

A Tale of Two Astor *Titanic* Watches

by Bob Frishman
Photos courtesy Freeman's

On April 22 in Chicago, Illinois, Freeman's sold a Patek Philippe 18k gold-cased pocket watch, with Tiffany & Co on its dial, to an Irish businessman for \$1,024,000 (includes buyer's premium); the estimate was \$300,000/500,000. Its seemingly ironclad provenance placed it on the recovered body of John Jacob Astor IV, the headline-leading Gilded Age victim of the April 1912 *Titanic* disaster.

Two years ago on April 27, 2024, a 14k gold-cased Waltham Watch Company pocket watch, which was also claimed to have been found on that celebrity corpse, was sold for \$1.5 million by English auctioneer Henry Aldridge & Son Ltd., Wiltshire, England. The buyer was Patrick Gruhn, a controversial German cryptocurrency entrepreneur whose family, like Astor's, left Germany and found fortunes in America.

When Astor's body was examined in Halifax, Nova Scotia, a careful inventory of his personal effects included one gold pocket watch. Astor's 20-year-old son, Vincent, returned with the body to New York City and, according to Freeman's provenance, wore the Tiffany watch until his death in 1959. The watch then went into the family vault until now, reemerging from the estate of its final family owner, Charlene Marshall, along with Astor's gold-cased pencil that sold at the same sale for \$204,800. The family-verified "chain of custody" has no gaps of ownership outside of the immediate family.

According to Andrew Aldridge, the Waltham watch was recovered in Halifax and worn by Vincent Astor until 1935, when it was gifted—reportedly with the *Titanic* connection—to his godson, William Dobbey, son of Astor's executive secretary of the same name. The Dobbey family sold it in the 1990s to collector John Miottel, who loaned it periodically for museum exhibits. Miottel's collection sold in the Wiltshire sale.

While both watches are in gold hunting cases with Astor's initials engraved on their back covers—that is where the similarities end. Tiffany's Manhattan store has been called the Astor family jeweler, and its name on a watch dial would have been far more prestigious in 1912 than the name of the watch's Swiss maker, Patek Philippe, or certainly of Waltham's. Astor would have paid top dollar for the 18k case and the top-grade movement within.

The case of the diminutive 12-size Waltham watch is 14k. Its 19-jewel Riverside model 1894 movement was considered high-grade, but not top-of-the-line. Its serial number, 11015590, correlates to a manufacturing date of 1901. A nearly identical Waltham watch, made several years later, hammered at a Schmitt Horan horology auction for \$650 on September 10, 2022.

A 1900 Tiffany gold watch with an attributed Patek Philippe movement, nearly identical to Astor's, sold on October 23, 2025, at Jones & Horan for \$2700; again, demonstrating how provenance and association can vastly multiply values to buyers.



Tiffany 1904 18k gold pocket watch recovered from body of John Jacob Astor IV.

A 36-minute video podcast posted April 2 by Collectability, Patek Philippe expert John Reardon discussed these watches with host Tania Edwards and Reginald Brack, the head of Freeman's watch department. They called the Waltham watch "the elephant in the room" but agreed that it would have been extremely unlikely for John Jacob Astor IV, one of the world's richest and best-dressed men, to have worn a Waltham watch—made by a company known for their early industrial mass production of watches—on the *Titanic*. Even as a so-called "travel watch" that would have been less valuable than more complicated watches, which Astor most likely also owned, a slim Tiffany Patek would have met his minimum standards for a watch that his wealthy companions certainly would have noticed and commented upon.

The panelists also agreed that quite possibly the gold Waltham belonged to the Astor family and might have been available as a gift to a valued employee. But



Patek Philippe Swiss movement in Astor's Tiffany pocket watch.

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it would have been inconceivable for John IV to have given away, to a non-family member, the watch found on his beloved father's body. And the panelists restated Tiffany's seamless documented provenance that included a thorough printed description from Patek Philippe's Geneva archive, confirming the watch's 1904 making and date of sale,

The panelists also knew that viewers would wonder about either watch's condition after days immersed in salt water. Reardon pointed out that neither the gold case nor the enamel dial would have suffered, and that certainly Vincent would have rushed the watch back to Tiffany's to clean and restore the steel and brass components. A master watchmaker confirmed for Freeman's that their watch was serviced several times, and that expected oxidation traces are visible.

The stories of the *Titanic*, and of the disastrous end of Astor's honeymoon with his 18-year-old pregnant second wife, are well known. The new Irish owner of Astor's Tiffany watch now has a tangible and visceral connection to that catastrophe and to those victims. He can wind that watch and hear its ticking, just as Astor did. The owner of the Waltham watch, who paid nearly a half-million dollars more, can do the same with his Astor watch, perhaps without the same whiff of Atlantic seawater.

Another *Titanic* watch retains the auction record for items associated with that 1912 disaster. An 18k gold Jules Jürgensen watch, recovered from the body of victim Isidor Straus, sold for \$2.3 million in November 2025. Its hands displayed the exact time of the ship's sinking, 2:20 a.m.