

Willis Michael, FNAWCC, (1894-1969) and the National Heritage Museum

by Bob Frishman (MA)

A well-known secret about major museums is that they have far more items in dark storerooms than on display in public galleries. Some permanent collection items are rotated through exhibits, but understandably, many others are never seen except by occasional scholars.

One such storeroom full of clocks is beneath the National Heritage Museum in Lexington, Mass. The museum was built as a Bicentennial gift to our nation by the Scottish Rite Masons of the Northern Jurisdiction of the United States. Most of its 200-plus clocks and watches were part of the collection of Willis R. Michael, second president of the NAWCC from 1949 to 1951, and two-term NAWCC director (1951-1959). Since the Museum opened in 1975, on the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Lexington, it has displayed only small groups of his timepieces and has mounted just a few larger horological shows. Two public exhibits of the Michael clocks, in 1977 and 1982, were noted by *The Magazine Antiques*,¹ and another show will open in 2007.

I learned of these treasures ten years ago from Tom Leavitt, director of the National Heritage Museum at the time. New England Chapter 8 funded a summer intern there in 1996 to compile a detailed listing of the museum's horological holdings. The resulting printout, which lists 148 clocks and 52 watches, is in the NAWCC Library and Research Center. I also worked with Tom to organize our chapter's 7th Annual Educational Symposium at the Heritage Museum on September 28 of that year. In addition to hearing from speakers, including the late Ward Francillon, the 60 attendees were able to tour the storage areas and examine all the clocks and watches. Another Chapter 8 Symposium, this one focusing exclusively on the Michael clock collection, is scheduled for Saturday, September 30, 2006. (*For details, see the August 2006 MART Member Matters.*)

Willis R. Michael, born in 1894, died in 1969 without ever seeing the National Heritage Museum. "Brother" Michael was a nationally prominent 33rd-degree Mason who held several leadership positions, culminating as Grand Sovereign of the Grand Imperial Council, Empire of the East. This probably explains



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Willis Michael in his home workshop.

why his widow, Ruth B. Michael, donated a significant part of his collection to the new Masonic museum. (Details of the gift are confidential. In June 1993, even more of his collection, 752 lots, was sold by York Town Auctions in York, Pennsylvania.²)

Trained as a tool-and-die maker, Willis Michael worked as a young man on the development of the Dudley Masonic watch, and was owner/operator of successful specialized tool and die companies in York, Pennsylvania. Michael's interest in clocks began in 1937, when he purchased a grandfather clock in Lancaster. The collection grew to include more than 30 tallcase clocks, five organ clocks, and enough other rarities to become a 14-room private museum in his home in Red Lion, Pennsylvania. The 1948 *York Dispatch*³ printed a series of articles about him and his "400 Clocks and 225 Watches," and these articles were republished by Michael as a 28-page booklet.

A July 1948 BULLETIN article devotes three pages to his collection, including a photo of his workshop (part of which is shown on this page) and another of him talking with Charles and John Bowman.⁴ The December 1949 BULLETIN reports on him hosting a large dinner meeting of York Chapter No. 7 and supplies a photograph of one large room of his house/museum.⁵ *Hobbies Magazine* in 1952 and 1953 featured a multipart series, "A Visit to a Scientific Wonderland," about his then-famous collection that had expanded to music boxes, antique tools, sundials, and automata. In the June 1953 BULLETIN, he was referred to as "the dean of American collectors."⁶ An early founder of the NAWCC (membership number 197), he was eulogized by D. H. Shaffer in the BULLETIN of August 1969.⁷

In May and June of 2002, I again visited the National Heritage Museum basement storerooms to research this article and to encourage more appreciation and displays of this important collection. I brought well-known clock auctioneer Bob Schmitt to help with the mission. During those two days, accompanied by museum officials, we worked our way down the random

rows and shelves of clocks, stopping to examine and discuss as many as we could. (The watches in the collection await another expert visit.) The following descriptions are of some of the collection's highlights, which demonstrate its breadth and quality.

We started with the tallcase clocks. One by George Hoff of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, c.1780, may be the collector's first acquisition. Michael's brief biography in the *York Town Auction* catalog indicates that his initial purchase was a Hoff tallcase clock, but he may have had others. This one had a mahogany case of typical Pennsylvania proportions, but the three-weight movement was unusual, with inline winding arbors, quarter striking (not Westminster) on a nest of four bells and a calendar pointer, along with a center sweep seconds hand.

Two tallcase clocks by John Fisher, Yorktown, Pennsylvania, also had center-seconds and rolling moons, and they were important to this story for another reason. Michael dedicated his home's clock museum to the memory of Fisher—the local early clockmaker, engraver, portrait painter, and organ builder who died

in 1808. During the 1949 Chapter 7 dinner at Michael's home, a direct descendant of Fisher presented a detailed account of her ancestor's life and work.

Another Pennsylvania tallcase clock, in nice original condition, was made by Jonathan Jessop. He was one of York's outstanding clockmakers as well as the teacher of Phineas Davis, who went on to help invent the first coal-burning locomotive. The clock, with white dial and rolling moon, probably predates 1817, when his build-ings were carried away in a flood.

Perhaps most importantly, there was a tallcase by the famous David Rittenhouse, Norristown, Pennsylvania. While only a two-train bell-strike movement, it had a rolling moon and a more advanced calendar indicating day of the week, and date.

There were several other tallcase clocks by makers such as Jacob Hoffstедder, Jacob Custer, Charles Cooper, Silas Hoadley, Jacob Gorgas, and Daniel Rose. (In 2001, I serviced two others, a brass dial John Breakenrig, Edinburgh, and a Martin Shreiner, Lancaster, white dial, and set them up in an adjacent Masonic office building.)

Figure 1, below. James Conliff English skeleton clock signed R. A. Mosely, Boston.

Figure 2, right. Birge & Fuller wagon-spring steeple-on-steeple.

NATIONAL HERITAGE MUSEUM, LEXINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS, GIFT OF MRS. WILLIS R. MICHAEL, 75.66.11A-C



NATIONAL HERITAGE MUSEUM, LEXINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS, GIFT OF MRS. WILLIS R. MICHAEL, 75.66.14A-C



There also was a large Dutch tallcase by Johannes Elias of Amsterdam. Circa 1670, it boasted four rocking ships and rocking cherub, a calendar with figures for each month, and an alarm. An imposing German “Jupiter” organ clock by T. Hilzinger, Meakwen, towered above the others. Six soldiers on its dial would sway as the tune played. In its shadow was a dwarf clock by Noah Ranlet, Gilmington, New Hampshire, nearly all original with a kidney-shaped dial, early movement, and large alarm bell on top.

We moved to the shelves of smaller clocks. An English skeleton clock (Figure 1) signed R. A. Mosely, Boston, was recognized as the excellent work of James Conliff, Liverpool. Another skeleton clock, an unsigned triple fusee with a nest of bells, probably was a sample of Willis Michael’s machine skills and clockmaking abilities. While large and impressive, it appeared to have been converted from a bracket clock because of features that would not appear in a period factory-made piece. On top was a chronometer escapement with helical hairspring, the dial and spring barrels were unpierced, the plate screws had no collets, and the overall finish level was not quite up to expected standards.

A Birge & Fuller wagon-spring steeple-on-steeple clock (Figure 2) was among a few others of this same style, and was beside an



NATIONAL HERITAGE MUSEUM, LEXINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS, GIFT OF MRS. WILLIS R. MICHAEL, 80.61.1A-C

Figure 3, right. J. C. Brown acorn wall clock.

Figure 4, left. Kroeber noiseless rotary clock.



NATIONAL HERITAGE MUSEUM, LEXINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS, GIFT OF MRS. WILLIS R. MICHAEL, 85-108.2A-C

even rarer Asa Munger, Auburn, New York, 8-day pillar and scroll. Next was a J. C. Brown, Bristol, wall acorn clock (Figure 3), an Ansonia bouncing doll, a good early Briggs Rotary, and a Kroeber noiseless rotary (Figure 4).

A German hexagonal six-legged table clock, made in the mid-1600s by Frauenpries, had a fire gilt brass case with little glazed windows and a complete grand sonnerie movement with alarm, pull repeat, and original balance cock. Another early piece was a coach watch signed Erb in Wien, likely from around 1750, with strike and alarm, in a pierced brass case. It had a large fusee and chain, and a good porcelain dial. There was a Laport Hubbell globe clock, much rarer than the Timby version, with a balance wheel movement to rotate the globe.

An imposing French bracket clock by Henri de Martinot, Louis XIV style from around 1700, was inlaid with brass and tortoiseshell and had many complications and a finely engraved dial. Martinot was chief clockmaker to the Sun King and had lodgings in the Louvre. Another smaller bracket clock was Japanese, c.1825, with twin foliots to accommodate their old system of hours of varying lengths.

Out of the storeroom and upstairs in a large public display case was a Simon Willard lighthouse clock (Figure 5). Perhaps the most important clock, and certainly the most valuable, it often is on display in the museum’s Made in Massachusetts exhibit. The clock’s

porcelain dial has Simon Willard's name fired into it. In that same public case was a fine Aaron Willard shelf clock with an old oxidized silver mirror, and a George Hatch banjo with wooden sidearms and bezel.

These examples cover only a small part of what Willis Michael collected and what the National Heritage

Museum now owns. Because the museum has photographs of just a portion of the collection, and only a small number of pictures can accompany this text, a visit to Lexington is the only way to truly appreciate these timepieces. The Museum's research library contains his donated horological books and pamphlets; these, too, are available for study on site.

While we understand that the museum has a far broader mission than the NAWCC's facility in Columbia, Pennsylvania, we hope that it will continue to honor the memory and interests of our second national president, their Brother Willis Michael. Specifically, we hope for online availability of all descriptions and photos, as well as for enhanced exhibitions. And finally, we hope that many of our fellow NAWCC members will take the time and opportunity to view these horological gems.

Notes

1. *The Magazine Antiques* (August 1977): p. 184 and (June 1981): p. 1274.
2. "The Willis R. Michael Collection of Watches, Clocks, Scientific Instruments, Music Boxes and Automata," *York Town Auction, Inc.* (June 22-23, 1993).
3. "Red Lion Man's Collection Spans 400-Year Period in Clockmaking," *The York Dispatch* (April 10, 1948).
4. NAWCC BULLETIN, No. 24 (July 1948): pp. 462-464.
5. NAWCC BULLETIN, No. 31 (December 1949): pp. 24-25.
6. NAWCC BULLETIN, No. 49 (June 1953): p. 407.
7. NAWCC BULLETIN, No. 141 (August 1969): p. 979.

Acknowledgments

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About the Author

Bob Frishman, NAWCC member since 1980, repairs and sells antique clocks at his home-based business, Bell-Time Clocks, in Andover, MA. He is a past treasurer, vice-president, and president of New England Chapter 8. This is his third article for the BULLETIN. He can be contacted via his website, www.bell-time.com.

Bob Frishman generously paid the reproduction fees for the photography featured in this article.

About the Museum

The National Heritage Museum is located at 33 Marrett Road in historic Lexington, MA. It is open every day, with free admission and parking. Contact the Museum by phone at 781-861-6559 or see their website at www.nationalheritagemuseum.org. To view the clocks in storage, special permission and appointments are required.



NATIONAL HERITAGE MUSEUM, LEXINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS, GIFT OF MRS. WILLIS R. MICHAEL, 75.66.15A-G

Figure 5, right. Simon Willard lighthouse clock.