

TOWER CLOCKS OF WEST VIRGINIA

by Robert D. Psumny Jr. (WV)

INTRODUCTION

As the NAWCC is now working on the Public Time Initiative, a program to identify, collect, and maintain data on all public clocks in the United States, I wanted to share the data and experience I gained while researching public clocks in West Virginia over the past five years. It is my hope that the data will be useful to others interested in public clocks, and that this article may inspire others to get involved with the effort to identify, catalog, and collect data on the remaining public clocks in America. This article presents a brief history of how I became interested in public clock research, and how I started my survey of public clocks in West Virginia. The data for West Virginia public clocks are given in tabular form, and I include notes about especially interesting public clocks in the state. Finally, there are a few suggestions that readers might find helpful as a “how to” manual for starting their own research. It is my hope that many more of you will get interested and involved in public clock research.



STARTING MY RESEARCH

I moved to West Virginia in the summer of 1998 to accept a teaching position at a small liberal arts college. Being born and reared in the flatlands of northern Ohio, I found my new mountainous state to be quite beautiful, but I had precious little time to travel and explore during the academic year. Many educators no doubt are familiar with the saying “the top three reasons to become a teacher are: June, July, and August,” so I had resolved that I would spend a good deal of the summer of 1999 traveling the roads of West Virginia. It was at some point during the 1998-1999 academic year that I heard about the “Tower Clock Millennium Project.” This was a project of Donn Haven Lathrop, clockwork historian and frequent contributor to the NAWCC BULLETIN, that sought to catalog all public clocks by the end of the millennium. I had first met

Figure 1, left. The Cabell County Courthouse in Huntington, WV. **Figure 2, below.** E. Howard time and strike movement, inside the Cabell County Courthouse tower.



Donn through an Internet e-mail list of clock repair specialists. A few e-mails were exchanged, and I agreed to be “state coordinator” for West Virginia. (Each state will have a coordinator to collect and process data on clocks.) After I had agreed to be involved with the project, Donn suggested that I try visiting clock sites myself. He even provided me with data listing West Virginia installation sites of public clocks by Seth Thomas, Howard, Pollhans, and Stevens. It now seemed clear that the survey of West Virginia public clocks could be integrated with my summer travel and exploration plans. This is how my research began, as I set off for a few installation sites each day. I visited 24 sites in the summer of 1999, and to date I have visited more than 80 sites in West Virginia.

PUBLIC CLOCKS OF WEST VIRGINIA

Let me say plainly that this compilation of public clocks in West Virginia is by no means exhaustive. I was diligent in visiting every reported installation site and every county seat as well, but I am sure there are clocks that I missed. Likewise, it is possible that some of the clocks I visited five years ago may have been removed, electrified, or altered by now. If any such omissions or changes are called to my attention, I will

gladly update my information and pass it along to the NAWCC.

The data for West Virginia show how few public clocks survive in original condition, as many are electrified, replaced, or removed when buildings are demolished. Currently, my research has documented 32 tower clocks and 14 post clocks in West Virginia. Of the 32 tower clocks, only four remain operational with their original or restored weight drive. A few tower clocks are in original condition, but are not currently running. Four more tower clocks are running with an electrified time train mounted onto the original movement, and one tower clock is weight-driven with an electric-mechanical rewind system for the weights. Of the 14 post clocks I documented, none were running by weight power. Of the three documented installations of Pollhans tower clocks in West Virginia, none remain at their original location. It is likely that they were scrapped long ago, but there is always hope that one may resurface.

The data for the public clocks of West Virginia are summarized in Tables 1 and 2. I have purposely excluded data on length of pendulum, serial numbers, model numbers, and even bell casting dates and inscriptions. However, I have included all this information on the

TABLE 1—Data on Tower Clocks of West Virginia

City	Location	Maker	Model	Trains	Dials	Installed	Notes
Berkeley Springs	Morgan County Courthouse	E. Howard		2	4	?	Movement incomplete
Bethany	Bethany College	Seth Thomas	No. 15?	1	4	1901?	Electrified
Buckhannon	Upshur County Courthouse	Verdin		2	4	?	Original ST in storage
Buckhannon	Wesleyan College Chapel	Electric		1	4	?	
Charles Town	Jefferson County Courthouse	E. Howard		2	4	1872 or 1885	Electrified
Charleston	Baptist Temple	Seth Thomas	No. 15	2	4	1966	Electric rewind
Clarksburg	Harrison County Courthouse	Electric		1	1	?	
Elizabeth	Wirt County Courthouse	Verdin		2	4	?	Original Pollhans removed
Fairmont	Marion County Courthouse	Seth Thomas	No. 17	2	4	1899	Electrified
Franklin	Franklin Presbyterian Church	Seth Thomas	No. 15	2	4	c. 1926	Electrified
Glennville	Glennville State College	E. Howard	Roundtop	2	4	1899	Movement not in use
Grafton	High School	Electric		1	1	c.1938	
Grantsville	Calhoun County Courthouse	Electric		1	1	?	
Harrisville	Ritchie County Courthouse	Seth Thomas	No. 16	2	4	1924	Original, hand wound
Huntington	Cabell County Courthouse	E. Howard		2	4	1890	Original, hand wound
Lewisburg	Greenbrier County Courthouse	Electric		1	2	c.1963?	
Mannington	Public School	E. Howard	Roundtop	2	4	1902	Movement not in use
Middlebourne	Tyler County Courthouse	E. Howard	Roundtop	2	4	1923	Movement not in use
Morgantown	Monongalia County Courthouse	E. Howard		2	4	c. 1892	Movement not in use
Morgantown	West Virginia University	Simplex		1	4	1996	Original ST removed
New Martinsville	Wetzel County Courthouse	Verdin		2	4	?	Original Pollhans removed
Parsons	Tucker County Courthouse	E. Howard	Roundtop	2	4	?	Original, hand wound
Pineville	Wyoming County Courthouse	Verdin		1	4	?	Original Howard removed
Ripley	Jackson County Courthouse	Verdin		1	4	?	
Shepherdstown	Shepherd University	A.L. Dennison		2	4	1842	Original, hand wound
Terra Alta	Bank	Electric		1	2	c.1991	
Wayne	Wayne County Courthouse	E. Howard	Roundtop	2	4	c. 1924?	Electrified
Weirton	Purdy & Main St.	Electric		1	2	?	
Welch	McDowell County Courthouse	E. Howard	Roundtop	2	4	1885	Electrified
Wellsburg	City Building	Electric		1	4	?	
West Union	Doddridge County Courthouse	Verdin		2	4	?	Original Howard removed
Weston	Old State Hospital	Stevens		2	3	?	Movement not in use
Winfield	Putnam County Courthouse	Electric		1	1	?	

complete data sheets I submitted to the NAWCC Library. Following are photos and information on a few of the more interesting public clocks of West Virginia.

GEORGE STEVENS
TOWER CLOCK—WESTON, WV
(Figures 3, 4, 5a, 5b)

The installation data for West Virginia showed only one clock by George Stevens, and that was in the Weston Hospital (Figure 3). Originally known as the Trans-Allegheny Asylum for the Insane, construction on this facility began in 1858, when the location was in the “remote section of Virginia.” When Virginia seceded from the Union in 1861, construction work ceased. Union troops liberated \$27,000 from the Exchange Bank of Virginia in Weston that was set aside for construction on the Asylum. This money was removed to Wheeling (the Restored Government of Virginia at Wheeling), and became a “part of the start-up treasury for the restored government and eventual new State of West Virginia.”¹ West Virginia became a state on June 20, 1863, and the legislature renamed the facility the “West Virginia Hospital for the Insane.” West Virginia did ultimately pay reparations to Virginia for public debt, which included money for the Weston Hospital. The first patients arrived in 1864, and building on the facility would continue until 1882. On November 6, 1871, *The Weston Democrat* reported that the clock for the main building’s central tower was completed and should be running in a few days. The report also said of the clock, “It will be like some politicians, having three faces.”

I was excited at the prospect of seeing my first Stevens tower clock, but that excitement was tempered after I managed to speak with an employee of Weston Hospital, and he assured me that the clock was gone. He said that it had been removed long ago and that the dials were now electrified. I then made contact with a Lewis County employee who was able to facilitate a visit to the tower for me, as the hospital had been closed since 1994. Imagine my surprise when I climbed the tower and found the tower clock movement mostly intact! It was missing its escapement from an earlier electrification, but the rest of the movement was there (Figure 4).

It appeared that an electric motor had been installed at some point to turn the original motion works, and then the drive shafts were disconnected at some later point in order to install electric motors to drive the

¹ Joy Gilchrist-Stalnaker. *A Short History of Weston Hospital* (Weston Hospital Revitalization Committee, 2004).

TABLE 2—Data on Post Clocks of West Virginia

City	Location	Maker	Model
Beckley	Bank	McClintock	4 Dial Albany?
Charleston	Virginia & Court Streets	McClintock	4 Dial
Charleston	Capitol St.	E. Howard	2 Dial Post
Charleston	Bus Station	?	4 Dial Post
Elkins	Findley St.	Brown	2 Dial Post
Follansbee	Bank, Route 2	Elec. Time	2 Dial Post
Huntington	3rd. Avenue	Seth Thomas	4 Dial Post
Lewisburg	Bank	McClintock?	2 Dial
Martinsburg	Merchants & Farmers Bank	?	2 Dial
Moorefield	Winchester Ave. & Route 55	Verdin	2 Dial Post
Morgantown	360 North Main St.		2 Dial Post
Princeton	Main St.	McClintock	4 Dial
Romney	National Building	McClintock	2 Dial
Wheeling	14th & Main	E. Howard	2 Dial Post



Figure 3. The Weston Hospital. Central section of main building with clock tower.

hands. I discovered that the clock frame was actually yellow with red pin striping under the years of grime. I took many photos and measurements and sent them to Fred Shelley to ask for help in identifying the movement. After reviewing the information, Mr. Shelley

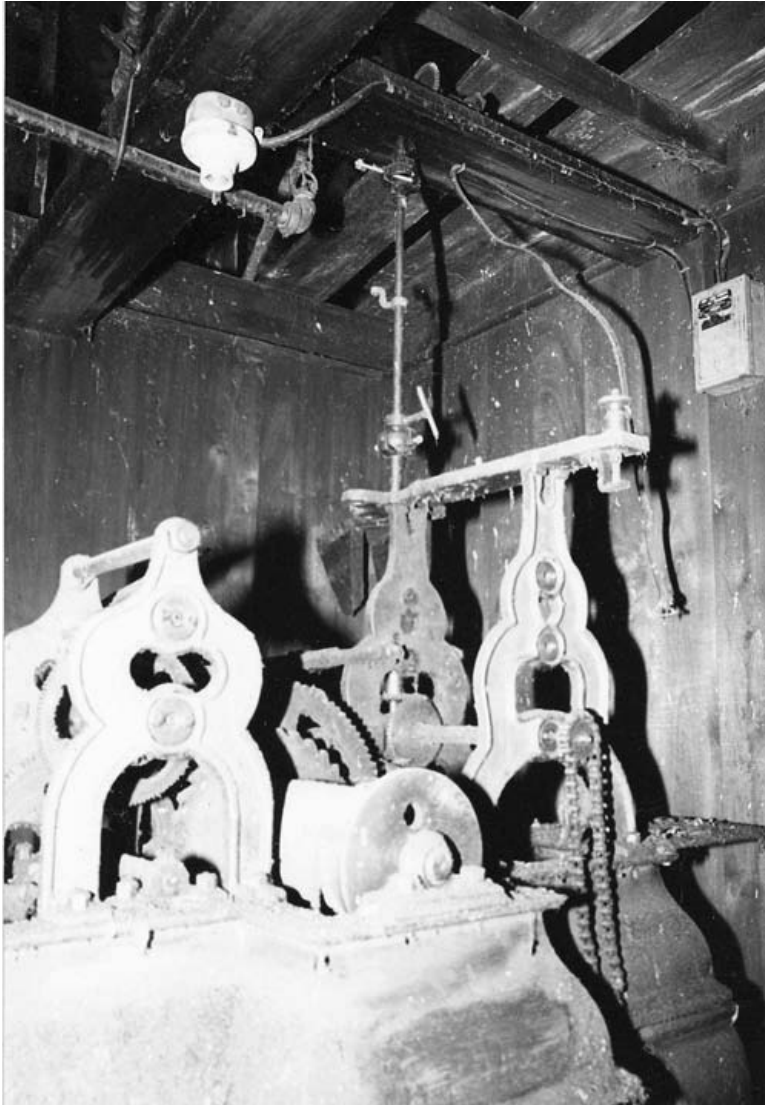


Figure 4, left. Weston Hospital tower clock. Note the frame offset for the large winding barrel in the middle and the chain and sprocket on the time train at right, a vestige of an electrification.

wrote that “There are many features about the clock that are clearly Stevens in character, but the possibility exists that the clock is another major Stevens retrofit of an earlier clock, maker unknown.”² Mr. Shelley pointed out that the Weston clock lacks the Stevens hallmark clutch and perforated time wheel for resetting the hands; it does not have the typical Stevens strike train, and its two-blade fan fly is not typical (Figures 5A and 5B). He pointed out that most Stevens clocks installed in 1871 would have used the Crane striker system.

While it is easy to explain the absence of the Stevens clutch and resetting wheel (most likely removed when the movement was electrified), the frame and strike system of this clock do seem to indicate that it was manufactured after 1871. The best explanation seems to be that this movement was made by Stevens, but that it was not the clock from the original 1871 installation, the maker of which remains unknown. In fact, the clock currently in the tower matches Mr. Shelley’s designation of a “Model 4” Stevens from his article in the April 1994 NAWCC BULLETIN. The “Model 4” Stevens clock illustrated in Figure 39 of his article has the same plates, a frame, and even the two-blade fan fly. The only significant difference is the strike system levers, and it seems that Stevens continued to experiment with these. The photos in Mr. Shelley’s article show three different systems of strike levers on the Model 4 clocks, perhaps this clock exhibits a fourth system. Mr. Shelley lists 1880-1916 as production dates for the Model 4, so this gives us some idea of when the current clock may have been installed. However, until further documentation or information can be discovered (possibly in the Weston Hospital’s financial records), the more specific history of the current tower clock and its predecessors from 1871 will remain a mystery.

² Fred Shelley, Personal Correspondence. June 1999.



Figure 5A, left. Weston Hospital tower clock strike train as seen from the pendulum side of the movement.

Figure 5B, right. Weston Hospital clock strike train as seen from the fan fly side. Note the indexing plate and the 12 notches in the rack on the rod nearest to the camera.



**E. HOWARD TOWER CLOCK
PARSONS, WV
(Figures 6, 7, 8a, 8b)**

The beautiful tower clock in the Tucker County Courthouse was a most welcome surprise on my survey. I had set out in search of a Seth Thomas installation in Terra Alta, and my proposed route took me through Parsons. At the edge of Parsons, I was excited to see a large tower clock that was not listed on any of the installation data for West Virginia. As it turned out, I never made it to Terra Alta that day, as I spent several hours documenting and photographing the wonderful E. Howard tower clock in Parsons.

The E. Howard roundtop movement was restored by Parsons resident and NAWCC member Doyle Kisner and now transmits accurate time to the four dials at the top of the tower (Figure 6). The clock room is remarkably clean, and there is even a copy of the helpful "Directions for the Care of a Tower Clock," from the E. Howard Clock Company, posted on the wall (Figure 7).

While very little is known about the specifics of installation for the Weston clock, the Parsons clock is a completely different story, and an interesting one at that. The Tucker County Courthouse was built in 1898, but upon its completion, there were no remaining funds

Figure 6, below. E. Howard "roundtop" movement in the Tucker County Courthouse, Parsons, WV.

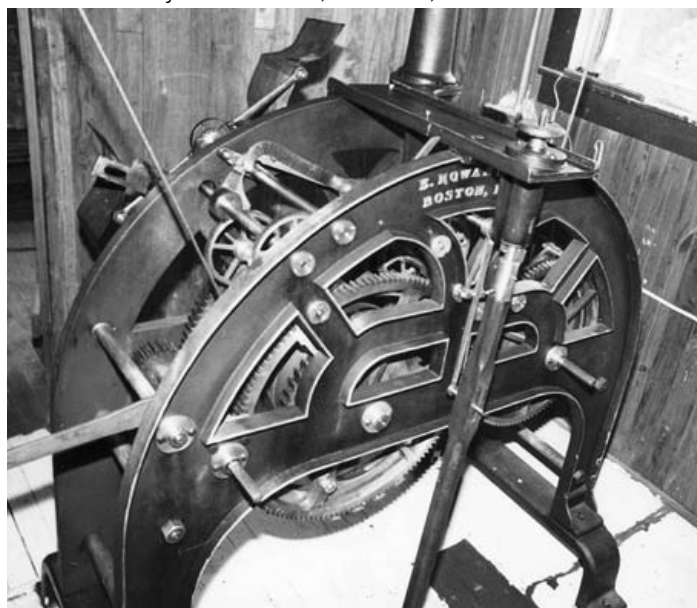


Figure 7, below. Directions for care of an E. Howard tower clock are on site (text set and superimposed over original for clarity).

**DIRECTIONS
FOR THE CARE OF A TOWER CLOCK.**

Wind the clock at a uniform time, once a week, being careful to put the pin in the stud after the key is put on to it, on the clocks that are arranged to be wound in this manner. Where the winding stud is square there is no provision made for this pin.

To set the clock on time, pull out the pin that goes through the centre-wheel, and into a hole in a plate that has 60 holes, each representing a minute of the hour; hold the pin out, while with the other hand take hold of the bevel-wheel on the lower end of the perpendicular shaft, connected with the dial-wheels above, and turn until the pointer at one of the bevel-wheels at the top of the clock indicates the desired time, then let the pin fall into the hole opposite it. If it be a striking clock, and the time for striking has to be passed when setting, wait at that point of striking, until the clock finishes striking, before moving farther. If the clock is a few minutes too fast, wait until the clock shows twenty (20) minutes past the hour, and then turn the clock backwards to the true time.

TO REGULATE.

To make the clock go faster, turn the nut at the top of the pendulum the side towards you to the LEFT. To make it go slower, turn the nut at the top of the pendulum, the side towards you to the RIGHT. One whole turn of this nut will vary the rate of the clock about one half of a minute in 24 hours.

OILING.

The pallets where they slide on the teeth of the escape wheel, and the pivots throughout the clock, should be examined as often as every two months; and whenever there appears to be an absence of oil, they should be well oiled, first wiping off any dirt, dirty or gummy oil that may have collected. Use cotton cloths for wiping, and be particular and not leave any lint on any of the parts wiped. On striking clocks, oil the rack slide screws, and be sure that the slide is always free and smooth in moving. Apply rawline to the lifting cams that operate lever to pull the bell hammer.

Keep weight cables greased by rubbing them with piece of hard tallow.

Well oiled, means oiled with the proper kind of oil, and as much put on as can be applied, and not run off from the parts oiled. Great care must be used in procuring the proper oil. We always keep in stock a supply of tower clock oil in packages convenient for use.

All the pivots and movable bearings about the dial works, and their connections to the clock, should be gotten at, and have the same attention and oiling as the movement, except the pulley sheaves.

PULLEY SHEAVES.

The bearings of the sheaves should be oiled once each three months, at least, with clock oil. The oil hole for the bearings of the sheaves is in the square rod of the pulley pin just outside of the pulley frame and on the upper side of the square. The bearing is hollow and will hold considerable oil. FILL IT FULL.

THE E. HOWARD CLOCK CO.
NEW YORK BOSTON CHICAGO
U.S.A.



Figure 8A. Vintage photograph of the Tucker County Courthouse showing clock dials on the tower faces. No movement was yet installed.

to install a clock in the tower. Instead, clock dials were installed, with hopes that a movement might be added at a later date.³ After the prohibition amendment was passed by the United States Congress, Tucker County officials began rigid enforcement. Fines for violation grew rapidly and were placed into the “Justice of the Peace Fund.”⁴ The Tucker County Court reported on June 8, 1921, that they used these funds to purchase a tower clock, bell, and illuminated dials from the E. Howard Clock Company for the sum of \$2,421.⁵ The clock was started on February 1, 1922, at 4:40 P.M.⁶ Following are two photos of the Parsons tower clock. The first is from a postcard of unknown age, and shows dial rings with no enclosure to the top of the tower. The second photo is of the current day tower with the enclosed and illuminated dials (Figures 8A and 8B).

SETH THOMAS TOWER CLOCK CHARLESTON, WV (Figures 9 and 10)

Though installation records show that tower clocks were installed in the former Capitol building and Kanawha County Courthouse, the only remaining tower clock I found in Charleston is the Seth Thomas that is housed in the tower of the Baptist Temple. It is still weight-driven, but has an electrical rewind system (Figures 9 and 10). This clock has had multiple lives, as it was originally installed at the Mingo County Courthouse in Williamson. I had visited Williamson in search of the clock earlier in my survey, and I was disappointed that there was no clock tower at all in the modern Courthouse in Williamson. So it was quite surprising and gratifying to find the Williamson clock ticking away in Charleston just a few days later. Although

^{3, 4, 5, 6}Homan Hall, *The Court House Clock* (Parsons, WV).

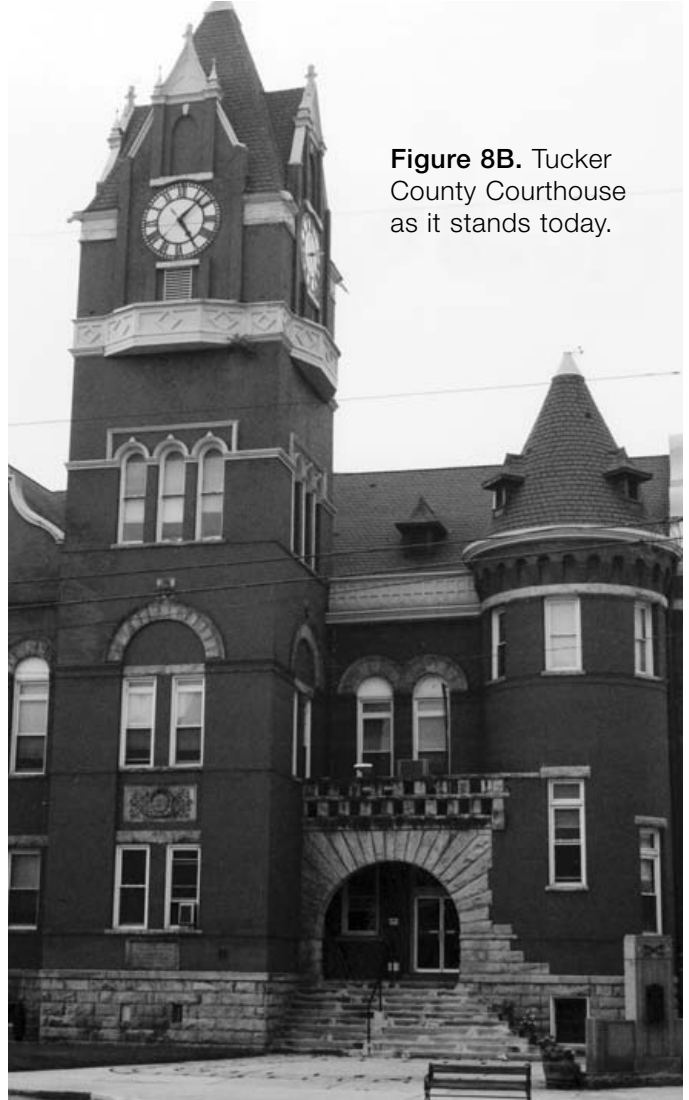


Figure 8B. Tucker County Courthouse as it stands today.

I do not know exactly when or why the Seth Thomas movement was removed from Williamson, I do know that the clock was installed at the Charleston Baptist Temple on September 23, 1966.

A. L. DENNISON TOWER CLOCK SHEPHERDSTOWN, WV (Figures 11 and 12)

The oldest public clock I encountered was the A. L. Dennison tower clock in Shepherdstown. The clock was originally installed in 1842, then relocated to another building in town after 1860.⁷ The clock is still wound by hand, although construction in a room below the tower decreased space for the fall of the weights, and the clock must now be wound twice a week. Fred Shelley documented this clock in his *NAWCC supplement Early American Tower Clocks*, so I have included photos of the tower and the dial motion works only.

⁷ Fred Shelley, *Early American Tower Clocks* (Columbia, PA: NAWCC, Inc., 1999).

Figure 10, right. Charleston Baptist Temple clock's Seth Thomas No. 15 movement fitted with electric rewinding mechanisms. The strike train was not operational at the time of this photograph.

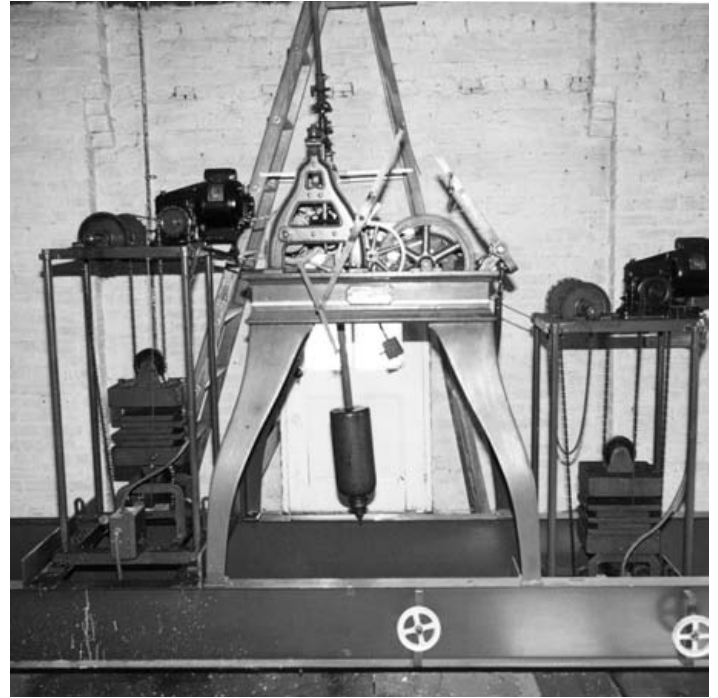


Figure 9. The tower of the Charleston Baptist Temple.



Figure 11, right. Tower on the campus of Shepherd University that houses the A. L. Dennison tower clock.

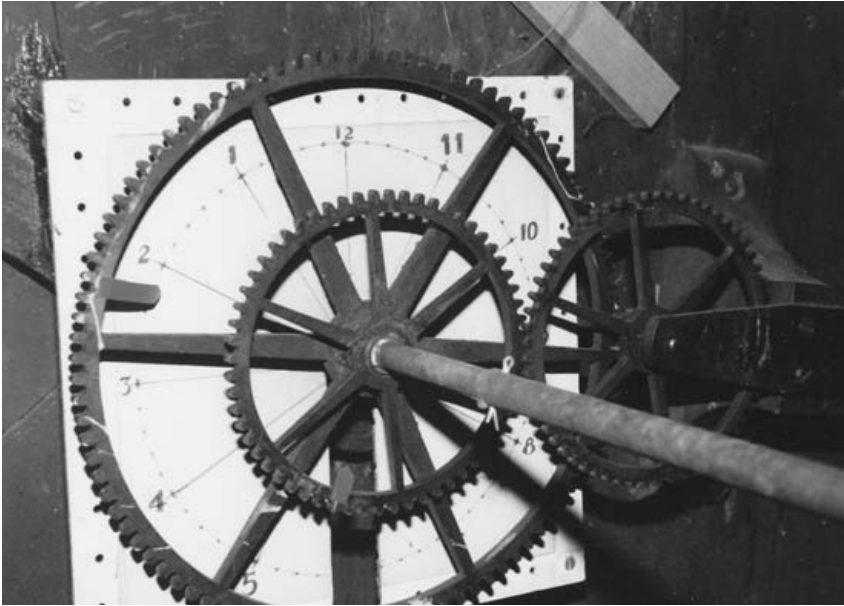
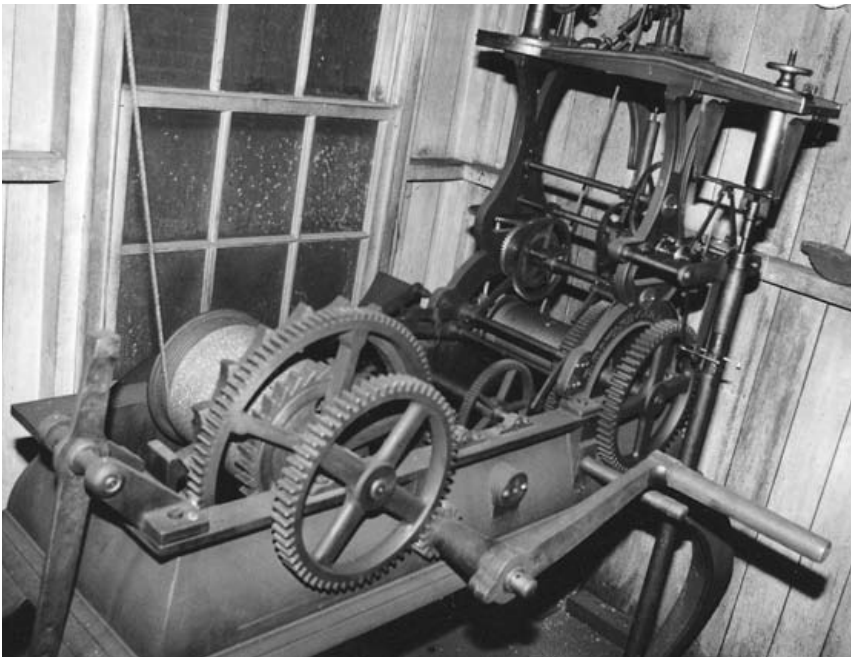


Figure 12, above. Dial motion works for the Shepherdstown clock. **Figure 13, below.** Time and strike tower clock with gravity escapement in the Monongalia County Court House, Morgantown, WV. This E. Howard clock is complete and on site, but the dials are now run by an electrical system.



HELPFUL HINTS FOR PUBLIC CLOCK RESEARCH

Finally, I wanted to give some tips for researching public clocks to any interested readers. They are only suggestions, but they have served me well in my research to date.

1. Expect the unexpected. It is good to have a plan of attack, but know that some things will have changed. For example, nearly half of the installation sites I visited no longer had a public clock (or even a

building for that matter). The installation records are just that. They record installation of public clocks, not removals of clocks and demolition of buildings. In these instances, I usually had good luck searching through postcard collections at local antique stores. For, if there was a public tower or post clock in a prominent place years ago, chances are it was documented in a photo and turned into a postcard. I was able to find postcards and photos of many of the removed clocks and demolished buildings that were on the installation lists. Similarly, you will come upon many clocks that are not on installation lists at all. These clocks may have been relocated from a previous installation (the case with at least one of the clocks in my survey), built by a maker whose records are not available, or simply missed in the records.

2. Use your ears, but trust your eyes. The goal of research is to get accurate information about the clocks in question. Many of the clocks are considered “institutions” in their communities and have acquired quite a lore over the years, much of it untrue. On many occasions, local citizens assured me that they had a fine Seth Thomas tower clock, only to discover that it was actually a Howard once I climbed the tower and looked at it. My point is that aural information is useful in finding clocks, but it should not be depended upon to identify specifics of the movements or installation dates. Good research technique goes to the primary sources, which means visual inspection of the clock movement and printed or micro-filmed records of newspapers, county commissions, local historical societies, and the like, to establish date of installation. It may have been all of my training in music research that caused me to be so cynical about secondary sources, but it was this cynicism that resulted in my locating the Stevens clock mentioned above.

3. Take your toolbox. A “tool” in this sense is anything that will help you or make your job easier. Climbing towers is usually a dirty business, so wear old clothes and take gloves. A mask might help if breathing in tight bird-infested areas is difficult. Be prepared to deal with the potential hazards of birds, bats (and their droppings), and wasps. Other necessary tools include a flashlight, tape measure (for measuring pendulum length, frame, etc.), pencil and paper (I fre-



Figure 14. Seth Thomas four-dial post clock, Huntington, WV.

quently make sketches of frames and plates), and a camera with flash. I prefer a wide angle lens, as many towers have extremely cramped quarters. Lastly, I make sure that I carry standard books on tower clocks, makers, and models with me on all my visits. These can be invaluable in identifying movements.

4. Do your homework. Try to make as many contacts about a prospective site before you leave. When I began my research, I simply took a leisurely drive to the site, and then started to gather information. This was successful in many instances, as there were numerous times where I happened to be driving to a known site when I came upon an unknown site, stopped, and was allowed to climb the tower on the spot. However, in many more instances, I got to the site to find that there was no one who could let me in to see the clock until tomorrow, the next week, or some other time. Even though I was driving for pleasure and exploring the state, I did not relish a four-hour drive only to discover I would have to make the same drive

at a later day in order to see the clock. I began making calls ahead of time to schedule an appointment before I made my visit. I used the NAWCC directory, county government listings, and even local business listings to inquire about local clocks.

5. Be polite, but be persistent. Go through all the proper channels necessary to view a clock. In all my research in West Virginia, I was never denied the opportunity to view a clock. Sometimes I did have to make a second or third trip to see the clock, but the satisfaction of knowing that the clock was correctly documented was worthwhile. The best case scenario is that the proper channels involve simply being at the site and asking to view the clock. The most complicated situation I had involved getting permission from a county commission to climb their tower and view the clock. I had to wait two weeks until the next commission meeting, but once I explained my purpose and the project, they granted me access to their tower immediately after their meeting. One of them even climbed the first few flights with me.

6. Mention the NAWCC. On all my visits I made it clear that I was a member of the NAWCC and that I was interested in collecting data only. I always volunteered to write a letter to the clock owners in order to document just what sort of a clock they have, and I made sure that contact information for the NAWCC was in that letter. I explained that I wanted them to know that the NAWCC can be a source of help to them if they should ever need help in coordinating logistics and repair of their clock. Many NAWCC chapters routinely donate time to repair and restore public clocks. The greater the visibility the NAWCC can maintain in the project, the better it will be for the preservation and restoration of America's public clocks.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Donn Haven Lathrop for giving me the initial idea for the West Virginia survey, and for providing me with the installation lists for the state. Fred Shelley was most gracious and cooperative in offering his opinion concerning the photos I sent him of the Stevens clock, or Stevens retrofit clock, in Weston. I also want to thank all of the custodians, maintenance workers, caretakers, and public officials who granted me access to all of the towers in my survey.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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