

Two William B. Lorton “Iron Front” Clocks Made to His May 1, 1855, Patent Design

by Lee Davis, FNAWCC* (PA)

William B. Lorton of New York City was a metalworker, a designer of clock fronts, and apparently an occasional dealer in clocks assembled to sell. Little is known about the man and his work, but he had at least two patents for metal clock fronts. This article provides a brief review of references to Lorton found in earlier *NAWCC Bulletins* and two beautiful William B. Lorton clock fronts cast to his May 1, 1855, design patent no. 700 (Figure 1).

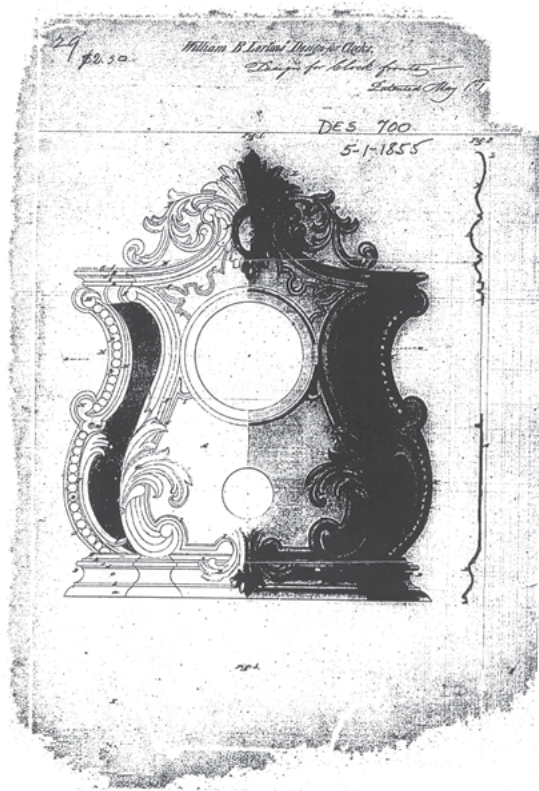


Figure 1. One of William B. Lorton’s iron front schematics submitted with the patent application showing the clock front as it would appear when cast. This drawing was accompanied by two other drawings showing a side view and a detailed front view, with letters keyed to the various areas. Also included was a description of what the decorative areas would look like when cast. Lorton was granted a patent for his design on May 1, 1855.

References to William B. Lorton in earlier *NAWCC Bulletins* include the following:

- *NAWCC Bulletin* No. 262 has a brief notation¹ discussing an ogee shelf clock with a Lorton label placing him at One Cortland Street. The *New York City Directory* puts him at this address from 1857 to 1861.
- *NAWCC Bulletin* No. 294 includes an Answer Box inquiry² presenting a different style of iron front clock in the cathedral style. Paul Heffner found William B. Lorton listed in the *New York City Directories* as follows: 1853–1854: clock casemaker 3 Dutch St; also there in 1854–1855; 1856–1857 not listed; and 1857–1858 to 1860–1861: at 1 Courtland St. This inquiry also shows a label with Lorton’s name and the words “Manufacturer of American Clocks, No. 1 Courtland St., (Gilsey Building). (One door from Broadway.) New York, Manufactory and Papier-Mache Works, No. 3 Dutch- Street.” Thus, Lorton may have been operating at two locations simultaneously. The movement in this cathedral iron front is unmarked, but Heffner suspected Lorton bought it from Sperry & Bryant, based on earlier work done by Snowden Taylor and published in his book *Forestville Clockmakers*.³
- *NAWCC Bulletin* No. 339⁴ continues the discussion on William Lorton and shows a colorful iron front clock with a bird and floral motif with “Lorton’s Patent’s Applied For” cast on the inside. At the time of the writing of the Research Activities and News column, the patent number and design information for this clock front had not yet surfaced, and Snowden Taylor speculated that it may have been the practice to secure a patent on one style of clock front and then use the word “Patent” on other styles being produced at or near the same time period. This clock has no label inside, so the retailer is unknown. However, the



Figure 2. Two iron front clocks cast by William B. Lorton in accordance with his patent design no. 700 dated May 1, 1855. Each clock weighs about 19.5 lb. and is 16" wide by 22" high. A magnet will attach to each case. Nicely painted flower arrangements adorn each, with the artist probably given freedom to arrange as desired. The cartouche of the Union shield on the left clock may have reflected the gathering national feelings of the time on the approaching Civil War.

same clock pictured in the column carries the label of "CROSBY & VOSBURG" at "No. 1 Courtland St./ (No. 4 Gilsey Building,)." The original text continues: "...and the under label was deduced as that of Bristol Brass & Clock Co. , Depot, 3 Courtland Street." So it seems that William Lorton was doing business with and was a close neighbor of Crosby & Vosburg in the mid-1850s. Page 500 of that issue also shows Lorton's patent No. 641 for the cathedral clock front dated April 25, 1854, which matches the clock shown in reference 2.

The two clocks on which this article is based (Figure 2) were made to the May 1, 1855, patent description; they are identical castings but painted differently—perhaps by the same artist. Each clock measures 21.5" high x 16.5" wide and weighs just over 19.5 pounds. The clock front is attached to the custom-built wood box, which houses the movement and gong by two ears cast into the clock front on the top and the

bottom and held fast to the box by screws, which may be seen from the back side of the clock. There are no feet. The casting is done so that the angle of the sides provides the necessary support for the clock to stand unaided by the box. In fact, the box does not touch the surface on which the clock is placed.

Figure 3 shows the label of the clock with the patriotic shield in the top cartouche, which states "Connecticut Clock Manufacturers/No. 54 John Street/New York." However, the "54 John" reference has been blackened out and may have been done before the clock was sold, suggesting and perhaps indicating the street number was no longer accurate at the time of the sale.

The movement (Figure 4) looks to be identical to a movement in Figures 127 and 116 by the Ansonia Brass Co. in Tran Duy Ly's 1998 book *Ansonia Clocks and Watches*.⁵ The movement, although of some interest, is not necessarily significant in shedding



Figure 3. The label attached to the backboard of the clock with the Union shield. Spittler and Bailey report this company being in New York ca. 1850–72, with several locations.⁶ This label has 54 John Street underneath the blacked out area and may have been done at the factory when the company had located to one of their later addresses.

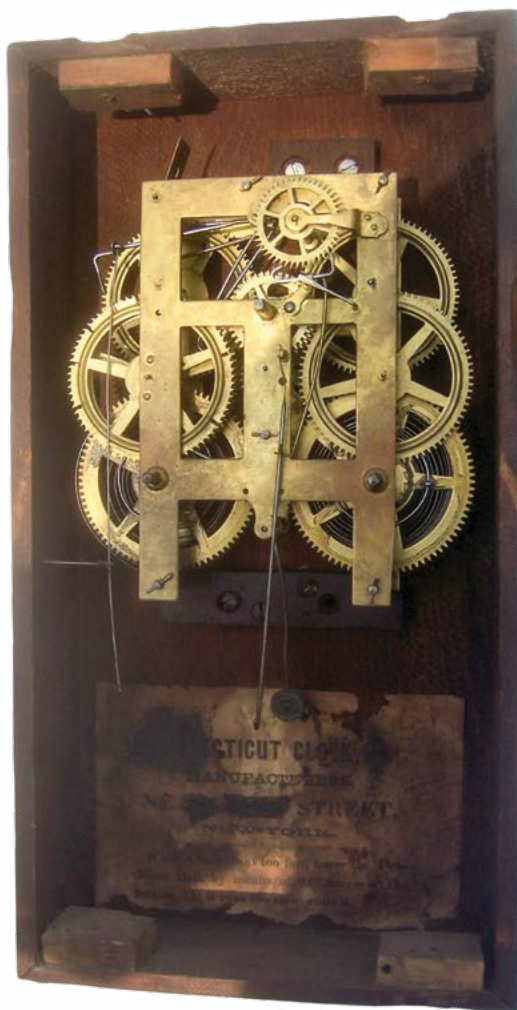


Figure 4. The unmarked 8-day spring-driven movement in the Union shield clock is thought to be by the Ansonia Clock Co.



Figure 5. Side view of both clocks illustrating the reddish-brown faux graining; the gold outlines follow the relief casting decorations and enclose more floral decorations. Note the angular curvature of the base of each clock designed to support the case without the use of rear legs on the attached box behind which houses the movement.

more light on these upscale cast front clocks because Lorton was probably getting movements from various sources when he could find them at prices that fit his budget.

Of special interest (at least to the author) are the beautiful floral arrangements and decorations painted on these clocks. Several varieties of flowers are painted in complementary colors and arranged to fill the available space. The flowers are of various sizes and orientations; some are full frontal view, and others are from more of a side angle. The sides (Figure 5), owing to their shallow angle, are also visible from the full frontal view and they too are decorated with similar flowers arranged in a trailing vine motif. Judging from the deftness and design, I suspect both clocks were painted by the same hand. The cartouche at top center (Figure 6) may have been painted to order with the Union crest on one clock and a symbolic design on the other.

A copy of Lorton's patent design for this clock front survives and is referenced by the drawing and a three-page explanation describing the various scrolls, the crest, the upper cornice, the embellishments, shape, appearance, ornamental rosettes, etc., but, obviously, not the applied decorations. The choice and placement of the flowers may have been the artist's choice, and like most of the work contracted out (or done in house), we may never know the names of these unsung artists.

Acknowledgments

I thank Bill Iles, Mary Jane Dapkus, and the late Ed LaFond Jr. for help in putting this article together.



Figure 6. Front view of the Lorton cast-iron clock front with an orange and gilt cartouche decoration, and the floral decoration enclosed by a gold line following the relief raised cast line, and showing more subtle faux graining around the base and edges.

References

1. Snowden Taylor. Research Activities and News. "More Unusual "Clockmakers" from Labels, etc." *NAWCC Bulletin*, No. 262 (October 1989):420.
2. Paul Heffner. Answer Box. "A William B. Lorton Clock." *NAWCC Bulletin*, No. 294 (February 1995):107–108.
3. Kenneth D. Roberts and Snowden Taylor. *Forestville Clockmakers*. Fitzwilliam, NH: Ken Roberts Publishing, 1992.
4. Snowden Taylor. Research Activities and News. "More on William B. Lorton, New York, NY." *NAWCC Bulletin*, No. 339 (August 2002):499–500.
5. Tran Duy Ly. *Ansonia Clocks and Watches*. 2nd ed. Evanston, IL: Arlington Book Co., 1998.
6. Sonya L. and Thomas J. Spittler and Chris Bailey. *American Clockmakers and Watchmakers*. Vol. 3. Fairfax, VA: Arlington Book Co., 2000.

About the Author

Lee Davis joined the NAWCC in 1966. He has written several articles for the *NAWCC Bulletin* and the *Watch & Clock Bulletin* and is the author of *NAWCC Bulletin Supplement No. 18*.

Davis was a national director from 1985 to 1989, acting executive director in 1988 and 2001, and acting *NAWCC Bulletin* editor in 1988. He is a current member of the Nominating and Elections Committee.

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