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The Waterhouse Clock

Oglesby Paul and Richard J. Wolfe

In the summer of 1950, Mrs. Robert deWolfe (Mary Ware) Sampson presented to the Harvard Medical School an old tall-case (grandfather) clock that she had inherited from her great-grandfather Benjamin Waterhouse. Benjamin Waterhouse (1754–1846) was a prominent and controversial founding member of the Medical School faculty. He was the first Hersey Professor of the Theory and Practice of Physic, and was especially recognized for his pioneering introduction of smallpox vaccination into the United States in 1800. The door of the clock was distinguished by a round brass plaque reading “The gift of the Honorable Peter Oliver D.C.L. late Chief Justice of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay to Benjamin Waterhouse M.D., 1790.” Because it was apparent that the decorative finials and fretwork were missing from the top of the case, Dean George Packer Berry authorized Assistant Dean Reginald Fitz to have these restored by a cabinetmaker.¹ The clock, said to require winding only once or twice a year, was then installed in a corner in the Faculty Room named for the same Benjamin Waterhouse. The *Harvard Medical Alumni Bulletin* of January 1951, in a brief item recognizing the gift, noted that Dean Berry had wound it up at the School’s 1950 Christmas Party. Also at this event, the University Marshal made graceful remarks, and included in them a quote from Ecclesiastes 3: “By tradition, Justice Peter Oliver’s clock which came to Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse in 1790, is wound at a family gathering at Christmas-time to remind those who follow him in caring for it that there is a time to every purpose under the sun: a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to break down and a time to build up; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to keep silence and a time to speak; a time of war and a time of peace.”²

Dr. Reginald Fitz was clearly intrigued by the new clock and wished to identify where it was made and by whom. There was no maker’s name on the dial or case, and none was found in the movement. Mrs. Sampson, the donor, wrote to Dr. Fitz on 16 September 1950 that Alexander G. Macomber, who had always cleaned, oiled, and wound the clock, “thinks it an old Willard. It is apparently the same in works as that owned by Dr. Locke which Mr. Macomber tells me Mr. duPont offered \$25,000.00 for but Dr. Locke kept it.”³ Dr. Edwin A. Locke of the Harvard Medical School faculty did indeed own a Simon Willard tall-case clock that

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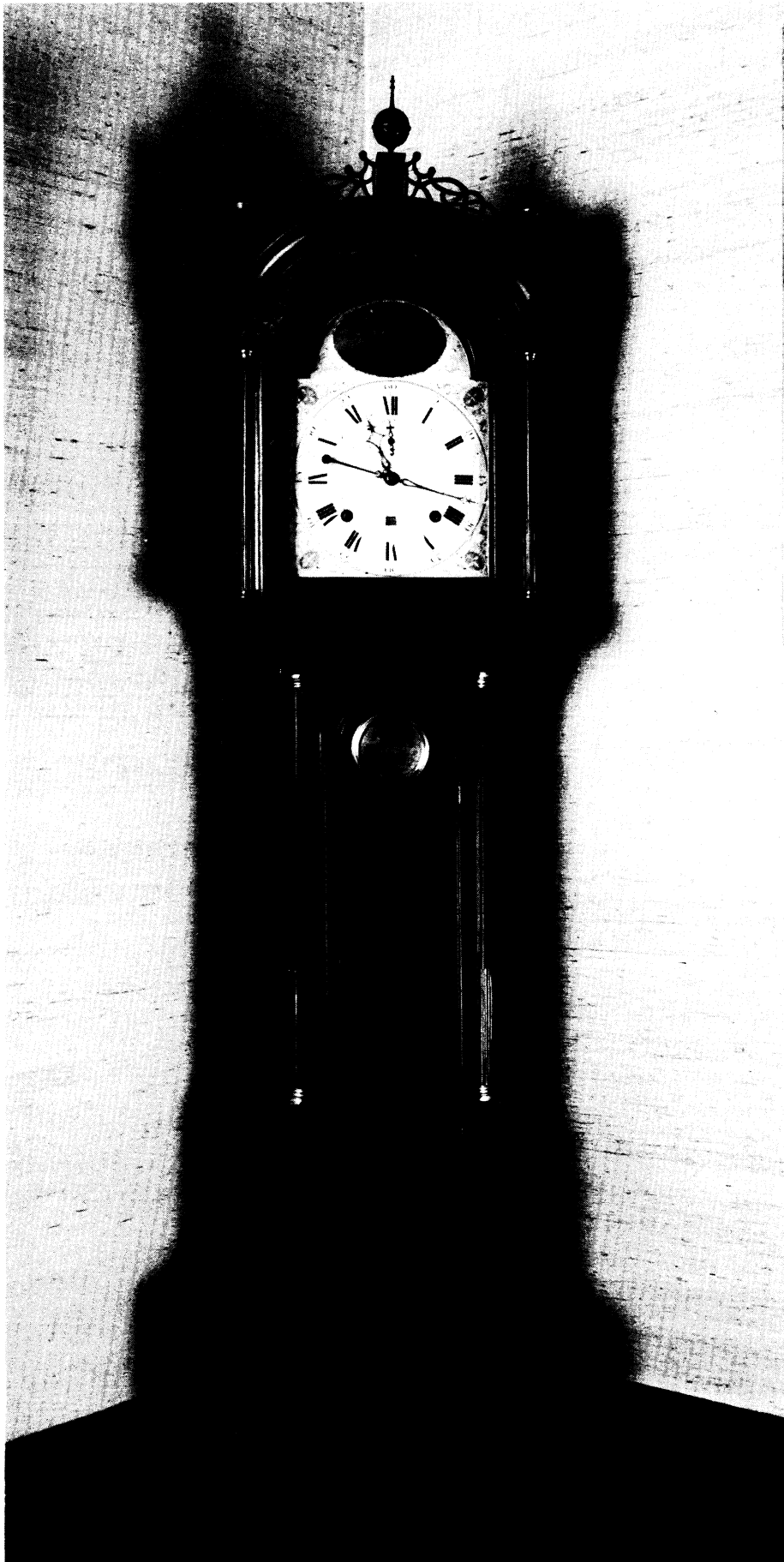
RICHARD J. WOLFE is Curator of Rare Books at the Countway Library.

We wish to thank Dr. Philip Cash for his assistance.

² “The Winding of the Clock,” *Harvard Medical Alumni Bulletin* 25 (January 1951): 63.

¹ Reginald Fitz, “The Waterhouse Clock, 1790; Harvard Medical School Faculty Room, 1950,” a two-page typescript document dated 3 November 1950, in folder labelled “Clock—Waterhouse,” in the Harvard Medical Archives in the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine.

³ Mary W. Sampson to Reginald Fitz, 16 September [1950], autograph letter, in folder labelled “Artistic and Memorial Objects, Clock—Waterhouse,” in the Harvard Medical Archives. This file contains materials collected by Dr. Fitz on the clock between 1950 and 1952.



*The Waterhouse Clock. Photo by
Stuart Darsch.*

would go for one year between windings, which was similar but not identical to the Waterhouse clock. If Simon or one of the other Willards was the maker, the Waterhouse clock would have been made in eastern Massachusetts. However, Macomber himself wrote on 17 October 1950 from Holliston, Mass., without great conviction: "I am not only willing to guess, but, in my honest opinion, and I have spent a lot of time thinking on the idea, the works were made in England, but again I may be wrong."⁴

Dr. Fitz wrote to members of the Waterhouse and Oliver families, and to horologists and others on both sides of the Atlantic, in a vain effort to find where the clock was made. He learned that such timepieces, which ran for a year without winding, although unusual, were not excessively rare, and that such movements had been developed in Europe as early as the seventeenth century. He also referred to the fact that Waterhouse papers were at the Medical School "in the Archives," but evidently he did not search them, or if he did, he discovered nothing helpful.⁵ However, it should be noted that after that time, additional papers were deposited in the collection by Mrs. Southworth (Margaret Thayer) Lancaster (in 1967) and by Malcolm G. Ware (in 1974), which may have included the letters quoted below.

The most recent commentary on the issue came in 1980 in *A Study of Simon Willard's Clocks* by Husher and Welch. These authors state:

This clock, according to family notes, was furnished by Simon Willard and it supposedly ran all year on one winding. However, we found that the one year duration was a misnomer and that it actually ran for six months per winding. We are inclined to believe that Willard sold the clock because he was the leading clockmaker in the vicinity of Harvard, he advertised one year duration clocks, and the status of the Honorable Peter Oliver, who gave the clock to Dr. Waterhouse, would not be compatible with a supplier that was not the best. . . . We have not been able to ascertain whether the movement was imported or whether it was made by Simon Willard. Unfortunately, we cannot insist that Simon made the movement in the Waterhouse clock because of the many design features which were not Willard's style.⁶

The authors thus suggest that the maker of the case may not have been the maker of the movement (a possibility that cannot be disproved but that is unlikely in view of the evidence that is presented below). The volume contains a full-length photograph of the clock with the incorrect description: "Six month tall clock signed by Simon Willard." (Actually, there is no such signature.) Husher and Welch seem to have made the judgment to include the Waterhouse clock in a book devoted to those undoubtedly made by Simon Willard on the shaky bases of unidentified "family notes" and the prominence of Judge Peter Oliver. They also comment on the similarity to the Locke Simon Willard tall-case clock. Willard had indeed placed inside the case of some of his tall-case clocks an undated advertisement describing "clocks that will run one year, with once winding up, with very elegant cases, price 100 dollars."⁷

We became interested in this minor enigma a year or so ago, when one of us, in Manhattan, had a conversation with William Doyle, an antique dealer who now

⁴ Alexander G. Macomber to [Reginald Fitz], 17 October 1950, two-page autograph letter in folder "Artistic and Memorial Objects, Clock—Waterhouse."

⁵ Fitz's letters are in the folder "Artistic and Memorial Objects, Clock—Waterhouse."

⁶ R. W. Husher and W. W. Welch, *A Study of Simon Willard's Clocks* (Nahant, Mass.: Privately Printed, 1980), 229–37.

⁷ *Ibid.*

owns Dr. Locke's Simon Willard clock. Mr. Doyle believed that the Harvard Medical School owned the mate to his unique clock, that the Harvard clock was therefore also a rarity, and as such was exceedingly valuable. That this might be the case was confirmed by a recent newspaper item detailing that a Simon Willard tall-case clock had recently been sold for more than \$400,000.⁸ It was thus of some consequence to discover, if one could, the maker of the Waterhouse clock. If the Willard connection could be proved, perhaps the clock should be moved from the Faculty Room to Fort Knox, to await a rainy day.

An investigation, which included the Waterhouse papers at the Countway Library, seems now to have clarified this matter.

Peter Oliver, the donor of the clock to Benjamin Waterhouse, was born in 1713, to a well-to-do Boston family, attended Harvard College, where he got into trouble for stealing a goose and a turkey, and in the mid-1740s established a successful ironworks in Middleborough, Mass. Although without legal training, he was appointed to a succession of judgeships, ending in 1772 with the position of Chief Justice of the Superior Court. A staunch Loyalist, he became exceedingly unpopular with the activists of the time, and finally in March 1776 was forced to flee with the British troops evacuating Boston by ship. He settled in Birmingham, England, in 1778, and died in 1791.⁹ Judge Peter Oliver had three children, the youngest of whom was Andrew Oliver, born in 1746, who was married in 1769 to Phebe Spooner. Andrew Oliver died in Middleborough in 1772, having been married for only three years, but in that interval he fathered three children. The eldest of the three, Elizabeth, was born in 1769, and was brought up in the Boston area by her widowed mother. In 1788, she was married in Roxbury to Benjamin Waterhouse, born in 1754, who had been educated initially in Newport, Rhode Island, later in London under Dr. John Fothergill, and in Edinburgh, ending with an M.D. degree from Leyden in 1780.¹⁰

Judge Peter Oliver was ill in Birmingham in 1788, and did not attend the wedding of his granddaughter. Indeed, he never returned to Massachusetts after his flight in 1776. Perhaps because the granddaughter, whom he called Betsy, had been brought up without a father and because he felt particularly responsible as a grandfather *in absentia*, Judge Oliver seems to have extended himself to send presents to the newlyweds. Two letters from Judge Oliver to his new grandson-in-law, which have been found in the Waterhouse papers at the Countway Library, illustrate clearly his intentions.¹¹

The first is addressed to "Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse, Cambridge near to Boston, New England, care of the Mentor Capt. Snow":

Birmingham April 24th, 1789

Dear Sir!

I received letters from you & Betsy, Mrs. Russell & Daniel, by Dr. Loyd—I am obliged to you all, & should have answered each before, but a turn of the Sciatica,

⁸ *Boston Globe*, 21 July 1991, p. 80.

⁹ "Peter Oliver," in C. K. Shipton, *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, vol. 8: *Biographical Sketches of Those Who Attended Harvard College in the Classes 1726–1730* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1951), 737–63.

¹⁰ T. Spooner, *Records of William Spooner of Plymouth, Massachusetts and His Descendants* (Cincinnati: F. W. Freeman

Press, 1883), 1: 425–27; and W. G. David, *The Ancestry of Joseph Waterhouse, 1754–1837 of Standish, Maine* (Portland, Maine: Anthoensen Press, 1949), 23–25.

¹¹ Peter Oliver to Benjamin Waterhouse, 24 April 1789 and 3 February 1790, Waterhouse Papers, the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine.

which I have not had for forty years past, hath prevented my writing untill now; and cannot, as yet, answer the others, but hope to write soon.

I wish much to see my old friend Dr. Loyd,¹² but fear I shall not, as I cannot go to London—I have sent to invite him to see Birmingham, but I fear also that he will not come here—it is but about eighteen hours ride.

You mention Mr. T—; he had better not have mentioned the salary affair to you, for he too much betrayed the confidence I placed in him, to do him any service—I wish to drop the affair.

Tell my dear Betsy, I will send her knives & forks as soon as I can, as also the elogium which I mislaid—I have a clock making for you, which I hope you will have this summer—I design it for a good one, & it will go a twelve-month with once winding up; so that if you have not bought, you will desist.

I have but just now heard of this opportunity so have only time to tell you all that I expect to write more fully soon—my love to you all *correspondents*, and to Betsy's mother—respects to all inquiring friends.

I am dear Sir!

your friend

Peter Oliver
Dr. Benj. Waterhouse.

The second relevant letter from Judge Oliver to Dr. Waterhouse is a long one, which reads in part as follows:

Birmingham Feb. 3, 1790

Dear Sir!

Six or seven american letters staring a man in the face for categorical answers appear to me as formidable as a battery of cannon & mortars ready to pour out their vengeance—however, as I have listed in the forlorn hope, I hope to carry them one by one with perseverance.

I first answer three of *yours*—that of August 26th wishes that Dr. Lloyd & I might meet—it would have given to me a particular pleasure to have met him, but a rheumatic attack utterly prevented my going to London, & I suppose, distance or business discouraged him.

And after several paragraphs, he went on to write:

Yours of Nov. 8th and 20th mention the receipt of the clock—I was glad, you were pleased with it; it will save you the trouble of winding once pr. week, & perhaps forgetting your task of winding—it takes but *six feet* to the floor from the top of the weights, after wound up—the device on the face I thought not amiss.

And later:

I am sorry that Betsy is so shy of asking for trifles—I send her a dozen of knives & a dozen of forks to match her dissert knives, as also a carving knife & fork—I remember that you had oysters in your river, & table knives are often spoiled by using them in opening oysters; I therefore send you six oyster knives—give Philip one of them to open his Plimouth oysters; I also send him a knife & fork to eat them with—The construction is curious, & I have sent it open, so that you will see the grooves, & then it slides into place & slides back to open—Miss Clarke

¹² Oliver refers here to James Lloyd, a physician of Boston, who, being a Loyalist, spent the years of the American Revolution living in England.

sends to him two neck-kerchiefs, & my son, the Doctor, sends to him two pair of buckles; all for a new years gift.

From these two letters, one can make certain deductions. First, Judge Oliver was a generous grandfather and grandfather-in-law, and enjoyed giving presents. Second, he was living in Birmingham and was too ill to travel to London. (Indeed, he died the year after the second letter was written.) Therefore, his presents most likely originated in or were bought in Birmingham. Third, he was well informed regarding the clock, writing "I design it for a good one," knew its height and the scene painted on the dial. Such familiarity indicates that he had purchased the clock from a clockmaker in Birmingham, rather than that he purchased it unseen from London, or from a clockmaker in the United States. There were several clockmakers in Birmingham in the period, and R. J. Hetherington of the City Museum and Art Gallery of that city suggested in 1951 to Dr. Fitz that the firm of William and Caleb Nicholas may have made the clock.¹³

Additional confirmation of the English origin of the Waterhouse clock, and also evidence of its role as a model for Dr. Locke's and other Simon Willard one-year tall-case versions, is to be found in several news items in the Boston press of the day.

The *Massachusetts Magazine* of May 1792 (vol. 4, no. 5), has the following item under "Domestick Chronicle": "A clock has been finished by an ingenious artist of Roxbury, of no more than the common height and size of an eight day clock, which will go a year with one winding up." Simon Willard's clockmaking shop was in Roxbury.

On the front page of the *Columbian Centinel* of 13 January 1798 is a similar message:

Mr. Russell:

I observed in your last paper, high encomiums on an ingenious Mechanic in Dedham. I doubt not his merit, and hope he will be rewarded and patronized. But we ought to remember that we have some others who do the country equal credit, such as Mr. Pope, who made the *Orrery*, and Mr. Willard of *Roxbury*, who contrived a clock to *run a whole year without winding up*. These are specimens of ingenuity that ought to be remembered likewise (Jan. 10).

Justice

This letter brought the following rejoinder in the issue of 17 January 1798 (p. 2):

Mr. Russell,

I observed in your last papers, some little difficulty respecting determining the degree of credit which some of our ingenious mechanics merit, as it concerns the invention of certain pieces of machinery. One piece speaks of Mr. Willard of *Roxbury* "who contrived a clock, to run a whole year without once winding up".—Now the fact is, Mr. Willard, although a very ingenious artist, *did not contrive* that clock, but copied it from one in the possession of Dr. Waterhouse, of Cambridge, which he imported a few years ago from *England*; which the Doctor permitted him to inspect for that purpose. It ought to be mentioned that Mr. Willard never pretended that he was the inventor, but always acknowledged and mentioned the original he took it from. To have made such a one, after a few inspections, does credit to his ingenuity.

Fact

¹³ R. J. Hetherington to Reginald Fitz, typescript letter, 23 February 1951, in folder "Artistic and Memorial Objects, Clock—Waterhouse." According to Hetherington,

Caleb worked from 1787 to 1818, and William from 1785 to 1841.

Dr. Waterhouse, of course, did not import the clock from England; it was sent to him from England as a gift, but otherwise “Fact” seems to have been well informed. That the early American artisans should have often copied their British counterparts is not surprising, as for some time the latter possessed superior experience and sophistication in design and artistry, and set the style in fashion. F. A. B. Ward of the Science Museum of London wrote in 1985, “In colonial days the domestic clocks found in America bore close resemblance to their European counterparts, particularly the English long-case clock.”¹⁴ Husher and Welch in their book on Simon Willard, referred to above, stated that Willard often copied the work of others, and that “we have no doubt that by 1790 Simon could duplicate English eight day, musical and one year movements if he wanted to.”¹⁵

The sum of the evidence from Judge Peter Oliver’s two letters of 1789 and 1790 to Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse, and from the newspaper items of 1798, adds up to a reasonable and convincing understanding of the origin of the tall-case clock now ticking comfortably in a corner of the Faculty Room of the Harvard Medical School. The clock was a present from Judge Peter Oliver to his new grandson-in-law, Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse. It was made not by Simon Willard of Roxbury but by a clockmaker in Birmingham, England, in the spring of 1789, and was shipped across the Atlantic, Waterhouse receiving it about the first week of November. It was set up in Waterhouse’s house in Cambridge, and being unusual and doubtless the only one in the Boston area so designed, came to the notice of and was soon seen by the talented clockmaker Simon Willard, of nearby Roxbury. Willard completed a copy first in 1792, and probably made only a few such reproductions, which, with the special feature of requiring winding only once a year, were decidedly expensive for the time.

The Medical School’s English Waterhouse clock, contemporary with those of Simon Willard, is distinctive for its remarkably documented history, for its being a gift to the first Hersey Professor, for its role as a unique model for Simon Willard’s own one-year tall-case clocks, and for its continued service as a handsome, reliable timekeeper after the passage of more than two hundred years.

¹⁴ F. A. B. Ward, “Clocks,” in *Encyclopedia Americana* (Danbury, Conn.: Grolier, 1985), 8:92. ¹⁵ Husher and Welch, *Simon Willard’s Clocks*, 219.