

THE NORTON CLOCK COMPANY

Horological History or Local Myth

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By
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I concede at the outset that my presentation tonight may be neither philosophical, sociological, or literary as prescribed by the constitution of the Philosophical Club of Cleveland. In fact, it is historical in nature but we have dealt with matters of history before. To tell the truth, this may be local myth rather than history but if so it is a myth embraced by many steeped in what they believe to be Lake County history. To some extent the paper begs the question of how many of our beliefs, how much of our historical "knowledge" is based on no more substantial evidence than "...somebody said so!"

At any rate, the Norton Clock Company has occupied a significant amount of my time; and energy since I first heard of it 1991. But. ... I get ahead of myself. First some background.

The history of clock manufacture in colonial America was one of very slow development. Our mother country did not see us a source of manufactured goods but rather a source of raw material. Brass, for example, was very expensive and prohibitive for all but those clockmakers serving the wealthiest clients. Most "American" clocks had, in fact, brass movements made in and shipped from England and encased in Boston, New York, or Philadelphia. These are the stately tall case clocks that are so admired today. There were clockmakers in America but most were English transplants sent here as much to service English products as to manufacture new clock movements. They engaged apprentices, however, and these young men learned very quickly.

After the Revolution brass was available but still very expensive and wanting in both quantity and quality. Wood, however, was plentiful, cheap, and relatively easy to work in the early shop. In the closing decades of the eighteenth century clocks with wooden movements were being produced in modest numbers. These were often clocks of good to excellent quality but made by hand, one by one. This was about to change.

Eli Terry completed his apprenticeship in 1792 and was making wooden works clocks in his own shop by 1795. Wooden clock movements not only enabled a cheaper clock but the use of smaller cases further reduced costs of both labor and material. Clock ownership was brought within reach of a growing middle class and the demand for clocks grew rapidly.

Tired and discouraged at the pace of making four or five clocks by hand and peddling them door to door Eli Terry took a page from another Eli -Eli Whitney. Terry introduced the first known successful application of mass production in America. We're talking here of more than making a lot of clock movements fast but of a complete interchangeability of parts. In 1806 Terry signed a contract to produce 4000 clocks in three years. People thought he was nuts. Many offered huge prices for the four thousandth clock confident that they would not have to pony up. They were proven wrong and they paid.

Terry set up slowly working an entire year on tooling, machinery, and water mill power. At the end of the second year he had produced one thousand clocks and the final three thousand were delivered before the close of the third year. Terry continued in this manufacture for some years before selling out to two of his most promising apprentices who later became giants in the American clock making industry, Seth Thomas and Chauncey Jerome.

Let's take a look at the wooden movements. There were many different models but by far the most common was what you see here or a variant thereof. By trial and error the right woods were recognized and then utilized by almost all makers. Plates were made of red oak, riven or split and then planed to the proper thickness. The gears were of cherry which was planed, turned, sometimes ornamented, drilled, and then had teeth cut into the blanks. The pinions, arbors and pillars were made of laurel, beech, apple, dogwood, or maple. These woods, while hard to work, were plentiful and wear like iron. Why the variety? With four to six pillars, eight to ten arbors, and as many pinions in each clock we're talking about several hundred thousand parts needed in a shop producing 10,000 clocks a year as was not uncommon by the late 1820's and 1830's. These small parts could be 'jobbed out" to local farmers as "winter work" and made to specification. Jobbers used those woods that were at hand.

The wood works clock industry thrived with more than eighty known manufacturers producing clock movements in 1833, some as many as 10,000 units a year. The financial panic of 1837 brought an end to the industry although some wood movements were made into the 1850s. As the economy improved manufacturers turned to brass which had become more readily available with nearly a half dozen rolling mills in New England alone. The era of the wood works clock movement was over.

As a side bar for the lawyers, it's hard to imagine a time when more lawsuits were filed over patent infringements. Eli Terry had the first successfully massed produced movement and everybody wanted to get into the act. Hundreds of cases were filed every year, often against multiple individuals or companies for allegedly copying a product. Often small changes were made to evade patent suits and then suits were filed to test whether the change was enough to constitute a new product. Another area for fee taking was the formation and dissolution of partnerships and the ensuing battle over ownership of product design. Eli Terry manufactured in four or five partnerships and Seth Thomas had even more.

The foregoing clock activity took place in the East where most of the population lived. Connecticut was, arguably, the center of American clock manufacturing although notable makers were found in New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. Though relatively unknown some were even found in Ohio which brings me to my own particular interest.

In 1971 James Gibbs published a book entitled Buckeye Horology. In it he lists by county all known clockmakers in the state at that time (i.e. 1971). His research consisted of contacting history teachers, museums, historical societies, etc. in all of our eighty eight counties. He inquired about any clock or watch making activity known in each county. He cited over one hundred reports of clock-making activity in Ohio Counties through 1875. He notes no less than ten in Cuyahoga County alone. Gibbs took some pains to distinguish between who made clock movements, who cased them (not the same thing), who marketed them, and who repaired them. For some reason

clock repairmen are referred to as clockmakers which adds to the confusion. Since Gibbs ground breaking work more makers or reputed makers have been found throughout the state and added to the roster.

Anyway, in the early nineties I was paging through Buckeye Horology to see if I needed this book for my own library .Coming to the Lake County section I found, 10 and behold, a listing for the Norton Clock Company. We have lived in Lake County since 1964 and had never heard of this enterprise. Not only was the Norton Clock Company in Lake County but was sited on Jordon Creek in Concord Township, not five miles from my home.

The citation in Gibbs reads, "The factory is thought to have been in operation prior to 1840 and is reputed to have made clocks with wooden wheels and iron weights and they are said to have found there way into every home in the community."

This was too much to resist and I began my search for information concerning the Norton Clock Company. Initial results were promising as the three recently published histories of Lake County all mentioned Eden P. Norton and his enterprise, the Norton Clock Company. I researched census records at the Western Reserve Historical Society and found reference to Eden P. Norton in records from 1820, 1830, and 1840. There he is simply listed as a farmer.

I published an inquiry in the "Bulletin", a monthly publication of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors. The "Bulletin" has a very popular section where readers can post inquiries regarding any area of horological interest. My inquiry about the Norton Clock Company, reaching some 40,000 collectors, clockmakers, watchmakers, etc. produced no response. At the "Little Mountain Folk Festival" I distributed hundreds of the little reward posters such as you found at your place tonight. No response. Inquiries were published in the newsletters the Lake County Historical Society, The Lake County Genealogical Society, and others. No response. A special appeal was made to the "Cog Counters" a subchapter of the NA WCC whose membership has a special interest in wood works clocks. No Response.

Other concerns intervened, enthusiasm waned and the project was dropped until just a year ago. A friend was organizing a panel of speakers to present information on 19th century Northeast Ohio clockmakers. The presentation would be at the annual convention of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors in June of 2006 right here in Cleveland. Would I please reopen my research on the Norton Clock Company? The panel included presenters from Trumbull, Ashtabula, Wayne, and Cuyahoga Counties along with yours truly from Lake County .I must say that my part was unique in that each of the others on the panel had a clock around which they had developed a history .I had a rather meager history and was searching for a clock!

As I say, early efforts were encouraging. Several county and township histories indicated the existence of the Norton Clock Company in the area specified. I dug deeper into Lake County history. Howe' s Historical Collections of Ohio - both the 1848 and the 1888 editions list industry and prominent citizens. Neither Norton nor his clock company made the list. Williams Brothers published an extensive history of Lake and Geauga Counties in 1878 making no mention of a Norton Clock Company although listing many other enterprises both large and small.

In 1908, an A.G. Smith wrote a series of articles for the Painesville Telegraph entitled: "Power Hammers Once Clanged oil the Big Creek." In this series of essays he quotes extensively from correspondence from area residents in the 1830's and 1840's listing "...twenty-six waterpowers on the Big Creek and its tributaries." No mention of the Norton Clock Company but there is listed a turning mill owned by Eden P. Norton where he is said to have produced "...ships fenders, hand spikes, belaying pins, broom handles, wagon hubs, hay and manure forks." There is no mention of clock parts.

During the Depression, the WPA writers' project explored Lake County history from every angle but their records do not mention a clock factory. Just a few years ago the Lake Metro-Parks explored all streams entering or leaving the park's domain. Many industries were identified and placed in their site but not a clock factory.

I returned to recent histories to follow up any source material for their mention of local clock activity. In the Painesville Telegraph in 1940 there appeared a series of articles written by one Murray Morse entitled "Concord's Vanished Waterpower". In the installment appearing on April 17th, 1940 (page 3) he wrote these words: "The Norton Clock Factory and forging shop was situated about one half mile from this point (where the Jordon Creek crosses Hampden Road). These Norton Clocks, a wooden wheel weight type, found their way into nearly every home in the community and many are still running today." Sound familiar? Each subsequent locally written history simply quoted Mr. Morse. So did the Lake County Historical Society and so did Mr. Gibbs.

I shifted my focus from the factory to the alleged clockmaker, Eden P. Norton. This was somewhat complicated by varied spellings of his first name EDIN, EDEN, EDAN, and in one place he is listed as EDWARD. He was said to have been born in "or about" 1799 possibly in Vermont. In 1823 he married Louisa Wells, a Geauga County resident born in Connecticut. There were eight children born of this union and those surviving childhood moved from the area.

He died in 1862 while visiting his son in Illinois.

Census records of 1820, 1830, and 1840 at the W .R. Historical Society list E. P. Norton as a farmer. His obituary appearing in genealogical records say he was a lifelong cobbler. A. G. Smith (1908) suggests that he was an industrialist!

Louisa Wells died at 79 years of age in Iowa while visiting her son.

Real estate records reveal that Eden P. Norton did own property that included a stretch of Jordon Creek. A 1976 map siting early Concord industry puts the Norton Clock Factory on this property.

Further efforts to learn about Mr. Norton proved fruitless until a bit later.

I turned my attention to Jordon Creek. All early histories attribute this name to an early settler named Jordon. Current maps call it Gordon Creek. It drains a large part of Concord Township and empties into Big Creek. This latter point is also contested as many residents say it empties into Kellogg Creek which then enters Big Creek on its way to the Grand River. Here was a

mystery that could be solved. I obtained maps from the Lake County Soil and Water Conservation District and Natural Resources Conservation Service. These maps show Jordon Creek vanishing into thin air near the confluence of Big Creek and Kellogg Creek. For what it's worth I have personally tramped over much of this area and have been at the point where Jordon Creek empties into Big Creek. I mention this as an illustration of problems encountered with oral history (perhaps I should say oral geography!) This was a topic well addressed in remarks by Ted Sande some years ago before the Philosophical Club of Cleveland.

Jordon Creek is all but dry 10 months of the year, especially in late summer. Residents with property bordering the Jordon assure me that it does flood occasionally usually in springtime. In July of 2006 most of these tributaries of the Grand did indeed flood forcing many from their homes. The Grand River itself went 17 feet over flood stage.

Most of these early creeks filled in as land was cleared for agriculture and erosion set in. Still, it boggles the imagination to assume that a stream two or three feet wide and six inches deep and dry most seasons could power a turning mill of any size. Exploring Jordon Creek where it intersects Painesville-Ravenna Road (Old SR 44) I discovered, nearly covered in brush, a historical marker erected by the Lake County Historical Society in 1953 saying, among other things, that the Norton Clock Factory was sited nearby. The creek at this point is barely more than a trickle.

In some related history, Lake County prides itself on the industry of another early citizen one Grandison Newell. Among other things Newell smelted iron from bog ore, an early industry in several areas of the county. Among his products it is documented that he shipped clock weights and bells to Riley Whiting in New England. Whiting was a major producer of early 18th century wood works clocks. His records also suggest that he sold weights and bells to Anson Merrill of Vienna Township in Trumbull County. Anson Merrill's clocks are among those discussed by one of my panel colleagues last June. He had pictures! There is no mention of Grandison Newell having sold weights or bells to his neighbor Eden Norton who would have needed both.

There is an obelisk marker in the Concord Cemetery honoring the Norton family and marking the grave of several children that died in infancy or early childhood. Township officials assure me that while children are buried here they have no record that Eden or Louisa are buried there. They died in Illinois and Iowa and may not have been hauled back to Lake County for burial. Driving by I frequently point this obelisk out to my wife and was surprised to see there a flag marking the monument on Memorial Day 2006.. I investigated and learned that Eden P. Norton was alleged to have been a veteran of the War of 1812. At the age of 13??

Lake County was part of Geauga County until 1840. Geauga County extended from the northern boundary of Portage County all the way to Lake Erie. For whatever reason Lake County was carved out of the northern most townships of Geauga, the eastern most townships of Cuyahoga, and "voila" a new county is born. Thus records in both counties must be researched.

In a foray into Geauga County tax records I learned a great deal about Norton's horses, sheep, and cattle but nothing about a clock enterprise. I shared the resources of the Chardon Library archives that day with a woman doing genealogical research. I mentioned my frustration to the Chardon Library curator of archives and she suggested that I speak with a local historian and called

over to the woman with whom I shared table space. She introduced me to local historian Connie Wells. I nearly fainted!

Here was Eden Norton's great, great, great, great grand niece by marriage. She knew a lot about Louisa and Eden but had never heard of the clock factory. She had a complete and documented record of the birth and death dates of all members of the Claridon Township First Congregational Church. (If you've ever traveled East on SR322 to Claridon you've seen this stately New England Style church on a "village green" on the left side as you pass.) This record cites Norton's birth as 1794. This makes him 20 plus years old for the War of 1812 a more likely age for active service.

There are several more very slender threads to be explored. The most recent author of a published Lake County history, Bari Stith, is archivist for all of Geauga County. She has promised to assist me research what remains of Geauga records most having been destroyed in a courthouse fire in the late 19th century .She had never heard of the Norton Clock Company either.

So where does this leave us? Eden Norton, Jordon Creek, these are indisputable. A Norton Clock Company -well, the earliest reference is found in a 1940 undocumented historical article in the now defunct Painesville Telegraph. Did it exist or not -I doubt it. In fact I won't believe it until someone shows me a clock with the Norton Clock Company label!

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