

EARLY COLONIAL CLOCKMAKERS IN  
PHILADELPHIA

By CAROLYN WOOD STRETCH\*

The early American arts and crafts of the Quaker City have had rather late recognition, but that can easily be explained by the fact that Philadelphians of today still have much of the simplicity, dignity and reserve of Colonial times when it comes to a discussion of their household possessions or of their craftsmen ancestors. Then, too, until Alfred Coxe Prime gathered together the advertisements from the newspapers of Philadelphia, Maryland, and South Carolina, there was no source book where one could obtain reliable information; and, unfortunately, very little advertising was done before 1750.

The early historians of our city, while they have done much to assist the student of the political development of our town, cannot be relied upon when it comes to the development of its industrial life. For example, both Watson, and Scharf and Westcott, are responsible for the statement that Peter Stretch made the State House clock in 1753; and, in 1759, was paid £ 494 5s. 5½d. for making it and taking care of it for six years. Peter Stretch's will was probated six years before Councils gave the order for the clock, so it is obvious that Watson erred and following historians accepted this statement without verification. This mistake on

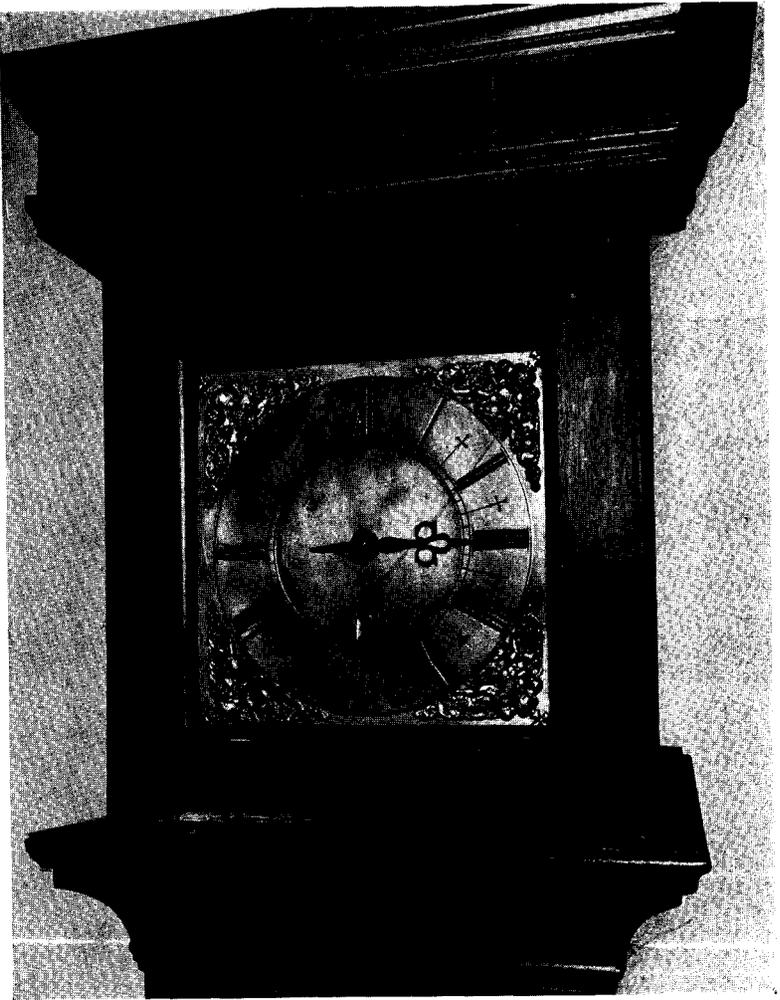
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\* An address delivered at the Rittenhouse Bicentenary Dinner (Dr. John A. Miller, Chairman, and John Frederick Lewis, LL.D., Toastmaster), April 8, 1932, in the hall of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Miss Stretch desires information respecting Colonial clocks of Pennsylvania, Delaware and Maryland, and invites correspondence addressed to her at The Historical Society, 1300 Locust Street, Philadelphia. *Editor.*

the part of the annalist is easily excused, for Watson lived at a time when the southeast corner of Front and Chestnut Streets was still called Peter Stretch's Corner at the Sign of the Dial.

Thomas Stretch, a son of this pioneer craftsman, was also a noted watch and clockmaker, who after his father's death sold the Front Street Corner and established himself at the southwest corner of Second and Chestnut Streets. Both Watson, and Scharf and Westcott, devote quite a bit of space to the description of that historic old fishing club, the State in Schuylkill, of which Thomas Stretch was a founder and the first governor. They even show a copy of an invitation to a hunt, which Thomas Stretch sent out in 1744,—but both fail to record the fact that he was a celebrated watch and clockmaker. Perhaps it was a highly difficult feat to prepare a dinner of rounds of beef, barbecued pig, sirloin steaks, fish, fowl, and lemonade (not to mention the fish house punch now famous the world over), but Thomas Stretch could also make a very accurate and beautiful clock! Time will tell,—and values change!

It was, of course, this genial old sportsman who made the State House clock and not his celebrated father, Peter Stretch. In 1762, Edward Duffield succeeded Thomas Stretch in the care of the clock; and, in 1775, when Edward Duffield wished to resign in order to devote more time to his ancestral estate in Moreland Township, David Rittenhouse offered to succeed him. The pay for this work was only £ 20 per annum and it seems pathetic that such a scholar as Rittenhouse should have felt the necessity of adding this small amount to his yearly income. He also took care of the clock made by Edward Duffield for the American Philosophical Society in 1769. It is, I think, characteristic of this man—this willingness to serve his fellowmen, no matter what the personal sacrifice



Made by Peter Stretch *circa* 1702. Probably the oldest American-made clock extant. Owned by Miss Carolyn Wood Stretch



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this might have entailed. Both Duffield and Rittenhouse were such very superior craftsmen, men of genius, that either one could have made a better clock for the State House than Thomas Stretch; but remember, at that time, David Rittenhouse was but twenty and Edward Duffield was only twenty-two.

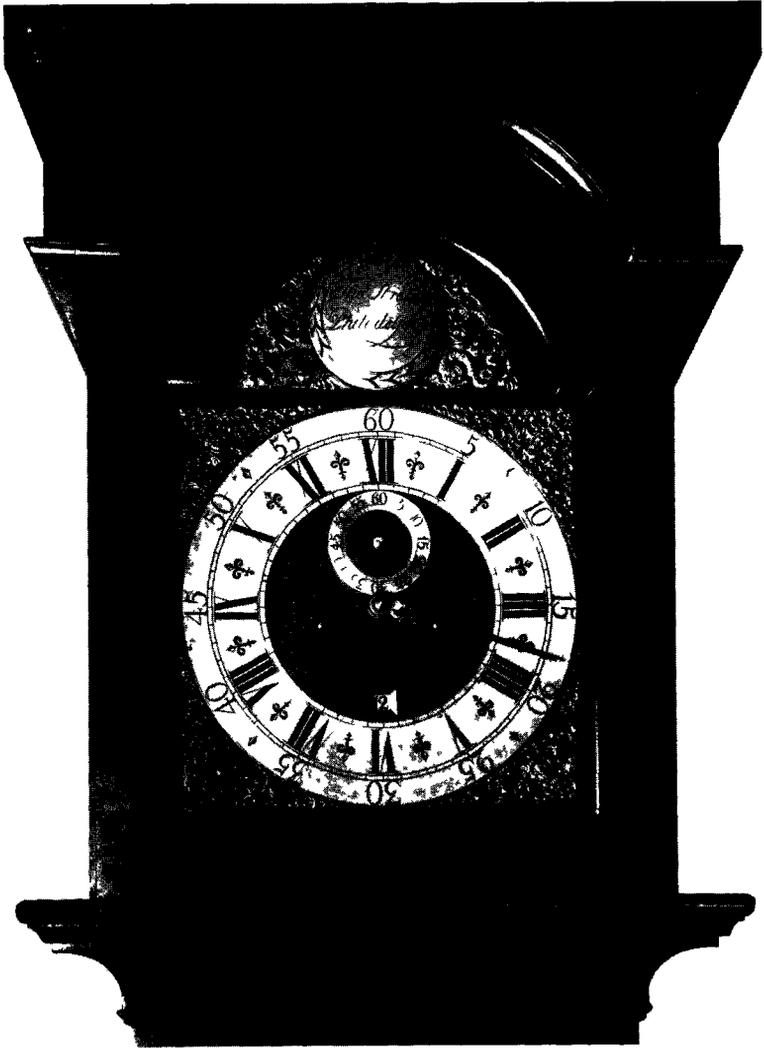
There were two other noted clockmakers who worked contemporaneously with these men. One was Owen Biddle, born 1737, and the other John Wood, Jr., born 1736. Owen Biddle, like his two friends, was a scientist, a statesman and a patriot; a member of the American Philosophical Society and associated with Rittenhouse in his observations of the transit of Venus. Some years ago, Dr. Babb, speaking before the students at the University of Pennsylvania, on Rittenhouse, the scientist, paid Owen Biddle high tribute, referring to him as the scientific Quaker who sacrificed his Quakerism for his country and, when his country was safe, sacrificed his personal gain to his religious convictions. It is interesting to learn, at this time, that the clock which Owen Biddle made for his own family is still in the possession of one of his descendants. Another very beautiful clock by this maker is in the home of Mrs. Arthur Biddle, at her country estate in Gwynedd valley. This clock was made, I think, about 1767, at which time Owen Biddle advertised in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* that he made and repaired watches and clocks in the best manner and on the most reasonable terms.

The other craftsman, John Wood, was not scientific, was not a member of the American Philosophical Society, but he was a celebrated clockmaker whose personality has always had a strong appeal. He was not only a craftsman but a very successful merchant who, today, ought to be venerated by the Poor Richard Club. He advertised extensively, from 1760 to 1793, in both English and German newspapers and when he

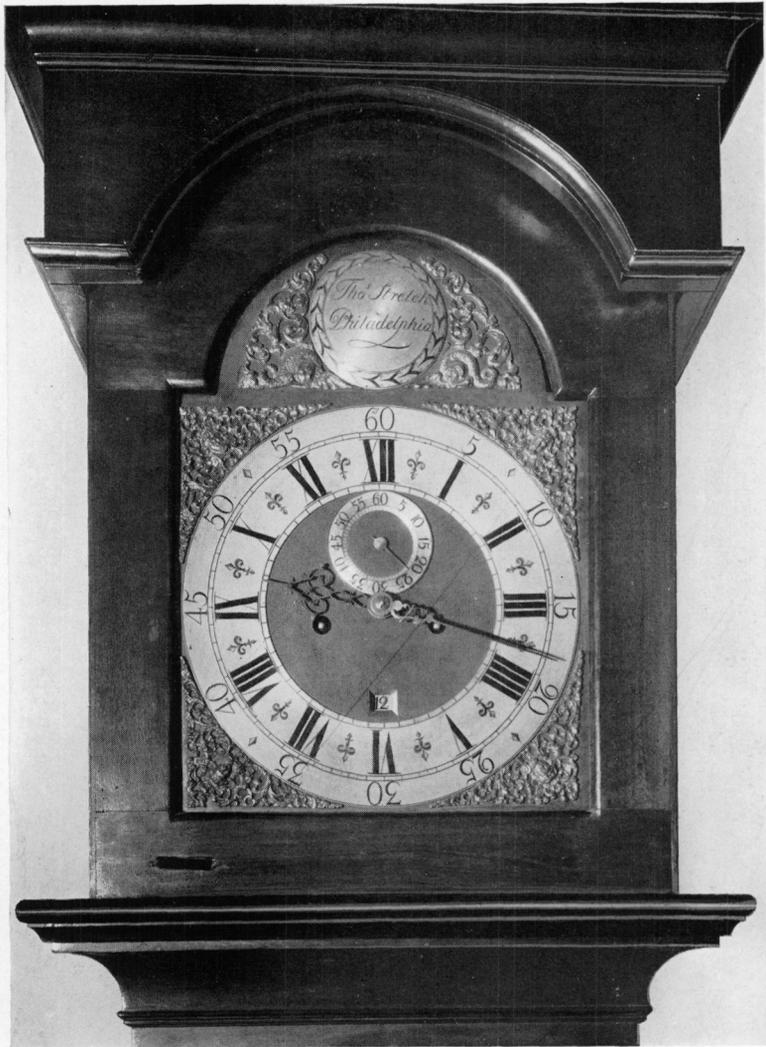
died, at fifty-seven, had accumulated a fortune. He owned much property in Philadelphia and in various other parts of the State. In his will, he bequeaths a house in Front Street, south of Chestnut, to one of his sisters,—describing it as the house built by William Huston, but sold at sheriff's sale. That is the only bit of information I have been able to learn about William Huston, also a maker of very beautiful clocks. He never advertised and evidently left no estate, at least there are no such records in Philadelphia. Surely John Wood proved conclusively that it "pays to advertise."

Not only did John Wood make clocks and watches for his fellow townsmen, but he catered to the country trade—both English and German—supplying all parts of both watches and clocks to those who wished to assemble their own time pieces. He had an entirely different background from the other men under discussion. His father, also a practical watch and clockmaker, could neither read nor write; but he was industrious and thrifty, saved his money and, when Peter Stretch's Corner was up for sale, purchased the property for his son, leaving him a fairly good income to carry on his work. This son remained at Front and Chestnut until 1793, when he succumbed to the yellow fever.

Just inside those beautiful wrought iron gates of old St. Paul's, is a time-worn marble slab which states that John Wood was a watch and clockmaker, and for upwards of twenty years was a warden of St. Paul's church. The Honorable Norris S. Barratt, in his "History of Old St. Paul's Church," states that John Wood was a distinguished member of the Grand Lodge of Free Masons, an officer in Washington's forces, a signer of the articles of agreement to purchase land on which to build the church, and that, in 1754, he was one of the signatories to the Memorial to the Penns. No doubt John Wood inherited great mechan-



Made by Thomas Stretch *circa* 1725 Owned by William Bacon Evans  
Moorestown, New Jersey



Made by Thomas Stretch *circa* 1725. Owned by William Bacon Evans  
Moorestown, New Jersey



ical genius from his father who was a good craftsman, but that exquisite clock in the Philadelphia Room at the Metropolitan Museum proves that he was also a great individualistic artist. Was it not Sir Joshua Reynolds who said, "It is not birth that makes the artist but decision, application and industry"?

We have now considered four artisans whose clocks are fairly well-known. Shall we leave the contemplation of these scientific clockmakers who were the friends of both Washington and Franklin and go backward to the time of the Penns to see upon what traditions these men built their clocks?

Lurette Van Arsdale Guild, a well-known writer on the geography of antiquities, says in all sincerity: "Pennsylvania was never lacking in able craftsmen. Whether in glass, metal or the furniture crafts they excelled in their particular trades." Perhaps it was the combination of racial inheritances and religious influences that made this colony so different from New England and the other colonies further south. Philadelphia early was known as a city of great wealth and beautiful homes, with a highly cultured social life. To this colony, just thirty years before Rittenhouse was born, came Peter Stretch from his home in Leek, Staffordshire, England. He came with an intimate knowledge of the work of the greatest clockmakers England ever produced—Thomas Tompion, George Graham and Daniel Quare—all members of the Society of Friends. These men were also members of the great clockmakers company in London instituted to protect the interests of the city trade. But there were also fine clockmakers early in Dublin, Edinburgh and in the smaller towns of England, who, after they had learned their craft, returned to their native heath.

According to F. J. Britten, the noted authority on English clocks, Samuel Stretch, the uncle of Peter, was a noted maker of lantern clocks, in Leek, as early

as 1670. This was the year Peter Stretch was born. Six years after he came to Philadelphia he was elected a Common Councilman, which office he held for nearly forty years. He soon became an important factor in the political, social and industrial life, of the Quaker City.

The minutes of Councils show that, in 1717, Peter Stretch was paid £ 8, 18s. 10d. for work done on the Town Clock. He not only made clocks and watches, but he made compasses, scales and mathematical instruments. A receipted bill which he presented to the Proprietor for these articles, which Thomas Penn purchased in 1733, is in the Manuscript Department of our Historical Society. That Peter Stretch's clientele included the wealthiest and most influential families in the community is shown by the clocks that have come down in these families from father to son for six or seven generations. A glance at the list of original members of the State in Schuylkill to which his sons and grandsons belonged, lead one to suppose that they patronized home talent instead of importing their clocks from England as did the wealthy men of the other colonies. James Logan whose beautiful estate *Stenton* was built in 1728, was an enthusiastic *Schuylkillian*, and I often wonder which of the clocks I have discovered graced his home. Joseph Wharton, that genial Friend whose estate *Walnut Grove* was, after his death, the scene of the famous Meschianza, was another who toasted his Governor (Thomas Stretch) in the famous punch. What has become of his clock? James Coultas, whose country seat *Whitby Hall* was until recently a Colonial landmark in West Philadelphia, was also a fisherman and his clock made by another son of Peter, William Stretch, is still in the home of a descendant who considers it one of her choicest possessions. Philip Syng, that past master in the fashioning of silver, whose beautiful inkstand in the State



Made by Peter Stretch *circa* 1740. Owned by The State in Schuylkill



House has long been admired by visitors from all over the world who visit at our shrine, was a close friend of Thomas Stretch and an enthusiastic angler. Where is his clock? Can anyone give its history?

We know that the *watches* made by Thomas Stretch were also greatly treasured by their owners. An advertisement appeared in the *New Jersey Gazette* of April 17, 1782, as follows: "A robbery! The house of a subscriber in Hopewell Township, Hunterdon County was entered on the night of the 12th instant by eight or more armed men who robbed it between eleven and one o'clock. Among the articles taken was a very good plain silver watch, engraved Thos. Stretch—Philadelphia no. 25."

In the years that I have been hunting for Philadelphia Colonial clocks and watches, I have found twenty clocks by Peter Stretch, seven by Thomas, and two by William. I have found neither a watch nor a clock signed by Isaac Stretch, a grandson, or Samuel, a nephew, but they were at work contemporaneously at the Corner. These clocks cover in design practically every style of tall case clock made before the Revolution and indeed much later, with the exception of the Rittenhouse astronomical clock such as we see here. The first clocks made by Peter Stretch, from 1702 to 1705, had but one hand with the marker between hours indicating the half hour. These markers were usually variants of the arrowhead or of the fleur-de-lys. Peter usually used the arrowhead but Thomas and William preferred the fleur-de-lys and sometimes omitted the markers altogether. The dials were all beautifully made of brass, the spandrels varying from the two cupids supporting a crown to the floral designs of rococo motifs. The spandrels as well as the hands usually testify to the age and genuineness of the clock. Not long ago I heard of a Peter Stretch clock in a nearby Jersey town. I examined it carefully and found

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nothing genuine but the dial ring, containing the maker's name. The works were modern and the wood was new. The hands were of a date a hundred years after the dial and the clock manipulator had absolutely erred in his hinges. No eighteenth century clockmaker, I think, ever destroyed the beauty of the pendulum door with large, ornate brass hinges such as I found on the outside. Unfortunately few clock repairers are students of period furniture and the value of these old clocks is often destroyed by additions of frets, feet and decorative spandrels entirely out of harmony with the original design.

To return to the evolution of the tall case clock. By 1710, the Stretch clocks had not only a minute hand but also a second hand. J. Stogdell Stokes has one of this type in his charming early American farmhouse just outside of Philadelphia. This clock has a bull's eye in the pendulum door as had all the earlier clocks of this maker. Miss Anna C. Garrett has the earliest clock showing the domed top, probably made about 1720. It has descended to her from her Colonial ancestors of Delaware County. Even after the domed top became the accepted design both Peter Stretch and Thomas often reverted to the rectangular type of classic simplicity. The early members of the Society of Friends did not stress decoration, but later we know from the work of William Savery that they accepted it. One of the most beautiful of the later Rittenhouse clocks which I have seen, belonged to the family of Wistar Morris and has come now to his granddaughter, Mrs. W. Logan McCoy. The case was probably made by Savery or one of his school.

By 1720, the Philadelphia clocks showed arched dials. The arch first contained a cartouche showing the maker's name, but the later clocks of 1730 used this space for a subsidiary dial for the phases of the moon.

The most sophisticated Peter Stretch clock is one



Made by John Wood *circa* 1780. Owned by W. Gedney Beatty. In the Philadelphia Room of the Metropolitan Museum



owned by the Schuylkill Fishing Company. That and one belonging to Mrs. Nathaniel Janney, of Overbrook, both show the broken arch and both are made from beautifully marked mahogany. All the early clocks were of walnut, which now has a wonderful patina, where the clocks have been well cared for.

That I have not been so successful in locating many of the clocks made by Thomas Stretch, is due, I think, to the fact that they have reached the hands of dealers and have been scattered. I know of one in Dover, Delaware, and one in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The one in Ann Arbor has traveled far from its original home in Virginia, near Washington's home at Mt. Vernon, to California, and from there to Michigan. It is entirely in the original, and keeps absolutely accurate time. The most beautiful Thomas Stretch clock is in the home of William Bacon Evans of Moorestown, to whom it has come from ancestors of five generations. For stateliness and perfect proportions I consider it without a peer. There were many other clockmakers in Philadelphia but few, if any, of their clocks can be found to testify to the character of the maker. I have seen one by Henry Flower, and one by Francis Richardson, and one by Frederick Dominic. The Richardson family were superior silversmiths, but they also sold clocks, purchasing the movements from Peter Stretch. Joseph Wills made very fine clocks between 1725 and 1759. Charles Evans, of Riverton, New Jersey, has a very early Joseph Wills in his collection. It has a brass dial, beautifully etched, and a twenty-four hour chain wind. I have found two other fine examples of this maker; one, a very beautiful clock, is at the Philadelphia Country Club, and no doubt others eventually will come to light.

In Germantown, both Augustine Neisser and Christopher Sower made clocks as early as 1740. Professor Weygandt of the University of Pennsylvania has in

his home, a clock by Neisser that has belonged to a Cornelius Weygandt since the day it was presented to a Colonial ancestor of that name.†

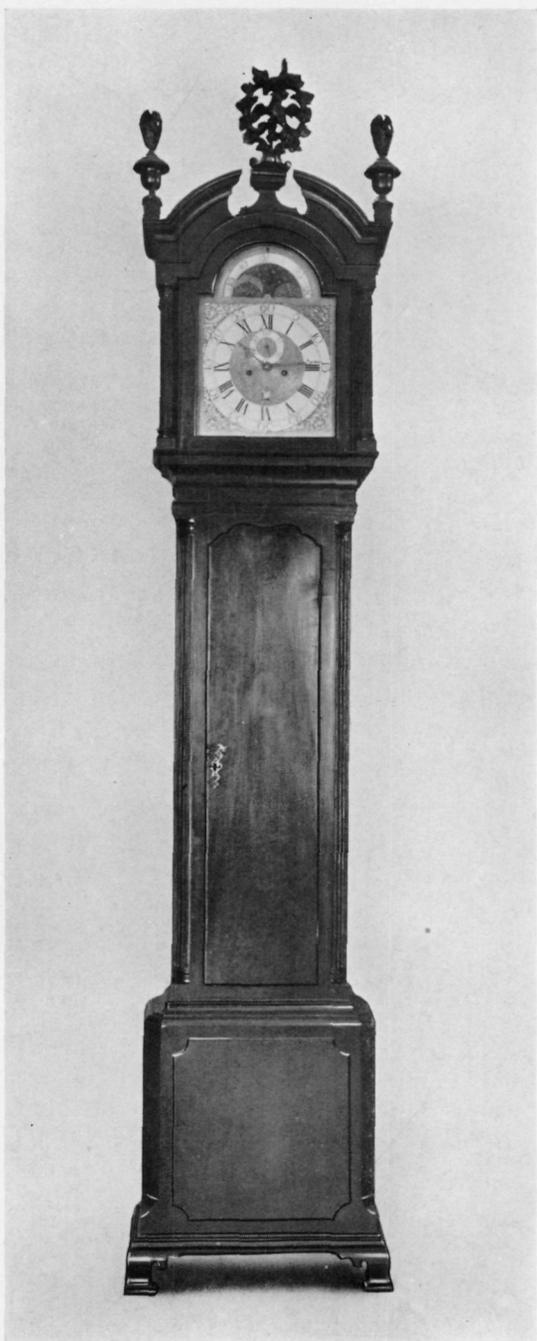
Little has been done to pay tribute to any of the craftsmen who made these fine old clocks in Philadelphia. Outside of the Quaker City, and its environs, even the name of Rittenhouse means little in the history of clockmaking. When I examined the wonderful collection of clocks and instruments assembled for this celebration,‡ I recalled a book—"Time and Timekeepers," written by a professor of astronomy in a New England college for his students in astronomy. There are nearly six hundred pages devoted to the subject, including the history, construction, care, and accuracy of clocks and watches—but the name of Rittenhouse does not appear. The author does not seem to know that Philadelphia ever had a famous clockmaker.

Wallace Nutting has done much in his clockbook to popularize the subject by showing wonderfully fine photographs, but as a book of reference it is entirely unsatisfactory and incomplete. So far as I know, but one really reliable book has ever been written on early American clockmakers and that deals only with Connecticut clocks. The author, Penrose R. Hoopes, a profound student of eighteenth century clocks has

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† Professor Weygandt, in a letter of April 13, 1932, writes: "John Bechtel gave to his son-in-law, Cornelius Weygandt, in 1739, the works of this Augustine Neisser clock. It is family tradition that Cornelius Weygandt made the case. He was a turner. His father-in-law, John Bechtel, was also a turner and pastor of the German Reformed Church on Market Square in Germantown. The works by Neisser were a marriage gift from a father-in-law to his son-in-law. Of course I do not know when the clock was made, but it is certainly not later than 1739. This clock is an eight-day clock. It still keeps the best time of any clock in our house."

‡ Miss Stretch refers to the Rittenhouse exhibit in the hall of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, an account of which begins on page 236.—*Editor*.



Made by Edward Duffield *circa* 1785. Owned by Mrs. Thomas A. Curran



destroyed many a cherished tradition, but he places the history of clockmaking on a firm basis of fact.

Can we not do the same for Philadelphia? We have a society for the preservation of landmarks. Can we not go further and have a society for the preservation of antiquities?

I have great faith that Dr. McClenahan, with his broad vision, and with his increased opportunities for service in the new Franklin Memorial, will gather in its museum the work of Franklin's friends and co-workers of the eighteenth century, the clockmakers of Philadelphia, beginning with Peter Stretch in 1702, and ending with David Rittenhouse in 1796. Surely their clocks have stood the test of time, and as the late Judge Conrad, that fine old chronicler of Delaware clockmakers, said of Duncan Beard, "A man who by his own brain and hand can conceive and construct something that will serve his fellowman for two centuries, is deserving of the plaudits not only of his *own* generation, but of those that come after him."