

# Early American Clocks

By Ken Farmer

When you first aware of time? My first memory is of an electric clock in our living room growing up in the 50s. At that age, my earliest concern with time was where the big hand was in relation to the television shows that we could pick up with a big antenna on the roof. Another significant time-awareness moment for me was when I first saw Thomas Jefferson's Great Clock at Monticello, designed by Jefferson and built by Peter Spruck in 1792. It is fully functional today, and can be seen on tours of the house. The Great Clock is driven by two sets of cannonball-like weights, which hang on both sides of the front doors. On Sundays the clock is wound with the help of a folding ladder, and the weights are raised to the ceiling. Throughout the week, the top ball on the right-hand set of weights reveals the day and even the approximate hour as it falls through holes in the floor, past markers on the wall with Sunday at the top and Saturday at the bottom. The clock is attached to a Chinese gong that chimes the hour. It could be heard three miles from the main house, keeping time for all the plantation's daily activities.

The pendulum clock, invented in the seventeenth century, was the most accurate timepiece until the invention of quartz oscillators in the 1930s.

In Colonial and post-Revolution America, a weight-driven pendulum clock was the gold standard for telling time. These clocks were located in the homes of wealthy landowners and business people and were expensive. One hundred dollars spent on a clock in 1800 would be the equivalent of spending over two thousand dollars today. Virginia and the Southern states produced great examples during this period.

The earliest clocks made in Virginia had movements by Thomas Walker of Fredericksburg, VA. This tall clock, 1765–1785, has an engraved face containing works by Walker. The case is attributed to Daniel Spencer, a Rhode Island cabinetmaker who moved to Lexington, KY in the late eighteenth century. The Fredericksburg movements are original, and the cleaning inscriptions are all from Lexington and Owensboro artisans. It is not unusual to find early clocks with the works and cases made by different craftsmen. Many clocks made locally in the South had works imported from



The **Thomas Walker of Fredericksburg Tall Clock** is prized nationally by collectors and museums. Walker clocks are scarce. Thomas Walker, was "very highly regarded" across Virginia for the quality of his workmanship, with only about a dozen known examples. Tall case clock, movement by Thomas Walker (d. 1786), Fredericksburg, VA, 1765–1780. Case maker unknown, Shenandoah Valley, Virginia, 1765–1780. Black walnut, chestnut, yellow pine and glass; brass, steel, and iron. OH. 95, OW. 21, OD. 11 in. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Museum Purchase (1951-578).



The "Queen" Tall Case Clock is one of the most remarkable American Tall Clocks known. It is distinguished by its great height and by an ambitious combination of inlays, brass and silver mounts, carcass shaping, and projecting ornaments. According to longstanding oral tradition, the case and the eight-day movement were commissioned around 1809 by Sebastian "Boston" Wygal (1762–1835) of Montgomery (now Pulaski) County in the southern Valley of Virginia. While many western Virginia clocks share the same monumental stance and exaggerated architectonic proportioning, few are as flamboyant. The design of the case reveals two distinct aesthetic interests on the part of the maker: one rooted in a sophisticated concern for visual order, classical allusions, and meticulous workmanship, and the other revealing a more playful, less disciplined, spirit. Representing the former are the multiple bands of geometric-patterned stringing, the classical urns on the base and trunk, the urn-shaped finial on the hood, and the American eagle motif in the tympanum. In marked contrast to these formal elements are German-American motifs such as the meandering vines on the trunk and base, the flowering witch's hearts at the bottom of the trunk door, and the whimsical inlays above the hood door in which bellflowers emanate from striped shields. Also departing from prim neoclassical standards are the scrolled feet, the projecting hood scrolls with their pendant spheres, and the F-holes in the tympanum, which are clearly derived from those on violins and other string instruments. The merging urban neoclassical designs with local traditions is a hallmark of furniture made in the western part of Virginia during the early national period.

Tall Case Clock, possibly by Peter Rife, America, Virginia, Pulaski County (probably), circa 1810. Mahogany, cherry, tulip poplar, oak, black walnut, holly, maple, bone, horn, silver, iron, brass, and steel. OH: 108 1/2"; OW: 24"; OD: 15". Object Number: 1996-107, A&B. Colonial Williamsburg. Museum Purchase.



The John Cole Tall Case Clock, Peter Rife and David Whipple, Montgomery County, VA, circa 1810.



**Southern Painted Masonic Tall Case Clock**, of yellow pine construction throughout appears to retain its original Prussian blue, red, yellow, and black painted surface. This Southern painted Masonic clock includes hearts, diamonds, pinwheels, and a central molded and painted diamond "eye" in pediment. The New England painted wooden dial is decorated with Masonic and shield devices, signed "S Thomas, Plymouth" (Seth Thomas, Plymouth, CT). It is important to note that Northern clockworks were often imported into the South and incorporated into locally made cases. 91" x 20" x 11," probably Edgefield, SC area, early 19th century. This paint-decorated long case clock with Masonic motifs was sold at Brunk Auctions in 2006 for \$200,000.



DELANEY ANTIQUE CLOCKS

**Shelf or Case on Case Clock**, Benjamin Morrill of Boscawen, NH, circa 1810. A wonderfully inlaid mahogany cased Massachusetts shelf or case on case clock was crafted by clockmaker Benjamin Morrill of Boscawen, NH, (1794–1857). Of the seven examples currently known by this Maker, this is the most elaborate and visually pleasing in terms of the case form and design. It is unusual in that it features an arched iron dial painted and signed by the clockmaker. Considered the transitional form, this dial is a smaller version of the standard tall case form. The popularity of the painted arch dial and its incorporation in its use on a tall case clock is undeniable. Interestingly, this may be the only example of a Massachusetts shelf clock form having the combination of an arched dial and a paint decorated tablet in the door on the lower case section. Image courtesy of Delaney Antique Clocks.



DELANEY ANTIQUE CLOCKS

**Federal Massachusetts Banjo Clock**, Simon Willard & Son of Boston, MA, circa 1825. A fine Federal Massachusetts wall timepiece or "Banjo clock." This American form was made by one of America's premier clock companies, Simon Willard & Son of Boston, MA, circa 1825. This example is signed and numbered on the dial, "No. 4587." The case is constructed in mahogany and incorporates half-around mahogany frames fitted with highly figured mahogany panels. A turned mahogany acorn finial mounted to a finial plinth tops the case. This case's sides are fitted with brass sidearms, and the bezel is brass, with fitted glass. The bezel opens to allow access to the finely crafted steel arrow hands and the painted iron dial. The time track displays the hours in Roman style numerals. The clock's weight-driven movement was designed to run eight days on a full wind—the movement secured through bolts that remain with this clock. The pendulum rod is fitted with a brass faced bob. This clock measures approximately 32.5" long overall. Image courtesy of Delaney Antique Clocks.

Germany or England, installed in cases created by regional furniture makers. Value and desirability rise quickly when a clock has signed American works and an ornate case that is also American. Great local examples in Virginia and the South are extremely rare. The "Queen" of all southern clocks, which descended in the Wygal/Miller family, now resides at Colonial Williamsburg. Circa 1810, this clock has works made by Peter Whipple, and the case is attributed to Peter Rife, a cabinetmaker in Montgomery (now Pulaski) County, VA. It is a tour-de-force of inlay and fine woodworking skills.

I attended the auction where this clock was sold in 1996. There was a lot of anticipation and gossip about the clock and its ultimate sales price.

A Richmond dealer offered the family \$250,000 for a private sale, which caused the family to take the clock out of the house and put it in storage for safekeeping. Everyone expected the clock to bring at least \$250,000 and that the bidding would start at that amount. Before opening the bidding, the auctioneer stated that the family had decided to sell the clock with no reserve or minimum. A phone bidder took \$180,000, and one additional bid from the crowd won the clock at \$190,000. With the buyer's premium, it sold for a little over \$200,000. You could have heard a pin drop in the auction gallery. What happened? High estimates at auctions are a great way to reduce buyer enthusiasm. Successful auctions operate on the illusion of a bargain. Everyone assumed that the clock would start at a quarter of a million dollars, but only two bidders were even close to being ready to buy it. You can see this fantastic clock at Colonial Williamsburg in their newly expanded art museum galleries. The



**Seth Thomas Shelf Clock**, circa 1880. From Ken and Jane Farmer's personal collection.



DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum has scheduled an upcoming exhibition, *Keeping Time: Tall Case Clocks*, to open in late 2020, featuring over 20 eighteenth-century tall case clocks.

I had the pleasure of selling what I call the “Gutsy” brother of the “Queen” of southern clocks. The John Cole tall case clock, by Peter Rife and David Whipple, is another example from the same school, that we sold at auction for over \$280,000 in 2012. When I was still operating my auction house in Radford, a gentleman came in with two Polaroid photos of this particular clock. It was so tall he couldn’t capture it in one photograph! We immediately went to his house and, upon review, we made a deal to offer the clock at auction. I knew it was great—still in the old finish, with signed works and an amazing case. My biggest challenge was to get him to agree to letting me start the bid at less than \$200,000. He finally agreed as long as there was a \$150,000 reserve. Once we began marketing, the serious bidders were not put off by the reserve. It was low enough to motivate them to bid.

This item is now in an important Eastern Virginia collection. Great and rare items sell themselves. If you can collect the best and rarest objects, they will give you great pleasure and always remain desirable.

It is always great to look at the American clocks that are masterpieces, but where does that leave everyone else? The vast majority of longcase clocks in today’s market bring less than \$2000. By the 1840s and 50s, the Industrial Revolution took over the clock market, and by 1900, Sears and Roebuck were selling oak kitchen clocks for less than \$20. In our personal collection, one item Jane and I have is a factory-made Seth Thomas shelf clock, circa 1880, that we bought in the 1980s for less than \$50. It probably isn’t worth a lot more these days, but we’ve always liked it because of the rabbits on the reverse-painted panel.

Even though most of us have a phone with a clock in our pocket these days, collecting antique clocks is still worthwhile. Identify what you like, what you can afford, and have fun searching for your next find.

**Massachusetts Tall Case Clock**, with Lunar Calendar Dial, Simon Willard and William Prescott of Roxbury, MA, circa 1790. This handsome, tall clock epitomizes the formal “Roxbury” form popular in Boston during the late 18th century. This representative example by the premiere Boston clockmaker Simon Willard (1753–1848). This inlaid mahogany case exhibits excellent proportions and is decorated with line inlays. The painted iron dial is signed on the front by the Clockmaker, “S. Willard” in script lettering. The Artist, William Prescott, signs the back of the dial. His signature reads, “Willm Prescott No 12.” In the arch of this dial, one will find a moon phase mechanism or lunar calendar. The lunar calendar or moon phase mechanism is a mechanical almanac. The four spandrel areas are decorated with colorful floral patterns framed with gilt designs. This fine dial also displays the hours, minutes, seconds, and calendar dates in the traditional locations. This clock, circa 1790, stands 97” tall to the top of the center finial and the case around is 20” wide and 10.5” deep. Image courtesy of Delaney Antique Clocks.



**Ken Farmer** is a lifelong resident of Virginia and currently resides in Charlottesville. He and his wife Jane have been avid students and collectors of Americana and Southern material culture since they married in 1974. Since his teenage years Ken has been a musician and singer of traditional Appalachian and American Roots music. As a performer he became interested in the songs, history, objects and stories of his native Southwest Virginia, which led to him the antique business where he has worked for over 40 years. Ken has also appeared on *Antiques Roadshow*, as a specialist in folk art, decorative arts, and musical instruments. Ken runs an antique and fine art appraisal and consulting business that serves collectors, estates, and individuals throughout the mid-Atlantic.

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### Reference Links

The DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum  
at Colonial Williamsburg  
[www.colonialwilliamsburg.org](http://www.colonialwilliamsburg.org)

Delaney Antique Clocks  
[www.delaneyantiqueclocks.com](http://www.delaneyantiqueclocks.com)

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