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# A masterful William Claggett clock

## *A short story in a tall case*

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SOME OF THE finest clocks made in eighteenth-century New England came from the Newport, Rhode Island, shop of William Claggett. The Rhode Island Historical Society has recently acquired one of Claggett's masterpieces, the tall-case clock of exquisite craftsmanship and unusually complex works shown in the color plate. Its eight-day movement incorporates an extensive train of brass gears which relay nine different kinds of information to an elaborately engraved and silvered brass dial (Fig. 1). Claggett is believed to have made only three of these remarkable clocks, which today are acknowledged as his finest work.<sup>1</sup>

Claggett purchased locally made walnut or mahogany cases for most of his clocks from such Newport cabinetmakers as Job Townsend (1699 or 1700–1765).<sup>2</sup> But his three masterpieces all have japanned cases, and it is now thought that for his most elaborate clocks he ignored the local cabinetmakers and sent to Boston for appropriately elegant cases. It was probably during his apprenticeship in Boston, perhaps with Benjamin Bagnall (c. 1689–1773),<sup>3</sup> that William Claggett first encountered japanned furniture. After moving to Newport in 1716 he maintained communication with Boston artisans.

It is not known who actually made the pine case for the Rhode Island Historical Society's clock, but it was decorated in 1736 by the Boston japanner Robert Davis, who boldly inscribed his name, occupation, location, and the year inside the door (Fig. 2).<sup>4</sup> Davis' prominent inscription inspired a remarkable tradition: the craftsmen who were chosen to maintain this sophisticated clock proudly left their signatures throughout the case and works, providing a documented history that spans almost 250 years.

It appears that the clock was originally owned in Newport,<sup>5</sup> where in 1754 its works were dismantled and cleaned by a local craftsman. Scratched into one of the two brass plates is the inscription *Christopher Townsend/Clean'd This Clock/y<sup>e</sup> 15 Day th 1 M/1754* (Fig. 3). The signature could be that of

Tall-case clock, probably Boston, c. 1736. Works made by William Claggett (1696–1749), Newport, Rhode Island, c. 1736; case decorated by Robert Davis (d. 1739), Boston, 1736 (see Fig. 2). Inscribed on the dial, *William Claggett Newport* (Fig. 1). Pine, with japanned decoration; height 82¾, width 21¾, depth 11¼ inches. Claggett was an ornamental engraver as well as a clockmaker, and his clock faces are invariably elegantly inscribed. *Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, Rhode Island; photograph by Helga Photo Studio.*



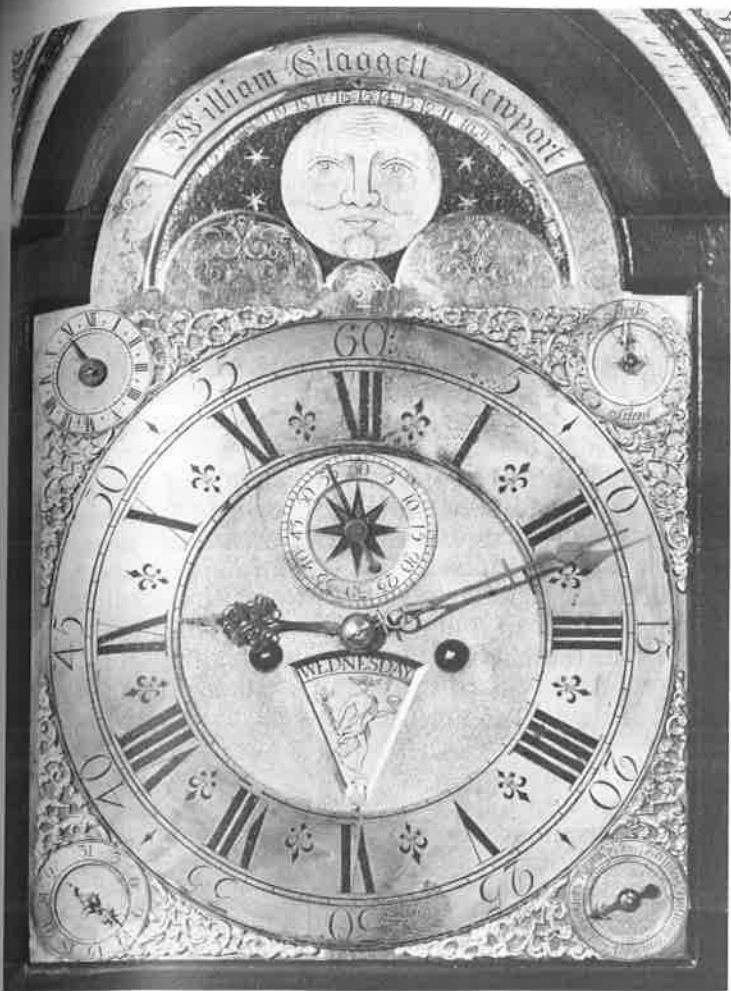


Fig. 1. Face of the clock shown in the color plate. In addition to telling the second, minute, and hour, the central dial includes an aperture showing the day of the week, illustrated by the appropriate Roman deity (here, Mercury) and corresponding astrological sign—a device occasionally found on European clocks but rarely employed in this country. The four dials in the spandrels indicate, clockwise from top right, whether the bell will strike or remain silent; the month; the day of the month; and the condition of the tide, whether ebbing or flooding—an essential consideration in the seaport town of Newport. The phase of the moon is indicated in the dial in the arch. *Helga photograph.*

Christopher Townsend Sr., a brother of Job Townsend. Christopher Townsend Sr. is known principally for having made desks,<sup>6</sup> but with six workbenches,<sup>7</sup> his shop was large enough to accommodate such auxiliary functions as clock maintenance. The signature could also be that of his son Christopher Townsend Jr., who was sixteen in 1754 and was presumably serving his apprenticeship in Newport, where he became a purveyor of clocks<sup>8</sup> and a watchmaker.<sup>9</sup>

In the second half of the eighteenth century the japanned clock was shipped to Massachusetts, where in 1799 it turned up in the Boston shop of Joseph Pope (1750–1826).<sup>10</sup> George Whiting, an apprentice in Pope's Marlborough (now Washington) Street manufactory, actually did the cleaning and, discovering the Townsend signature inscribed forty-five years earlier, left his own name scratched in the brass (Fig. 4).

The clock is listed in the 1804 estate inventory of Martin Brimmer as being in the middle kitchen of his Jamaica Plain house amidst his comfortable dining furniture.<sup>11</sup> Japanned furniture was no longer fashionable, and the clock, by then at least sixty-eight years old, had been relegated to a less formal part of the house.

Brimmer bought his Jamaica Plain estate in 1779 but it is not known when he acquired the clock.<sup>12</sup> Until 1868 Jamaica Plain was part of Roxbury, a rural village that became renowned for its distinguished craftsmen, among them John Doggett and



Fig. 2. Detail of the inside of the door of the clock illustrated in the color plate, showing Robert Davis' inscription. The inscription, the longest and most informative known by an American japanner, is published here for the first time. Davis' signature on a japanned high chest of drawers at the Baltimore Museum of Art is illustrated in *ANTIQUES* for May 1974, p. 1082. *Photograph by courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society.*

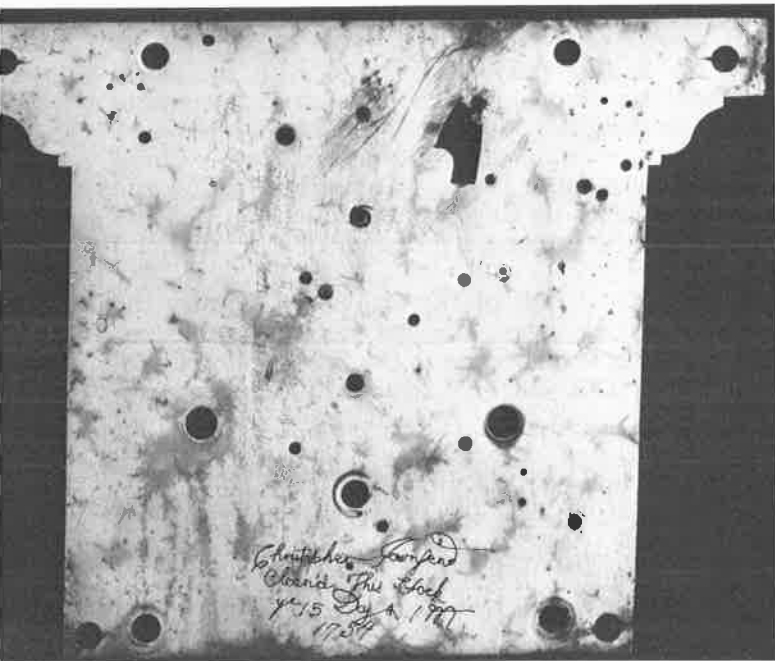


Fig. 3. Back of the front plate, with a tracing of the inscription by Christopher Townsend Sr. (1701-1787) or Christopher Townsend Jr. (1738-1809) superimposed on the photograph. The inscription, like several of the others in the brass plates, is so worn that it is impossible to photograph. The *M* of the inscription refers to January. The Gregorian calendar was adopted by an act of Parliament in 1752, but the Puritans and Quakers of Rhode Island shunned the pagan names of the months in favor of a numerical system. Since the publication of Mabel Swan's study in *ANTIQUES* for April 1946 (pp. 228-231), Christopher Townsend Sr.'s death date has very often been confused with the year in which he wrote his will, 1773. His obituary in the *Newport Herald* of December 27, 1787, states, "Died last Monday morning [December 24], Mr. Christopher Townsend, aged 87." Photograph by Morgan Rockhill.

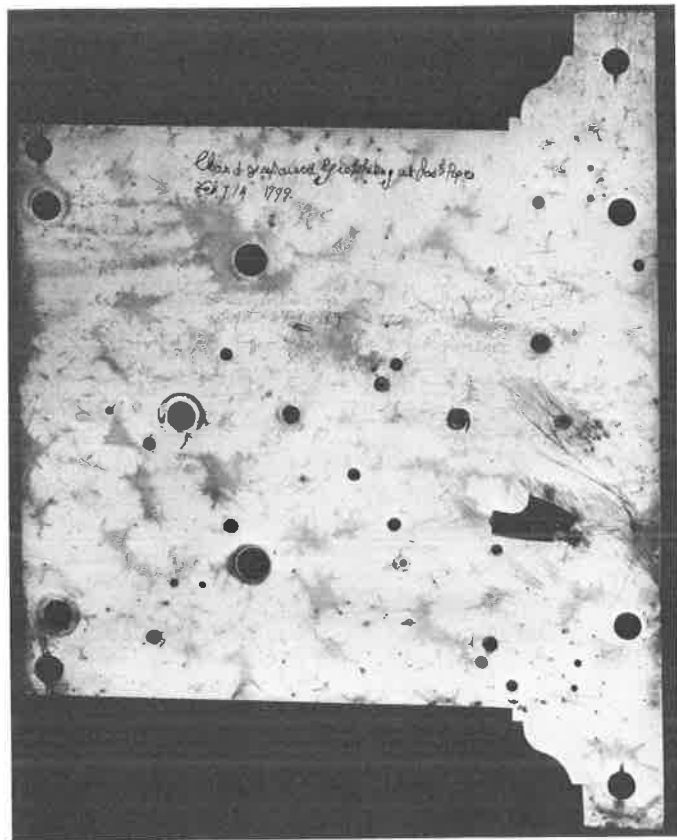


Fig. 4. Back of the front plate, with a tracing of the inscription by George Whiting superimposed on the photograph. Whiting continued to work in Joseph Pope's watch and clock manufactory after completing his apprenticeship there in 1803. Rockhill photograph.

William Fisk. In 1780 the Willard family of clock-makers set up shop in Roxbury, and in 1800 Simon Willard repaired the clock. Etched in the brass works is the inscription *Simon Willard Repair'd this Clock 1800 Aug<sup>t</sup> 25* (Fig. 5).

In preparing to auction the estate, Brimmer's widow had the clock cleaned again, this time turning to Simon Willard's best apprentice, Elnathan Taber.<sup>13</sup> Taber must have held the clock in high regard, for over the next twenty-five years he tended it loyally, leaving a record of his repairs and maintenance on eight different occasions (see Fig. 6).

At the Brimmer auction on August 1, 1806, the clock was bought by a neighboring shoemaker named John Gould. For the next half century it stood in his Jamaica Plain farmhouse, where, in 1857, it was discovered and purchased by Elisha Dyer, governor of Rhode Island from 1857 to 1859.

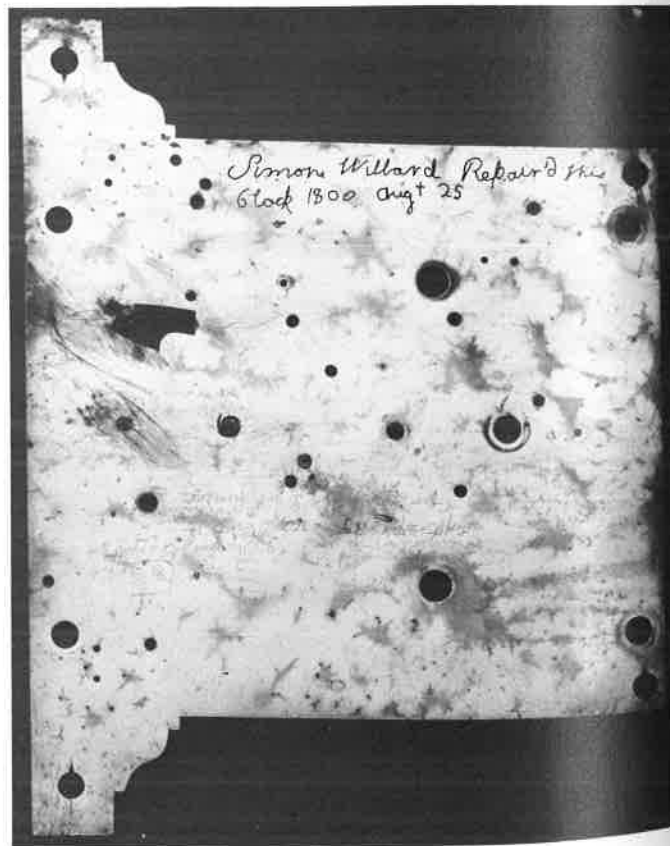


Fig. 5. Back of the front plate, with a tracing of the inscription by Simon Willard (1753-1848) superimposed on the photograph. Rockhill photograph.

A member of the Rhode Island Historical Society since 1838, Dyer was an amateur historian who had an avid interest in Rhode Island history. He carefully recorded what the Goulds could tell him about the clock, and, following the precedent set by the various craftsmen who had worked on it, he left the documentation pasted inside the japanned case (Fig. 7, left).

Dyer brought the 121-year-old clock back to Rhode Island and had it thoroughly overhauled. Thomas G. Daggett, known throughout the area for his ability to rehabilitate old clocks, cleaned and repaired the works in 1857 and cleaned them in 1859, both times scratching *Thomas G. Daggett & Son* on the brass plates and dating the card he tacked inside the case (Fig. 7, right). The local sign painter Samuel Bower reworked the finish in 1857 and added his name on the inside of the door, emulating Robert Davis' flowing signature and appropriating the title "Japaner" for the occasion (Fig. 8). Bower's son William, also an ornamental painter, inscribed his



Fig. 6. Front of the front plate, showing the inscription made by Elnathan Taber (1768-1854) in 1805. Taber inscribed the clock eight times between 1805 and 1831. Rockhill photograph.

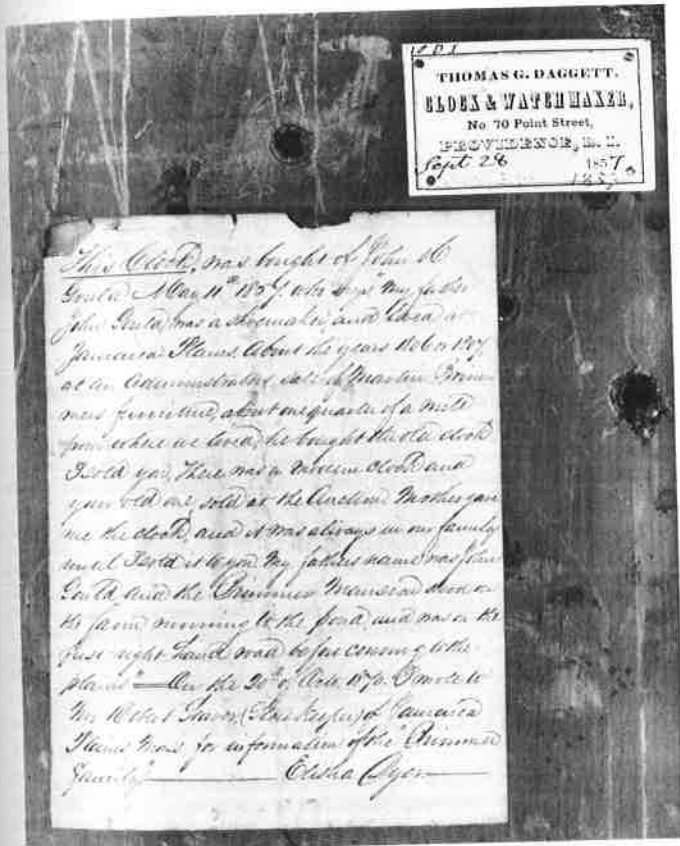


Fig. 7. Detail of the inside of the case, showing (left) the record kept by Elisha Dyer (1811-1890) of the Gould family's history of the clock, and (right) the card of Thomas G. Daggett (1795-1871) of Providence. Inscribed on Daggett's card are Sept 28 1857 and March 3... 1859, recording the dates on which he worked on the clock. Helga photograph.

name below his father's in 1884. It was probably one of the Bowers who rebuilt the base of the case, lowering it approximately seven inches,<sup>14</sup> and replaced much of Davis' original japanning with lacquer and bronze-powder stenciling (see Fig. 9).

In 1881 Governor Dyer had the clock cleaned by Hermann Ockel, a Swiss immigrant who specialized in "repairing of the most complicated Watches, Clocks, and Music Boxes."<sup>15</sup> When Ockel dismantled the works he discovered the remarkable roster of



Fig. 8. Detail of the inside of the door showing inscriptions by Samuel Bower (1793-1860), 1857, and his son William Bower (1835-1893), 1884. This is the only instance in which either man is known to have called himself a japaner; apparently the Bowers borrowed the term from Robert Davis' 1736 inscription. Photograph by Rick Stafford.

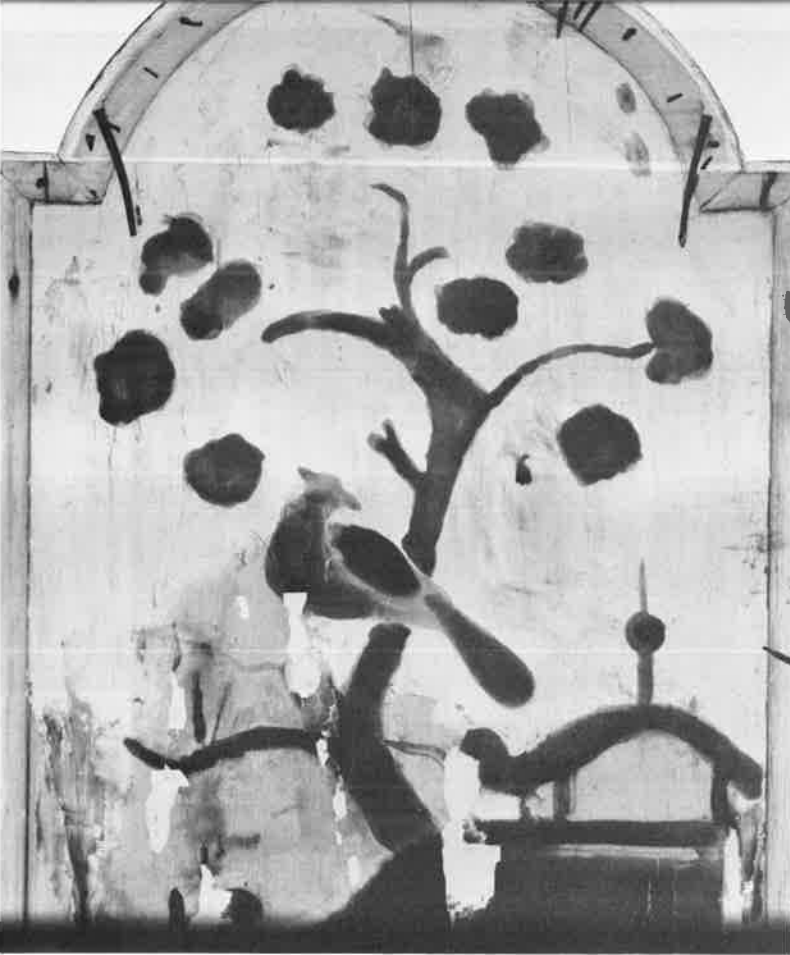


Fig. 9. Radiograph of the top of the clock door. Obscured by extensive nineteenth-century restorations, the delicate detail of the original japanning on the door is revealed in this radiograph. Smaller tree branches have been overpainted and the larger features coarsened by gilding and the application of additional gesso. Radiograph by Dr. William Colaiace; Rhode Island Historical Society photograph.

craftsmen's signatures and recorded what he found there.<sup>16</sup> His transcription, arranged chronologically under the heading "Gov Dyer's Old Fashioned Clock," was also pasted inside the door of the case (Fig. 10).

As the clock passed down through generations of the Dyer family the inscriptions continued to accumulate, and in time Rhode Island craftsmen from three centuries had left their marks on the remaining open spaces in the works, case, and seat board. In 1933 Joseph Downs, then associate curator of decorative arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, borrowed the clock from Anthony Dyer, the governor's grandson, for the museum's pioneering exhibition of American japanned furniture.<sup>17</sup> Dyer maintained the long tradition of documentation by gluing some of his correspondence with the museum inside the case (Fig. 11).

The Claggett clock remained in the Dyer family for 122 years. In 1979 it was bequeathed to the Rhode Island Historical Society, at last fulfilling the hopes of the early and influential antiquarian Irving Lyon, who almost a century before had urged the historical society to try to acquire a Claggett clock:

While in Providence I . . . saw a very fine William Claggett clock with his name on it, in a japanned case. . . . I doubt not but that there are others in Providence and as Claggett was such a prominent man and his clocks the very best it would not be a bad idea for you to get one to put in your building as an historical specimen. It would certainly increase in interest and value.<sup>18</sup>

Governor Dyer's great-granddaughter was a fourth-generation member of the Rhode Island Historical Society, and although she was unaware of Lyon's advice to the society, she considered it an appropriate repository for her family's "old fashioned clock"—a William Claggett masterpiece whose documented history is without parallel among American clocks.

<sup>1</sup> One of the two other known Claggett masterpieces is in the Redwood Library in Newport, and is illustrated in Richard L. Champlin's authoritative article on Claggett's work, "The Redwood Library Clock," *Newport History*, vol. 47 (summer 1974), pp. 186-187; the other, illustrated as Pl. 3245 in vol. 2 of Wallace Nutting's *Furniture Treasury* (Framingham, Massachusetts, 1928), is in a private collection in Rhode Island. Claggett is also known to have been commissioned in 1746 by the New York City merchant Gerardus Beekman to make a clock that was to be housed in a tall case made or decorated by the Boston japanner Thomas Johnston (1708-1767). It is not known if this clock still exists, but Brock Jobe, who kindly brought Beekman's references to it to my attention, has concluded that Johnston japanned the case. Beekman apparently had an exasperating time assembling the clock and case. He finally had the empty case shipped ahead without the works. "Pray, be so good as not to let Claggett [sic] rest til I have my clock," he wrote his Newport agent in 1747. "I have the case, which is as much use as a bell without a clapper" (Beekman to John Channing, New York, October 5, 1747, and September 4, 1747, *The Beekman Mercantile Papers*, ed. Philip L. White [New York, 1956], pp. 28, 25).

<sup>2</sup> Richard L. Champlin, "William Claggett and His Clockmaking Family," *Newport History*, vol. 47, pp. 169-171.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of Robert Davis and Boston japanning, see *ANTIQUES* for May 1974, pp. 1082-1091.

<sup>5</sup> One of the first owners may have been the *B Green 1739* whose name is penciled in the tympanum of the inside of the door. Although Green was a common name in Rhode Island in the eighteenth century, no obvious candidate can be associated with the inscription.

<sup>6</sup> Ralph E. Carpenter Jr., *The Arts and Crafts of Newport Rhode Island 1640-1820* (Newport, 1954), p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> The six workbenches are mentioned in Townsend's will which is in vol. 2 of the Newport Probate Records (p. 239), in City Hall, Newport. I have only seen a transcription of the will in a notebook compiled by Mrs. Peter Bolhouse, now in the library of the Newport Historical Society.

<sup>8</sup> That Townsend sold clocks is evidenced by the following advertisement, which appeared in the *Newport Mercury* on March 1, 1773: "Just imported from London, and to be sold, by Christopher Townsend, jun./A parcel of elegant eight-day clocks. . . ."

<sup>9</sup> Townsend is designated as a watchmaker in the following advertisement: "To be Sold at public auction, On Wednesday, June 12, 1810. . . . All the right, title, and interest held at his decease by Christopher Townsend, late of Newport, Watchmaker. . . ." (*Newport Mercury*, June 9, 1810).

<sup>10</sup> Although undistinguished as a clockmaker, Pope had a reputation for technical brilliance based on the public's acclaim of a huge orrery he built between 1776 and 1786 (see *The Memorial History of Boston*, ed. Justin Winsor [Boston, 1881], pp. 500-502). The orrery, which was purchased by Harvard University in 1789, is pictured in *Paul Revere's Boston: 1735-1818* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1975), p. 73.

<sup>11</sup> Norfolk County Probate Records, vol. 12, p. 145; Norfolk County Court-house, Dedham, Massachusetts.

<sup>12</sup> Brimmer (1742-1804) bought the estate after it was confiscated in 1779 from Sir Francis Bernard (1712-1779). According to Eva Boyd Phillips, "Jamaica Plain By Way of London," *Old-Time New England* (vol. 49, April-June 1959, p. 89), Bernard's close friend and neighbor was Joshua Loring (1716-1781), who owned the high chest of drawers made by John Pimm,

Providence, R. I., Mar 31 1881  
 Joe Dyer's Old Fashioned Clock  
 1<sup>st</sup> Cleaned by Christopher Townsend,  
 Jun 15, 1751  
 2<sup>nd</sup> Cleaned by Geo Whiting at Jos<sup>s</sup> Popes  
 Feb 14, 1799  
 3<sup>rd</sup> Cleaned by Simon Willard  
 Aug 25 1800  
 4<sup>th</sup> Cleaned by E. Tabor  
 Nov 18<sup>th</sup> 1805  
 5<sup>th</sup> Cleaned by E. Tabor 1810  
 6 " " " " 1819  
 7 " " " E. Townsend Apr 22, 1819,  
 R. Henry  
 8 " " " J. G. Daggett Nov 27, 1857.  
 9 " " " H. A. Ockel April 1, 1851

Fig. 10. Transcription by Hermann A. Ockel (1843–1923) of the craftsmen's names he found scratched into the brass movement, 1881. The source of these names was not discovered until the movement was dismantled and cleaned this year. *Rhode Island Historical Society photograph.*

with japanning attributed to Robert Davis, which is now in the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum. Thus it is conceivable that the japanned clock was already in the Jamaica Plain house when Brimmer acquired it. Another possibility is that the clock was brought to the Jamaica Plain house by Sir William Pepperrell (d. 1816) who owned personal property in Rhode Island and could have brought the clock north with him when he rented Bernard's house before it was confiscated. Still another possibility is that the clock was brought to the house by General Nathanael Greene, who is known to have owned a Claggett clock, and who quartered his troops in the abandoned Bernard house during the Revolution. In short, there is no lack of links between Jamaica Plain, Rhode Island, and the Claggett clock, but they are all essentially circumstantial.

<sup>13</sup> See John Ware Willard, *A History of Simon Willard* (Boston, 1911), pp. 106-109.

<sup>14</sup> The figure of seven inches was arrived at by comparing the height of the base with that of other clocks of the period, in particular the Claggett clock illustrated in Nutting, *Furniture Treasury*, vol. 2, Pl. 3245.

<sup>15</sup> Providence city directory for 1891, p. 1148.

<sup>16</sup> When the clock was restored this year several inscriptions Ockel had missed and others added after his list was made were discovered on the works. Because abrasive scrubbing would have obliterated the shallow inscriptions, the movement was cleaned in a solvent bath by George Steiner, whose name has been recorded in the brass works.

<sup>17</sup> See Joseph Downs, "American Japanned Furniture," *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, vol. 28 (March 1933), pp. 42-48.

<sup>18</sup> Irving Lyon to Amos Perry, librarian of the Rhode Island Historical Society, Hartford, Connecticut, February 19, 1886; archives of the Rhode Island Historical Society. I would like to thank Thomas Brennan, registrar of the Rhode Island Historical Society, for bringing this letter to my attention. The clock Lyon had seen was not Governor Dyer's, but the clock illustrated in Nutting, *Furniture Treasury*, vol. 2, Pl. 3245 (see n. 1).

Fig. 11. Fragments of a letter from Joseph Downs to H. Anthony Dyer, September 15, 1933, affixed inside the clock case. Further correspondence between the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Colonel Dyer, now in the files of the department of American decorative arts at the museum, indicates that the museum's primary interest was the japanned clock case, and that neither Dyer nor Downs was aware of the inscriptions in the brass works. *Helga photograph.*

