



# British Horology Times

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## An Antebellum Artifact

*By Ken Rockwell (Fl)*

### Antebellum Tallahassee

Florida in 1830 was a like a frontier town since it was declared a territory in 1822 and only achieved statehood in 1845. Tallahassee, located half way between the Spanish settlement towns of St. Augustine and Pensacola, became the capital in 1824. The growing prosperity of this extreme southern territory was being pushed along by the production of cotton. There were nearly a thousand plantations in Florida producing cotton, timber and cattle, not only for the Americas, but exporting to England and the rest of Europe.<sup>1</sup> Tallahassee had the geographic advantage of having the safe port city of St. Marks, Florida just twenty miles away. St. Marks was one of the oldest settlements in the Americas first settled by the Spanish in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> The notorious campaign of Andrew Jackson (1816-1819) to “Rid Florida of its Native Populations” was followed by the 1821 Presidential land grants. Without a treaty, the Second Seminole war ended in 1842, and all conflicts ended in 1858.<sup>3</sup>

In this frontier, cotton was the gold, and early speculators followed the new wealth. In 1840 the city heritage included the children of the early emigrants to the Americas with English, Scotch, Welsh and Irish composing the majority of the Florida pioneers. The new city of Tallahassee also had the French influence of Prince Murat and the business ventures of Marquis de



*Figure 1: Towle and Myers, Tallahassee, Florida contract (private label) watch showing heavy gold case and lovely dial of fine quality*

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Chapter 159

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Striking Halifax watch paper. Father Time climbs a mausoleum-like tombstone on a blustery, lightning filled night with bending trees and falling pillars. Death is on the left, dagger in grasp. "*O Death, Where is thy Sting, O Grave Where is Thy Victory*". A comforting message to not fear death because heaven is waiting.



## President's Message – Fall 2019

I hope you enjoy this latest edition of the British Horological Times. Our feature article in this issue was contributed by Ken Rockwell. This well illustrated article describes a marvellous timepiece and the background surrounding its construction and sale. Thank you, Ken.

Additional thanks are due to Ken for volunteering to make a presentation at our meeting at the Florida Mid-Winter Regional in Kissimmee in February. His topic at that meeting will be "A Retrograde Journey" in which he will describe a collaborative and creative solution in the restoration of an early eighteenth century London timepiece having a glass chain protector and a portrait outer case.

Our meetings at the Southern Ohio Regional as well as the National Convention in Dayton promise to have interesting presentations as well. Safwat Wahba has agreed to describe the timepieces of Joseph Windmills, master of the Clockmakers Guild of Loondon in 1702, at our April meeting in Wilmigton, Ohio.

At the National Convention meeting in Dayton in June, Craig White will discuss an interesting James Ferguson clock. Ferguson was a highly respected Eighteenth Century astronomer and scientist whose accomplishments include orreries and globes. He was the creator of the eponymous Ferguson paradox. While speaking of the National Convention in Dayton, please remember that Chapter 159 is a co-host for this national event. BH Vice-President Rich Newman and others are putting in countless hours to ensure this will be successful. Please volunteer to help at the Convention. It may only be for an hour or two but your assistance will be greatly appreciated.

The Chapter is in need of a Secretary. It is a far from odious job. Please let us know if you can help.

On another note, as mentioned at the meeting in Springfield last summer, the Educational Horology Chapter (179) is organizing a trip to England from August 22 to September 5, 2020. They plan to visit horological sites in London and environs such as the Clockmakers Guild display at the Science Center, the student room at the British Museum, the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, and Belmont House. Other sites include Salisbury Cathedral (home of the oldest tower clock) as well as Bowes Castle in Scotland (home of the famous Silver Swan automation clock). This promises to be a thoroughly enjoyable and informative tour. Details can be obtained from Advantage Tours International ([lerescu@gmail.com](mailto:lerescu@gmail.com)).

I look forward to seeing you at one of our future meetings. Until then, I wish you the happiest of holiday seasons and good health in the coming year.

Cheerio

Bob

Lafayette. Most of the population of approximately sixteen hundred citizens worked as farmers, merchants and tradesmen. Antebellum plantations such as Goodwood and Ventura provided the cotton that was shipped to mills in New England and Great Britain. Shipped from the industrial revolution factories, cotton cloth cultivated with slave labor, clothed the people of the world. The first railroad line in Florida started construction in 1836. The line was initially mule drawn with wooden tracks and transported goods between St. Marks and Tallahassee. Prosperity eventually replaced the wooden tracks in 1856, and as much as 50,000 bales of cotton moved annually by steam driven locomotives. <sup>4</sup>

## **Towle and Myers**

Both Fredrick Towle and Selim Myers' journey started in the Northeast region of the United States. Fredrick Towle was born on November 23, 1798 in Chester, New Hampshire, a town associated with silversmiths, jewelers and watchmakers. <sup>5</sup> Selim Meyers is listed as having been born in New York in 1818 with no listed family history. <sup>6</sup> Fredrick Towle started his journey south with a failed attempt at a shop in Savannah, Georgia. With a few saved tools from a fire that took his first shop, he continued his pilgrimage to the red dirt hills of Tallahassee, Florida. Arriving in 1827, he was known for living on a Bit (12.5 cents) a day. Committed to a dream of making his fortune through hard work and frugality he opened up the first Tallahassee jewelry store in 1831. By Christmas of 1835, Towle's jewelry store, with a marquee sized sign out front with an image of a large pair case English watch, listed silverware, guns and musical instruments to be found among the watches and jewelry. <sup>7</sup> His advertisement of 1835 in "The Tallahassee" newspaper services offered his services as a jeweler, a watchmaker and a gunsmith. Recorded in the records of *The American Antiquarian Society 1848*, was a watchmaker named Peter Lindsey Warden who completed his apprenticeship with Henry Towle in Haverhill, New Hampshire. Warden traveled to Tallahassee for employment with Towle and Myers as a watchmaker. <sup>8</sup>

As Mr. Towle was expanding his stock and increasing his influence on the city of Tallahassee he was in need of help, resulting in the employment of a fifteen-year-old boy named Selim Myers who would later become his partner. Mr. Towle was the silversmith and Mr. Myers became the watchmaker. An interesting personal aside is that Mr. Towle made the comment that his tall young partner had one eye looking to the left and the other to the right. His assessment was that this is the result of the watchmakers magnifying loupe making the muscle around one eye strong and the other eye muscle weak. My friend and mentor Mr. Jessie spent his whole life working at a watch bench. Recently I visited Mr. Jessie in a Crawfordville rest home. He had the same work-related malady as Mr. Towle described in Mr. Myers general appearance, one eye looking left and the other right.

Mr. Myers died on March 21st in 1881 at the age of 62 or 63. Having suffered with rheumatism for many years Mr. Towle had passed away in New York in 1857. Mr. Towle and Mr. Myers ran a business together and lived next door to one another. Mr. Myer's youngest son was born in 1857 and named Fredrick Towle Myers. The business did not survive the Civil War and ended with the Antebellum Chapter, in 1860. <sup>9</sup>

## The watch Movement, dust cover, dial and gold case

The watch movement is engraved Jn. Cragg, 8 Northampton Sq. serial numbers 31986, and gold cases hallmarked T and M with French-like horse head and English-like passant stamps.

This very heavy (123 grams) solid gold pocket watch is considered to be a contract watch, or a private label pocket watch (Figure 1). The industrial revolution historically started in London in 1760; however, the division of labor in the world of horology started well over fifty years before that date and by 1800, production was up two hundred thousand a year.<sup>10</sup> The English watches of the 19th century was sometimes signed by a maker but more likely by a business man (retailer) who bought finished and unfinished movements) from manufacturing



*Figure 2: Cragg movement of very high finish quality*

centers found in English cities like Coventry and Prescott, England. John Cragg had his eye on the growing former colony to send his movements to be cased in silver or gold by watchmakers and jewelers throughout the new American cities.<sup>11</sup>

The finished watch mechanism sold by Cragg is an example of the high-quality English time pieces produced during this time interval (Figure 2). Including a large diamond end stone, this 15 jeweled lever fusee movement has the finest finish on all of the movement's brass and steel components. In terms of horological theory and design, the detached lever became the escapement technology for modern mechanical watches like Rolex. The attention to detail affords this remarkable mid-19th century pocket watch to be

accurate within a few seconds a day. The sustaining power of the fusee movement lets one wind the Massey three lever watch without interrupting the accuracy of its time-keeping capacity.

With finesse, the dial of the watch reflects the artistry of the English enamellist (Figure 3). All the markers and numerals are in Fibonacci-like proportions to the circumference of the dial, and the watch case itself. The preciseness of the enamel trade craftsman leaves the dial without the appearance of human execution. The dial of the watch is labeled "Towle and Myers, Tallahassee, Fla." This could very well be a label applied at its destination or a distributor in the United States. Another John Cragg watch movement was studied, and has its dial labeled John Cragg, London with the serial number 33633. This watch movement has no evidence of having ever being cased and is in the same condition as when it left the factory in the mid-19th century. The case hinge is missing and the tap holes for the hinge, under microscopic examination, still have the original

gilding on the threads. Upon further examination under a microscope, the dial's red label is surface fired onto the enamel and would be easy to remove. Movement number 33633 is most likely an example of the inventory sent to the Americas, from an English exporter and an early instance of multinational commerce and manufacturing.



*Figure 3: Fine dial with gold hands signed Towle & Myers, Tallahassee Fla.*



*Figure 4: Dust cover engraved "Made Expressly for Towle and Myers Tallahassee, Fla"*

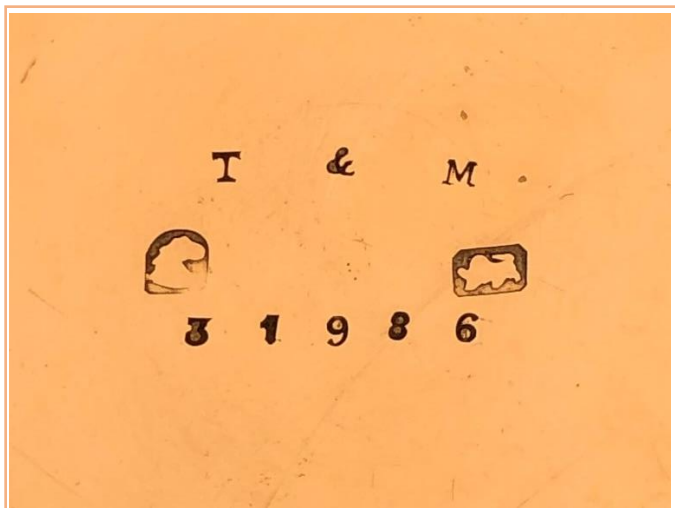
An impressive dust cover found on the Cragg movement #31986 is of a design to protect the movement and its intricate components. This design was used early in the 18th century by famous English makers such as George Graham. It was such a successful design that it was used for over one hundred and fifty years. The finishes on the dust covers are impeccable and stand alone as artful sculpture. Esthetically the dust cover with the Towle and Meyers watch is proudly engraved “Made Expressly for Towle and Myers Tallahassee, Fla”. Such a dust cover of course was a great branding plan by the aforementioned early retailer (Figure 4).

The gold case is a heavy precious metal case that measures a minimum thickness of six tenth of a millimeter throughout. Similar in design to English and continental nonferrous craftwork of the Ninetieth century, it was made to appeal to the fashion sensitive taste of the aspiring early American gentry. The hunter-style watch case is embellished with a corn row, engine turned design that started showing up in the later part of the eighteenth century, exemplified by French horologist A.L Breguet (Figure 5). Although it would require more manufacturing evidence, it is assumed Early American goldsmiths such as E. Rockwell of New York had the capacity to assemble gold watch cases by 1822. Unlike the closely monitored English goldsmith, the early American makers had a vague system of case stamps to define authenticity of precious metals and makers.

The Towle and Myers watch is not an exception to this general guideline. Evident on the reverse side of the case lids are hallmarks common to this period of American watch cases. The Towle and Myers watch has both the French-like Horse head and the English-like Lion Passant (Figure 6). The hallmarks are used to assure the purchaser of precious metal content. The T an M are common letter stamps used by jewelers even today. Curiously, upon examining the reverse engine turned design, there is little microscopic evidence to suggest an after-manufacturing embossing stamp. On high gold content precious metal, any hammering on metal six tenths of a millimeter will always leave a history of the stamping motion on the reversed side. In general, this can be polished away unless there is engraving or engine turning of a geometrical design. All of this leads to speculation about the origin of the watch labeled Towle and Myers. The stem and bow, the rim, bezel and hinges are superbly assembled and soldered to make a seamless home for the impressive J. Gregg watch movement. The watch case is crafted to the highest level and, by today's standards, of a caliber applicable only to high end contemporary decorative arts.




*Figure 5: Heavy, gold engine turned hunter-style watch case embellished with a corn row design*



*Figure 6: Case hallmarks, likely American*

During the American Civil War, the firearm most frequently used was the muzzle loading Springfield rifle, manufactured in Springfield, Massachusetts. The Armory in Springfield has a display of incredible machinery used to take raw steel to make the weapons of war. If one would stop for a moment and look at the sophistication of an ordinary watch from this time period and compare it to the weapons of 1860 there would be a glaring contrast, not only to the intent of both creations, but to the magic of the watch and the genius of its

creators. From the initial conception of the portable time pieces in 16th century Nuremberg, there has been a rapid acceleration that raced past period associated mechanics and craft. Simply put, the firearms in comparison are crude and the pocket watch is a brilliant work of art. This is not to say the Springfield Armory does not have merit- - rather that the timepieces are greatly undervalued and ahead of their time.

Over the last decade I have experienced the good fortune to place my hands on the creations of genius. Timepieces by makers including Fromanteel, Quare and Graham have been brought back to life by the lessons learned in a timeless Panacea serenity. Like a hobo, I am adrift in the tide and the universe that inspired their creation. Mr. Towle and Mr. Myers, you both are long ago gone, and I just wound the mainspring on your watch. I used the same watch key to set the time. It has a comforting tick that both of you experienced. The watch has a thousand sounds of the gears and springs that engage like spinning planets and the far away moons that inspired the historically collective creation. I know the love both of you shared. The watch, the antebellum artifact that you sold at your North Monroe Street Shop in Tallahassee will remain a testimony of the beautiful creations we are capable of conceiving and executing. 

#### Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> *Plantation Culture, Land and Labor in Florida History Florida Memory Division of Library and Information Services*
- <sup>2</sup> Alchin, Linda., *Panfilo de Narvaez Elizabethan Era*. 1528
- <sup>3</sup> Jack Davis, *Gulf, The Making of An American Sea*, pp. 102-104
- <sup>4</sup> Paisley, C., *Tallahassee through the Storebooks*, 1843-1863. The Florida Historical Quarterly, Vol.50, No.2 .111-127 JSTOR
- <sup>5</sup> Towle, Henry, *American Silversmiths*, Rootsweb Ancestry.com
- <sup>6</sup> National Archives and Records administration roll microfilm p.77
- <sup>7</sup> Groene, Gertram, *Ante-Bellum Tallahassee*, Florida Heritage Foundation, Tallahassee. 1971 pp.35-36 (Florida Archives)
- <sup>8</sup> American Antiquarian Society (Florida Archives), Congressional Edition, Volume 267, p.204 (38), Rootsweb Ancestry.com
- <sup>9</sup> United States Census, 1880 index and images, family search <https://family search.org/arc:61903/:1MNZ7-DBH>
- <sup>10</sup> Cuss, Terence Camerer, *The English Watch 1585 – 1970*, 2009
- <sup>11</sup> *Collinson's Directory 1861*, Cragg 8 North Hampton Sq. London, England

#### About the Author:

Ken Rockwell has authored articles and lectured numerous times for the NAWCC. He is an accomplished gold and silversmith and has restored hundreds of antique watches. Ken received the prestigious NAWCC Pritchard Award in 2013. He has a BS from Southern Illinois University, an MS and a Master of Fine Arts from Florida State University.