

Redwood Library and Athenaeum, Newport, Rhode Island

# Claggett Clock Reunion

by Bob Frishman

Back on June 5, 2015, I attended a daylong seminar, “Time Well Spent: Clockmaking in Colonial America,” at the venerable Redwood Library and Athenaeum in Newport, Rhode Island. The Redwood, America’s first purpose-built library, was founded in 1747 and still occupies its original but expanded Neo-classical building. In its reading room on that spring day, my eyes alternated between the podium and a stunning japanned-case tall clock by Newport maker William Claggett.

I returned to the Redwood on December 14, 2018, for the opening reception of a historic exhibit of 35 clocks by William Claggett (1694-1748), his son-in-law James Wady (c. 1706-1759), and the younger Thomas Claggett (d. 1797), also likely a relative. Bringing together so many clocks by these three Newport makers in one place at one time was an unprecedented feat, unlikely ever to be repeated. All but one were tall clocks, although two of those were displayed without their fragile wood cases, and the clocks arrived from a wide array of public and private collections.

The official exhibit title is *The Claggetts of Newport: Master Clockmakers in Colonial America*. I have named this article a “reunion,” although in actuality these clocks never were all together before. They were crafted at various times during more than 50 years when 18th-century Newport prospered and could provide a strong local market for such luxury household products. With their ornate cases, complicated machinery, and shiny faces, such clocks often were the most valuable item in affluent homes of that era.

The idea for the exhibit was spawned before the 2018 publication of *Claggett: Newport’s Illustrious Clockmakers*, a 268-page full-color hardbound book produced by the team of Frank L. Hohmann III and Donald L. Fennimore. This dynamic duo—a collector and scholar of early American clocks and a Winterthur emeritus curator—previously published a similar tome on the Stretch clockmaking family of Philadelphia. They now are at work on their next project on the Pennsylvania clock-making brothers David and Benjamin Rittenhouse. At first proposed only as a book-signing venue, the Redwood became the site of a dramatic display for the subjects of the Claggett book.

An important point is well presented. The Claggetts and Wady, like nearly all Colonial clockmakers, fabricated only the metal components. Their names adorn the engraved dials, but the wooden cases, made by other specialized craftsmen, offer the bulk of what we see. Rarely do we know the names of those woodworkers, but it is likely and sometimes clear that familiar Newport furniture makers, such as Townsend and Goddard, were involved.

One clock in the exhibit was not in the tall-case style. Number 10 in the book, it is a black japanned table or bracket clock, circa 1740, similar to ones made in England at that time. Its fusee movement is time only, with a single “drop strike” on each hour. The signed arched dial shows moon phase and date of lunar month at its top. A mock pendulum swings in the curved aperture, along with the real one mounted at the back of the brass and steel movement.



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Hohmann and Fennimore list 89 Claggett and Wady clocks in their book and focus on 28 of the finest examples for detailed descriptions and photographs. Not surprising, more examples bubbled up after the book’s release. Nearly half of the clocks at the Redwood’s exhibit were previously unrecorded and never exhibited, and they now add to the scholarship. At the exhibition reception, the two authors presented an illustrated lecture and signed a tall stack of copies of their book.

The exhibit’s logistics fell to another committed team. Ed Kane, a serious underwriter and researcher for Hohmann and Fennimore, also is a Redwood member/donor. Two years ago, he connected with the library’s energetic executive director, Dr. Benedict Leca, and planning commenced. In 2018 dealer/scholar Gary Sullivan was enlisted as co-curator with Leca, and Sullivan was instrumental in arranging loans, transportation, design, labels and signage, and setup, and in providing information for this report. They also called upon nearby clockmakers Ed Christiansen and Peter Nunes for their expertise in moving, installing, and running these antique machines.

A second historic Newport venue also is in on the act. Just down the street, the Newport Historical Society has mounted a companion exhibit, “My small Ability”: *The Life and Work of William Claggett*. Along with ephemera and artifacts, three clocks may be examined. Tall clocks by William Claggett and James Wady are on view, but most striking is the circa 1732 over-size octagon-head japanned tavern clock hanging in its original location in the Seventh Day Baptist Meeting House, now part of the society’s headquarters. While the clock case is boldly signed by William Claggett, the clock likely is of English manufacture, imported and sold to the church by Claggett. Also on display is a large primitive machine for generating bursts of static electricity. Claggett made and demonstrated a similar apparatus as part of his wide-ranging skills and money-making interests.

The Redwood is the exhibit’s sole venue. The clocks on loan return to their private and institutional owners after April 21, no longer and never again on public view with so many of their ticking cousins. For more information, visit the Redwood’s website ([www.redwoodlibrary.org](http://www.redwoodlibrary.org)).



On Newport’s historical Bellevue Avenue, the Redwood Library and Athenaeum is in America’s earliest public Neoclassical building.



More than 150 attendees overflowed the Redwood’s lecture hall and spilled into the adjoining spaces. The crowd included exhibit lenders, library and local community members, clock dealers and experts, *Antiques Roadshow* appraisers, and curators from the Willard House & Clock Museum, Yale University, Old Sturbridge Village, Wadsworth Atheneum, and Concord Museum.



Among the curators present at the opening was Dennis Carr of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Here he is admiring the lineup of Claggetts. Carr contributed the book’s detailed and lengthy introduction about 18th-century Newport, “The Most Thriving, Flourishing Place in All America.” Patricia Kane of the Yale University Art Gallery also was on hand, and she supplied the book’s foreword.

## Richard L. Champlin Papers, 1973-1998

Richard L. Champlin (1926-2003) dedicated the majority of his working life to serving the Redwood Library and Athenaeum and he was also one of the foremost experts on Claggett clocks. Champlin was the author of several scholarly articles on William Claggett and his family for *Newport History* and his collection of research notes, photographs, and correspondence was acquired from his nephew Richard Haymon so that his work could be made available for future researchers. On display are a selection of letters Champlin received in response to inquiries he made about Claggett clocks to institutions and collectors around the country.

Gift of Ed Kane

Ephemera related to Richard L. Champlin (1926-2003) is on display at the Redwood. Boxloads of his papers recently were discovered in a descendant’s possession and purchased for the library by Ed Kane. Champlin’s extended research and publications on the Claggetts were the most comprehensive until the new book.





Frank Hohmann (left) and Don Fennimore, coauthors of the new book *Claggett: Newport's Illustrious Clockmakers*, mingled at the exhibit's opening reception. They then delivered an hour-long presentation highlighting the book's contents.



Benedict Leca, Ph.D., is the Redwood's executive director and co-curator of the exhibit. He is dwarfed by the library's own William Claggett masterpiece. The japanned pine case was made for Claggett and Newport's Stanton family by an unknown Boston specialist. Claggett skillfully engraved the brass dial with its unique four subsidiary dials indicating the clock's highly complicated movement.



Co-curator Gary Sullivan also chose to be photographed with the Redwood's elegant gem. Number 13 in the new book, the clock boasts one of the few surviving 18th-century American japanned cases. Its movement chimes the quarter hours on six bells, and the dial indicates an extraordinary ten functions, including high tides, lunar dates, days of the week, phases of the moon, and, of course, the time.



Philip Morris may have traveled the farthest, from Bessemer, Alabama, to attend the opening. He is a board member of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors (NAWCC) and author of *American Wooden Movement Tall Clocks: 1712-1835* (2011). Morris was a longtime personal friend of John B. McLemore (1966-2015), focus of the hugely popular podcast *S-Town*. Morris is organizing a 2019 exhibit on McLemore at the NAWCC Museum in Columbia, Pennsylvania.



Massachusetts clockmaker Peter Nunes stands with the William Claggett movement he completely restored for the exhibit. The fragile and incomplete case remained with its private owner. Most viewers were spooked by the dial's moving eyes, which shift back and forth once a second with every swing of the pendulum. This clock reportedly was first owned by Rhode Island governor and signer of the Declaration of Independence Stephen Hopkins.



Ready for sale at the exhibit's opening reception, the new Claggett book was joined by the authors' first major publication, *Timeless: Masterpiece American Brass Dial Clocks* (2009), which also features Claggett output.



There were too many tall clocks to fit in the Redwood's Van Allen Gallery, so a few were placed in a larger front area too. Number 6 in the Claggett book, and from a private collection, this circa 1745 cherry case clock by William Claggett sports a carved shell more typical of Providence and Warwick than Newport.



Ed Kane and his wife, Martha Wallace, pose with their circa 1734 William Claggett square-dial walnut-case clock. Their family foundation is a major backer of the book and exhibit. Kane joked that he is not worried that readers will know that the clock is his; he figures that potential thieves will target fancier specimens. Other private lenders, sometimes of multiple clocks, were present but more circumspect.



The tombstone dial of this circa 1748 clock by William Claggett displays additional complex functions in its top arch. The moon phase is revealed in a less common "penny moon" format. The silvered numbered rings indicate the date of the lunar month and the time of local high tides, information perhaps still useful to the clock's private owner.



William Claggett's fine engraving skills clearly are demonstrated on this silvered brass dial. His skills were considered so good that he was hired to produce copper plates for printing local paper currency. Those original plates are on view at the Newport Historical Society, ready to stamp out more Colonial bills.

