaching \$22,140, this watch also announced the time, down to the minute, on miniature gongs when the crown button was pressed to activate the "repeat." Unlike its second-place cousin, it did not feature the chronograph stopwatch function, useful for timing horse races, track events, etc.

The \$3000/5000 presale estimate for a circa 1800 William Cummens mahogany tall clock amused everyone who knew that Roxbury clocks by this

Willard apprentice, especially ones with a rocking ship automation in the dial arch, bring far more. Its second-place finish, tied with the Tiffany watch at \$24,600, still was approximately half of what these clocks could realize at the height of the antique clock market 15 to 20 years ago. Cheney explained that the estimate did not reflect Skinner's known policy of low estimates to encourage bidders but was as much because the clock had been taken in by another Skinner staffer who was not as familiar with makers and values. This was understandable, given the current weak demand for more common tall clocks of equal age and quality.

Next up at the sale after the Cummens clock was another tall clock, this one in a cherry case and with a dial signed "Rufus Porter Billerica." Known far better as a New England muralist and founder of *Scientific American* magazine, Porter did make at least a few clocks. This reporter found the circa 1820 clock irresistible, especially because Billerica is a short drive from my home in Andover, Massachusetts, and because nearby clock repair customer of mine has Porter murals covering a wall of his Federal-period home. The clock sold within estimate at \$3567.

Marine chronometers usually appear at these Skinner sales, and one by William Edward Frodsham of London took sixth place at \$18,450. Current prices for these highly accurate navigational timepieces usually are 10% to 20% of that high price, but the dial signature included "No. 1" along with the Frodsham family name, which always earns a premium. Some of the instrument's early history is known, including travels to the Arctic Circle in 1823 and 1824. W.E. Frodsham's No. 2 chronometer joined Charles Darwin on the H.M.S. *Beagle's* five-year voyage.

I was fortunate to have the company of watch and chronometer expert Tom McIntyre (see [www.awco.org]) at an auction preview. Together we examined the Frodsham chronometer, and he noted its very good original condition and some distinctive features. Unlike later and more standard marine chronometers, the movement was smaller, it had fully signed plates and a watch-style dust cover, it had 30-hour (not 56-hour) running duration, and it lacked an "up-down" pointer on the dial to indicate when rewinding was needed. The escapement was a typical standard Earnshaw-style, with trapezoidal weights on the balance wheel. The gimbale wood box appeared to be correct and probably original.

One non-horological item, sold near the auction's end, ranked among the top ten lots. A Columbia phonograph, "The Toy Graphophone," brought \$14,760. With original labels, wood shipping crate, printed broadside, japanned tin horn, and wax records, it was a pristine example of the mechanical music machines introduced in 1899 by the American



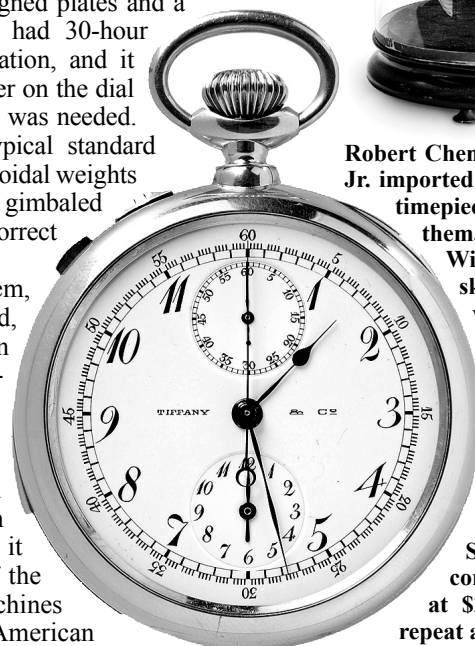
This E. Howard & Co., Boston, No. 61 carved walnut regulator was the sale's top lot at \$52,275, and it joins others in a major Texas collection. Howard built these imposing special-order clocks, with their astronomical dials, for customers desiring the highest possible timekeeping accuracy.



Williams Cummens added a rocking ship flying the American flag in the arch dial of this circa 1800 mahogany tall clock. A tower on the rocky coast also flew the American flag. The winning bid for this Roxbury, Massachusetts, clock, placed by phone, pushed the selling price to \$24,600 (est. \$3000/5000), tying for second place.



Robert Cheney now strongly believes that Simon Willard, Jr. imported from France and sold these unusual skeleton timepieces. The son of Simon Willard did not make them, nor did later owners merely affix the iconic Willard name. Unlike most French and English skeleton clocks, these need daily winding, not weekly, and are powered by dangling weights rather than by coiled mainsprings in brass barrels. Estimated at \$8000/12,000, it brought \$19,680.



High-grade watches with several "complications" usually bring strong prices, and this Tiffany & Company Swiss 18k gold pocket watch with the most complications in the sale tied for second place at \$24,600 (est. \$4000/6000). It has minute-repeat and split-second chronograph functions.

Graphophone Co., New York. Few of these survive from the earliest days of recorded music, and the “toy” size added to its luster.

Two lots ahead of the Graphophone was another top-ten lot, a Parisian musical automaton picture clock, circa 1880, that brought \$11,685. Attributed to Xavier Tharin, it had an elaborate arched gilt frame enclosing a clock above an animated hand-colored lithographic scene of a farrier’s shop. An additional cylinder musical movement added to the attractions of a wagging dog tail, nodding horse head, laundress scrubbing, and two smiths at work.

The eighth-ranking lot was another tall clock, this one Dutch, circa 1770, selling at \$12,300. Amsterdam maker Johannes Van Wyk signed the composite dial showing much more than the time; viewers could also tell day, date, and lunar positions. The highly ornate marquetry-inlaid case stood 105" to the tip of its pagoda top. “Dutch striking,” with the upcoming hours ringing a half-hour ahead, and an alarm completed the package.

Tom McIntyre and I also examined other appealing lots during our preview session. A William Bond and Son, Boston, chronometer, No. 627, was not part of the Bond shop collection. It had a typical Liverpool movement but a less common 24-hour dial, as did an H.H. Heinrich, New York, chronometer. McIntyre believes that many of these 24-hour-dial models were slightly adjusted for “sidereal” time, easing longitude calculations by on-board navigators. They sold for \$3444 and \$1599 respectively, indicating the power of the Bond name. A circa 1900 pocket chronometer by A.P. Walsh of London made \$5535, not only for its 18k gold open-face case but because of Walsh’s reputation as one of the finest makers and “adjusters” of the day.

We scrutinized several other rare watches as well. Albert Potter was an Albany, New York, maker who fled to Cuba to avoid the Civil War draft. He later set up shop in Geneva, Switzerland. His circa 1890 18k gold hunting-case pocket watch made \$10,455, although it was fitted with a lever escapement rather than the superior pivoted detent for which he was famous. McIntyre complimented the watch’s original heavy gold case, since so many such cases have been melted for their tempting scrap value.

A “Model 1872” American Watch Company 18k engine-turned gold open-face pocket watch earned \$6458. It was the best grade made at the time by the company and had 20 jeweled bearings. When I questioned the unusual even number of jewels, McIntyre explained that a center-hole jewel on the pillar plate could easily be broken during movement service. However, most makers of watches with more than 15 jewels added a jewel for that hole as well, leading to the more familiar 17, 19, 21, and 23 advertised jewel counts in higher-grade watches.

A star of the watch collection was passed but found a post-auction buyer. Also from the Bond collection, this circa 1802 18k gold fusee timepiece had an even more famous Boston provenance, being from the family of Harrison Gray Otis. Engraved with successive generations

of that name, the case also had a bright green William Bond and Son watch paper inside the back cover. The 1796 Harrison Gray Otis mansion in Boston is a historical landmark and museum owned by Historic New England (see [www.historicnewengland.org]).

While many clocks were strong sellers, including several by E. Howard and some good French carriage clocks, the clock category overall was weaker than that of the watches. Particularly troubled were Victorian-era German clocks, which sold at a fraction of former values or failed to find buyers at all, even those with rare long-duration movements. The very conservative estimates ended up being realistic or high. One example was a circa 1880 Vienna floor regulator with calendar, wound just once a year, that made only \$2460 on a \$4000/6000 estimate. Another year-duration oak wall regulator from Vienna, circa 1870, brought \$3444 (est. \$2000/3000), but a 90-day Vienna floor-standing regulator was sold for \$2460 on its \$4000/6000 estimate.

A high-profile Houston dealer and collector, Ralph Pokluda of Chappell-Jordan Clock Galleries, told me that he won nearly all of his below-estimate online bids. He could not resist the bargains on the European clocks, and even snagged a Gilbert wall clock that was among a nice group of American mantel and hanging models that sold at or under estimates.

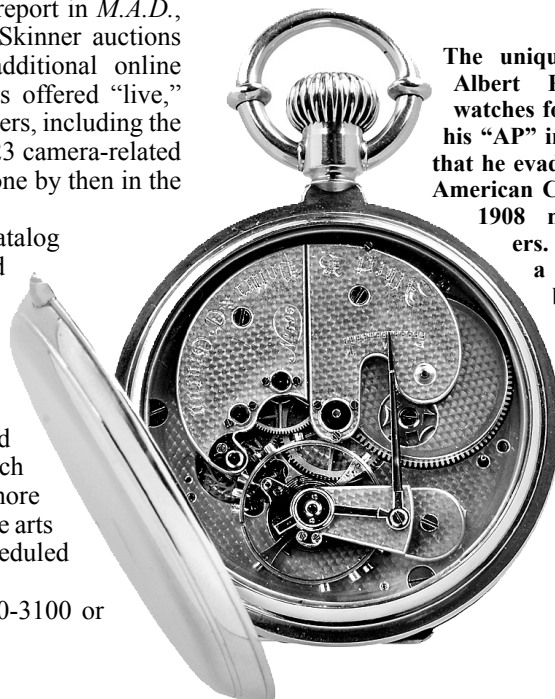
Unlike at the previous sale (see my report in *M.A.D.*, August 2015) and many other recent Skinner auctions in other categories, there was no additional online eBay-style component. Everything was offered “live,” although lots often sold to absentee bidders, including the meteorites (most passed) and the final 23 camera-related lots, which went to the Asian family alone by then in the room or to their online competitors.

As usual, the print and digital catalog produced by Cheney’s team offered large, first-class color photographs and detailed descriptions, making it an important future reference for collectors and dealers. Skinner remains one of the few upper-tier auction houses with specialized horology auctions and experts, in contrast to other houses, which routinely mix clocks and watches into more general furniture, jewelry, and decorative arts sales. Skinner’s next such auction is scheduled for April 23.

For more information, call (508) 970-3100 or visit (www.skinnerinc.com).



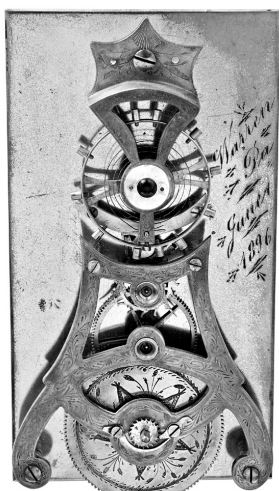
Pocket watch keys, required before watches were wound and set via built-in knurled crowns, often are finely crafted and coveted by collectors. They can include precious stones and metals and can appear in many decorative forms. This group of 25, mainly from the 19th century, well exceeded the \$400/600 estimate to bring \$1599.



The unique movement plates in Albert Potter’s Swiss pocket watches form a stylized version of his “AP” initials. We are fortunate that he evaded possible death in the American Civil War and lived until 1908 making fine timekeepers. This watch, which has a clear glass “exhibition” back, allowing the movement to be viewed while remaining covered, sold for \$10,455 (est. \$2000/4000).



For more than a century, Patek Philippe has been at the peak of Swiss watchmaking. This large 18k gold open-face 1905 pocket watch was made for Gondolo & Labouriau in Brazil, and an accompanying 2010 certificate from Patek confirms its provenance. It sold for \$5843.



My high bid was left in the dust for this brass jeweled watch escapement model that sold for \$2583 (est. \$300/500). Signed “Warren, Pa, June 1896,” this oversize working version of what powers and regulates a typical mechanical watch most likely was fabricated by a watchmaking student. Mounted on a 4 3/4" x 2 1/2" brass plate, it is smaller than many I have seen, and perhaps even more appealing for that reason.

In spite of the tightening bans on selling antique ivory products, the sale of this 17th-century diptych sundial was not preempted. Sundials were the most common and accurate time-keepers of their time—on sunny days. This highly detailed example from Nuremberg, Germany by Conrad Karner, which included the names and latitudes of 24 towns, along with the necessary built-in compass, sold for \$4305 (est. \$2000/2500).



The October 2015 educational symposium sponsored by the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors featured musical clocks and music boxes. Among the kinds of objects discussed were musical bracket clocks like this circa 1825 mahogany example by George Yonge of London. It plays a selection of six tunes on a nest of nine bells and sold for \$6765 (est. \$7000/9000).



William Edward Frodsham was the second generation of his famous London horologist family, and this was the first chronometer he produced, at age 20. Its high bidder was in England, so the clock, which sold for \$18,450 (est. \$4000/6000), is heading back home. Sadly, Frodsham drowned while swimming a year after making this clock.

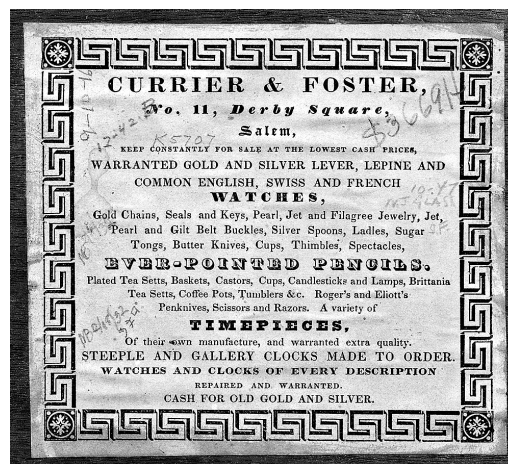
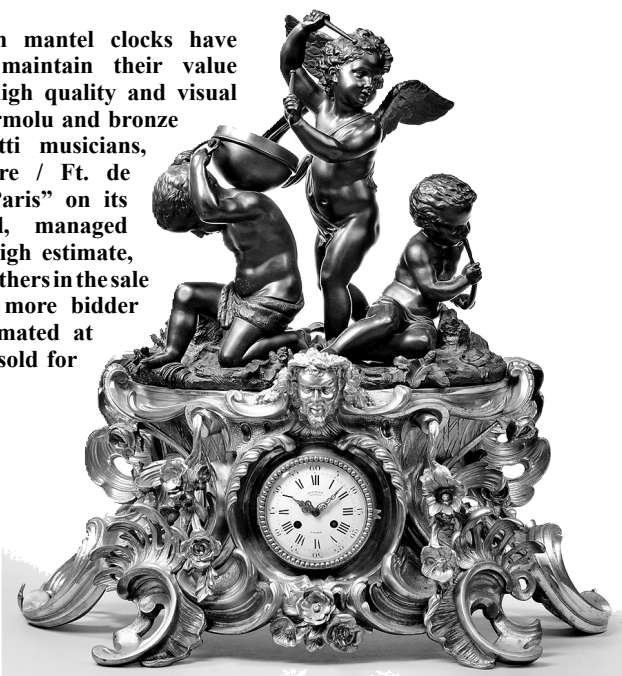


French carriage clocks vary widely in quality, features, and value, and the maker of this one, Drocourt of Paris, is highly regarded for all three. The circa 1880 portable clock boasts calendar and alarm functions plus *grande sonnerie* striking with quarter-hour repeat on demand. Most carrying cases disintegrated or were discarded long ago, but accompanying this is its original velvet-lined leather-covered box, which helped it to reach \$11,070 (est. \$4000/6000).



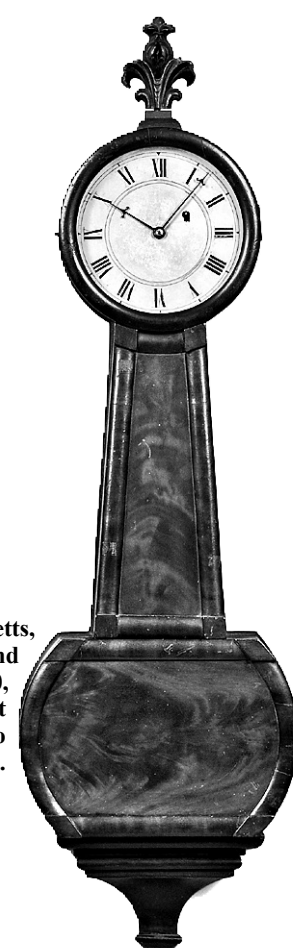
The Toy Graphophone, originally sold in 1899 for \$3, has appreciated nicely in value since then. The 3 1/2" diameter turntable, made in New York, plays wax records, which were priced at five for 50 cents. Estimated at \$7000/9000, it sold for \$14,760.

Ornate French mantel clocks have struggled to maintain their value despite their high quality and visual appeal. This ormolu and bronze figural of putti musicians, signed "Denière / Ft. de Bronzes / A Paris" on its porcelain dial, managed to exceed its high estimate, unlike several others in the sale that deserved more bidder attention. Estimated at \$2500/3500, it sold for \$5535.



A bonus with the Salem banjo clock is the original inside paper label advertising the Derby Square shop's many goods and services.

Early 19th-century craftsmen in Salem, Massachusetts, produced highly important wooden furniture, and this Currier and Foster banjo clock, circa 1830, reflects that tradition. With its mahogany front panels, curved sides, ornate carved finial, and no side arms, it differs from Boston's typical output. Estimated at \$4000/6000, it sold for \$8303.



Simon Willard invented the banjo clock, which he termed his "patent timepiece." Because so many were made by his contemporaries and by later manufacturers, ones in good condition that can be safely attributed to him bring premium prices and may be studied for original details. This example has some inpainting on its original glasses, and its Arabic-number dial is much less common than ones with Roman numerals, but it still should satisfy its new collector-owner. It sold for \$7380.

All but two of the 17 Howard clocks found new homes, but this Howard & Davis No. 4 was one that did not (est. \$1200/1800). According to Cheney, the consignor was happy to keep his banjo-style wall clock with its rosewood grain-painted case, made circa 1860 when Edward Howard still partnered in Boston with David Davis.



Much was happening on this French gilt-frame picture clock that brought \$11,685 (est. \$5000/7000). Gongs and music accompany many moving figures in the colorful painted scene of a village farrier's workplace.



Nathaniel Mulliken of Lexington, Massachusetts, produced this cherry tall clock, circa 1765, that sold for \$8610, a reasonable price for an important New England maker. British troops burned Mulliken's house and shop during their retreat from battling the Minutemen in April 1775.

The auction included a modest number of good early New England shelf clocks. Large and rare, this George Marsh and Co. hollow-column eight-day weight-driven mirror-front model, which sold for \$5535, includes a strap brass Connecticut movement by Joseph Ives. It probably was sold around 1832 when Marsh emigrated from Farmington, Connecticut, to Ohio.

