

A Book Review

Willard Lighthouse Clocks

by Bob Frishman

Simon Willard, perhaps America's best-known clockmaker, never advertised these as "lighthouse clocks." He never referred to his much more popular invention as "banjo clocks" either. True to the inventor's intentions, the title of this new book refers to the former as "patent alarm time pieces." Coauthor Paul Foley used Willard's term for the latter, too, in his thicker hardbound 2002 classic, *Willard's Patent Time Pieces*.

Scholars still disagree about how "banjo" was applied to those hanging clocks, but the origin of "lighthouse" seems clearer. Around 1819, when Willard was issued his patent for this new style, the Eddystone Lighthouse in the English Channel was well known and considered an architectural wonder. Willard may have heard and sung a popular sea shanty, "The Keeper of the Eddystone Light." Although the name of the clock was attached later in the 19th century, and several variants look nothing like a lighthouse, the name stuck.

The design was innovative not only because of its unique form. The alarm hammer rapped on the case side rather than rang a bell, the polished brass movement was fully visible under a fragile glass dome, and the relatively short case required different gearing and a heavier weight to allow winding just once a week. The clocks featured fine woodworking and shiny metal castings, all contributing to a high retail price in reach of only affluent patrons impressed by the Willard reputation for quality and accuracy.

There can be several reasons for the rarity of antiques. When new, they may have been expensive, custom made by individual skilled craftsmen, or experimental. Few of them may have survived the ravages of time, moves, and war. Or, as with lighthouse clocks, they are rare because hardly anyone bought them. Simon Willard had hoped that this new design, based on a Neoclassical pedestal, would repeat the commercial success of his banjo clocks, but he was disappointed. Probably fewer than 200 came from Willard's time, and the rest of the few hundred in public and private collections are 20th-century reproductions. As the book suggests, "The lighthouse clock was the Edsel of its day."

That quotation is by the book's other author, John C. Losch, who is one of the country's most knowledgeable and respected horologists. He and Paul Foley teamed up to document a 2002 exhibit of lighthouse clocks at the Willard House & Clock Museum in Grafton, Massachusetts. The project was delayed until now, but it has been worth the wait since the bringing together of 16 examples was difficult, unprecedented, and unlikely to be repeated. More than a catalog, the book also reports on additional clocks that were not exhibited in 2002, and it provides loads of technical information for readers interested in more than the aesthetic features.

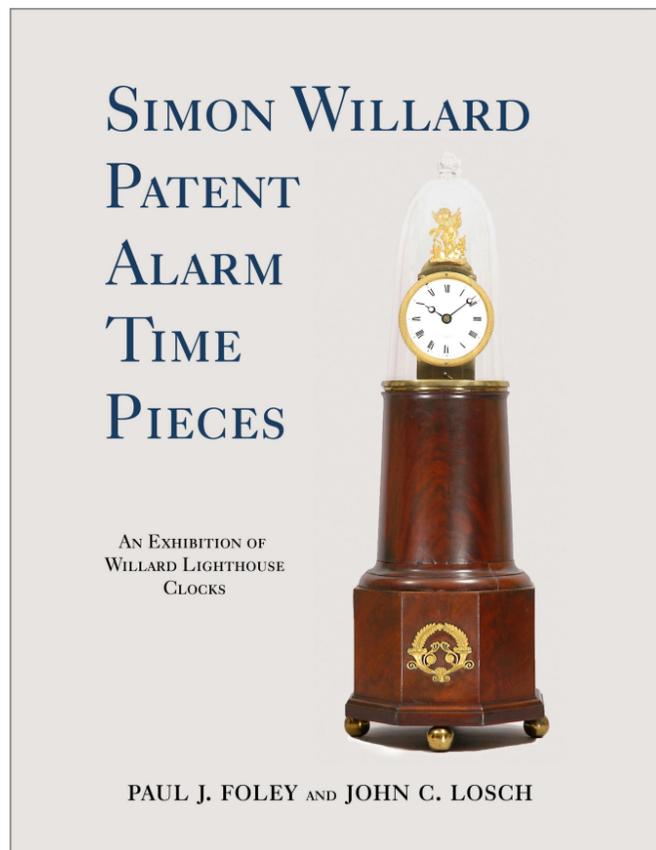
Losch wrote the book's introduction, providing the historical context, and the next chapter comparing the listed clocks. In Part II, each of the older clocks is described in approximate chronological order. Part III covers the reproductions in the exhibit. Large full-color photographs enhance the text and show many movement and case specifics. The Part IV addenda include Willard advertisements, technical analysis, the text of Simon Willard's 1819 patent, and a bibliography.

A crucial, and perhaps puzzling, point throughout the book is the fact that no two lighthouse clocks are alike, and they may differ in substantial ways from each other. With later reproductions, such differences are understandable, but clocks from Willard's years also vary in ways that do not make sense if he was the sole maker trying to commercially manufacture. The authors claim that certain decorative components, such as fired enamel dials and elegant fire-gilded metal castings, were sourced in France, so these could vary as orders were placed over time. No cases are signed, so local cabinetmakers must have been enlisted as needed, and each had his own methods. Some clocks, even by Willard, had no alarm. But differences in the brass and steel movements, if made by the same hand, would hardly have been efficient, even if Simon Willard possibly was continuing to innovate and refine the product.

The most likely explanation is that Simon Willard did not make all or part of many of the clocks bearing his name. The uneven quality of the work supports this idea, and the vaguely worded patent is little help. As with thousands of banjo clocks, there were authorized

*Simon Willard Patent Alarm Time Pieces:
An Exhibition of Willard Lighthouse Clocks*
by Paul J. Foley and John C. Losch

Willard House & Clock Museum, 2016, 110 pages, softbound,
\$35 plus S/H from the Willard House & Clock Museum,
(www.willardhouse.org/shop) or (508) 839-3500.



subcontractors and unauthorized copycats during his lifetime, and there were many more reproducers afterwards.

One of the best-known makers of Willard reproductions was James E. Conlon (1880-1948) of Boston. Losch recalls completing six or seven lighthouse clock movements that Conlon left unfinished when he died, and Losch says that these then went to another famed and notorious reproduction maker, Elmer Stennes (1911-1975). Clock No. 34 in the book is a Conlon-Stennes alarm model.

Conlon and the dealers to whom he sold were not always scrupulous about clearly identifying the clocks, and museum and private collectors have sometimes needed to amend attributions. I have viewed a 1984 memo in the Winterthur Museum files concluding that its "Simon Willard" lighthouse clock 57.1011, from the bequest of Henry F. du Pont, probably was a James Conlon product, and it is now so identified.

Genuine early 19th-century lighthouse clocks occasionally come on the market, although fewer in recent years, and can sell for upward of \$200,000 at auction. Good reproductions may sell in the \$5000 to \$10,000 range. Somewhere out there is an original painted toleware case. The photos of clock No. 7 in the book show only a movement, with its painted metal dial, that was recovered without its case after a 1976 armed robbery of the Willard museum.

If just viewing and not owning is a reader's goal, then museum visits will suffice. Fine examples of Willard clocks are at the Willard House & Clock Museum (of course); Historic Deerfield, Deerfield, Massachusetts; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum and Library, Lexington, Massachusetts; the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts; and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. If those venues are not possible, or need enhancement, then this new book should satisfy. There is no other complete book or thorough professional study of lighthouse clocks available.

TO THE PUBLIC.



THE Subscriber respectfully informs his Friends and the Public, that the President of the United States has granted him a PATENT RIGHT, for his newly Invented ALARUM TIMEPIECE.

These Timepieces will run 8 days, with once winding, and keep exact time; there is an Alarm affixed to them, which, when set, will not fail to go off at the hour you wish to rise;—the Case is about 16 inches high, and easily moved to any part of the house, without putting it out of order.—The whole of the Clock work is inclosed with a handsome Glass, and is wound up without taking it off, which prevents the dirt from getting into it.

These Timepieces have been proved to keep better time than the French, and have a decided preference over his former Patent, in point of elegance and usefulness. The demand for these have already exceeded his expectations.

Those wishing to ornament their parlors with these Clocks, may rest assured that they are made under his immediate inspection, and can rely on their being genuine.

The gentlemen authorised to sell them are Mr. THOMAS RICHARDS, New-York, and Mr. J. B. JONES, of Boston, No. 37, Market-street, where they are now to be seen.

The Subscriber continues to make at his Factory, on the most approved plans, warranted STEEPLE, CHURCH, and BANK CLOCKS; he has also just constructed a Clock, which will run nine days, with once winding—the weight descends but 8 inches—they come cheap, and answer an excellent purpose for an office.

Distant orders will be promptly and faithfully executed.

SIMON WILLARD.
Roxbury, Aug. 10, 1822

CAUTION.

I believe the public are not generally aware, that my former Patent Right expired 6 years ago; which induces me again to caution them against the frequent impositions practiced, in vending spurious Timepieces. It is true, they have "Patent" printed on them, and some with my name, and their outward appearance resembles those formerly made by me: Thus they are palm'd upon the public.

Several of them have lately been brought to me for repairs, that would certainly put the greatest bungler to the blush. Such is the country inundated with, and such, I consider prejudicial to my reputation; I therefore disclaim being the manufacturer of such vile performances.

Aug. 13. 2is6os. S. WILLARD.

Simon Willard placed this newspaper ad in the September 3, 1822, issue of the *New-England Palladium*, hoping to increase sales. Note that he also warns against "spurious Timepieces" bearing his name.

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