

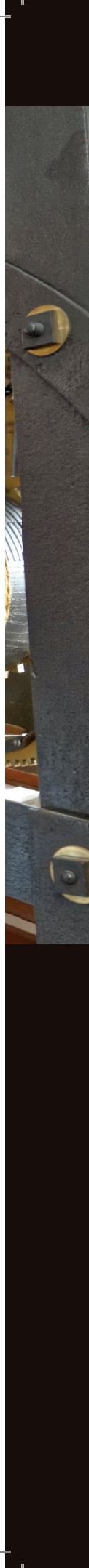


Executive Director Robert C. Cheney discussing Simon Willard's shop methodology in the original Willard Clock Shop, Grafton, Massachusetts. Benjamin, Simon, Aaron, and Ephraim Willard worked in this space throughout the last half of the 18th century.

MEET

Robert C. Cheney

By Kathy Ortt



The keynote speaker for Time-Con 2020 is Robert C. Cheney, a third-generation clockmaker earning his living at the bench for over 30 years, providing conservation services for many of the top public and private collections of clocks throughout the country, including Old Sturbridge Village, Worcester Art Museum, The American Antiquarian Society, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. During that time, Cheney wore many other hats as a consultant: curator, collections management advisor, exhibition designer, photographer, historian, writer, lecturer (in the US, UK, and Canada), appraiser, and trustee or board of director positions at the American Clock and Watch Museum, National Watch and Clock Museum, and the Willard House & Clock Museum. Cheney is a recent recipient of a Star Fellowship in the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors for a lifetime of service in the NAWCC, his published work, and lectures in the field.

Leaving private practice in 2006, Cheney founded and was the director of the “Clocks, Watches, and Scientific Instruments” department at Skinner Inc., Boston, for the next 12 years. This department held two sales yearly to a worldwide audience of this specialized category. He was the author of over 30 color auction catalogues and often an appraiser on *Antiques Roadshow*. Cheney retired in 2018 and remains a licensed auctioneer in Massachusetts and New Hampshire and continues as an auctioneer for Schmitt Horan & Co. at their twice-yearly sales in Manchester, New Hampshire.

Cheney became the executive director and curator of the Willard House & Clock Museum, in Grafton, Massachusetts, the homestead of the famous Willard clockmakers and the finest collection of Willard clocks known. His keynote is titled “Horology: My Life, My Love, My Heritage.” Cheney is also giving a lecture called “Timepieces of the Willard House & Clock Museum.”

Can you set the stage for your keynote address?

My career in horology officially began at age six, when I repaired my first museum clock under my father’s watchful eye. After college and a totally unrelated degree, a 35-year career followed with clients seeking services from conservation to collections management and allowing a good look at some of the finest horology in the nation.

Later, career opportunities were presented when I became the founder and director of the “Clocks, Watches, and Scientific Instruments” department at Skinner Inc., Boston. The international auction arena was an exhilarating overdose of horology with twice annual sales averaging 500 lots, with individual lots ranging from a half million dollars to 30 bucks!

Presently, as executive director and curator of the Willard House & Clock Museum, I’ve come full circle, back to the very place where my dad lit the fire of the wonders and adventures of horology. My visit at age six to the rundown homestead of the old-time Willard clockmakers certainly set the stage for a career rich in historical research, mastering the craft of clockmaking, and some remarkable social encounters made possible only because of a knowledge of horology. These encounters will highlight my presentation.

What should we know about the Willard brothers and the museum?

The Willard House & Clock Museum in Grafton, Massachusetts, is the birthplace and home of Simon (1753-1848), Benjamin (1743-1803), Aaron (1757-1844), and Ephraim Willard (1755-?), four of the most famous clockmakers of the 18th and early 19th century. The homestead includes the only 18th-century clock shop still standing on its original foundation in America together with the tools and equipment needed to produce the most complicated of furnishings found

in early homes. The museum galleries include a wide assortment of Willard family portraits, furnishings, Thomas Jefferson drawings, and 85 masterpiece-level Willard clocks. I will discuss the nearly 50-year history of the museum and the “art and mystery” of making clocks and related tools in 18th-century Grafton.

What is your history with the Willard Museum?

I first saw the homestead of Benjamin, Simon, Aaron, and Ephraim Willard in 1958, at age six. My dad, the late Bradford W. Cheney, attempted to get the historic homestead or at least the clock shop, which is the only 18th-century clockmaker’s shop still standing in America, preserved or moved to protect it from impending demolition. During frequent visits to the site, my dad lit a lifetime fire of enthusiasm in me to learn more about the four Willard clockmakers who called that isolated farm their home over 250 years ago.

Failing to get the needed financial support from the NAWCC or Old Sturbridge Village to move the clock shop to a more secure location, he convinced two local collectors, Dr. Roger and Imogene Robinson, to purchase the homestead and workshop in 1969. With total restoration of the property completed, it opened to the public as a museum in 1971. During and after college at the University of Massachusetts, I volunteered at the museum and assisted the founders and others.

What is significant about the Willard brothers as clockmakers?

The Willard brothers were the first established clockmakers west of Boston. As rural mid-18th-century artisans, their production was limited due to their isolation from population centers and limitations of available components for clockmaking seen in urban centers.

The two most successful of the brothers were Simon and Aaron. Simon received three patents:

- 1) Clock roasting jack for rotating meat or poultry in the fireplace in 1784
- 2) Patent Timepiece or “banjo” clock; perhaps the most popular clock ever made in America in 1802
- 3) Patent Alarm Clock or “Lighthouse” clock in 1819

Simon also made clocks for the Supreme Court and the US Congress, knew Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Levi Lincoln, and made a clock for Jefferson’s college in Charlottesville. At one time, he was one of the best-known clockmakers in America. Aaron Willard was extremely successful, making hundreds of clocks of various forms: tall, shelf, and wall clocks were his forte. He had a large “manufactory” on Washington Street in Boston, employing clockmakers, cabinet makers, carvers, gilders, and dial and glass painters by 1800.

Benjamin’s and Ephraim’s contributions to horology were marginal, although both produced quality clocks until their deaths. Benjamin’s early work placed him in the center of Lexington, where the “shot was heard round the world” in 1775. The museum’s earliest clock by Benjamin is dated 1768 and marked Lexington.

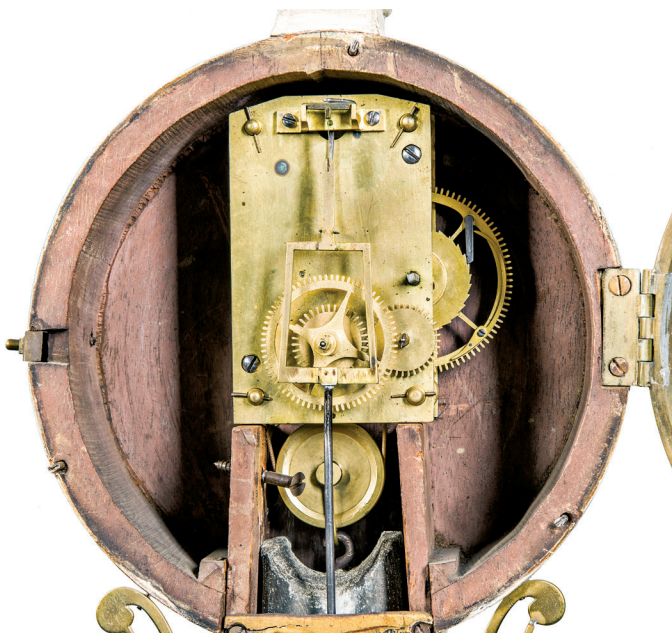
Do you collect clocks?

Not actively. Having been a high-level dealer for many years, a conservator for over 30 years, and a passionate collector of New England brass dial, pre-revolutionary war tall clocks, and related decorative arts, I have lived with the best through most of my life and do not feel the need of ownership anymore. I continue to actively collect early horological objects, mainly watches, sundials, and ephemera.

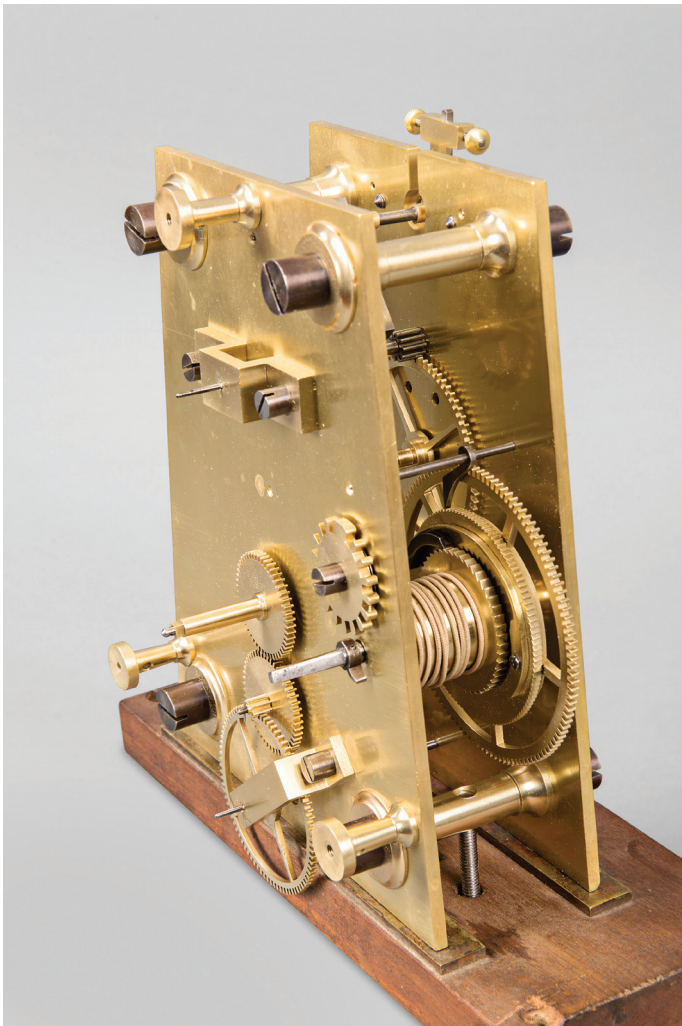
What are the most valuable clocks or watches in terms of collecting?

If you are a true collector, the most valuable clocks or watches are the objects that excite you, that you can learn something from, and that you enjoy owning. As a dealer, I never said that any clock or watch that I sold would be a “good investment.” There are many avenues to collect in horology today, with AWCI, NAWCC, and several major auction houses to present the material, and the Internet to help with your education. Most markets are very affordable at this time. Buy what you like!

Kathy Ortt is an editor of the *Horological Times*.



Eight-day brass weight-powered timepiece with deadbeat escapement, T-bridge, step train, and through bolt attachment to the case.



Eight-day brass and steel movement of a floor-standing Astronomical Regulator, by Simon Willard Jr., Boston, circa 1840. Movement features jeweled deadbeat pallets, maintaining power, Geneva stop, seconds-beating heavy brass pendulum bob with wooden rod.

Willard House and Clock Museum Promised Gift. Mahogany case in the form of a Greek column, with the upper section for the dial, fluted mid-section with removable flute for access to single weight and pendulum, and eight-sided base with attached gilt ormolu mount depicting "Commerce."

