

The *Other* Simon Willard, Clockmaker

by Bob Frishman

Photos courtesy Willard House & Clock Museum

While not quite a household name, Simon Willard (1753-1848) is well known to American decorative arts scholars and collectors as an eminent and innovative Massachusetts clockmaker. His signed clocks, including the “banjo” style that he invented, continue to earn top prices. He was just one in a clockmaking family originating in Grafton and working mostly in the Boston area. Perhaps equally familiar are his brother Aaron (1757-1844) and his nephew Aaron Jr. (1783-1864), who were more prolific and successful in the clock business.

Simon’s son Simon Willard Jr. (1795-1874) is sometimes confused with his father, but he was the fifth of Simon’s 11 children with his second wife, Mary (Bird) Willard. Simon Willard Jr. is the focus of this feature, especially because now at the Willard House & Clock Museum in Grafton, Massachusetts, there are *two* extremely rare astronomical regulator clocks bearing his name on their dials.

A Willard family descendant, John Ware Willard, published in 1911 a family history focused mainly on the elder Simon but also providing biographical material about other Willards. Within several pages about Simon Jr., he reprinted sections of an 1872 autobiography (now lost) written by Simon Jr., who describes his cold, hard childhood and what came afterward.

Until age ten, he had no schooling. He went four years to a rudimentary public school whose teacher did not spare the “rod and ferule.” He then apprenticed with his father and with a Portsmouth, New Hampshire, watchmaker whose shop failed at the onset of the War of 1812. He entered West Point in 1813, amply describing in his memoir the school’s primitive and bare conditions. He resigned from the Army in 1816 after the war had ended and he saw no chance of advancement.

Back in Roxbury (adjacent to Boston), he operated a crockery ware firm until its failure in 1824, when he resumed labor at his father’s clock shop. From 1826 to 1828 he apprenticed himself to a New York City chronometer expert, Dominick Eggert, and then Simon Jr. returned to Boston, where he finally was successful for the next four decades in his shop at 9 Congress Street, selling and repairing timepieces, including complicated high-precision marine chronometers. An 1828 ad in the *Columbian Centinel* touted his repair expertise, his English chronometers for sale, and the availability of “CLOCKS of all descriptions” from his father’s Roxbury shop.

Since publication of the 1911 book, many errors have been noted by later scholars, including questionable references to Simon Jr.’s products and accomplishments, but these do not diminish his importance. Not open to question, and as stated in an 1874 memorial after his death, was his prominence as a horologist as well as his presidency of the Boston Chess Club and of the Association of Graduates of West Point Military Academy. For the latter, he presided at an 1873 alumni dinner attended by President Grant and General Sherman. The next year, at age 80, he died of asthma, which had afflicted him for many years.

His Boston shop had shuttered in 1870, and its stock was purchased by the widowed Sally Bond, who was running the nearby competitor Bond & Son. As detailed in Donald Saff’s new book *From Celestial to Terrestrial Timekeeping: Clockmaking in the Bond Family* (reviewed by me in the October issue of *M.A.D.*, p. 152), the Willard inventory included many silver and gold watches and English chronometers by renowned makers. Some of those items were, in turn, auctioned in 1876 when the Bond firm needed cash, and Saff notes that the sale included astronomical clocks damaged in Boston’s “Great Fire” of 1872.

Interestingly, John Ware Willard stated on the opening page of the section about Simon Jr. that he “never made clocks,” explaining that nearly all clocks were made in larger factories by that time. However, a few pages later the author wrote that “in 1828, he made an astronomical clock of such excellence and rare accuracy that for

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forty years it was the standard of time for all New England.” Fortunately, that clock still exists and is on display as a gem of Harvard University’s Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments, overseen by Dr. Sara J. Schechner, its David P. Wheatland Curator. The clock was donated in 1894 by Simon Jr.’s son Zabdiel, and it is the third such regulator known, joining the two at the Willard House.

The author mentioned this clock a second time: “For many years he had entire charge of all the public clocks of the city of Boston. His Astronomical Regulator, tested by daily transit observation, was the standard time for all the railroads in New England.” It has been suggested that this 1828 clock had been installed at the Harvard Observatory, so it rightly was returning to Harvard in 1894, but there is no evidence to support this claim, and it seems unlikely since William Cranch Bond, also a local precision clockmaker, was in charge of the observatory during its early years.

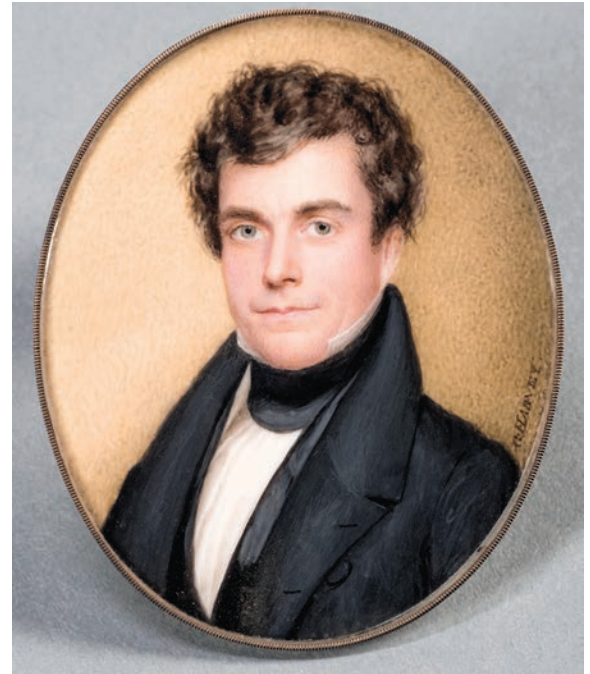
The actual makers of all these clocks, and of much of the entire Willard output, is a deep issue that continues to confront researchers, scholars, and collectors. There is substantial evidence that the brass and steel movements of most Willard tall clocks, in their familiar Roxbury cases, were made in England or completed here from English clock “sets.” The finely crafted high-precision movements in the three standing regulators appear to be English, and each is different from the others, which would be unlikely if made by the same hand. Close connections are documented between Simon Willard Jr. and the venerable clockmaking firm of Charles Frodsham in London. For example, in mid-1854 Willard’s firm advertised new timepieces from Frodsham as particularly suited for railroad purposes.

I contacted Richard Stenning of Charles Frodsham, still in operation, and provided him with Willard regulator-movement photographs. He replied, “As to who may have made the movements, I believe it will be very difficult to attribute them. They loosely follow an English pattern, but the subtle differences are not recognizable as any one maker’s work. It is quite probable that the movements were bought in and the dials signed for retail by Willard.” Robert Cheney, executive director and curator at the Willard House & Clock Museum, agrees and admits that this subject is ripe for research.

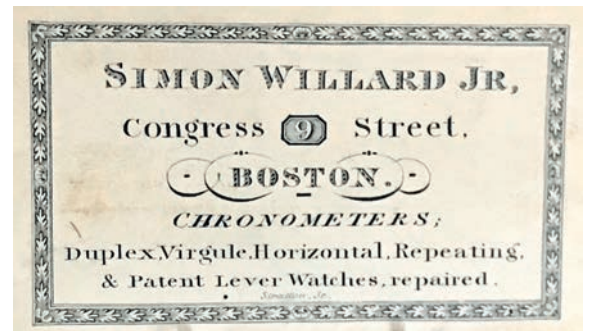
Regardless of who the makers are, Cheney is thrilled to have both signed regulators at the museum. The first arrived recently, donated by a generous trustee who purchased it through a Willard family descendant. Within days, by astounding coincidence, Cheney was telephoned about another one, previously unknown, being offered for sale by a Boston dealer. A different trustee stepped up and bought it as a future donation to the museum. As the accompanying photographs indicate, the cases are completely different from each other.

The museum owns yet another Willard astronomical regulator, circa 1850, but this one has Zabdiel’s name engraved on the round dial, along with “Simon Willard & Son” and “Boston and Providence Railroad.” Displayed in the museum’s Willard workshop, this movement has no wooden case, which may have been lost or which may indicate that the movement originally was installed in some other fashion. While researching Zabdiel, I discovered why a trove of his father’s possessions turned up in California, where they were purchased by the founders of the Willard House & Clock Museum, Dr. Roger and Imogene Robinson. Zabdiel wintered at his ranch in Murphys, California, and his possessions remained there after his death in 1918. A ranch caretaker preserved the unique artifacts and made the sales later in the 20th century.

For more information and to schedule visits, contact (www.willardhouse.org) and (www.chsi.harvard.edu).



A miniature portrait of Simon Willard Jr. depicts him as a young man with brown hair. According to Robert Cheney, Simon actually was a “ginger” with red hair, but redheads in those years were suspect, so the artist changed the color.



Simon Willard Jr.’s trade card highlighted his chronometer specialties.



Printed watch papers often were inserted into the hinged back covers of pocket watches to remind owners about who sold and serviced their timepieces. Simon Willard Jr.’s paper noted the utility of chronometers to determine longitude. “Chimney” clocks are what were later called mantel clocks. Frishman photo.



One of two Simon Willard Jr. astronomical regulators on view at the Willard House & Clock Museum, this circa 1842 imposing Gothic-style floor clock was gifted by museum trustee David Newsom.



A second Willard Jr. astronomical regulator, circa 1840, is a promised gift to the Willard House & Clock Museum from museum trustee Charles N. Grichar. Robert Cheney suggests that its unusual tapered column, round head, and octagonal base are reminiscent of smaller “lighthouse” shelf clocks invented by Willard’s father.



This finely finished high-precision time-only weight-driven eight-day movement occupies the top of the Willard House column-form floor clock. Nearly certain is that it was made in England for Simon Jr. to sell here. The case may have accompanied it from overseas, or more likely it was made here by a skilled joiner.

Willard certainly did not make this French skeleton clock although his name is on it. He imported many fine timepieces for his Boston customers. This glass-domed clock sold at Skinner on October 31, 2015, for \$19,680, and it headlined my article about the auction in the February 2016 issue of *M.A.D.* (see p. 3-B). Unusual for a skeleton clock, it is weight-driven and 30-hour, not spring-powered and eight-day duration. Photo courtesy Skinner.



Many pounds of dense liquid mercury are visible in this glass-jar pendulum hanging in Simon Willard Jr.’s regulator clock at Harvard University. Mercurial pendulums made a major contribution to 18th- and 19th-century timekeeping accuracy, correcting for temperature variations and keeping accuracy to within seconds a month or better. Unlike the movement, which has English origin, the pendulum most likely was a Willard creation. Photo courtesy Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments, Harvard University.



The Simon Willard Jr. regulator at Harvard is in the traditional case, nothing like the rare versions at the Willard House & Clock Museum. Most astronomical regulators appear in these basic, sturdy round-top cases since they were for scientific purposes, not decorative appeal. Frishman photo.



Astronomical regulators featured a special dial since the minutes and seconds were far more crucial than the hours for timing celestial observations. This dial adorns the third known example of Simon Jr.’s astros, on view in the Putnam Gallery of Harvard University’s Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments. Frishman photo.

Although Simon Jr.’s name is on the painted dial, it is unlikely that he made this clock. Many clockmakers, including his father who invented the style, were churning out these very popular wall clocks that Simon Sr. called his “improved timepiece”; the banjo name came long after his death. Photo courtesy Skinner.



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