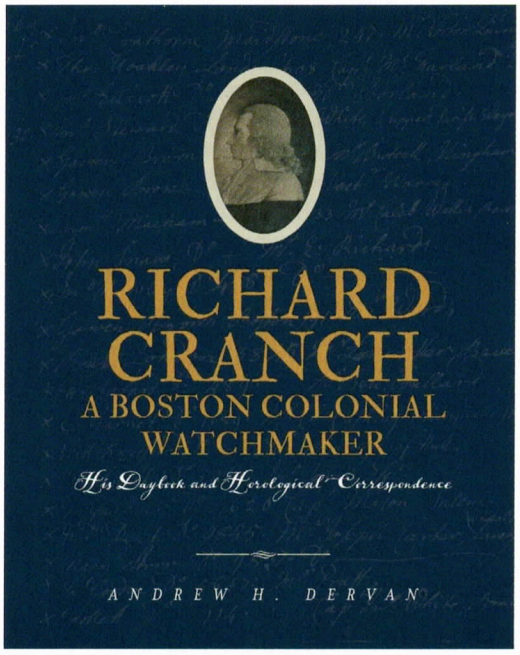
Book reviews



Andrew H. Dervan. Richard Cranch: A Boston Colonial Watchmaker, His Daybook and Horological Correspondence. National Association of Watch & Clock Collectors, Inc., 2025. ISBN 979-8-9859967-6-0, 160 pages, softcover, $45.

....is a doubt with me, whether the Articles can be got in the manner you Order them, I mean in the Rough.... I am Inform'd they never will sell unfinish'd work for Export....

August 9, 1769, letter from George Watson in Bristol, England, to Richard Cranch in Boston

Rich Newman, President of the AHS USA Section, wrote the foreword to Andrew Dervan's new book that offers details and analyses not only of a colonial American watchmaker's daybook but also of letters with horological content to and from a forgotten Puritan artisan, Richard Cranch (1726–1811).

Newman noted the special significance, confirmed in the above quote by Cranch's cousin, that Britain energetically banned the export of unfinished watches and parts to protect a profitable advanced-technology trade that employed thousands of domestic workers. Cranch had been hoping, without success, to purchase and finish rough movements in his own shop and to supply watchmakers throughout New England with materials much cheaper and easier for them to import than to fabricate.

Like other early American watchmakers, Cranch was able to order complete cased watches from England and retail them locally. In at least one instance, the movement plate was signed 'Rich'd Cranch Boston 501'. Now in the collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS), the silver-cased watch is catalogued as 'attributed to by [sic] John Chapman, of London, 1772.... Repaired and engraved by Richard Cranch, Boston, October 1774, Jewelry 04.024'.

Twenty-four years later, a 1793 letter to Cranch from London watchmaker Charles Smith raised an issue that could ring alarms today. Smith supplied pricing for watches of various grades and complications, and added that 'I generaly [sic] make the distinction by putting different Names....'. This calls into question the authenticity of maker names engraved on English watch movements of that period, adding to the known practice of Continental watchmakers falsely scribing English-sounding surnames. The English themselves apparently were doing the same; in current reference books I could not find some makers that Smith cited.

The main focus of Dervan's book, however, is the discovery and transcription of Cranch's watch-repair daybook covering 1769–1774. Cranch in 1765 established himself as a watchmaker in the prosperous port city of Salem, but in 1767 he moved to Boston for better opportunities. The filled ledger listed, in clear handwriting, approximately 3,750 verge watches serviced – averaging two per day, noting makers (real or make-believe as suggested above), locations, and serial numbers. While nearly all the watches were English, a handful were French, Dutch, or Swiss. The few signed 'Dublin' were likely made across the Irish Sea from that city.

The entries revealed that many watches were repaired repeatedly in six to nine month intervals; not surprising given their varying qualities and ages, hard usage, and dusty sooty surroundings. Throughout all these busy years of watchmaking, Cranch apparently had continuing problems getting paid in a timely manner, or at all, by his customers.

The source of these extremely rare primary-source documents must be applauded. Longtime Boston furniture restorer and scholar Robert D. Mussey, Jr. devoted years to seeking and photographing Cranch ephemera all across North America. Although intending to publish these materials, Mussey eventually realized that this would not be possible for him. In 2021, he donated his painstaking daybook transcriptions to the NAWCC with hopes that they would produce such a book. Mussey also found, bought, and donated to the MHS the Cranch-signed watch mentioned above.

Dervan, a frequent writer of NAWCC *Bulletin* articles, had previously transcribed and analyzed the account book of colonial watchmaker Samuel Bemis while a volunteer at the Benson Ford Research Center in Dearborn, Michigan. (I recruited Andy to speak about this at the 2018 NAWCC symposium at the Henry Ford Museum.) He was the obvious choice by the NAWCC to address this trove of horological history, and Mussey generously shared all of his voluminous documentation with him. Robert Mussey provided me with these words about the book:

> Andrew has done a wonderful job of tackling a previously unfamiliar subject, digesting 20 years of my research and transcriptions of Richard Cranch's letters, and conducting his own research to craft a fulsome biography of this little-known Boston figure. When I first found Cranch's watch repairman's daybook, I recognized his handwriting immediately, and knew that it was mis-catalogued as authored by a later descendant. It became clear immediately that it was a rare survival. Dervan does a masterful job of putting both Cranch and his watch repair business in the context of the economic, political, and craft times.

As Mussey stated, the biography is far more than a treatment of Cranch's five-year ledger. While much of the Cranch wool-manufacturing family remained in Devon, Richard, the youngest of seven children, emigrated from Brook at age nineteen. After a four-month shipboard delay and a six-week Atlantic passage with his married sister and husband, he arrived in Boston on November 2, 1746. Soon after, using his innate mechanical aptitude, he built a novel wool-carding engine, comparing it to a 'fine 8-day clock', and he was teaching himself horology.

By 1749, he was acquainted with recently-arrived English clockmaker Gawen Brown[1] and discussed specifics with him about the turret clock in Old North Church that Brown was updating from balance to pendulum regulation. Cranch later recorded twenty-three repaired watches with Brown's name on them. (Dervan alerted me that another repaired watch was signed by Edward Duffield, the subject of my biography reviewed in *AH* June 2024, pp.251–2.)

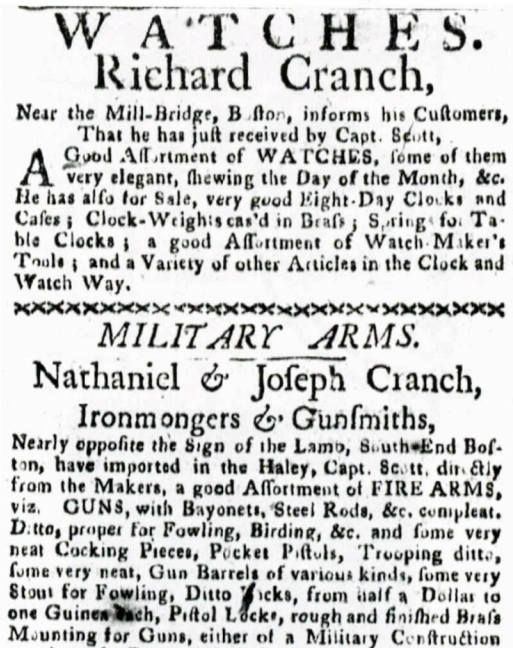
Cranch's personal library was extensive and mostly was religious texts, but Dervan lists four horology classics by Cumming, Derham, Hatton, and Lepaute that most likely facilitated Cranch's self-education. Alexander Cumming's 1766 book with its sixteen folded plates, *The Elements of Clock and Watch-Work*, also is at the MHS. Inside are signatures of both Richard Cranch and William Cranch Bond mentioned below.

For the years 1752 to 1766, Cranch was otherwise involved south of Boston, after fleeing the city's smallpox outbreak, in glassmaking and whale oil businesses that eventually could not be sustained. Full-time watch repair followed after moving north to Salem, and then to Boston.

In 1762, Cranch at age thirty-six married twenty-one-year-old Mary Smith, the eldest daughter of Reverend William Smith of Weymouth. The book includes the flowery words of a courting poem Cranch composed. Two years later, Mary's younger sister Abigail married Cranch's friend, John Adams, the future Revolutionary leader and second American president. The brothers-in-law were close and exchanged many letters, and Cranch appeared often in Adams's diaries.

This important friendship could not ensure the Cranch family's financial stability that was always precarious. With the 1774 closure of the Port of Boston by the British following the 'Tea Party', his business in the city dried up and he again moved south to Braintree where he struggled with farming, tutoring, and other business efforts during our War of Independence, when he was too old, thin, and sickly to fight, and in the succeeding decades. Occasional watch

1. Editor's note: on whom see Chris Watson, 'The Gawen Brown family and 'The last apprentice' , *AH* March 2010, 31–42.



WATCHES.
Richard Cranch,

Near the Mill-Bridge, Boſton, informs his Cuſtomers, That he has juſt received by Capt. Scott,

A Good Aſſortment of WATCHES, ſome of them very elegant, ſhewing the Day of the Month, &c. He has alſo for Sale, very good Eight-Day Clocks and Caſes; Clock-Weights caſ'd in Braſs; Springs for Table Clocks; a good Aſſortment of Watch-Maker's Tools; and a Variety of other Articles in the Clock and Watch Way.

MILITARY ARMS.

Nathaniel & Joſeph Cranch,

Ironmongers & Gunſmiths,

Nearly oppoſite the Sign of the Lamb, South-End Boſton, have imported in the Haley, Capt. Scott, directly from the Makers, a good Aſſortment of FIRE ARMS, viz. GUNS, with Bayonets, Steel Rods, &c. compleat. Ditto, proper for Fowling, Birding, &c. and ſome very neat Cocking Pieces, Pocket Piſtols, Trooping ditto, ſome very neat, Gun Barrels of various kinds, ſome very Stout for Fowling, Ditto Locks, from half a Dollar to one Guinea each, Piſtol Locks, rough and finiſhed Braſs Mounting for Guns, either of a Military Conſtruction or otherwiſe, Forg'd Work for Gun and Piſtol Locks, ſuch as Cocks, Hammers, &c.

N. B. Guns and Piſtols repair'd and clean'd, Alſo, Razors, Sciſſars, &c. Ground and Poliſh'd in the neateſt Manner.

Two of Richard's nephews from Devon arrived later in Boston and established themselves in business. Advertisements by them and Richard, published in the *Boston-Gazette*, 13 Dec 1773, appeared together. Courtesy of GenealogyBank.

repairs could not revive that occupation for him, especially with failing eyesight and problems in securing English supplies.

His broad knowledge, wisdom, and skills were recognized, if not lucrative. He was awarded an honorary Master of Arts by Harvard College in 1780, and in 1781 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He served terms in the Massachusetts legislature as a representative and senator, he was on a committee disposing of Loyalists properties, he was a judge in the Court of Common Pleas, and he was appointed postmaster of the town of Quincy, but none of these paid regularly or adequately. Long after his death, Quincy in 1900 named a new school in his honour.

Unbeknownst to her husband, Abigail Adams often helped with financial support, and when Richard and Mary died within a day of each other in 1811, Abigail avoided paupers' graves for them by having their remains placed in the Adams family tomb. Cranch's estate inventory, however, listed a valuable $40 clock, two silver watches worth $25, and a large quantity of watchmaking tools and materials valued at $129.

Clockmaker William Bond (1753–1848) married Cranch's niece, Hannah, prior to emigrating in 1777 from England to the coast of Maine. Bond was the father of the much more famous Boston horologist William Cranch Bond (1789–1859), and the book describes letters between the senior William and Cranch, and their ongoing family connections.

While the Cranch daybook does not list repair costs or procedures, and many of the letters do not address horological matters, they constitute an invaluable resource not only for horology scholarship but also for the history of that time and place. The text is enhanced with captioned images of daybook pages, period newspaper advertisements, buildings, letters, and artefacts.

Dervan produced many footnotes, a bibliography, an index, and nine appendices. The daybook lists more than a thousand repair customers, and Appendix 7 offers brief biographies of approximately 250 whom he could identify. Unfortunately, the first eight pages were later used as a scrapbook and have over-pasted newspaper clippings; these hide an estimated 160 more transactions.

Dervan divided 655 of those repair customers by professions that Cranch often logged: ship captains (253), ministers and deacons (166), doctors (97), military officers (69 probably from the British forces occupying the city), merchants (41), etc. These include many well-known New England names: Samuel Adams, Nicholas Boylston, Dr. Benjamin Church, John Hancock, Josiah Quincy, Paul Revere, Isiah Thomas, and Dr. Joseph Warren who was killed at the June, 1775, battle of Bunker Hill. His body was mutilated by British regulars and then buried in a shallow mass grave. Months later, his decayed remains were identified by silversmith Paul Revere who recognized a dental bridge he had made for Warren.

Printed or online publication of the entire daybook has not yet been undertaken. When and if this occurs, scholars and collectors can scour them for additional insights into the watches, makers, and customers they contain. Nonetheless, a wealth of new information awaits readers of this important book.

Bob Frishman