Last but Not Least: John L. Wheeler
The Last Wood- and Brass-Movement Shelf Clock Maker in Upstate New York

By Russ Oechsle, NAWCC Silver Star Fellow (NY)

THE SEARCH BEGINS

My first knowledge of John L. Wheeler of Nassau, NY, came from The Cog Counter’s Journal, originally created by the late, great Ward Francillon in the 1970s and continued to this day by NAWCC Cog Counters Chapter 194. On page 10 of The Cog Counter’s Journal, no. 5 (February 1975), Ward passed along information from the late Bill Wadleigh, who had reported a beveled-case wood works ogee made of bird’s-eye maple, with an odd 30-hour wood movement and a label reading “John L. Wheeler, Nassau Village, NY.” This location was Nassau, Rensselaer County, NY, located about 20 miles east of Albany and not, as one might suppose, Nassau County, NY, on Long Island. Figure 1 shows a map of New York State with Rensselaer County outlined, and Figure 2 shows the location of the town of Nassau in the county.

The label in Bill’s clock, quite remarkable now that I know more about this maker than I did 45 years ago, clearly claimed that Wheeler was making both wood and brass movements and the cases as well. So inured are we to the fact that clock dealers, sellers, and makers often (if not generally) exaggerated their expertise on their labels, it is actually surprising when the claims on a label prove valid. Eventually, I was appreciative of the work of The Cog Counter’s Journal, Ward Francillon, and Bill Wadleigh, because this remains the only reported Wheeler label, and the only specific record of the wording thereon, and Wheeler’s claims have actually proven to be true! Unfortunately, Bill did not take a photo of his clock or its label, but he did record the label’s wording and layout as follows:

**BRASS and WOOD CLOCKS**

of every variety, Manufactured by

**JOHN L. WHEELER**

Nassau Village, N.Y.

Also, Clocks and watches of every description carefully repaired and warranted. Particular attention will be paid to cleaning and repairing all watches left in his care. Also, new clocks made to old cases and new cases of any pattern made to order.

The label deserves parsing. In the first few lines, Wheeler claims that he manufactures, not just sells, “Brass and Wood Clocks.” In the 2003 NAWCC publication An Empire in Time: Clocks and Clock Makers of Upstate New York (written and edited by the author and Helen Boyce with the collaboration of over a dozen additional researchers), more than 150 clockmakers, dealers, and distributors were identified as being active in upstate New York (roughly interpreted as west of Albany) from the late 18th century to the mid 20th century. Of these, no bona fide actual maker of both wood and brass works movements was identified aside from John L. Wheeler.
Also note that in the last few lines of the label another bold statement appears, namely that in addition to making his own movements, Wheeler states that he can make clock cases “of any pattern made to order.”

The history of clockmaking in upstate New York in the early 1800s is replete with shelf clock casemakers who seemingly wisely chose, in order to reduce costs, to buy movements for their cases from any of a number of high-volume Connecticut makers. There were exceptions, of course, most notably 8-day brass movement producers such as Asa Munger and his related firms at Auburn, NY (1816–37); Abner Jones at Bloomfield (1818–41); Jared Arnold Jr. at Amber (1832–37); Phillip Smith at Amber and Marcellus (1829–42); and Marshall & Adams and E. W. Adams at Seneca Falls (1834–37).

Munger, Jones, and Arnold Jr. made and cased only brass movements, but the Smith and Marshall & Adams/E. W. Adams firms also cased and sold wood movement clocks, and when they did so they purchased their wood works from Connecticut makers.³

John L. Wheeler’s label clearly notes that he was located in the village of Nassau, leading research inquiries in that direction. Lastly, Wheeler’s stated claim that he had the...
knowledge and experience to repair clocks and watches "of every description" suggests that he was formally trained as a jeweler, goldsmith, and watch and clock repairer as typical for this period. His clocks certainly support this level of expertise but alas, after four decades of attempts, any clues as to where Wheeler obtained his clockmaking training have proven elusive.

Bill Wadleigh's contribution was followed up in The Cog Counter’s Journal, no. 8 (November 1975), page 6 by a reply from the late DeForest Galer, a former resident of the Albany, NY, area who had by then relocated to Michigan. Galer reported that he owned yet another bevel case with mahogany veneer, with an unusual movement. Galer's case was without a label, but it did provide a provenance, as the clock door featured an original reverse-painted tablet depicting a large building, akin to a school or institution, complete with the inscription "J. L. Wheeler, / Nassau - Village."4 A full case photo of the Galer clock is shown in Figure 3A, and the movement in his clock is shown in Figure 3B.


My search for any other research on Wheeler compiled to that date yielded the clear conclusion that there simply wasn’t any. The following represents all of the information I have been able to gather over the last 40 years on this maker. I think it can best be stated that while the historical record has yielded facts with respect to Wheeler grudgingly and certainly incompletely, the search has nonetheless proven fascinating and rewarding.

**EARLY LIFE IN RENSSELAER COUNTY**

John L. Wheeler was born on January 9, 1802, the son of Ezra and Mercy Wheeler of the town of Stephentown, Rensselaer County, NY, a portion of which, along with the Wheeler property, was set off as the town of Nassau in April 1808.5 Ezra Wheeler and family were recorded as living in Nassau in 1810, and in the 1820 Census, he and his two sons, Isaac (b. 1795) and John, were listed as "engaged in manufacturing."6 Later in life, Isaac was listed as a "molder" and "furnaceman," perhaps suggesting that the family was engaged in metal founding in addition to farming.7 In The Cog Counter’s Journal no. 8, DeForest Galer stated that he had “researched the name [of John L.] and found that Wheeler was a Salt Merchant in Nassau...Circa 1830–35." In my many years of research, I have been unable to find any evidence to support this reference.
The Wheeler family property was located a few miles east of the village of Nassau and consisted of 74 acres of land. The homestead was located on the Albany Turnpike running east and west through the town (now US Route 20), then and for nearly two centuries thereafter, the primary road linking Albany and points east to Massachusetts.8

Figure 4 shows a portion of an 1861 map showing the town of Nassau, with the village of Nassau on the left and the approximate location of the Ezra and Mercy Wheeler farm circled in the center of the town.9 Unfortunately, original and subsequent deeds lack specificity as to the exact location of the family’s farm property.

JOHN L. WHEELER IN COLUMBIA COUNTY, NY

Facts regarding John L. Wheeler’s early history are limited at best. We know from Census records that his wife’s name was Mary and that they had at least three children, the names of two of which, Sarah Ann (1827–42) and Emma A. (1830–50), have been recorded.10 The first deed found for John L. Wheeler was recorded on April 13, 1827, for a house lot not in Nassau, Rensselaer County, but one in a village located approximately 12 miles southwest, that of Valatie, town of Kinderhook, Columbia County (note that Valatie is unaccountably pronounced “Vah-lay-shuh,” but I’m sure the locals have their reasons). As described, the lot purchased under this deed was next to his already existing (but apparently unrecorded) house lot in the village. Valatie is situated at the junction of two water sources: the Valatie Kill and Kinderhook Creek. Both streams have sufficient falls in elevation to supply excellent water power, and this attracted a number of prosperous mills and industries to the area in the early 1800s.11

The deed placing John L. Wheeler at Valatie is helpful, of course, but it provides no clue as to his life and work experience prior to the mid-1820s. Perhaps he worked with his father and brother in Nassau and moved to the next town south to pursue better opportunities. While we cannot say how, exactly, we can nonetheless assert, based on his later activities, that by his time in Valatie, Wheeler had no doubt developed considerable mechanical abilities and perhaps even at this point an interest in clockmaking.

The mortgage of $710 on Wheeler’s vacant lot was taken from the Kinderhook Manufacturing Co., suggesting that Wheeler may have been employed by that firm.12 The Kinderhook Manufacturing Co., specializing in the weaving of cotton goods, was the first large mill to be established on Kinderhook Creek around 1820, and as the industry increased in magnitude it employed many operatives who settled in that part of the village. Around 1855, this factory passed to William P. Rathbone and was thereafter operated by him as a paper mill.13
A RETURN TO NASSAU

Wheeler’s first recorded deed transaction after his return to Nassau was signed December 11, 1837, when he purchased the 74-acre farm of his still-living parents Ezra and Mercy Wheeler for $1,550 from brother Isaac and his wife, Tamma. The description of the $550 mortgage John took from Isaac indicates that John had previously purchased two other (unspecified) parcels on the turnpike totaling 10 acres. Included in the deal for the family homestead was the interesting proviso that John and Mary agreed to take over responsibility for the care of his parents from Isaac.18

Based on deed records, then, it appears possible that Wheeler could have commenced making clocks at Nassau any time after 1834–35, and evidence suggests that clockmaking continued into the early 1840s. As noted, John Wheeler’s labels and clock inscriptions indicate that his shop was in the village of Nassau, not the town, but no deeds were recorded for property in the village. The 1840 US Census for Rensselaer County provides what may be the only clue as to the actual location of Wheeler’s clock shop. In the Census, John and his wife, Mary, are listed as aged between 30 and 40 with three female children between 10 and 14 years; John is noted as being involved in “manufacturing and trades.”19 A review of the Census page on which Wheeler is listed along with the of heads of households adjacent to his location yields the likelihood that his shop and home were located on the turnpike just east of the village center, as approximated in Figure 6.

A portion of an 1858 map of Columbia County showing the village of Valatie is shown in Figure 5.14 The approximate location of John Wheeler’s house lot is circled in red, and the original location of the Kinderhook Manufacturing Co. is circled in green.

The 1830 Census lists John and wife, Mary, and three female children under age 5 at Valatie, plus two apparently unrelated individuals living with them, including one male age 20–29 and one female age 10–14 who could, perhaps, have been boarders or employees working with John at his as-yet-unspecified manufacturing efforts.15

On January 9, 1833, Wheeler sold the vacant lot he had purchased in 1827 to Orin Carpenter for $297, and on July 10, 1833, he sold his dwelling house and lot to the Kinderhook Manufacturing Co. for $1,086.45.16 Again, this may suggest that he maintained a relationship with that firm. We also know by deed reference that while at Valatie, Wheeler purchased burial plot rights for his family in the village’s Prospect Hill Cemetery.17

It appears, therefore, that John concluded activities at Valatie by mid-1833 and then moved back to Nassau, where his father, Ezra, mother, Mercy, and brother, Isaac, and family continued to live.

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Figure 5. A map of the village of Valatie, ca. 1838, with the locations of the Wheeler house lot and Kinderhook Manufacturing Co. circled. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS MAP COLLECTION, LAKE & BEERS, MAP OF COLUMBIA COUNTY, NY, 1838.

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Figure 6. A portion of the 1858 Rensselaer County map of the village of Nassau, with the apparent approximate location of John L. Wheeler’s residence and clock shop circled. LIONEL PINCUS AND PRINCESS FARYAL MAP DIVISION, THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY, “MAP OF RENSSELAER COUNTY, NEW YORK,” NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY DIGITAL COLLECTIONS.
JOHN L. WHEELER: AMBITION AND BAD TIMING

Uncovering extant examples of John Wheeler shelf clocks with wood or brass movements is extremely difficult. First, it is apparent that few were produced, and attribution is difficult due to the fact that most of the extant clocks lack labels, since they either never had them or had lost them at some point. One could judge Wheeler’s attempt to make his unique, low-production yet highly labor-intensive cases and movements in the face of competition by established Connecticut makers producing thousands of clocks per year quixotic if not simply doomed to failure. His timing could not have been worse; at the exact time he chose to start, the very ground on which he and even the largest clockmaking firms in Connecticut were standing was shifting in permanent ways, leaving past and current product lines obsolete and effectively eliminating the possibility for unique, small-volume makers like Wheeler to survive.

By the mid to late 1830s, when John L. Wheeler began his quest to become a wood and brass movement and clock casemaker, the world of American clockmaking and marketing was fundamentally transitioning. The artisan tradition of handmade clocks had actually long since passed, led by the revolutionary mass-production methods inventor Eli Terry applied to wooden tall clock movements in 1806–9, and then to wood works shelf clocks after 1815. The use of wood as the movement material resulted in clocks that the masses could afford for the first time. Yet by the mid-1830s, wood movement tall clock production had for all intents and purposes ended, and even the era of wood works shelf clocks was ending.

In his autobiography published in 1860, prominent early American clockmaker Chauncey Jerome stated that "wood clocks were good for a time, but it was a slow job to properly make them, and difficult to procure wood just right for wheels and plates, and it took a whole year to season it. No factory had ever made over Ten thousand in a year." Jerome himself ended his wood movement production soon after his brother Nobel invented and the pair began producing a 30-hour brass movement around 1837 that could be produced more cheaply and reliably than their prior wood movements. Wheeler was thus entering the 30-hour wood works shelf clock market just as it was disintegrating.

Prior to 1830, shelf clocks with 8-day brass movements were prohibitively expensive for most buyers. This began to change when inventor Joseph Ives patented a weight-driven 8-day brass shelf clock movement utilizing strap brass strips to contain the gears in place of the cast brass plates then prominent. The resulting cost savings made 8-day brass movement shelf clocks much more accessible for many buyers. By the late 1830s, Ives and those makers using his movements had competition from a number of other makers, and when spring steel became available from American producers by the early 1840s, even the weight-driven brass movement clocks were threatened.

In the midst of these changes, however, when Wheeler chose to try his hand at making his own 8-day brass shelf clock movements, he used cast brass plates and gears and levels of experimentation that for all practical purposes rendered any opportunity for profitability moot before his first examples were produced.

As if these market factors were not enough, nationwide economic conditions could likely not have been worse for anyone attempting to start a business in the United States in the late 1830s. The calamities came with the effects of the Panic of 1837, a nationwide economic crisis brought on by rampant land speculation and the collapse of the American banking system following President Andrew Jackson’s failure to renew the charter of the central Second Bank of the United States. Banks failed, money became scarce, and businesses large and small, lacking credit and unable to collect on their outstanding accounts, went bankrupt overnight. The crisis was to last into 1843—hardly a welcome environment for Wheeler’s nascent entrepreneurial efforts.

JOHN L. WHEELER’S WOOD MOVEMENTS

Snowden Taylor described the Wheeler wood movements as resembling the standard “Terry-type” movement in style and form but differing in many individual details. For comparison purposes, Figures 7 and 8 show front plate views of a typical Terry movement and a Wheeler 30-hour wood movement, respectively.

For example, Wheeler’s plates have only three large access holes for pinning the movements to the side rails instead of the four found on the movements of many other makers. On the Wheeler movements, but not on other “Terry-type” movements, one access hole appears in the front plate behind the count wheel to assist in setting the strike train.
On the Wheeler movements, the escape wheel bridge is not riveted to a wood block, as with most wood movements. Rather, a triangular-shaped bridge made of brass, bent to provide proper clearance over the escape wheel arbor, is used, similar to bridges found on many brass movements. Other than his use of escape wheels with either 36- or 39-tooth counts, compared with the “standard” (i.e., most common) 42 teeth for short case wood movements and 28 to 32 teeth for long cases, Wheeler’s gear counts are similar to those found on most wood works clocks.

WHEELER’S NUMBERED WOOD MOVEMENTS
I felt fortunate to obtain a loose Wheeler movement around 1983 and envisioned eventually finding a case to put it in. Alas, the search goes on! After studying the movement, it was noted that the number “139” had been written in pencil on the front plate of the movement to the right of the escape wheel, but no great importance was placed on the fact at the time. Perspectives changed in the mid-1990s when a collector unveiled to me a wonderful diminutive and complete short case, scroll top, mahogany-veneered case with double tiger maple half-columns (Figure 9A). The case had no label but it did contain an original John L. Wheeler 30-hour wood movement! Other distinctive case features included a maple wood dial with “country crude” hand-painted flowers in the spandrels and background paint so white and clean as to look almost too new. One interesting construction feature found on all of the Wheeler cases to date is that the door frames are not dovetailed but butt-joined with splines, as seen in Figure 9B. Even more interesting was the fact that the number “137” was inscribed in pencil on the movement and on the top edge of both doors, and the date “1841” was written in pencil on the back of the dial (Figure 9C). The numbering found on Wheeler clocks is extremely helpful, of course, but the fact that the inscriptions were made in pencil make them vulnerable to extinction with a single cleaning or restoration.
A REVELATION: A JOHN L. WHEELER 8-DAY BRASS MOVEMENT CLOCK

Interestingly, just a few months later, I saw a case at the American Clock & Watch Museum (ACWM) in Bristol, CT, which was so virtually similar to clock no. 137 that I was sure it was a Wheeler product. The ACWM clock was perched high on a shelf about 10’ above the floor in the Barnes Wing of the museum, and I implored Chris Bailey, the curator at the time, to bring it down for me. Even up on the shelf it was obvious, courtesy of an enlarged center aperture in the dial, that the movement in the case was brass, not wood (Figure 10A). As he climbed the ladder, Chris related that the clock had been donated many years before as part of the liquidation of the Seth Thomas Clock Co. collection by General Time Corp. and that the clock had been identified as an early Seth Thomas product. Not knowing what it was, but knowing that it was not a Seth Thomas and appreciating its beauty, Chris had placed it to rest in prominent anonymity for the long term. Once down to table level, a quick perusal revealed a triple-decker version of clock no. 137! Not only that, but the dial was remarkably white, with hand-painted flowers; the top of the case had the same diminutive scroll treatment, and the top board and the inside of both doors were numbered “132” in pencil (Figure 10B).
There was no doubt in my mind that the same person who fashioned the case for wood works clock no. 137 also made case no. 132. And the anticipated wood movement, or any sign of an original wood movement? Nowhere to be found. The reality was a unique 8-day cast brass movement with "A-frame" plates, which were secured to the seat board by screws through extensions of the plates.

The plate castings were crude, with many imperfections. The trains were reversed, and the right-side strike train featured a count wheel attached directly to the back of the great wheel. Nearly matching the “132” on the case was the number “133” stamped on the front plate of the movement (Figure 10B). It was clear that the same maker produced both cases numbered 137 and 132, and that brass movement no. 133 belonged in case no. 132 just as the Wheeler wood movement had always belonged in case no. 137. We had confirmation of the claims on Wheeler’s label, to wit: “BRASS and WOOD CLOCKS of every variety Manufactured...Also,...new cases of any pattern made to order.”

The next helpful revelation came when I shared pictures of clock no. 137 and clock no. 133/132 with the late Snowden Taylor. He immediately called me to report his knowledge of a clock in his collection with a case showing most of the same design features as these two and with a brass movement undoubtedly made by the same person as clock 133/132! The main difference? This new clock was a full-size triple decker with cornice top—a stretched version of clock no. 133/132, if you will (Figure 11A). Sure enough, the movement (unnumbered in this instance, so designated Clock W-1) was of the same basic A-frame design but instead of a count wheel strike and reversed trains, this example had a standard train arrangement and a rack-and-snail strike, a clear sign that the maker was experimenting as he went along (Figure 11B). Unfortunately, this case lacked any pencil numbers, probably due to refinishing efforts, and the original
Figure 11A. Full-case view of a full-size triple-decker case from the Snowden Taylor collection, nearly identical to case no. 133 other than in size. Note that the clock had a clear glass in the lower door when first seen in the Taylor collection. The current owner had a replacement tablet produced and installed. No original case numbers have survived.

Figure 11B. Front view of the 8-day movement found in the clock in Figure 11A. This movement has standard train arrangements and a count wheel strike, clearly evidence that Wheeler was continuing to experiment with his movement design. This movement was not numbered.

THE SEARCH CONTINUED

This convoluted train of information and knowledge has led me on an ongoing quest to uncover additional Wheeler clocks, with those efforts yielding few, but nonetheless tantalizing, rewards, as noted below.

Clock No. 119: Short Case, Double-Decker Case with Original “Wheeler” Tablet and Wood Movement

At a Bob Schmitt auction in October 2001, a wonderful short-case Wheeler was offered (Figure 12A). The following attributes were noted: the case was identical to that of clock no. 137; it contained a wood movement; both the case and movement were inscribed with “119;” and just as with the Galer clock, this case retained an original reverse “J. L. WHEELER”-inscribed tablet! Whereas the Galer tablet featured an institutional building as noted above, this featured a country representation of a period Federal house (Figure 12B).

Designated W-2—Unnumbered: Full-Size, Empire Double-Door and Cornice Case with Wood Movement

After I shared my search for additional Wheeler clocks in The Cog Counter’s Journal, collector and researcher Bob Burton sent pictures of a wonderful full-size, double-door case containing a “standard” Wheeler 30-hour wood movement (Figure 13). Added amenities on this case include decorative inlay on the front edges framing the doors of the case, and a “porthole” opening in the wood lower panel door showing the pendulum swing. As with all Wheeler cases seen to date, the case primarily has mahogany veneer over pine with maple accessories. On this case, the columns and upper and lower blocks are solid tiger maple. No clearly discernable numbering can be found on the case doors, top, or movement of this clock, although a large “5” is found in pencil on the inside of the backboard.26
Designated W-3—Unnumbered: Full-Size, Empire Double-Door and Cornice Case with Wood Movement
A clock remarkably similar to clock W-2 was seen when I gave a talk on Wheeler to the NAWCC Rip Van Winkle (NY) Chapter 40 meeting some years ago (Figure 14). It lacks the inlay edging seen on clock W-2 and has a glass panel in the lower door. Only the solid columns are of maple, in this case bird’s-eye. The tablet shown in the lower door is not original and is a facsimile of the original tablet found on clock no. 119.

Designated W-4—Unnumbered: Bevel-Case Ogee with Wood Movement
It seems unnecessary to repeat the obvious, but clocks that lack labels, however beautiful and well-made they might be, will tend to defy identification. While Wheeler’s maple and mahogany Empire cases are likely to at least

Figure 12A. Full view of the Wheeler short case, double-door clock numbered “119.”

Figure 12B. Close-up view of the original reverse-painted tablet found in clock no. 119.

Figure 13. Full-case view of clock W-2 showing the decorative inlay banding on the inside framing and the porthole opening in the lower panel. This clock has a representative Wheeler 30-hour wood movement. PHOTO COURTESY OF BOB BURTON.
Figure 14. Full-case view of clock W-3. This case is a near duplicate of clock W-2 but lacks the inlay banding and the porthole lower-tablet opening. The tablet is a replica of the original in the clock shown in Figure 12A. AUTHOR’S PHOTO, COURTESY OF MILT BARBER.

Figure 15. Unnumbered bevel-case clock with Wheeler 30 hour wood movement. PHOTO COURTESY OF TROY LIVINGSTON.

garner respect for their uniqueness even without clear attribution, the same cannot assuredly be said for his simple, bevel-case clocks with wood movements that likely were the least expensive clocks Wheeler offered. A number of Connecticut makers produced similar bevel-case ogees in the late 1830s to early 1840s, and these models fell into the same general “cheap but tidy” class. It establishes the point that there may be many more of Wheeler’s bevel-case clocks extant, but if they lack labels and no one either checks the wood movements in the clocks or perhaps would not know the difference even if they did, then such clocks are likely doomed to anonymity. One person who knows the difference is collector Troy Livingston, who reported yet another bevel-case clock to me (Figure 15). The case features mahogany veneer, a plain dial and standard Wheeler wood movement. No original case/movement numbers remain.27

Designated W-5—Unnumbered: Empire Triple-Decker and Cornice Case with 8-Day Brass, Weight-Driven Movement with Alarm

Clock W-5 is quite similar in case execution to clock W-1 but is approximately 2” shorter than W-1, with the comparative difference resulting from shorter, stubbier mid-section columns on clock W-5. Were it not lacking a cornice top, short-case clock 133/132 could be seen as a miniature version of case W-5 (Figure 16A).

But John L. Wheeler never lacks for surprises, and clock W-5 contains the third 8-day brass movement variation found to date, containing even further and more sophisticated modifications to the previous two, as seen in Figure 16B. For example, the strike side (still on the left, as in clock W-1) now has an outboard extension to the plates that hold the strike control wire arbors, showing an
evolution from the two previous versions. And now the strike activation is back to a count wheel, as in clock W-1.

The time side features are similar to clock W-1, but wait—what are the other elements seen on the exterior and interior of the clock for? Why does the dial have a third winding hole at the 12:30 mark on the dial, as seen in Figure 16A? Notice in Figure 16B the extraneous holes and gouges in the backboard above the movement, then the extra (weight cord?) roller to the right and above the movement, and what appears to be a missing arbor for another roller just below, apparently designed to keep a cord from above from interfering with the time side weight cord and pulley! This is/was a Wheeler 8-day brass movement clock with alarm! Ah, to find (and severely shake) the repair person who decided at some point to dispose of what was likely a unique outboard, brass alarm movement.28

Other than several additional loose, so far unnumbered, movements, the above represents the sum total of Wheeler clocks I have been able to find. No doubt others exist, like the American Clock & Watch Museum clock, that are valued and appreciated for their uniqueness and beauty but standing with their owners clueless as to who made them. Perhaps this article will help uncover more of these remarkable artifacts.

THE LAST INDEPENDENT WOOD– AND BRASS–MOVEMENT SHELF CLOCK MAKER IN NEW YORK STATE

John Wheeler’s father, Ezra, died in early 1840, and in March of that year John and Mary sold all of their property in Nassau, including three parcels totaling 84 acres, back to Isaac for $550. Four days later Isaac sold it all to their mother, Mercy, for $300, a transaction seemingly intended to secure their mother a home and income for the remainder of her life.29

John and Mary are listed in the 1840 US Census for Rensselaer County as aged between 30 and 40 years of age, with three female children between 10 and 14 years. John is recorded as being involved in “manufacturing and trades.” It is unknown how long John continued to make clocks, but it is speculated that it likely did not extend long into the early 1840s.30

John Wheeler died at age 45 on March 10, 1847, in Nassau and was buried at the Prospect Hill Cemetery at Valatie in the plot he had purchased while living there years before. He was predeceased by his daughter Sarah Ann (d. January 10, 1842) and survived by his daughter Emma (d. September 18, 1850). The graves of both flank John’s in the cemetery. His wife, Mary, appears to have survived him, but searches to date have not revealed her date of death or grave site.31
John L. Wheeler had much in common with other 19th-century upstate New York clockmakers. His tenure was short, his historical record is spare at best, and, essentially, he has only the surviving clocks made by his hand to mark his life. His efforts, however ill-timed, were ambitious and his clocks exquisite. The contribution of each upstate New York clockmaker, casemaker, or dealer who sought to make a living by putting his name on a clock is significant, no matter how scant the number of clocks made or the longevity of the firm. John L. Wheeler epitomizes this fact as well as any of his brethren.

Acknowledgments
This article is dedicated to the great author and researcher Snowden Taylor, who, ever a fan of the interesting and obscure clockmaker, made me promise to write this article. Thanks also to Stephen Betts, who provided valuable assistance with deed research on John Wheeler.

Notes and References
4. Researcher/collector Robert Markowitz has astutely noted in communication with the author that the institutional building shown in the tablet on the Galer clock bears an uncanny resemblance to Nassau Hall, one of the most historic buildings on the campus of Princeton University in New Jersey, thus raising the possibility that Wheeler was taking advantage of a known connection with Nassau Village to help sell this clock. Unfortunately, reviews of Nassau histories and inquiries made to the Town Historian have yet to provide a link.
8. Deed, Mortgage, and Surrogate’s Court Records, Rensselaer County, NY.
12. Deed, Mortgage, and Surrogate’s Court Records, Columbia County, NY.
16. Deed, Mortgage, and Surrogate’s Court Records, Columbia County, NY.
17. Deed, Mortgage, and Surrogate’s Court Records, Columbia County, NY.
18. Deed, Mortgage, and Surrogate’s Court Records, Rensselaer County, NY.
27. Author’s correspondence with Troy Livingston, 2010.
28. Author’s correspondence with Dave Ewbank, 2011.
29. Find a Grave, www.findagrave.com; Deed, Mortgage, and Surrogate’s Court Records, Rensselaer County, NY.
31. Find a Grave, www.findagrave.com; Deed, Mortgage, and Surrogate’s Court Records, Columbia County, NY.

About the Author
G. Russell Oechsle has researched upstate New York clocks and clockmakers for more than 40 years. He is the coauthor of An Empire in Time: Clocks and Clock Makers of Upstate New York (2003, NAWCC); author of Good for a Time (2011, rev. 2021), detailing the largest collection of wooden works clocks in America; and author of Without Equal: The Clocks of Abner Jones of Bloomfield, New York (2022, NAWCC). Russ is a Silver Star Fellow of the NAWCC, past president of Central New York Chapter 55, past president of Cog Counters Chapter 194 and Tower and Street Clock Chapter 134, and currently serves as editor of Chapter 134’s journal, Public Time. He has also served as a past director of the American Clock and Watch Museum in Bristol, CT. In 2023, Russ was awarded the NAWCC Kenneth D. Roberts–Snowden Taylor Horological Research Award for his original research efforts.