

# Franklin Clock Awakens

by Bob Frishman

Photos courtesy Wiederseim Associates

If ever an auction lot qualified as a “sleeping,” it was an 18th-century English tall clock that sold February 15 at Wiederseim Associates in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, for \$37,500 (includes buyer’s premium), far exceeding its \$350 high estimate.

The clock’s engraved brass “sheet” dial was signed “Whitehurst, Derby” by its maker, John Whitehurst (1713-1788). His life is described in a detailed 2015 biography by Maxwell Craven, *John Whitehurst FRS: Innovator, Scientist, Geologist and Clockmaker*. Other names appeared on the mahogany clock case: on one small brass plate “B. Franklin” was engraved; “Property of Dr. And Mrs. Edward Parker Davis” was on the second. These names better explain the surprising high bids.

Whitehurst, a member of the famous Lunar Society that included Erasmus Darwin and Josiah Wedgwood, hosted several visits by Benjamin Franklin to his home in Derby, about 130 miles north of London. In an August 1, 1771, letter to Franklin, Whitehurst reported on a clock that he was crafting for his friend: “...I found it necessary to depart from Mr. Fergusons Plans, for the sake of greater simplicity. The moons southing, and time of high water, ought to be as visible as the time pointed out by the Indexes. I believe you will agree with me in this alteration. I consulted Mr. Ferguson before I altered his Designs....”

The clockmaker was discussing one of at least two distinctive long-case clocks that Whitehurst made for Franklin that indicated local tides. Both were adapted from an innovative design by famed Scottish astronomer and scientist James Ferguson (1710-1776). A drawing of a Ferguson-signed tide dial, reproduced on page 45 of the Craven book, is nearly identical to the sale’s Whitehurst clock, while the second one was described by Whitehurst in 1772 as having a round dial. The Derby clockmaker also made examples of the simplified three-wheel clocks that Franklin designed but were difficult to read and never were popularized.

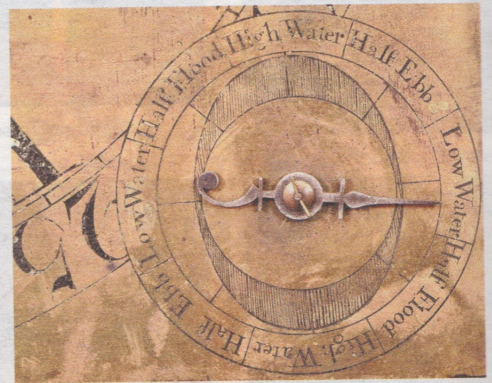
The tide clock’s dial has two subsidiary pointers in the lower corners. Unlike simpler systems that were calibrated for a single coastal location, this clock’s design could be used anywhere. Sadly, photographs of the



**Clock by John Whitehurst of Derby, probably commissioned by and belonging to Ben Franklin.**

back of the dial reveal that those gears now are missing, perhaps removed when a past repairer could not make them work.

Until the Wiederseim sale, this



**Detail of Whitehurst dial, showing local tide.**

clock was lost, but it now may be found. Other tide-display clocks by Whitehurst are not known. Franklin was unlikely to have left the costly clock behind when he departed from England in March of 1775 after realizing that conciliation with the mother country was impossible. And Mrs. Edward Parker Davis, born Ellen Duane Gillespie (1854-1924), was a direct descendant of Ben and Deborah Franklin’s daughter, Sarah Franklin Bache.

Another feature of the dial adds more spice to the story. Centered in the arch top is a spherical moon-phase indicator, although its motive components now are missing, too. This is unlike nearly all other clock dials that instead show the moon’s 29.5-day cycle on a flat rotating disk. A Colonial Philadelphia clockmaker, Edward Duffield (1730-1803), made at least four of these rare models, and one by him probably belonged to Franklin. That clock, also descended in the Bache family, now is in the collection of the American Philosophical Society, founded by Franklin and of which Duffield became a member in March 1768.

Duffield and Franklin were lifelong friends, and Duffield was one of three executors when the great man died in 1790. The will listed three clocks but not their makers. A reasonable assumption is that the Whitehurst clock was in Franklin’s Philadelphia home and inspired Duffield to produce his own versions, although not with tide indicators.

Another assumption is that the Whitehurst clock’s new owners know what they have. We trust that they will share it.

**Bob Frishman is completing a comprehensive biography of Edward Duffield to be published by the American Philosophical Society. See the website ([www.edwardduffield.com](http://www.edwardduffield.com)).**