

Terry, George, and a Rare Pillar and Scroll Clock

By George Goolsby, NAWCC Fellow (TX)

I began collecting clocks in 1975 and joined the NAWCC in 1978. My first interest was double-dial calendar clocks. Not until the early 1980s did my eye turn to early American clocks, wooden-works examples in particular. Pillar and scroll clocks were my favorites. I met Terry Brotherton at Chapter and Regional meetings and we became friends, not least because not too many local members were as fascinated as we were about wooden-works clocks. It was through Terry that I learned about and became a longtime member of Cog Counters.

In those days you went to Regionals and Nationals to find clocks to buy and sell. You also relied on the *Mart & Highlights* magazine and antique auctions' periodicals to find clocks of interest. Sellers' ads would tell potential buyers to send self-addressed stamped envelopes to receive a current list of clocks for sale. There was no internet, so subscriptions to publications like *Maine Antique Digest* and *The Antiques Trader Weekly* were essential for staying informed about upcoming clock auctions.

Thus it was in April 1990 that an advertisement appeared in *The Antiques Trader Weekly* for an auction in Milwaukee at Schragger Auction Galleries Ltd. Among the seven items in the ad was a very distinct pillar and scroll clock with an unusual top and an open escapement. I knew the clock was very rare and decided almost immediately to make a serious effort to buy it (Figure 1).

We all know that the one thing all auctions do is identify the person crazy enough to spend more than anyone else to buy something, but I was undeterred in my efforts to, as the lawyers say, reduce this clock to possession. I immediately sent a check to purchase the auction catalog and subsequently arranged to bid live by telephone. Again, there was no internet so remote bidding was by absentee bid or by phone. I had no idea who the competition was, how well the auction house was known, or what the item might bring, so dropping in an absentee bid made no sense. If I wanted it, I'd have to get on the phone.

The auction house estimated when the clock might come up, so I sat by my phone an hour ahead of the estimated 7 p.m. posting, waiting for the call. Sure enough, my phone rang and a nice lady handled my bids as the auction proceeded. It was busy at first with mostly floor bidders and, after putting in a bid to make my presence known, I laid back and let others bid. Before long the price rose and the bidding slowed. At that point the lady helping me advised that we were down to two hardcore phone bidders, me and some other guy from parts unknown, duking it out for the prize. I kept bidding and hoping that this other guy would give up before good sense overcame me and I stopped bidding. Sure enough, my unknown competitor surrendered first, and the auction lady congratulated me on my winning bid. Greater fool I may have been, but I had vanquished the foe and now owned the rare Eli Terry clock.

Figure 1. A rare pillar and scroll clock by Eli Terry, made ca. 1814. Donated by George Goolsby in memory of Terry Brotherton. COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL WATCH & CLOCK MUSEUM.





◀ **Figure 2.** George and Terry at the reception for the Pillar & Scroll Exhibit at the National Watch & Clock Museum in November 2006. The Eli Terry clock is behind us, largely obscured by Terry's smiling face. COURTESY OF GEORGE GOOLSBY.



Figure 3. Four old friends gathered at Terry's home on August 1, 2024: (left to right) Ralph Pokluda, George Goolsby, Jim Dubois, and David Collard. COURTESY OF GEORGE GOOLSBY.

In due course the clock arrived in Houston and sat for a few years in my downtown office. After a while it came home and assumed pride of place on our den mantel. Years passed and, while Terry and others knew about my growing clock collection, the fact that I had this rare pillar and scroll clock flew under the radar.

Sometime in the mid-1990s we had our usual August Regional in Houston, of which Terry was a major organizer. We were honored to have as a guest Dave Morgan, president of the NAWCC from 1997 to 1999. Terry volunteered to ferry Dave around to see some local collections, and he asked if he could bring Dave by to see my clocks. I said sure. So one evening Terry and Dave arrived and we began the tour, starting with the parlor and making our way back toward the den.

As we walked into the den, Dave and Terry both looked to the left and saw the rare Eli Terry sitting on the mantel. Dave started toward the clock but stopped short when Terry looked daggers at me, then at the clock, and back at me and said in a loud voice, "YOU! It was YOU! YOU got my clock! I had no idea YOU were the one who bought it!" After a bit more sputtering and Dave trying to understand what Terry was saying, we broke out in laughter. Terry didn't know I owned it, and I didn't know who the stubborn so-and-so was who kept running up the bidding that night back in 1990. Finally, the nemeses had met. From then on, the clock remained on my mantel or in my study, and Terry enjoyed very liberal visitation rights.

He loved that clock at least as much as I did. When the 1999 National was held in Houston, Terry was chair of the exhibit committee and principal architect of the exhibit booklet. It's no surprise, then, that the clock that ended up on the cover happened to be the same rare Eli Terry pillar and scroll with the outside escapement. Terry and I were guest curators of the Pillar & Scroll Exhibit at the National Watch & Clock Museum in Columbia, PA, from November 2006 to May 2007 (Figure 2). Among the many extraordinary examples in the exhibit was, of course, the Eli Terry clock. A book that's still available for sale in the museum store documents the exhibit (shop.nawcc.org/products/pillar-scroll).

More years passed and whenever Terry would come by with other out-of-town guests to look at clocks, the Eli Terry was always a favorite stop. We took turns telling the story of how the clock came to reside in Houston and often reaffirmed that the Eli Terry needed to go to the National Watch & Clock Museum when he and I were ready to let go of it.

A few years ago I finally did something I ought to have done at least a decade ago: I surprised Terry by giving the Eli Terry clock to him. I had owned it for three decades so it was high time for Terry to have it, to take it to his house and enjoy. He tried to beg off but I wouldn't take no for an answer (Figure 3). It could go to the Museum later.

Little did we know that far too soon Terry would be battling cancer. With the help of MD Anderson Cancer Center, his doctors, caregivers, wife, and family, Terry was able to spend several months enjoying many of his usual activities. Consistently upbeat, he nonetheless prepared himself for the day he and I would say goodbye. On one

visit, Terry showed me his will, pointing to the provision leaving the Eli Terry clock to me. I joked that he'd outlive me yet, but I was touched that he wanted me to once again have it and see that it was donated to the Museum. Sadly, Terry passed away on August 13, 2024.

With the help of Ralph Pokluda, the clock arrived in Columbia in November 2024. It remains a very rare timepiece and an important part of America's horological history. It is wonderful eye candy to collectors and never fails to draw interest. But this Eli Terry clock also represents decades of friendship between two guys down in Texas who, without knowing it, bid against each other to own it, later discovered how much they both appreciated it and found lots of ways to enjoy it, and commemorated their friendship by sharing it with everyone through its donation to the Museum.

Back in the 1950s there was a weekly crime drama on television called *Naked City*. At the end of each show, the announcer intoned, "There are eight million stories in the Naked City. This has been one of them." Undoubtedly,

there are many other stories our members can tell about their collecting adventures, but I'm glad Terry and I got to share this one.

Terry, our task is done and the Eli Terry clock now has a new home.

About the Author

George Goolsby is a longtime member of the NAWCC and previously served on the Board of Directors and as chair of the For All Time campaign. He has been collecting early American clocks for more than four decades, with particular interest in Joseph Ives, Salem Bridge, and wooden works examples. He is a Fellow of the NAWCC, has been recognized as a Donor of the Year, and has organized several exhibits at Nationals, Regionals, and at the Museum. He enjoys his many friendships with fellow members and subscribes to the view that if you are the smartest or most knowledgeable person in the room, you are in the wrong room. He continues to donate rare clocks from his collection to the Museum and contributes annually to the Association's endowment.



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