

## Riley Whiting and the Local Clock Industry

One of the earliest industrial undertakings in New England was the manufacturing of clocks, with western Connecticut, specifically the Naugatuck River valley and the area around Winchester the primary manufacturing sites. One of the important figures locally was Riley Whiting. One of his descendants is Colebrook's Elizabeth McNeill, wife of Dr. William McNeill. The family has loaned a scrapbook containing Whiting family material to the historical society, which contains the following letter, written to then Winsted mayor Joseph Darcey in September of 1943. I think it is of interest today, as it was sixty some-odd years ago.

"Mayor Joseph Darcey recently received from Charles Gerrish Sr., a Potsdam, New York resident, a surprising and interesting letter, revealing the history of the 'wag-on-the-wall' clock which originated in Winchester and Winsted back in the early 1800s. He also informed the mayor that he is one of the rare possessors of such a clock, which was made by Riley Whiting of the Town of Winchester. His letter in part, is as follows":

'I am taking the liberty to write you this letter because perhaps the subject matter will be of interest to you. As you perhaps know, during the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one Riley Whiting manufactured all kinds of shelf clocks and also pendulum clocks at Winchester and Winsted. It is also a matter of record that from 1807 to 1813 he formed a partnership with Samuel and Luther Hoadley until Luther died in 1813. It seems that on the death of Luther, Samuel Hoadley retired from the business. Whiting continued in business until the year of his death, 1835. In 1841 Lucius Clark purchased the business left after the death of Whiting and associated himself with Clark, Gilbert & Co. of Winsted, and which continued until the latter part of the twentieth century as the William L. Gilbert Clock Co.

Riley Whiting's specialty was the making of wooden clock works and he made his wood clocks somewhat different than the usual procedure then in vogue, for the machinery of these wood clocks was carried by a tin wheel on an upright iron shaft. The cogwheels were of cherry; the pinion was of ivy or mountain laurel and the face of white wood (basswood). These, with a little wire, a very little steel, brass, tin and cordage, made up the staples of material of the old one-day shelf clocks which they scattered all over the United States and Canada.'

'Now, according to records, Eli Terry, in 1792 or 93, went to what is today Plymouth, Connecticut and began making hang-up clocks. That is, he made only the movement and dial alone to hang on the wall without any case. In other words, what are known now as 'wag-on-the-wall' clocks. It appears he was only able to sell a few of these, and in 1807, after selling out to Herman Clark, his apprentice, he bought an old mill and began making clocks with cases, in partnership with Seth Thomas and Silas Hoadley.'

'It is very doubtful if any of the Eli Terry 'wag-on-the-wall' clocks are in existence today. In fact, other than the clock that I own, there seems to be but one such clock in existence. Some clock experts ponder over the mystery of where different kinds of clocks that were made by the thousands, have disappeared. One such expert, N. Hudson Moore, on the hunt for a genuine American-made 'wag-on-the-wall' clock, wrote forty-two letters trying to find a clock of the wag-on-the-wall variety, made in America, and could not find one. Not a trace of one in any of the towns that turned them out, nor

in any museums or historical societies that he wrote to. The mystery is this: long case clock movements were sold during the first few years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by traveling peddlers who transported them from place to place on horseback, the buyers being expected to furnish their own cases. On the other hand, often this was not done, and the dial and works hung up on the wall till dirt and dust clogged the wheels.’

‘So, with the exception of the Eli Terry works and dial, made to hang up without any case, and the clock I own, the American wag-on-the-wall clock was originally meant to be placed in a long case by the purchaser, who must either make the case himself or have it made for him. Yet despite the fact that perhaps a large number of these movements were sold, they are virtually extinct and so far as is known, no museum or historical society owns one. I recently received a letter from the Metropolitan Museum in New York City, saying that they do not own or exhibit a clock of this variety.’

‘You will perhaps appreciate this letter more fully and be glad to have the information that I own a genuine Riley Whiting wag-on-the-wall clock made, as it reads across its large dial, by ‘R. Whiting, Winchester.’ I am very sure if your city has a historical society, this organization will appreciate knowing about this clock.’

‘The exact year it was made is not known, but like the clocks said to be made by Eli Terry to ‘hang on the wall’ (wag-on-the-wall), this clock gives ample evidence that it, too, was made to wag-on-the-wall, for there is nothing about it that even suggests that it was made for a long case. Thus your city has the honor of knowing that there is in existence and still running and keeping very good time, considering, a genuine wag-on-the-wall clock made by one of its deceased sons.’

‘The dial is quite large and the hands (both hour and second hands) are made with soft metal, probably pewter, very large and hand wrought. It operates by two weights that are exactly like those (and of virtually the same size) as the weights used in the early American shelf clocks. These weights are attached to strong cords, which are pulled up and wound on two drums. The works are wood and the clock runs 30 hours with one winding. The pendulum is 40 inches long, to which is attached a small hand-wrought brass bob. The clock strikes on the hour and on a cast iron crudely-made bell attached over the works.’

‘I say the clock keeps good time ‘considering’, for there are two wheels somewhat warped and two new pieces of wood have been made to take the place of two cogs that were once broken off. Otherwise the clock is OK and in fine condition.’

‘If this letter has interested you, I am well repaid and I wrote it because I believed it my duty to inform you that there is a clock of this variety, made in your city, still in existence.

Very truly yours,  
Charles Gerrish, Sr.’”

I am not an expert on clocks, but I believe much more information has come to light about early American clocks in the last sixty years. The Winchester Historical Society has a good collection, and their personnel are well informed, so if you would like to see a Riley Whiting clock, as well as several others, pay them a visit, I guarantee that you will be well rewarded for your visit.