

How Did *A. L. Breguet's* Carriage Clocks Influence His Business Success?

by Tom Wotruba (CA)

Figure 1. Breguet push quarter hour repeater pocket watch No. 2371 and later renumbered 3313. It was first sold in January 1814 to the queen of Naples.

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Abraham Louis Breguet (1747-1823) was a masterful horologist, who gained an outstanding reputation for his continuous efforts in technical innovations and aesthetic creations in his watches and other timepieces.¹ Breguet's career success started with one underlying fundamental value: He wished to push the boundaries of technical excellence and was always pursuing new directions for progress. He sought ways to increase the running accuracy of his timepieces and to advance their form and function. His inventions affected the movement, such as with the escapement, suspension, and balance wheel, and increased sophistication for winding (e.g., self-winding) and improvements in use (e.g., repeating mechanisms for hours and parts of hours, sensing the time by touch without looking at the dial).

He never ceased working on new inventions and incorporating them into his products, which accounted for Breguet's reputation for never making two items alike. Each item from his workshop was unique, emerging from a set of business practices just the opposite of those

producing economies of scale and production efficiencies. His biographers noted that Breguet was obsessed with the development of every innovative idea he had, even at the expense of temporarily cutting back on production until his ideas were ready for application.² Breguet's timepieces were superior in function, extraordinary and distinctive, novel and fanciful. However, they were limited in quantity and thus expensive when the costs of their production efforts were properly reflected in the price to the customer.

Though primarily a watchmaker (Figure 1), Breguet also made clocks of comparable quality, which, as described many years later, "evinced an innate superiority in conception, design, and execution, which is difficult to convey in words."³ But a question has been raised about Breguet's feelings about his clocks, and particularly his carriage clocks, during his own lifetime. NAWCC member Philip Poniz, who has studied Breguet's records and writings extensively, suggested in his presentation on Breguet carriage clocks in the 32nd Ward Francillon Time Sym-



Figure 2. Breguet gilt brass quarter repeating carriage clock with calendar, moonphases, and alarm, No. 2497, sold in June 1810 to Prince Aldobrandini. ©SOTHEBY'S.

posium in 2012 that Breguet might have felt “I’m better than that” with respect to his carriage clocks.⁴ He offered as evidence that not a word was mentioned about carriage clocks in the hundreds of letters Breguet wrote—as if the clocks didn’t exist! No further reasons were offered for this supposition, but based on Poniz’s understanding from his comprehensive research on Breguet, his observation is interesting to consider. What might be the reason for such a dispirited notion in such an eminent producer? It certainly does not reflect the quality of the clocks he made (Figure 2), but it may have to do with other circumstances involving these extraordinary items, which today are highly prized. In particular, one consideration is the role these clocks played in the financial and business side of Breguet’s enterprise.

Breguet’s passion for pursuing refinements and inno-

vations over increasing production quantities resulted in periods of financial difficulty for his business. His major biographer seven generations later noted some of these financial challenges. For example, after about ten years in business, Breguet’s output was still too small and too slow to generate a profit.⁵ So in 1787 he sought a partner, Xavier Gide, whose investment in the business served to alleviate his critical financial position. Gide became frustrated, however, and the partnership was dissolved four years later. By early 1794 “the financial problems of the business had now become chronic.”⁶ A significant cause of these pressures on Breguet stemmed from his uncertain status during the French Revolution when he felt compelled to leave France and seek safe haven in Switzerland. His Paris workshop was reorganized, so that “as much as possible of the house” could be rented.⁷ The re-

organization of his business required more funds than he had, so Breguet turned to others for assistance with the anticipation that his return to Paris would see the business prosper.⁸ But in 1794 sales were only 19 items, 31 in 1795, 31 in 1796, and 39 in 1797.⁹

It was in this context that Breguet started building carriage clocks. Poniz reported that Breguet's records indicate he made a series of four carriage clocks in 1791. Clock No. 178, sometimes considered the first modern carriage clock, was sold to Napoleon in 1798, but it may have started as one of the 1791 series of four. During this same time period Breguet was developing his *sympathique* watch and clock. He wrote about it in a letter to his son in 1796, saying "I'm hoping, thanks to this, for the greatest promotion of our fame and fortune."¹⁰ This watch is inserted into a clock adapted to receive the watch, and the watch adjusts itself to match the time on the clock without requiring that the watch be opened. Breguet subsequently made some clocks specifically suited for this process (Figure 3), but as one of his biographers noted, those hopes for fame and fortune from this inventive system were disappointed.¹¹

Although Breguet experienced numerous periods of financial difficulty in his early career, his fortunes began to improve near the end of the eighteenth century. Breguet had certainly come to recognize that the market for his luxury and exclusive products existed among the social elite. "Breguet enjoyed his self-imposed task of delighting the fancies of the wealthy."¹² His ingenious products and his eminent reputation as their creator brought him to the attention of royalty, aristocracy, and the wealthy throughout Europe and elsewhere. His watches were not only eagerly purchased by kings, czars, dukes, diplomats, their families, and others in high society but soon many of these patrons were buying numbers of Breguet items for passing them on or selling them to other prominent parties eager to possess and display them as marks of distinction and good taste. For example, Talleyrand, the French statesman and foreign minister for Napoleon, gave Breguet regular orders for watches to sell to his acquaintances, including Ferdinand VII of Spain.¹³ Breguet learned to enjoy his involvement with the royalty and wealthy because they had the means to support his extravagant output. Not only did they desire to be owners of his unique and showy treasures but they also were willing and eager to expand his outreach to others of similar status.

How does this explain Breguet's feelings about his carriage clocks? Consider the manner that Breguet communicated with his prospective buyers. Except for one catalog, Breguet did not choose to publicize his products. Instead, he relied on his clients "to advertise his genius, for he well understood that recommendation was better than self-declaration."¹⁴ If Poniz's observation is at all true, it might imply that Breguet believed his carriage clocks did not offer the same opportunity as his watches for generating "visibility" and "notice" among extended

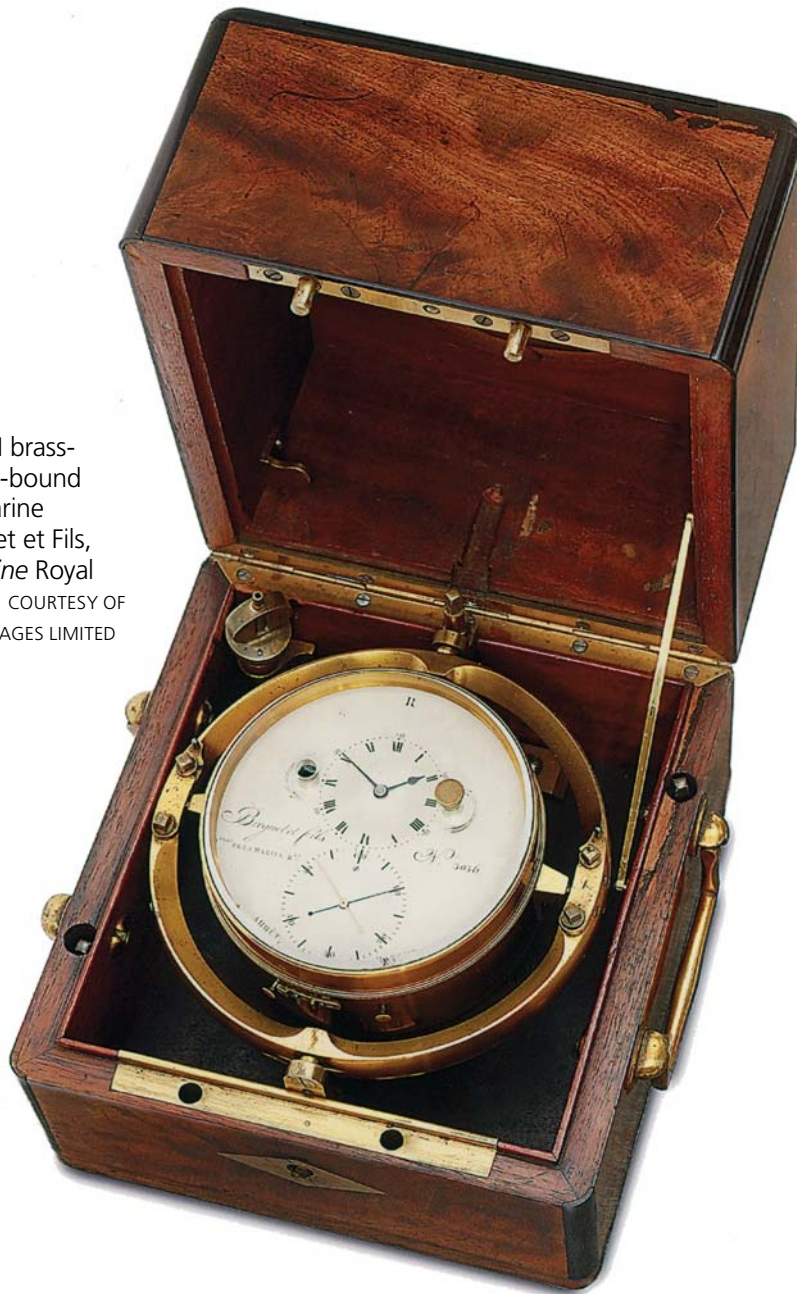


Figure 3. Breguet Sympathique No. 421, ca. 1808, with associated watch No. 239. COURTESY OF BEYER CLOCK AND WATCH MUSEUM, ZURICH.

members of his market. Watches were easily carried by their owners and displayed in suitable social settings. The watches themselves were a convenient means of generating publicity through their display by their proud and praising owners. Despite their name, carriage clocks were not convenient to carry and not showy in casual encounters. Carriage clocks served as an alternative to the watch and were popular because they were trim and neat, had easily read dials, and were ideal for ladies' boudoirs.¹⁵

It is interesting to consider how Breguet might have felt about another type of clock he made—the marine chronometer. Poniz states that, unlike his carriage clocks, Breguet wrote in detail about his marine chronometers in his letters and manuscripts (Figure 4). Breguet decided to devote effort to marine chronometers sometime around 1796, but "this was a ploy of dubious sincerity."¹⁶

Figure 4. Louis XVIII brass-mounted and ebony-bound mahogany 2-day marine chronometer, Breguet et Fils, *Horlogers de la Marine Royal* No. 3056, ca. 1818. COURTESY OF CHRISTIE'S ©CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LIMITED (2010)



The “ploy” seems to refer to Breguet’s response to critics who called him a society watchmaker obsessed with developing futile sophistications. Perhaps Breguet wanted to retort with the marine chronometers to show he could produce something more applicable and practical for an audience more broadly defined than the “social elite.” But his early work with marine chronometers did not seem to do much for his business success, because he sold only a dozen examples in 15 years.¹⁷ He probably soon realized that these items, unlike his watches, were not eagerly sought by his market of royalty and aristocracy, and they may have been less than competitive in price for what this more “practical” market wanted.

His work with marine chronometers did not blossom until around 1815, after his period of financial hardship

during which he needed to confirm that his relationships with the social elite were serving him well personally and professionally. His efforts with marine chronometers reflected a continuation of his desire to prove his reputation for technical skills, and he could come back to that after his social esteem and resulting financial position were more solid. His writing about his chronometers may have been motivated somewhat after he gained more stature, such as earning the title and official position as *Horloger de la Marine* in 1815 and becoming a supply source of chronometers to the navy. His writing also may be a reflection of his confidence and pride in his work, especially when he was no longer being assaulted by his critics.

Breguet’s carriage clocks were marvelous creations, and he certainly should not have been discouraged in

light of their mechanical and artistic qualities. His marine chronometers were equally superb, but perhaps in his mind, at least during his period of financial challenges, neither carriage clocks nor marine chronometers represented what he needed to achieve the publicity to support and maintain his business philosophy and customer acquisition. He believed his watches launched his business success and at the same time served to gratify his desire for recognition, prestige, and social reward. It all seemed to work out successfully. His biographers agree that Breguet's last years were happy, and his unending efforts brought prosperity to him and his firm.¹⁸

Notes

1. Lists and details of these efforts are found in Claude Breguet's *A.L. Breguet, Horologer*, trans. W. A. H. Brown (E.L. Lee, 1962); George Daniels's *The Art of Breguet* (London: Sotheby Parke Bernet, 1974); and Emmanuel Breguet's *Breguet: Watchmakers Since 1775; The Life and Legacy of Abraham Louis Breguet (1747-1823)* (France: Alain de Gourcuff Éditeur, 1997).

2. Emmanuel Breguet, *Breguet: Watchmakers Since 1775*, 135.

3. Charles Allix, *Carriage Clocks: Their History and Development* (Woodbridge, UK: Antique Collectors' Club, 1974), 37.

4. NAWCC member Phillip Poniz's presentation was videotaped and is available as video #924D from NAWCC.org – Library – video resources.

5. Emmanuel Breguet, *Breguet: Watchmakers Since 1775*, 46.

6. Emmanuel Breguet, *Breguet: Watchmakers Since 1775*, 103.

7. Emmanuel Breguet, *Breguet: Watchmakers Since 1775*, 103-104.

8. Emmanuel Breguet, *Breguet: Watchmakers Since 1775*, 107, 95, and 192. This same source records other instances when Abraham Louis Breguet sought financial assistance, even requesting Emperor Napoleon to make monthly purchases over an eighteen-month period.

9. Emmanuel Breguet, *Breguet: Watchmakers Since 1775*, 116-118.

10. Jean-Claude Sabrier, "Breguet, A 'Marketing' Man," in *Breguet Chez Chayette* (Rogers Turners Books, 2010), 54.

11. Claude Breguet, *A.L. Breguet, Horologer*, 5.

12. Daniels, *The Art of Breguet*, 11.

13. Sabrier, "Breguet, A 'Marketing' Man," 55. Emmanuel Breguet, *Breguet: Watchmakers Since 1775*, 67.

14. Daniels, *The Art of Breguet*, 9.

15. Ronald Pearsall, "Watches and Portable Clocks," in *A Connoisseur's Guide to Antique Clocks & Watches* (New York: Smithmark Publishers, 1997), 83-103, especially 97-98.

16. Emmanuel Breguet, *Breguet: Watchmakers Since 1775*, 118. On page 84 in *The Art of Breguet* Daniels stated that Breguet did not seem to have interested himself in marine chronometers until about 1815 when he was appointed as *Horologer de la Marine*.

17. Emmanuel Breguet, *Breguet: Watchmakers Since 1775*, 246.

18. Daniels, *The Art of Breguet*, 12. Claude Breguet, *A.L. Breguet, Horologer*, 10.

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About the Author

Tom Wotruba retired as a university professor after a teaching career of more than 30 years. During that time he published textbooks and many articles in academic journals. He has been a carriage clock enthusiast for at least 25 years, and since leaving academia he has written articles that have appeared in the *NAWCC Bulletin*, *Clocks Magazine*, *Horological Journal*, and *Antiquarian Horology*, as well as *Carriage Way*, the newsletter of the NAWCC International Carriage Clock Chapter 195, for which he is a member of the executive committee.