

# The Asa Munger Clock Case Mystery

by Bob Frishman

Swann's keyword alert system flagged "clock" for me in the description of lot 150 of this Americana sale. According to Swann's Rick Stattler, it was lucky for me that he happened to mention clock cases in his description of this 1826-54 handwritten account book kept by cabinetmaker Peter Prine of Auburn, New York. Even more fortunate, or coincidental, were the few pages Stattler used to illustrate the lot; one had two ledger entries for clock cases amongst the coffins, bedsteads, workstands, and other wooden items.

The cake's icing was the name "Munger" on the March 5, 1830, entry for six clock cases, price 9.00 dollars. According to Russ Oechsle, the recognized expert on early American clocks from that New York region, "Asa Munger has long been the most recognizable upstate New York, early 1800s clock maker. His movements were absolutely unique; his cases oversized and often extravagant, all of which have attracted collectors and researchers over the years. While many facts are known, many are not,

including how he sourced his cases."

Oechsle understandably was excited to hear from me about this lot, consigned by a New England dealer, and even more so when I shared with him an image of the book's inside rear cover. It revealed a dimensioned line drawing of Munger's most popular style of clock case, an 1820s large Empire-style flat-topped model that housed the maker's distinctive eight-day weight-driven brass movement. Oechsle suggested that we may have answered the question of who made Munger's estimated few thousand cases, and our expectations were high before my previewing the book in person. On that single ledger page alone we spotted Prine's charges for 17 cases, and there were no other known clockmakers in that local area in those early years.

Now for the sad news. A week later as I carefully paged through the book at Swann, I discovered that entries for clock cases appeared only on two other pages. One page showed a dozen for Munger, plus more unattributed cheaper ones in cherry (not Munger's usual wood); the other page listed only a single \$5 case without a customer

name. I spotted Munger's name once more within the 87 pages; on April 20, 1833, Munger hired Prine's wagon.

We thus can assume that Munger employed Prine only sporadically for case making and not later in Munger's career. We do know that Asa Munger in subsequent years employed workers at the New York State Prison in Auburn, a source of cheap labor that drew complaints from his clockmaking competitors.

Several articles about Munger have appeared over the years in the *NAWCC Bulletin*, the publication of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors. The NAWCC also published in 2003 *An Empire in Time: Clocks & Clock Makers of Upstate New York*, coauthored by Russ Oechsle, which includes pages about Munger.

Selling on April 16 for \$2375 (est. \$1500/2500), the book went to an active telephone buyer, a dealer who outbid us. Although a wonderful source of local craftsman history, like all such early American account books discovered and investigated by scholars, the book did not solve the Munger case mystery for us. If we continue to be vigilant and alert, we may spot future opportunities.



Asa Munger flat-top case.  
Photo courtesy Russ Oechsle.