

ATTLEBORO CLOCKMAKERS

by Steven Petrucelli (NJ)

Fig. 1 Hatch Timepiece

Described herein is a discussion of the historical basis for the Tift Banjo Timepiece. This work was inspired by the acquisition of a variant clock that raised a number of questions concerning the evolution of the Tift Banjo. It became clear, however, that a more diversified study of the region and period could be achieved and I have extended my research to include information on all of the 18th and 19th Century clockmakers of Attleboro, Massachusetts.

Attleboro has been known throughout the world for its jewelry manufacturing. The inception of jewelry making has been attributed to a Frenchman who began forging brass butts in North Attleboro in 1780.¹ Interestingly enough, the earliest attempt at clockmaking took place during this same period. Colonel Obed Robinson was one of the first manufacturers in Attleboro. At the end of the Revolutionary War, he began to make clocks for kitchen use. These clocks were described by Daggett in 1894 as "tall, old fashioned timepieces that are no longer humble kitchen clocks, but are promoted to the best rooms and the present chief places in the house."² A variety of tall case clocks were made in Attleboro over the period from 1790-1805. One such clock was "presented" to Ebenezer Daggett in 1797.² The making of clocks was abandoned around 1805, and in 1807 Colonel Robinson began to make jewelry.³

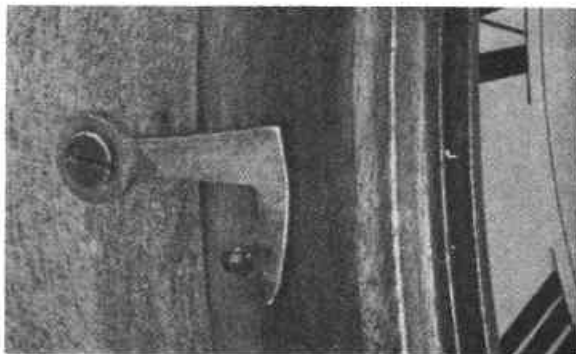
The next stage in the development of clockmaking in Attleboro deals with the contributions of Horace Tift (Tift). Horace Tift was born in Attleboro on December 18, 1804.⁴ He was

one of five children in the family of Samuel and Nancy (Woodcock) Tift. At age 21, he married Orinda Blackinton of Attleboro. During this same period, he became involved in a jewelry business. Draper, Tift, and Co. commenced the manufacture of jewelry in 1821.³ The original partnership was comprised of Josiah Draper, John Tift, and Ira Richards. John Tift was Horace's elder brother, and was born in Attleboro in 1800.⁴ By 1834, the business had grown to 20,000 dollars per annum, and the number of employees had risen to 15.³

Sales of the manufacture were principally made in New York and Philadelphia markets. The early products turned out by this workshop included interlocked brass chains and door fasteners.² Patents were applied for each of these products. The manufacture of "Patent Brass Door Ketches or Fasteners" is an important step in the evolution of the Tift Banjo. Not only were these fasteners used on the box door and wooden bezel of clocks, but they were also integrated into many types of furniture of the period. Today, we find this type of door fastener on many third generation timepieces; particularly those by Sawin, Hatch, J. J. Beals, and Tift. The Hatch timepiece shown in Figures 1-2 illustrate the use of these fasteners.

Horace Tift probably began making the timepiece around 1830. By this time, there were seven businesses in Attleboro engaged in the manufacture of watch keys, finger rings, guard chains, breast pins, gilt buttons, and door fasteners.³ Additionally, Richards and Ellis had a well-established ma-

Fig. 2 Close-up of bezel latch.



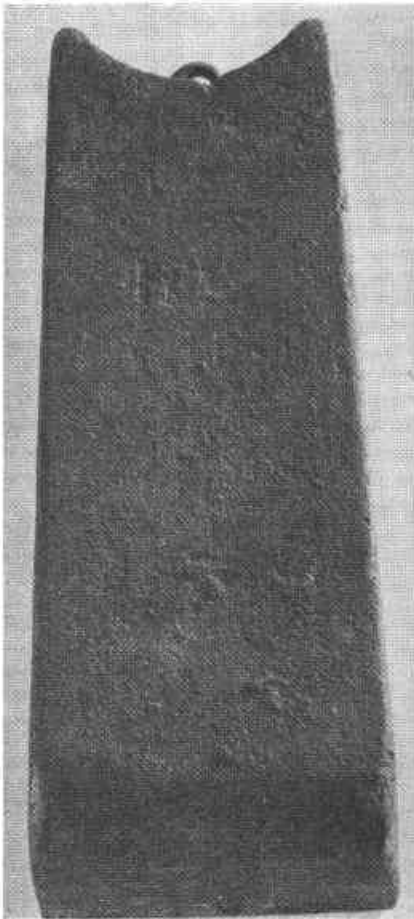


Fig. 3 Tift weight.

chine shop producing brass butts, castings and other kinds of brass work. Thus there appears to be a sound basis for the Tift Banjo with adequate support from a large and skillful group of Attleboro artisans. I should also like to comment on the black and gold glasses that were characteristic of the Tift Banjo. The simplistic nature of these tablets can be attributed to the people of the Attleboro community at that time. I would describe these people as technically oriented rather than artistic. The black and gold design evolved from the expertise acquired in the manufacture of gilt buttons with the application of this gilding technique to glass tablets. The black background was used for two reasons. First, it highlights the geometrical gold design, and secondly, it is economically well suited for large volume production.

The throat glass usually consisted of a vertical leaf design highlighted by a black border. The box tablet may be characterized by geometrical gold borders, an elliptical center opening revealing the bob, and a circular gold design on either side of the center opening. Another interesting Tift characteristic is the weight. An iron weight was always used and many contain the initials H T that were integrated into the casting. Figure 3 illustrates an example of a weight from a Tift Banjo in my collection. Although the physical properties of individual weights may vary from clock to clock, many can be described by the specifications summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Approximate Physical Properties of Tift Weights

1. Width at top	2.3 inches
2. Width at bottom	2.8 inches
3. Thickness	1.8 inches
4. Length (center)	6.4 inches
5. Length (edge)	6.9 inches
6. Weight	7.3 pounds
7. Markings	H T (2 were observed without any markings)

These characteristics are a summary based on a survey of five clocks. In all cases, the parameters were in accordance with these specifications with a ten percent tolerance band. I should also point out that one may find other types of iron weights in Tift clocks. Many of the weights that were used did not include the initials. Also, there have been examples of unsigned production banjos that have contained Tift weights. Since bottom board and weight replacement have always been commonplace with these clocks, one must not use this index as the sole criterion in identifying a timepiece. A detailed list of Tift features has appeared elsewhere, and I have considered only those characteristics that have thus far been unreported. The interested reader should refer to Banjo #30 of Mr. Ela's collection.⁵ One may utilize the comprehensive data accumulated at the end of that volume to contrast and compare the work of Tift to that of his contemporaries.

Tift was an established clockmaker by 1845.⁴ As a third-generation maker of the timepiece, he is an important link between the period of hand craftsmanship and the age of manufacturing. His business succeeded for two reasons: a quality product was sold at a modest price, and there was an effective sales effort that penetrated the New York and Philadelphia marketplace. The Tift business maintained an office at 192 Broadway, New York City, until 1862.⁶ Tift subsequently retired in 1862 after a long career as a clockmaker and jeweler.

In addition to Horace Tift, there were other clockmakers at work in Attleboro during the mid-1800's. George D. Hatch was an established watch and clockmaker whose career spanned a period from 1845-1870.⁶⁻⁹ Hatch was born in Attleboro on March 25, 1816.⁴ The Hatch family were among the earliest settlers in the North Village and enjoyed political as well as economic influence in the community. In addition to his activity as

a clockmaker, Hatch was elected to the Massachusetts Legislature in 1849, 1850, and 1860.² During the Civil War, he was chosen as one of three men responsible for Attleboro recruitments. Hatch initiated many manufacturing processes in the Attleboro clockmaking industry. The phrase, "simplicity is the ultimate sophistication," appropriately describes the clocks manufactured by Hatch. By 1860, the business had achieved a great deal of success, and provided opportunities for men such as Williams, Aldrich, Goodwin, and J. D. Hatch.

David L. Williams was a carpenter from Mansfield who settled in Attleboro during the 1840's.⁴ He was an important figure in the Hatch business, and in 1860, he bought a share of the business.⁵ A Williams and Hatch advertisement appeared in the 1867 Massachusetts Register and a facsimile is shown in Figure 4.¹⁵ He was involved in the manufacture of hundreds of weight-driven #5 Banjos, #70's, figure 8's, and keyholes. In some clocks, the initials "DLW" were inscribed into the backboard. I have also observed several movements with these initials scratched on the rear plate. The significance of "DLW" has been reported by Mr. Ela, however the actual meaning has never been clearly delineated.⁵ Based upon my research, I believe that "DLW" represents the work of David L. Williams.

A close associate of Williams was Silas E. Aldrich, who was a famous clock manufacturer in his own right. Aldrich was born in Attleboro on February 16, 1822. Near the close of the Civil War, he formed a partnership with David Williams. In the 1865 New England Business Directory, they were listed as: "WILLIAMS and ALDRICH, Manufacturers of Fine Clocks and Regulators."⁷ Aldrich was an important contributor to the growth of the clock industry in Attleboro. He manufactured clocks during the period 1850-1870.

WILLIAMS & HATCH,

MANUFACTURERS OF

SUPERIOR

EIGHT-DAY BRASS

TIMEPIECES

AND

REGULATORS,

WARRANTED INFERIOR TO NONE
OF AMERICAN MANUFACTURE.

NORTH ATTLEBORO',

MASS.



Fig. 4 Williams and Hatch Advertisement: From The Massachusetts Register And Business Directory, 1867.

During the 1850's, the clock industry of Attleboro experienced a period of significant growth. The importance of an efficient marketing capability was recognized by Wallace Goodwin. According to the genealogical records of Attleboro, Goodwin was a "Trader and a Peddler."⁴ I am inclined to believe that he was the thrust behind the sale and distribution of the clocks made by Tift and Hatch. This, of course, opens an area of controversy concerning the Wallace Goodwin Timepiece. There is no evidence in the literature that supports the existence of early Goodwin banjos. Not until 1860 is there any mention of him as a clock manufacturer. In the 1860 edition of the New England Business Directory, he is listed as a clock manufacturer at work in North Attleboro.⁶ To my knowledge, this is the only recorded data relative to his involvement as a clockmaker. Whether Goodwin made clocks prior to 1860 is a question that may never be resolved. Since the char-

acteristics of the reported Goodwin clocks are similar to clocks made by Tift and Hatch, I will leave this as an open question.

Finally, I should like to mention the work of J. D. Hatch. Jonathan Hatch manufactured clocks in Attleboro during the early 1870's. His relationship to G. D. Hatch is not clear since the genealogical records of Attleboro terminate at the year 1850. I assume that he was born in the early 1850's, and was the son of G. D. Hatch. J. D. Hatch did not succeed in the clock business, and there were many reasons for this. Certainly, the competition from the numerous clock factories in Connecticut weakened the position of the Attleboro products. The demand for cheap, spring-driven clocks resulted in the decline of the Attleboro clock industry. Another factor was the impact of foreign imports from England, France, and Germany. By 1880, the era of clockmaking in Attleboro had come to an end.

CONCLUSIONS

A summary of the evolution of clockmaking in Attleboro is indicated in Table 2.

Table 2 Summary of Attleboro Clockmakers

NAME	PERIOD	ACTIVITY	REFERENCE
Robinson	1790-1805	Clockmaker Gunsmith	2,4
Tiftt	1830-1860	Clockmaker Jeweler	4,6,12-14
Hatch, G.	1852 1845-1870	Watchmaker Clockmaker	12 4,8,9,12-16
Aldrich	1850-1870	Clock Manufacturer	4,7-9,15,16
Williams	1840-1850 1865-1873	Carpenter Clock Manufacturer	4 7-9,15,16
Goodwin	1840-1860 1860	Trader, Peddler Clock Manufacturer	4 6
Hatch, J.	1870-1875	Clock Manufacturer	9-11

Considering the relatively large number of clocks that were made in Attleboro, it is puzzling that so little is known about their heritage. In fact, many books on American clocks ignore Tiftt, Aldrich, Hatch, Goodwin, and Williams. The books that have included them have tended to be terse in the treatment of their vitae. It is hoped that this paper will provide some new insight into the history of clockmaking in Attleboro.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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