

# Rufus Porter and His Clock

By Bob Frishman (MA)

**R**ufus Porter, Billerica”. That is the name and town boldly printed on the painted metal dial of a cherry longcase clock. As I related during a presentation in Bridgton, ME, on July 31, 2017, I noticed this clock at a November 2015 auction at Skinner in Marlborough, MA. Because I had serviced clocks in a house with Porter wall murals, I was vaguely familiar with the artist, but on that auction day I was even more attracted to the town name; Billerica is less than 14 miles from my home in Andover. My final bid, against just one competitor in the sales room, was enough to win me a “local” clock and then kickstart my deep interest in Porter’s lifelong mechanical pursuits and inventions.

Basic research after the auction led me to two of Jean Lipman’s books—*Rufus Porter, Yankee Pioneer* (Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1968) and *Rufus Porter Rediscovered* (Hudson River Museum, 1980)—and then to the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, MA, where I paged through every crumbling issue of *American Mechanic*. Porter published and wrote much of this groundbreaking 1842 newspaper for about a year before selling what became the template for his founding of *Scientific American* three years later.

While these publications were fascinating for their mechanical and scientific content, and included some interesting watch maker ads and horology tidbits, they contained nothing about my clock. The only relevant reference I could find was in *United States Clock and Watch Patents 1790-1890* by George Eckhardt, privately printed in 1960, showing one patent that was issued to Porter on June 22, 1832. The one-line entry appears in the book’s section, “Striking Part of Clock,” with no further details. The disastrous 1836 Patent Office fire in Washington, DC, destroyed the documents and models that would have told the entire story.

Those details are perhaps revealed in some unique features of my clock’s 8-day weight-driven movement. Although it was fabricated mostly from standard brass and steel parts, probably imported from England, modifications to a few strike-system components were unfamiliar to me and to expert colleagues who also examined the movement. Porter appeared to be addressing technical



Figure 1. Rufus Porter cherry longcase clock.

issues related to moving the hands backward and easing friction.

The movement’s plates, the two brass rectangles that hold all the wheels in place, also were unique in shape and style. They were connected with screwed-in pillars, rarely seen here or in England. Better yet, “PR” was punched onto the front plate; Porter’s initials, I believe, stamped in reverse order. It is a common and understandable mistake to punch letters, or create a lettered metal punch, in the wrong sequence. There was no other contemporary New England clockmaker with those initials in either order, and I seriously doubt that Paul Revere was involved. To my eye, the form of the letters appears quite similar to the few extant Porter signatures.

There are no other known examples of clocks with Rufus Porter’s name, and there is no indication that he made the solid cherry case, or that he painted or lettered the face. My theory is that, in the early 1830s, he conceived a few improvements, worked with a nearby clock maker to incorporate them into a long-case clock movement, filed his patent, and had the clock case built by a local joiner. Most likely, he then stood the clock in the Billerica home where his first wife and children resided while he traveled and pursued his artistic and mechanical vocations. I visited the old cemetery in Billerica where Eunice Porter was buried in 1848. Two sons, Washington Irving Porter and Stephen T. Porter, occupy adjacent graves. How the clock ended up in another Massachusetts collection until my purchase is undetermined.

The April 4, 1833, issue of *New England Artisan: Laboring Man’s Repository* reported the issuing of a Rufus Porter, Billerica, clock patent, but seemingly a different and later one. The brief nine lines of description do not correlate to my clock or to the “striking parts” referenced in the 1832 patent. In this 1833 notice, mention is made of improvements to the escapement, how the hour hand is “acted upon,” and most interestingly, an alarm system that strikes a match and lights a candle at the selected time. No specifics about this invention are known either, again probably a victim of the 1836 conflagration, but the identical concept reappeared in actual clocks manufactured and sold by the Ansonia Clock Co. in the early 1870s. I wonder how many domestic conflagrations of that



time could be traced to a malfunction in this automatic nighttime match-striking device.

These two clock patents seem to confirm that Porter, a true polymath, focused occasionally on clock-making. This would not be surprising, as the design and mass production of timekeepers was a leading force in the 19th century American industrial revolution spearheaded in New England. He would have been aware of the emergence of many clock-making firms and innovations, and the resulting flood of affordable timepieces spreading across the new nation. There may be other Rufus Porter clock-making connections awaiting discovery. Some of his later published inventions also employ clockwork, such as a fire alarm he patented December 28, 1840. He died August 13, 1884 in Bristol, CT, a hub of clock manufacturing, where the *New Haven Register* reported that “there were very few present” at his funeral.

My Bridgton talk referenced other Porter patents, among more than two dozen, that preceded successful inventions and products. Few of Porter’s concepts appear to have been developed during his peak years because he had little capital and mostly was unable to convince investors to take his ideas to market. His “Aerial Locomotive” is the most alluring with its obvious similarities to blimps and zeppelins. His “Steam Carriage” anticipated the Stanley Steamer and other automobiles, his “Rotary Plough” resembled modern disk ploughs, and his “Elevated Railroad” preceded above-ground tracks still seen in many cities. The World War II U.S. Navy dry docks mirror his



**Figure 2, left.** Painted metal dial of Rufus Porter, Billerica, longcase clock.

**Figure 3, above.** Movement front plate with “PR” stamp.

1835 “Floating Dock.” According to a 1940 letter to the *Scientific American* written by Porter’s son in 1940, Samuel Colt paid Porter \$100 for a revolver patent that could have inspired the multi-shot firearms that made Colt’s vast fortunes—an inspiration at odds with Colt’s later recollections of how he conceived the idea. Of course, dreamers are not always the ones enriched by their visions.

I have seen two Rufus Porter inventions that did reach the market. The museum at Historic Deerfield in Massachusetts displays in visible storage one of his hand-cranked corn shellers patented in 1838. The American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, MA, has an example of his “Revolving Almanack”; another of these was in the collection of famed folk art expert Nina Fletcher Little. According to an advertisement in Porter’s 1841 *American Mechanic*, the device cost 62 cents, wood frame included.

A year after my clock purchase, I placed another bid for a Rufus Porter item at Skinner. This lot will be much more familiar to his admirers and collectors. It is a small watercolor profile portrait, in its original gilt wood frame, of Sylvester Norton of Suffield, CT. The little painting now hangs on the wall next to my clock, completing for now my collection of original Porter artifacts. They will be separated again while my clock joins a Rufus Porter exhibition at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art in Brunswick, ME. This show, running November 14, 2019 through June 1, 2020, promises to further bolster Porter as one of our finest exemplars of 19th century Yankee ingenuity.

### About the Author

Bob Frishman has been a horological restorer, scholar, writer, and lecturer since 1980. He has repaired more than 7,000 clocks and watches, sold more than 1,700 antique timekeepers, written more than 80 published articles, and lectured nearly 100 times on the subject. He is a Fellow of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, Chair of the NAWCC Ward Francillon Time Symposium Committee, and a Freeman of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers, London. He lives and works in Andover, MA.