

Skinner Inc., Marlborough, Massachusetts

Robert Cheney Clocks Out

by Bob Frishman

Photos courtesy Skinner Inc.

“We’re moving forward.” Those were the firm words from Skinner CEO Karen Keane. She spoke to me at the April 27 preview of the next day’s auction of clocks, watches, and scientific instruments. April 28 was also Robert C. Cheney’s final day as department director. Rumors were flying that Skinner would abandon his specialty and blend these items into sales of other departments.

Cheney boasts a lifetime of repair, study, and dealing in clocks.

Even during Cheney’s tenure after the founding of the department in 2009, many clocks and watches were offered in Skinner Americana, European, jewelry, 20th-century design, and discovery sales, often based on which department had brought them in. However, Cheney’s able assistant, Jonathan Dowling, has been tapped to replace him, and plans are underway for an October sale. Many lots already have been consigned and are in the cataloging pipeline.

Robert Cheney, now age 65, boasts a lifetime of repair, study, and dealing in clocks, mostly early American examples. He is acknowledged as the country’s leading expert on timekeepers by the Willard family. His knowledge, expertise, and connections to major collectors and collections contributed to Skinner’s successes in this area, and he may continue to advise them on a consulting basis. Many of his friends and associates have been aware of his recent serious battles with cancer, and although now cancer-free, he suffers lingering issues that contributed to the departure decision.

On his final day at Skinner, Cheney took his usual place seated at the podium. The first 43 lots, however, were antique motor vehicles and automobile memorabilia obtained and cataloged by Skinner specialist Jane Prentiss. The front portion of Skinner’s Marlborough parking lot became an antique car showplace. Most of the lots, from the estates of Eugene Bunce and Henry Snyder, were in fine condition and sold well. The salesroom had crowds not seen in years, but nearly three-quarters of them exited when the final car-related lot, a Goodyear Tire Sales sign, sold for \$197 (includes buyer’s premium).

The next lots, 45 to 86, were important clocks, tools, instruments, and machines consigned by the family of the late Don Wing of Marion, Massachusetts. Wing inherited much of the collection from his grandfather Henry C. Wing and father, Henry C. Wing Jr., but was widely respected in his own right and maintained similar interests. A lengthy tribute to Don Wing was published in the March 2016 magazine of England’s Antiquarian Horological Society. The Wing collection is much larger than what was on offer here, and we noted that other pieces were being offered recently by the Jones & Horan Auction Team in Goffstown, New Hampshire, and at a Martin J. Donnelly tool auction held on the same day as the Skinner sale.

The catalog cover lot was also Wing’s, but it failed to sell, despite the beautiful 1816 Holtzapffel and Deyerlein rose engine being the focus of a lecture the previous evening by conservator Richard Ketchen. He owns and uses a similar model for intricate decorative engraving work. The next lot, an 1868 ornamental turning lathe by the same London maker, also could not reach its reserve.

Other Wing lots did well, including two extremely rare regulator clocks by German immigrant horologist Charles Fasoldt (1818-1898), which made \$315,000 and \$67,650. Collectors almost never have an opportunity to see and bid on Fasoldt clocks or even his less rare watches, so these prices deserved applause. Many details about Fasoldt and his timepieces may be read in Derek Roberts’s *Precision Pendulum Clocks: France, Germany, America, and Recent Advancements*, Vol. 2 (2004).

Overall, the April 28 auction of 452 lots totaled \$1,259,740 with 88% sold, helped along by the automotive offerings. It will be a challenge for Jonathan Dowling to reach these heights again, but we wish him well. We also wish continuing success to Robert Cheney, who now has more time for his work with the Willard House & Clock Museum, back-burner scholarly and writing projects, and consulting on the acquisition and sale of fine clocks.

For more information, visit Skinner’s website (www.skinnerinc.com).

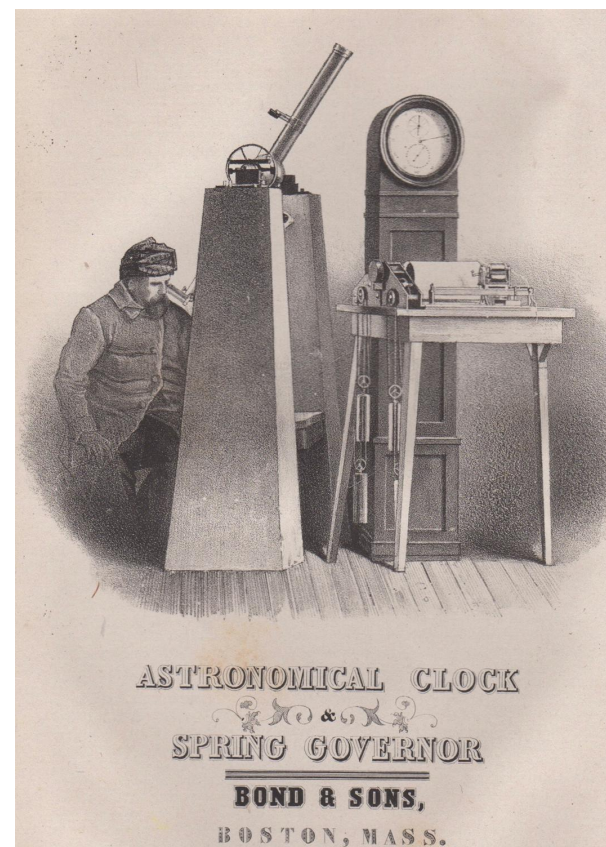


The relatively few clocks constructed by Charles Fasoldt are of the highest quality. Selling at \$315,000 (est. \$60,000/80,000), this inverted dial regulator tripled the price of the next-highest lot as it earned top-lot status. After a protracted contest between John Delaney in the room on his cell phone and house phone bidder 907, the latter is the new owner. Bidder 907 also paid \$67,650 (est. \$20,000/40,000) for the other Fasoldt regulator clock (not shown) on offer. Both were from the Wing collection.

For ornate monumental hall clocks from the Gilded Age, there may be no better example than this combination of a movement by J.J. Elliott of London in a case by R.J. Horner of New York City. Standing 116" tall, it presented ornamental and mechanical elegance and boasted provenance back to John Jacob Astor IV, who purchased it from Tiffany. Nine tubular bells announce each quarter-hour with Westminster or Whittington chimes. Jonathan Dowling assisted the phone bidder who paid \$86,100 (est. \$40,000/60,000) to claim the auction’s second-highest-priced lot.



Don Saff, a foremost horology collector, had a very good reason for acquiring this William Bond astronomical regulator. His agent, bidding from the floor, paid \$17,220 (est. \$6000/8000). Saff’s forthcoming book about Bond’s prize-winning exhibit at the 1851 London Crystal Palace Exposition includes an image of the Boston clockmaker’s three-piece display; one part is a standing round-top regulator just like the one he now owns. Saff believes that Bond imported top-quality regulator movements from England, and that this one may be by John Moore of London. Not shown, lot 242 was another astronomical regulator, circa 1825, with a silvered dial signed by Moore. It sold to an online bidder for \$13,530 (est. \$7000/9000). The edges of the seating board reveal the die-stamped name of the wood-case maker, which is almost never seen.



Queen Victoria was among the many visitors to the 1851 Great Exhibition in London who disparaged the American displays. In reaction, Charles T. Rodgers of Louisiana produced *American Superiority at the World’s Fair* in 1852. It was a printed hardbound compilation of information about America’s most significant exhibits. It was published to accompany a colorful lithograph illustrating these products. The book and print both are extremely rare, but I own the book and have viewed the fragile paper lithograph at the Boston Athenaeum. This is the book’s image included within several pages of dense text about the contributions of “Professor Bond.” We also see Bond’s innovative chronograph and transit telescope. Frishman photo.



I was very sorry that this large carved and gilded E. Howard gallery clock could not get a \$5000 opening bid. It had a \$10,000/15,000 estimate. It was a circa 1900 special order for Young’s Hotel in Boston. Before the auction, I contacted vintage menu collector Henry Voigt, who provided images of a dinner menu from that famous establishment, which closed in 1927. If the clock eventually sells, Voigt and I will be happy to share those pictures with the new owner.



A collection of vintage automobiles and related artifacts opened the auction. When these were done, most of the room cleared out, which said something about relative numbers of car and clock enthusiasts. The auction's fourth-highest lot was this 1951 Packard 250 convertible, which sold on the phone. It was consigned by the estate of Henry Snyder, and the net proceeds will be donated to the Shriners. Estimated at \$26,000/28,000, it sold for \$35,670.



Jonathan Dowling handled the winning phone bidder for this attractive J. Gooding eight-day mahogany tall clock. Joseph Gooding, assumed to be the signer of the clock face, was one of the earliest known clockmakers in southeastern Massachusetts and was based in Dighton. Made 1795-1800 with a dial marked "20," it is another numbered example of several by Gooding already documented. Despite a refinished surface, replaced feet, and possibly later top fretwork and chimneys, it reached \$19,680 (est. \$10,000/15,000).



Not every marine chronometer has a mechanical movement with an obligatory fusee, helical hairspring, detent escapement, etc. During a recent lecture on German chronometer-making presented by Ulrike Kranz at the Horological Society of New York, I learned that German chronometer-maker Glashütte also produced quartz models. This circa 1986 example sold to an absentee bidder for \$492 (est. \$400/600). Kranz is based in Glashütte, a small watchmaking town in Saxony, and she formerly worked at the German Watch Museum there. Other modern precision nautical timepieces, a 1966 Bulova Accutron Navigator and a circa 1970 Patek Philippe Naviquartz, were also offered in the sale.



Apparently the Skinner cataloger assumed, wrongly, that the market for curved-mount Keystone stereoviews still is moribund. The \$200/300 estimate was more than ten times too low. This lot of cased views sold for \$4305, while other similar lots of stereo cards in the sale also reached surprising heights. Many of us are happy that these important documentary photographs, enhanced by their three-dimensional vividness, may be regaining the values they merit.



I thought that this mahogany case English astronomical regulator looked familiar. It was lot 660 in the R.O. Schmitt auction on May 14, 2016, and it sold then for \$6037.50. Made around 1860 by Gabriel of London, it brought \$4920 this time around on a \$3000/4000 estimate. If quick profit was the motive, the consignor probably was disappointed.



Wristwatches continue to be a hot spot in horology collecting, and this sale offered a small assortment. Best by far was this circa 1955 18k gold gentleman's watch by top-drawer Swiss maker Patek Philippe. Aggressively estimated at \$7000/9000, it sold to an online bidder for \$6150. However, a 1990's Breitling "1884" steel chronograph (not shown), complete with original papers and box, failed at \$1600 to meet its reserve (est. \$2000/2500). Several good pocket watches also sold, including a Swiss Patek Philippe niello silver Chronometro Gondolo for \$4305 (est. \$3000/5000).



A recent auction at Boston's Grogan & Company featured a Willard lighthouse clock shown in the recent book on the subject, *Simon Willard Patent Alarm Time Pieces* (2016) by experts John C. Losch and Paul J. Foley. My review of the book appeared in *M.A.D.*'s March 2016 issue. This sale featured another one from the book, attributed to Simon Willard circa 1820. The catalog's rock-bottom \$4000/6000 estimate was verbally corrected from the podium to a more appropriate \$12,000/18,000. It just made it, selling for \$12,300.



Most mechanical marine chronometers are of two-day winding duration and were wound daily on shipboard to maintain their necessary accuracy. Eight-day versions are rare, and chronometers signed by American firms are rarer still. Circa 1880, this one was retailed and numbered by H.H. Heinrich of New York, and it sold for \$9225, within the \$8000/10,000 estimate, to a Vermont collector in the room. The same Vermonter paid \$2706 (est. \$800/1200) for a two-day chronometer (not shown) with another important New York marine-dealer name, Bliss & Creighton. Those who appreciate these fine and formerly vital nautical instruments are pleased that prices now appear to be stronger than those in the past few years.

Scientific instruments are within this Skinner department's purview. The buyer of a late 19th-century electrostatic generator must have been seeking a "shocking" experience and paid \$1476 (est. \$800/1200).





The Fasoldt clocks and Holtzapffel lathes were the cream of the 41 lots consigned by the family of Don Wing (1943-2015). Employed in key positions at Tabor Academy for 48 years, Wing was a third-generation collector, and many of the items consigned came from his grandfather and father. This 1971 photo shows Wing cementing the cornerstone of Tabor's Academic Center, of which he oversaw the construction. Photo courtesy Tabor Academy.



Perhaps the most unusual lot in the sale was a 1/12th-scale fully functional U-control model of a Republic-47D Thunderbolt. Long Island artist Ernest Berke needed nine years to construct this "anatomically correct" replica. The airplane earned first prize in a 1964 national competition. To win, it completed ten laps of flight plus performed powered takeoffs and landings. A predecessor of today's flying drones and with a 43" wingspan, it sold for \$11,070 (est. \$6000/8000).



Unless early 19th-century Boston-area banjo clocks can demonstrate nearly ironclad indicators of maker and originality, they usually sell these days for far less than in the past. This circa 1805 example by iconic inventor Simon Willard convinced bidders that it was "right." The mahogany case, painted iron dial, signed geometric glasses, and an eight-day movement with T-bridge, step train, and deadbeat escapement all contributed to the final price of \$5843 (est. \$3000/5000), still substantially below what these "patent timepieces" formerly brought.



Recent Skinner clock auctions have featured nice examples of early clocks from Japan. Ten were in this sale, and all but one sold, mostly within reasonable estimates. This Kake Dokei iron weight-driven striking lantern clock with alarm sold for \$4305 (est. \$3000/5000).



One big disappointment was the failure of this J.F. Houdin animated French clock to rise above \$25,000 and meet its reserve. Circa 1840 and in an ormolu bronze case, it probably deserved its \$35,000/45,000 estimate. Upon the hour, or on demand, the magician performs the "cup and ball" trick.



One of America's best horological craftsmen, Richard Ketchen, was enlisted for the Skinner preview reception to describe a few of the feature lots. He spoke about the two Fasoldt regulators, both of which he had restored. Here he is seen explaining the sale's cover lot, an 1816 Holtzapffel and Deyerlein rose engine, produced in London at great cost for "English gentlemen and gifted amateurs." Seated behind him is David Newsom, a well-known horology collector. Sadly, nobody would open the bidding at \$50,000 (it had an estimate of \$60,000/80,000), although a similar 1838 machine sold for \$228,000 at Skinner in 2012. Ketchen had no need to own a second rose engine, but he did purchase a five-volume set of accompanying manuals, rebound in leather with the name "Henry C. Wing" incised on their spines. I was the high bidder on another set of these books in original worn cloth bindings. Frishman photo.



Big E. Howard wall-hanging regulators almost always bring big prices, and this circa 1880 black dial No. 41 was no exception. Its 48" tall walnut case, the eight-day signed, weight-driven movement, the damascened pendulum bob, and the distinctive black, gold, and red reverse-painted glass tablet helped it reach an Internet bid of \$15,990, just topping its \$10,000/15,000 estimate.



Car clocks are where horology meets automobiles. These will be among the themes explored at next year's National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors symposium hosted by the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. The rim-wind timepiece in this 1909 Ford Speedster was estimated at \$18,000/\$25,000, vehicle included, but bidding stalled below reserve at \$12,000.



A good selection of English bracket clocks tempted bidders. I did not ask Skinner auctioneer and Americana department staffer Chris Barber if he is related to the maker of this Benjamin Barber musical example. Circa 1770, it offers a selection of tunes played on a nest of eight bells. It sold to a floor bidder for \$10,455, just reaching its \$10,000/15,000 estimate.



During his second-to-last day as department director, Robert Cheney spoke at the evening preview program. Behind him is a late 19th-century gilt tin eagle watchmaker's trade sign, which sold on a left bid for \$800 (est. \$500/700). The catalog reported an attribution to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, but the evidence was not sufficiently compelling for that coastal city's historical society to compete. Frishman photo.