

Appreciating Chauncey Jerome

By Chris H. Bailey, NAWCC Silver Star Fellow (FL)

While many collectors of American manufactured clocks revere the early pioneering work of Eli Terry, Joseph Ives, and their associates, many of today's collections are more likely to have clocks from the factories of Chauncey Jerome. Jerome's story was truly one of *From Rags to Riches to Rags*, the title of my 1986 NAWCC supplement on Jerome.¹ In spite of numerous trials and setbacks in his 50 years of clockmaking, by the time of his death in 1868 Jerome had manufactured more affordable clocks than any man of his time.

EARLY ASSOCIATIONS WITH THE CONNECTICUT CLOCK BUSINESS

Chauncey Jerome was only 11 when his father died, and the only skill he knew was making nails. In the winter of 1807, he was apprenticed to a carpenter for seven years, but in the winter when house construction was slow, he worked for a man in Waterbury, CT, making wood dial plates to be painted and used on wood tall clock movements. This was his first involvement with the clockmaking business, increasingly active in Plymouth, Waterbury, and Winchester, CT. Jerome considered getting work with Eli Terry of Plymouth but was discouraged by the local scuttlebutt that Terry and others were making as many as 200 clock movements a year, which would soon flood the market and kill that business. Little did anyone know that clock production was still in its infancy, Terry would soon contract to produce 4,000 clock movements by 1809, and clockmaking would become a major industry.

Jerome traveled to New Jersey in December 1812 with a young partner to make tall clock cases the remainder of that winter. When Jerome returned to Connecticut, the War of 1812 was in progress, and at age 20 he enlisted. Discharged in 1814, the following year he married and

started a family (Figure 1). Preparing to go to Baltimore to find work in the fall of 1816, Jerome heard that Eli Terry had built a new factory along the Naugatuck River in Plymouth and was setting it up to manufacture shelf clocks. Jerome visited Terry, who hired him to set up the factory's machinery and benches, and install the first circular saw in town. Terry had improved his pillar and scroll design, and Jerome started making cases for them. Jerome's contract with Terry ended in 1817, after which he rented a small shop and continued making pillar and scroll cases, buying movements, dials, and decorative glasses, and selling finished clocks a few at a time for \$18 each. His business did well and he was able to hire two workers.

In 1821, Jerome sold his home in Plymouth to Terry for \$600, taking 100 shelf clock movements, dials, glasses, and weights as payment.² Soon he went to visit prosperous merchant George Mitchell, who had a two-story house and 17 acres of land in the southern part of Bristol, CT, for sale. Mitchell agreed to take 214 complete pillar and scroll clocks as payment from Jerome. Jerome



Figure 1. Likenesses of Salome (Smith) Jerome (1794–1854) and Chauncey Jerome (1793–1868) about 1835. Salome was a sister of Samuel Bryan Smith of the clockmaking firms of J. C. Brown & Co. and of Smith & Goodrich. ANONYMOUS COLLECTION.



Figure 2. In 1824, Jerome produced his earliest clock product, a 4' tall clock. He made only 200 of these varnished pine cases, installing modified 30-hour wood gear movements made by Chauncey Boardman. COLLECTION OF THE LATE EDWARD F. LAFOND.



Figure 3. Although Jerome stated that he made the first new style of pillar and scroll shelf clock cases for Eli Terry, Jeromes & Darrow manufactured relatively few examples with typical 1-day time and strike wood movement clocks in pillar and scroll cases. This rare miniature timepiece with turned feet was made about 1828, at which time the Hartford, CT, label printer, Norton & Russell, was in business. COLLECTION OF THE LATE CHRISTOPHER BROWN, PHOTO COURTESY OF RUSS OESCHLE.

made the cases, finishing 100 clocks with parts from Terry, and exchanged cases with Terry for additional parts to complete the payment of 214 clocks to Mitchell. However, by 1823, Terry's business was booming and he had no extra movements to sell. Having a hard time finding movements for his cases, Jerome went to Chauncey Boardman of Bristol, a manufacturer of wood tall clock movements, and persuaded him to make 200 movements with square dials, altering the movements to have smaller winding barrels to reduce the clock's weight drop. Jerome designed a simple scroll-top pine case about 4' long, stained and varnished instead of veneered.

In the spring of 1824, Jerome and two partners went to Randolph, MA, rented a shop, and bought pine for the cases. Jerome made 200 cases, four at a time, and his

partners sold them for \$18 each. A few of these clocks still exist, some having Boardman labels (Figure 2).

In the fall of 1824, Jerome went into partnership with his younger brother, Noble, and Elijah Darrow, a clock dial and glass painter, to make handsome scroll-top shelf clocks with decorative glasses. Because Terry had patented his shelf clock movement, simply copying Terry's design would likely have caused legal problems. Instead, they went back to Boardman, who designed a new movement for them using features from tall clock movements, including overhead striking and an internal escapement. Because the new movement's striking was noisier, collectors have called it the "groaner." This new clock was eventually labeled Jerome, Darrow & Company. This was the first time Jerome's name appeared on clock labels (Figure 3).

1827–37: PROSPEROUS TIMES

By 1827, carved column and splat clock cases began appearing on the market, so Chauncey Jerome designed a new case with stencil-decorated half columns and splat with a looking glass or decorative painted glass in the door. Jerome said this clock could be made for a dollar less and sold for two dollars more than other shelf clocks—a seller's dream. About 1827, Noble Jerome designed a new wood movement for this clock, but it was impractical to set up and was soon abandoned. By 1827, Terry's movement patent had been challenged by Seth Thomas in court, and it soon became evident that Terry could not legally enforce his patent. Thus, around 1829 Chauncey and Noble Jerome and Elijah Darrow as Jeromes & Darrow began to manufacture both Terry-type and groaner movements for their decorative stenciled, carved, and Empire-style cases (Figure 4). By 1831, Eli Terry had developed a wood movement 8-day clock, and soon Jeromes & Darrow introduced their own 8-day wood movement clocks. Their business had so prospered that in 1831 Chauncey Jerome and Elijah Darrow paid 25% of the cost of building a new Congregational Church in Bristol, which still stands.

FINDING NEW MARKETS

With many firms getting into wooden gear clock production, by the late 1820s and early 1830s peddlers



Figure 4. Early Jerome, Darrow & Co. looking glass shelf clock with stencil-decorated pilasters, splat, and reverse-painted lower glass, ca. 1825. These early clocks had 30-hour “groaner” wood gear movements, and the decorated pilasters or half columns opened with the sash. PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES MAHRER.



Figure 5. The simple mahogany veneered S-shaped (ogee) case with a 1-day or larger 8-day weight-driven brass movement was made by the thousands from the late 1830s into the 1850s by Jerome firms and many others. This example has an original lower-door glass with a view of Jerome's New Haven factory where it was made. PHOTO COURTESY OF MIKE BAILEY, JEROMECLOCKCOLLECTOR.COM.

were selling thousands of clocks in southern markets. Shipping clocks by boat to ports in Baltimore, Charleston, and New Orleans was faster than transporting them over land, but wood gears would swell if over water for long distances, and the southern heat and humidity made it difficult to keep clocks running.

By the late 1820s, 8-day shelf clocks with brass movements by Joseph Ives and his associates were appearing in greater numbers. Ives had pioneered the use of rolled brass to reduce the cost of brass movements. Although at about \$20 their clocks cost more than twice as much as wood gear ones, they ran eight days on a winding and were more durable. Jerome began adding 8-day brass movements to his production by 1834. By this time southerners were growing disenchanted with northern peddlers, resenting their southern money being sent north to enrich Yankees. Many states began requiring peddler's licenses, charging as much as \$100 per county. In 1835, Jerome shrewdly rented a shop in Richmond, VA, where unassembled clock movements

and parts were shipped and assembled there, with locally printed labels claiming Richmond production. Local residents were not allowed in the “factory,” but Jerome's gambit worked and he avoided the licensing fees.

Clock production boomed until 1836, when a financial panic and string of bank failures caused most of the Bristol clockmakers to fail by the following year.

JEROME BREATHES NEW LIFE INTO A NEARLY DEAD CLOCK INDUSTRY

Jerome's clock business was in deep financial trouble in the latter part of 1837. He went to Richmond to try to settle accounts and collect unpaid bills and a few unsold clocks. He took one of his unsold wood gear clocks to his room one night. Unable to sleep, he came up with the brilliant idea that if his brother, Noble, could design a 1-day brass movement, it could use the same case, dial, and weights as a wood movement clock, cost only slightly more to produce than a wood movement one, and sell for much less than an 8-day brass movement one. Returning to Bristol at the end of January 1838, Jerome proposed his new clock idea to Noble, who designed an efficient, rugged, 1-day brass movement that was everything Jerome had dreamed of.³ It had five gears instead of seven, and could use a small case and lighter weights. Instead of \$20, Jerome's new 1-day brass clock could be sold for \$7 on credit, \$6 for cash. In half a dozen years, the wood gear clock was history (Figure 5).

Chauncey Jerome had a serious problem though. He was broke, and the tooling to make this new movement required significant funding. He found eight investors, and in 1839 the firm Jerome, Gilbert, Grant & Co. was formed to manufacture the new clock. It was such a success that a year later Jerome made enough money to buy out the partners plus 100% interest for one of the investors.⁴ In 1841, Jerome cleared \$35,000 of profit. Times were good again.

OPENING THE GREAT BRITAIN MARKET

By 1842, Jerome decided to ship a load of clocks to England and send his son, Chauncey Jr., and Epaphroditus Peck, another young Bristol man, to peddle them. Thinking the declared value of the clocks was too cheap

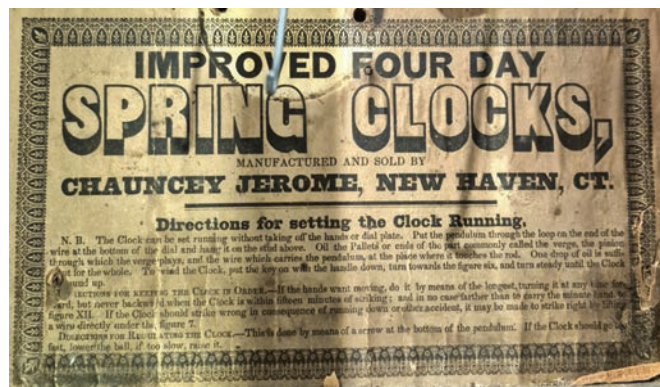


◀ **Figure 6A.** A Chauncey Jerome "Gothic" or steeple clock in an oversized, striped mahogany-veneered case made for the English market, ca. 1849. AUTHOR'S PHOTO.

▶ **Figure 6B.** The 8-day spring-driven movement from the Jerome steeple clock in Figure 6A. Earlier Jerome spring clocks had springs mounted in the lower part of the case, driving the clock by cords to the movement. By 1849, the springs had been integrated onto the movement. This example is die stamped "MADE BY C. JEROME / U. S. A." This movement is so robust, the clock is two to three times heavier than normal steeple clocks. AUTHOR'S PHOTO.



▼ **Figure 6C.** The label in Jerome's steeple clock in Figure 6A. Apparently the springs were not strong enough to drive this clock for an entire week, so it was labeled an "IMPROVED FOUR DAY" clock and had to be wound twice a week! Springs were soon improved and very few 4-day clocks are known. AUTHOR'S PHOTO.



compared to English-made clocks, customs agents were allowed to seize the entire shipment, paying the declared value plus 10%. Jerome soon sent a second shipment of similar value, which customs again purchased. But when a third shipment arrived, customs agents were finally convinced their valuation was truthful and released the clocks into the country. Sales were difficult at first, but eventually Jerome clocks found their way into the British homes where expensive domestic clocks were too costly for the homeowners.⁵ This opened the door for sales of affordable American-made clocks in Europe and elsewhere. Jerome's sales were so successful that many others tried to copy him, introducing poorly made clocks in ogee cases, some with fake Jerome labels.

THE GREAT BRISTOL FIRE

By 1843, Jerome had fitted up two factory buildings in Bristol just to manufacture brass movements, and in 1844, had fitted up another two factories on Long Island Sound in New Haven, CT, to make cases and assemble brass clocks for shipment to ports in America and overseas. By 1845, Jerome had four factories in downtown Bristol, two on each side of the Pequabuck River. On the south side of the river were his two-story movement and finishing shops with a walkway 11' above ground linking them. On the afternoon of April 23, 1845, one of these buildings caught fire and all four buildings, his storage and drying shed, and thousands of brass movements were

destroyed. His loss was estimated at \$50,000 and insured for only \$10,000. In spite of another setback, Jerome soon recovered, moving all his clockmaking to New Haven, where he had purchased a very nice home.

With the development of cheap coiled steel springs in 1847, Jerome began adding smaller cased shelf clocks using his weight-driven movements but powering them with spring-driving attachments. Within a couple of years, springs were moved directly onto the movement's great wheels (Figure 6).

THE JEROME MANUFACTURING CO.

By 1850, Jerome's business was booming and he added another factory, in Derby, CT, to support his New Haven operation. The 1850 industrial census recorded Jerome's factories as employing 325 men who produced about 280,000 clocks annually. A major supplier of their brass was Benedict & Burnham of Waterbury, CT, who approached Jerome with a proposal to form a joint stock corporation. The Jerome Manufacturing Co. was thus formed on February 14, 1850. Though Jerome became president of the firm, for the first time he lost much personal control of his company. It was run by his eldest son, Augustus, secretary and financial manager, along with other investors. Jerome wrote in his autobiography, "They had a great many additions to the factory buildings, putting in a new engine and a great deal of costly machinery. They laughed at me because I found fault with these things and called me an old fogey."⁶

THE JEROME AND BARNUM FAILURE

It was a dark day when Chauncey Jerome got involved with Phineas T. Barnum, the infamous showman. Barnum had invested in the Litchfield [CT] Manufacturing Co., which sold decorated papier mache cases to Jerome in the early 1850s. In 1854, Barnum purchased the surviving stock of the burned factory of Theodore Terry's Ansonia Clock Co., erected a building, and formed a new stock company, the Terry & Barnum Manufacturing Co. Barnum refused to spend the money needed to get the firm onto solid production ground, and by 1855 failure was inevitable. Barnum decided to sell the firm before then, and the most likely buyer was Jerome's company, though it was already overextended and could ill afford

the additional Terry & Barnum debt. In convincing Jerome to buy Terry & Barnum, Barnum promised, but never endorsed, notes to help Jerome's own firm become solvent. On February 14, 1853, the Jerome Manufacturing Co. was forced into bankruptcy, followed by Terry & Barnum a month later.

Barnum saw the failures coming and was better prepared than Jerome. Barnum hid his assets in the names of his wife and business partner and therefore did not lose his personal fortune. While traveling through Europe, Barnum falsely claimed that Jerome had ruined him and touted his own great financial ability in regenerating his fortune.

CHAUNCEY'S FINAL CLOCKMAKING VENTURES

Chauncey Jerome went from being America's largest clock manufacturer in 1850 to a ruined man by 1854. He lost not only his business, but his home and personal estate valued at \$61,000. The death of Salome, his wife of 39 years, added the ultimate pain to Jerome's losses that year. Jerome's clock factory was bought by his nephew, Hiram Camp, who continued production there as the New Haven Clock Co.

In the fall of 1856, Jerome and his second wife, Sophia, moved to Waterbury, CT, where he set up a casemaking shop for Benedict & Burnham's new Waterbury Clock Co. Noble Jerome set up the movement shop for the firm and managed Waterbury's movement shop until he died in 1861.

In the spring of 1857, Chauncey Jerome moved to Ansonia, CT, to work for Gilbert, Hubbard & Co. It must have been demeaning to have been William L. Gilbert's employer, then his financier, and finally his employee. On April 14, 1857, Jerome was granted a patent for a simple method to make clock case fronts (Figure 7). Because Jerome's name was well known, this firm sold thousands of clocks with Chauncey Jerome labels, even though his firm was no longer in business. In May 1858, Jerome went to work for Joseph H. Remer, a wealthy Derby, CT, merchant. Jerome put his last \$5,000 into this firm, but once Jerome was out of funds, Remer refused to pay bills, terminated the operation, claimed fraud, and

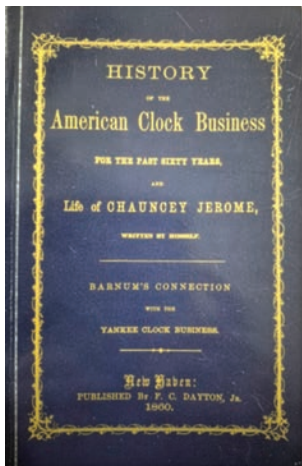
AMERICA'S 250TH ANNIVERSARY: CELEBRATING HOROLOGY



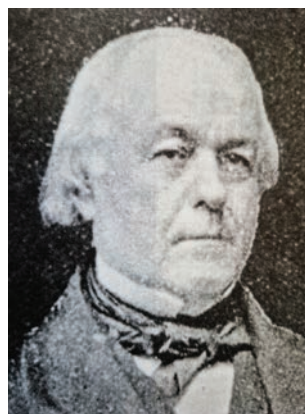
Figure 7. An example of a clock using Chauncey Jerome's April 14, 1857, clock case patent. This clever patent was for a rosewood-veneered base, front, door, splat, and chimney caps, which could be cheaply and quickly attached with glue blocks to a simple wooden box containing a movement and dial. These cases can be found in several sizes with 30-hour or 8-day weight or spring-driven movements. The Waterbury Clock Co. made examples, but many were made by Gilbert, Hubbard & Co., who attached copies of Chauncey Jerome, New Haven, CT, labels even though his business no longer existed. PHOTO COURTESY OF MIKE BAILEY, JEROMECLOCKCOLLECTOR.COM.



Figure 10. Chauncey Jerome's last clockmaking venture lasted from 1866 to early 1867 when, at age 73, he worked in the shop of the United States Clock & Brass Co. AUTHOR'S PHOTO.



◀ **Figure 8.** Jerome was the only American clock manufacturer who compiled a detailed history of the clockmaking business and his personal association with it. Original copies were bound in blue and gold heavy paper covers, as in the 1983 exact reproduction shown here, but it was also bound in buckram or in red, blue, or brown leather. It is a fascinating story every American clock collector should read.



► **Figure 9.** Probably the last photograph taken of Chauncey Jerome in 1865 at age 72. He deserves a great deal of respect, not only for the hundreds of thousands of affordable clocks his firms produced, but also for writing a history of the early clock manufacturing business in which he played a vital part.

threatened to have Jerome arrested. Through the aid of a friend, Jerome moved back to New Haven, where he and his second wife were living in 1860.⁷ During this time, Jerome finished writing his *History of the American Clock Business for the Past Sixty Years, and Life of Chauncey Jerome* (Figure 8).

Jerome was retired and living in New Haven from 1860 to 1866, but he had one more clock venture in him (Figure 9). In 1866, he moved to Austin, IL, near Chicago, to serve as superintendent of a new firm called the United States Clock & Brass Co. Biographer James Parton wrote: "Chauncey Jerome . . . is now at the age of seventy-three, far from his home, without property, and working for wages. I saw him, the other day, near Chicago, with his honorable gray hairs, and his still more honorable white apron, earning his living by faithful labor for others, after having had hundreds of men in factories of his own."⁸ Jerome obviously took some payment in clocks for his work at the factory, as a few spring-driven shelf clocks are known with over-pasted labels of "Chauncey Jerome, Austin, Ill." (Figure 10).

Jerome and his second wife separated when he moved to Illinois. In 1867, he moved back to New Haven to live with his son, Edward M. Jerome. Chauncey Jerome died on April 20, 1868, in New Haven, aged 74, and was buried with his first wife and several children in Grove Street Cemetery, New Haven.

Chauncey Jerome left a legacy, not of dollars, but of hundreds of thousands of affordable clocks that people have collected and enjoyed for more than 150 years.

Notes and References

1. Chris Bailey, *From Rags to Riches to Rags: The Story of Chauncey Jerome*, NAWCC Bulletin Supplement no. 15 (Columbia, PA: National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, Inc., 1986).
2. Bailey, *From Rags to Riches to Rags*, 7.
3. Noble Jerome had been trained in brass clockmaking in the shop of Joseph Ives. Noble was granted US patent no. 1,200 on June 27, 1839, for this 1-day brass movement.
4. One investor, William L. Gilbert, invested \$3,000 and Chauncey Jerome unhappily paid 100% interest to buy him out. The two already had bad blood, as Gilbert and his uncle, George Marsh, worked in Jerome's factory in the early 1830s when Jerome believed they copied his clock designs and tools on his time, then went to nearby Farmington to manufacture clocks as Marsh, Gilbert & Co.
5. When Robert Cheney and I traveled to horological collections in England in 1980, we visited the family home of the late Jeremy Evans (1951–2026), curator at the British Museum and author and co-author of two definitive books on the famous British clockmaker Thomas Tompion. Evans's mother showed us her large collection of clocks, almost all American-made and many by Jerome.
6. Chauncy Jerome, *History of the American Clock Business for the Past Sixty Years, and Life of Chauncey Jerome, Written by Himself* (1860; repr., Bristol, CT: American Clock & Watch Museum, 1983).
7. The 1860 census reported that Jerome owned no real estate and had only \$200 in personal property.
8. James Parton, *People's Book of Biography, or Short Lives of the Most Interesting Persons of All Ages and Countries* (New York: Virtue & Yorston, 1868), 210.

About the Author

Chris H. Bailey has been a collector and student of clocks since 1960. He joined the NAWCC in 1969 and in 1972 became curator of the American Clock & Watch Museum in Bristol, CT, retiring in 2010. During his career he documented many American clock and watch firms' histories and for 30 years lectured extensively on them to clock collecting groups coast to coast. He authored over 40 clock manufacturers' histories and articles, including the books *200 Years of American Clocks & Watches* (1975), *Fifty Years of Time: The First 50 Years of the American Clock & Watch Museum* (2009), and *American Clockmakers & Watchmakers* (2000, 2011), co-authored with Tom and Sonya Spittler. He has served as an NAWCC director, authored two NAWCC supplements, is an NAWCC Fellow, Star Fellow, and recipient of the James W. Gibbs Literary Award. He has also been a consultant and appraiser for museums, private collections, and auction houses. He is now retired and lives in central Florida.

My Enicar's Time

How long can this
Enicar wristwatch
Fool time
Where will it be
In 10 50 100 years
Luminous numbers
faded like fall
A face
With cloudy gray marks
(Hospitalized
People may joke)
But the black Nato strap
I added
Blends
And I'm happy enough
Wearing it now
Will anyone care about
Watches I've had
Especially beat up
After I'm gone
And if this little poem
Should live
In a bookcase or box
Where will my real
Enicar lie

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We all have our favorite things, each with its story. Have you ever wondered what will happen to yours after you have gone? Ray Comeau is past associate dean of management studies and director of foreign language instruction in Harvard Extension School, where he currently serves as a lecturer in courses dealing with the intersection of management, philosophy, and literature. He is a member of Chapters 8 and 87 in his native Massachusetts. His email is comeau@fas.harvard.edu.