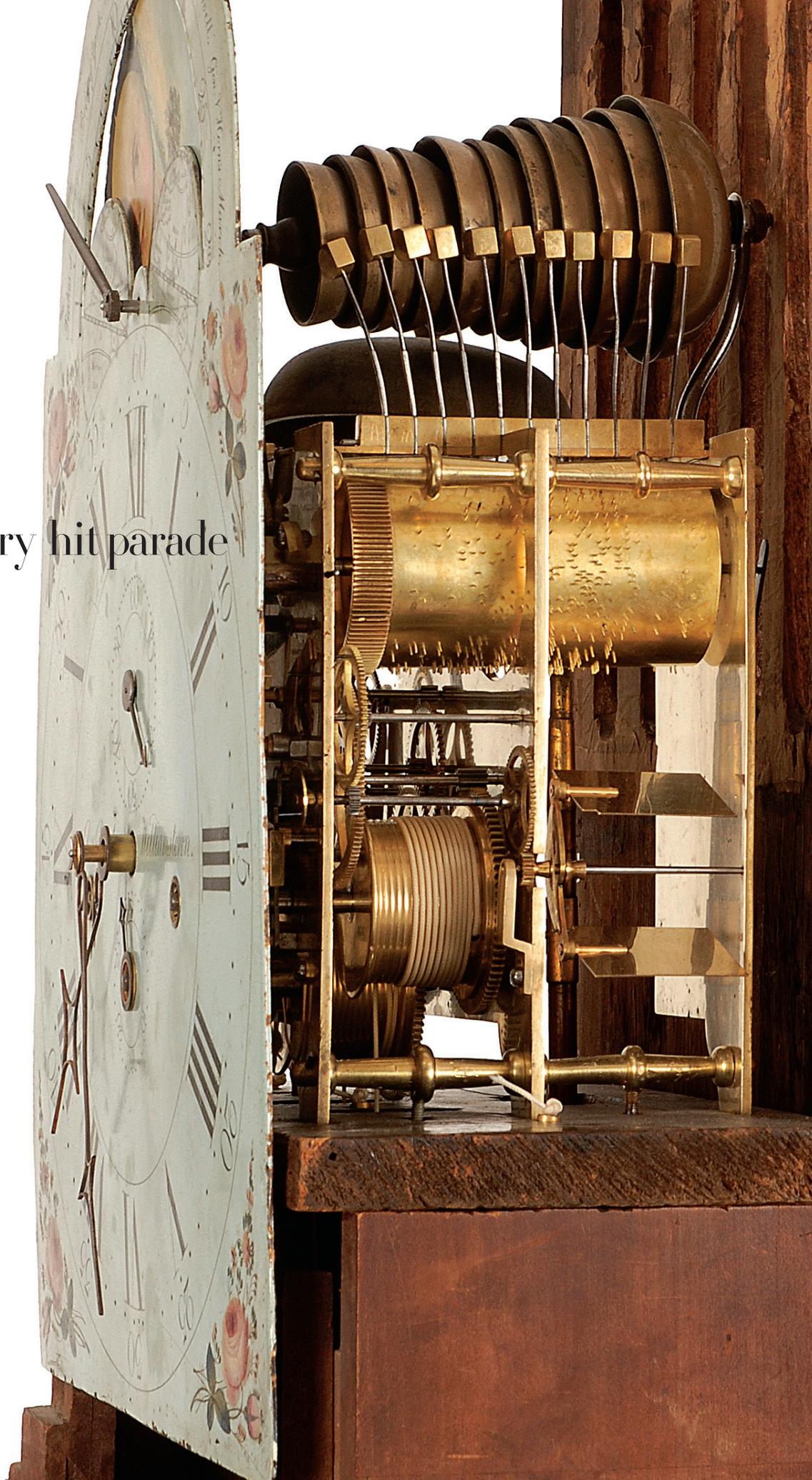


Eighteenth-century hit parade



## Early American musical clocks *By Gary R. Sullivan and Kate Van Winkle Keller*

**E**ighteenth- and early nineteenth-century musical clocks were the jukeboxes of their time, playing the popular tunes of the day. Today they afford us a rare, indeed, the only, opportunity to enjoy the music our ancestors heard, not an interpretation of the same song, but the exact sounds. These clocks also reveal interesting patterns of cultural preferences in music. While the bulk of the tunes were of British origin, the ones Americans chose for their clocks are different from those chosen by British buyers of the same period. And, just as furniture scholars can differentiate regional variations in American clock case styles, we can now recognize distinctive regional preferences in the tunes played on American musical clocks.

The thirty-year period from 1785 to 1815 was the heyday of musical clock production in the United States. While only a small percentage of households contained a

clock of any kind, only the very wealthiest could afford clocks that incorporated the complicated works that played music. People gathered in houses and public places to dance or sing to their tunes—and sometimes even paid to hear them. In 1744 residents of Philadelphia were invited to spend 18 pence to enjoy a traveling curiosities show, the anchor of which was a fine musical clock.<sup>1</sup> In 1775 a young Connecticut militiaman responding to the Lexington alarm was impressed by such a clock: “We staid at



**Fig. 1.** Detail of a musical movement, American, c. 1800, showing the revolving pin barrel, rack of graduated bells, and the hammers that strike the bells. *Private collection; photograph by Matthew J. Buckley.*

**Figs. 2, 2a.** Four-tune musical tall-case clock, works by Silas W. Howell (1770–1805), case labeled by Matthew Egerton Jr. (active c. 1785–1837), New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1797. Mahogany with light-wood inlays, poplar; height 99 (including finial), width 22 1/8, depth 11 inches. The music plays every hour, and the tunes include the popular song commemorating the Battle of Bunker Hill. *Private collection; Buckley photographs.*



Fig. 3. Giles Gibbs Jr. (1760–1780), a fifer from Ellington, Connecticut, wrote out his version of “Over the Water to Charley,” but the only water he knew was the wide Connecticut River, hence his personal title, “Over the River to Charley.” *Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford.*

Fig. 4. Detail of a page in Henry Beck’s manuscript “flute book,” begun in 1786, with music for “Hob or Nob” and “Over the Water to Charley,” two of the songs that also appear on Burnap’s clockface in Fig. 5. “Hob or Nob” is better known today as “The Campbells Are Coming.” *Library of Congress.*

Fig. 5. Detail of the tune selector on the engraved brass dial of clockworks by Daniel Burnap (1759–1838) for a musical tall-case clock, East Windsor, Connecticut, c. 1790. Six tune names are displayed across the arch. The music plays every third hour, at three, six, nine, and twelve. *Private collection; Buckley photograph.*

Captain bornam that night I see a Clock that would play tunes With 10 hammers.”<sup>2</sup> In 1826, for 25 cents, one could attend a concert at Mr. Scott’s Saloon in Baltimore, where two musical clocks provided the entertainment.<sup>3</sup>

In the colonial and early Federal periods, most Americans were of British ancestry and maintained the cultural traditions of their heritage. American musicians played traditional British songs, dances, and marches along with the latest tunes from the London stage and pleasure gardens. These were the tunes heard on the militia training ground in Lexington, in New York theaters, in the parlors of Philadelphia—and on Americans’ musical clocks.

Despite this bond, the songs found on American clocks differ markedly from those on British examples. Of course, the cases themselves also demonstrate regional differences, not only between American and British clocks, but within the United States as well. The one constant is that due to the high price of the musical works, the clock

cases were always the most elegant that could be obtained. While tall-clock cases signed by the cabinetmaker are extremely rare, several musical clock cases are signed or labeled, testifying to the high regard in which they were held (see Figs. 2, 2a).

A musical clock movement typically incorporates a rack of eight or ten graduated bells, each of which sounds a different note when struck by a corresponding hammer. A revolving barrel is fitted with dozens of precisely spaced protruding pins that, when in motion, raise and release the hammers, causing them to strike the particular bells at the proper moments (see Fig. 1). The spacing of the pins, combined with the surface speed of the revolving drum, determines the music played. A multi-tune clock required separate sets of pins for each tune. In order for a clockmaker to “pin the barrel” of a clock with a specific tune, the tune first had to be carefully translated from sheet music to a pinning chart (see Figs. 7a, 7b). Clockmakers

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It is now possible *to recognize distinctive regional preferences in the tunes played on American musical clocks*

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probably offered customers a list of tunes that were already charted. Offering an uncharted tune represented more work for the clockmaker and a higher cost to the customer.

Many of the musical clocks are inscribed on the dial with the titles of the tunes they played (see Fig. 5). Some only differentiate the tunes by number, but in many cases we have been able to identify these unnamed tunes.<sup>4</sup> Altogether we know of seventy-seven American musical clocks playing 196 identified British tunes. The ones found most often are:

<i>Hob or Nob</i>	(on 15 clocks)
<i>Banks of the Dee</i>	(15)
<i>Nancy Dawson</i>	(13)
<i>Marquis of Granby</i>	(10)
<i>Over the Water to Charley</i>	(10)
<i>French King's Minuet</i>	(10)
<i>The Maid of the Mill</i>	(7)
<i>Shady Bowers</i>	(7)
<i>Paddy Whack</i>	(5)
<i>Belleisle March</i>	(5)
<i>Indian Chief (Alknomook)</i>	(5)

In addition to these British tunes, three political songs of American origin are found on several American clocks. “Washington’s Resignation” (on 7 clocks) was an elegant minuet named for the dramatic moment of General Washington’s resignation as commander-in-chief of the American Army in 1783. “Bunker Hill” (on 7 clocks) was written by William Billings of Boston in the 1770s with violently anti-British lyrics. “Yankee Doodle” (on 5 clocks) was a jaunty tune first played by the British army in Boston in 1768, but after the rout at Lexington and Concord in 1775, the Americans adopted the tune as their own.

Frederick Heisely of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania’s musical clock of about 1815 to 1820 was certainly made for a patriotic customer. Its twelve tunes include “Washington’s March,” “Jefferson’s March,” and “Hail Columbia,” an American song that

**Fig. 6.** Detail of a six-tune musical tall-case clock, works by Burnap, East Windsor, Connecticut, c. 1790. Note the engraved and silvered brass dial with tune selector in the lunette. *Private collection; Buckley photograph.*






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*On the eighty British musical clocks surveyed, the most popular of the 176 named tunes are quite different from those found on American clocks*

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was an unofficial national anthem until 1931, when “The Star-Spangled Banner” was officially given the title.

On the eighty British musical clocks surveyed, the most popular of the 176 named tunes are quite different from those found on American clocks.<sup>5</sup> They are:

- Psalm 104* (15)
- Happy Clown* (13)
- Lass of Paties [Pattys] Mill* (12)
- Britons Strike Home* (9)
- Lady Coventry’s Minuet* (9)
- [Sir Charles] Sedley’s Minuet* (8)
- Highland Laddie* (6)
- God Save the King* (6)
- March in Scipio* (6)
- Miller of Mansfield* (6)
- Bright Aurelia* (5)
- Grenadiers March* (5)

Of this list, only four tunes also appear on American clocks: “Lass of Paties Mill” (on 4 American clocks), “Lady Coventry’s Minuet” (3), “Britons Strike Home” (2), and “God Save

the King” (2). The last two are found on American clocks of the mid-eighteenth century, when the tunes were newly written and considered patriotic expressions in British America as well as in England. One of the American clocks that plays “Britons Strike Home” is a masterpiece by Newport clockmaker William Claggett (Figs. 8, 8a).

The most prolific of all American musical clockmakers was Daniel Burnap of East Windsor, Connecticut. The repetition of tunes on his twelve known clocks suggests that he offered his customers ten British tunes that were locally popular.

- French King’s Minuet* (9 out of 12 clocks)
- Over the Water to Charley* (8)
- [General] Elliot’s Minuet* (7)
- Hob or Nob* (7)
- Rakes of Rodney* (7)
- Maid of the Mill* (6)
- Air by Handel* (4)
- Lovely Nymph or The Rapture* (4)
- Cuckoos Nest* (3)
- Orange Tree* (3)

Some of Burnap's customers wanted different tunes, though their requests, too, were for songs of British origin.

- Banks of the Dee* (1)
- Dutchess of Brumswick [sic]* (1)
- A Lovely Lass* (1)
- Rosy Wine* (2)
- Shady Bowers* (1)
- Successful Campaign* (1)



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Figs. 7a, 7b. Pages from the large collection of music handwritten by John Hoff (1797–1817) that includes many tunes played by American musical clocks. On one page he wrote out the music for “Air by Handle,” misspelling G. F. Handel’s name. On another page, he started a pinning chart for this tune, but made an error and began over again. Each band on the chart represents the location of a row of pins for one bell. The bell pitches are shown at the top of the chart. *Lancaster County Historical Society, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.*

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Figs. 8, 8a. Musical tall-case clock, works by William Claggett (1696–1749), Newport, Rhode Island, c. 1740–1749. Pine case with japanned decoration; height 9 feet 4 inches, width 21 ½, depth 13 inches. This pre-Revolutionary clock plays “Britons Strike Home” and “Happy Swain.” *Private collection; photographs by Laszlo Bodo, courtesy of Winterthur Museum.*



Study of the tunes *played by early musical clocks is opening a window on the music people heard as they went about their daily lives*

Fig. 9. Detail of the dial on a musical clock by Eardley Norton (1728–1792), London, c. 1770. Norton’s clock plays two minuets and four songs, including the patriotic “Britons Strike Home.” “I wish I may die if I do” and “Do Not Ask Me Charming Phyllis” are sentimental parlor songs available on English sheet music in the 1760s. They, like the earlier tune called “The Miller of Mansfield,” were seldom played in America. Courtesy of Arthur W. J. G. Ord-Hume.

Burnap may have kept pinning charts from when he worked in Thomas Harland’s Norwich, Connecticut, shop. Harland’s clocks include three tunes that Burnap also used: a minuet by Handel, “Over [the Water] to Charley,” and “Shady Bowers” (see Figs. 3, 6). In fact, the tunes that Harland and Burnap pinned are reflected in clocks by several other Connecticut craftsmen and also in manuscripts of music of Connecticut fifers and fiddlers.<sup>6</sup> The tune selections on clocks made by Jacob Sargeant of Hartford echo choices made by Harland’s customers in Norwich and Peregrine White’s in Woodstock. These include such favorites as “Nancy Dawson,” “Shady Bowers,” and “Lass of Paties Mill.”

But fashion is a curious thing. We found that the repertoire of songs on the nineteen known New Jersey musical clocks is quite different from the Connecticut repertoire. The top tunes in New Jersey were:

- Banks of the Dee* (11)
- Bunker Hill* (7)
- Washingtons Resignation* (7)
- Deserdurand* (6)
- Hob or Nob* (5)
- Nancy Dawson* (5)

Interestingly, Boston composer William Billings’s “Bunker Hill” is found on New Jersey clocks by three different makers (see Fig. 2), but it is not pinned into any known Massachusetts clock.

A different group of tunes appears on clocks made in eastern Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire, including “Marquis of Granby,” “Orpheus,” and “Duke of Argyle.” Perhaps, as craftsmen moved north seeking less crowded markets for their wares, they carried with them pinning charts from their apprenticeship days in Massachusetts.

Most central Pennsylvania clocks feature traditional German tunes and hymns, though very few identify the tune titles on their dials. Because German language sacred and secular music is not as well documented and indexed as British and American, it is often difficult to identify the melodies these clocks play. This is the case with the only known musical clock to survive by Reading, Pennsylvania, clock-maker Daniel Rose (Fig. 10) whose interest in music is reflected in his estate inventory, which included three musical clocks and an impressive selection of musical instruments, including an organ and a piano.<sup>7</sup>

Our study of the tunes played by early musical clocks in Britain and America is opening a new window on the music heard by people as they went about their daily lives. Thanks to new tune indexes and digital

Many early American musical clocks play the selected tune at the top of each hour. A few examples play the tune every other hour. Others play the tune three times through on every third hour (3,6,9 and 12:00). Some clocks automatically advance to the next tune each day, while most provide a movable hand for selecting a desired tune. Musical clocks are often fitted with a repeat lever that allows for playing the music on demand. It is activated by pulling a string inside the case.



recordings it is possible to identify the tunes played by clocks like Daniel Rose's as well as those with imperfect bells or recalcitrant musical trains. Clocks can be dated more closely as first-publication information about the tunes played becomes available, and their origins discerned through the selections of music played. In a few cases these juke boxes of their day preserve tunes that would otherwise be lost forever.

This article is drawn from the authors' research for the exhibition *Keeping Time: Musical Clocks of Early America*, at the Willard House and Clock Museum in North Grafton, Massachusetts, from October 6 to November 17, and the accompanying catalogue. In addition, the authors have in preparation a catalogue of all known pre-1830 American musical clockmakers and a compilation of every tune known to be played on American musical clocks and its history.

For information about the Early American Musical Clock Project, write to [info@garysullivanantiques.com](mailto:info@garysullivanantiques.com). Visit [themagazineantiques.com](http://themagazineantiques.com) for recordings of tunes played by early American musical clocks.

**Fig. 10. Detail of a multi-tune musical tall-case clock, works by Daniel Rose (1749–1827), Reading, Pennsylvania, c. 1810–1815. Mahogany with inlays, pine; overall height 9 feet 3 ½ inches (including finial), width 22, depth 11 inches. Private collection; Buckley photograph.**

<sup>1</sup> *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 12, 1744. <sup>2</sup> See entry for August 22, 1775, Calvin Pease, *Journal, American Revolution Journals and Orderly Books*, Box 3, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford. <sup>3</sup> *Baltimore Patriot and Mercantile Advertiser*, December 29, 1826. <sup>4</sup> European-American vernacular secular music of this period is well documented, chiefly in R. M. Keller et al., *Early American Secular Music and Its European Sources*, online database at [colonialmusic.org](http://colonialmusic.org). Sacred music in English printed worldwide is indexed in Nicholas Temperley's "The Hymn Tune Index" at <http://hymntune.library.uiuc.edu>. No such indexes are available for German language sacred or secular music. <sup>5</sup> Most of the British clocks and their tunes are documented in E. W. Cloutman, *English and Scottish Musical Clocks: Contemporary Scores to Aid Dating and Restoration* (Antiquarian Horological Society, Ticehurst, 2000). <sup>6</sup> See particularly manuscripts penned by Giles Gibbs Jr., Eleazer Cary, Cushing Eells, James Hosmer, Joel Allen, and Ishmael Spicer at the Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, and by Timothy Swan at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. <sup>7</sup> Rose's inventory is in Berks County Register of Wills, Reading, Pennsylvania.

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