A Longcase Movement from the Workshop of George Graham?

Surprises often await restorers inside the cases of old clocks, but horological surprises don’t usually come any bigger than this one.

By Peter Tol (NJ)

Some time in the 1670s, a young Englishman named John Hance (1645-1707) emigrated to America. He landed in New Jersey, the territory that had just been ceded to England by the New Netherlands. John Hance settled down in the coastal town of Rumson and became a wealthy man, eventually owning more than 550 acres (235 hectares) of land between the present towns of Rumson and Bay Head. As a magistrate, justice, and deputy, he became a leading figure in the early colonial affairs of New Jersey. This would seem to indicate that he did not come to America as a poor immigrant but rather as an educated young man with “connections.” The surname Hance was and still is relatively rare in both the United Kingdom and the United States. At the end of the nineteenth century a member of the English side of Hance’s family thoroughly researched his roots and postulated that the earli-
est ancestor came over with “the Conqueror,” by which he meant William the Conqueror, who invaded England in 1066 with an army of Norman, Breton, Flemish, and French soldiers. A manor in Bedfordshire was said to have been the reward for this early ancestor. The name Hance (or Hann/Haunce/Hands) is thought to have been derived from the Germanic first name Hans or Johan. The British family crest, or coat of arms, carries a French motto but that is not much proof of Norman origins, because French was the accepted language in England for centuries.

Once in America, John Hance married Elizabeth Hanson (1645-1732). They had several children, thus founding the New Jersey branch of the Hance family tree. The fascinating and relevant part of this story is that ever since John Hance settled in Rumson, many of his descendants continued to live and work in that town or its immediate vicinity. The owner of the clock that is the subject of this article in fact lives a mere 50 miles away from where John Hance first settled. Several years ago, he asked me to put the clock in working order again. He had recently inherited it from a cousin who also happened to be his godmother. The clock stood in her house in Maine for about 40 years. That was the only time, she had often said, that the clock had been “out of state.”

I went to the owner’s house and found a solid mahogany case just under 8 ft. tall with an unsigned painted dial. The case (Figure 1) is simple and straightforward. It has bracket feet, a well-proportioned trunk, a long door and a rather shallow swan-neck hood. On either side of the hood door there are fluted pillars with wooden bases and caps. The two wooden rosettes are gilded. The oval side windows add to the overall elegant appearance of the case. I showed pictures of the case to David Sperling (NJ), whose expertise in American clocks and their cases could help me in establishing the birthplace of this particular case. He decided that it was certainly not a New Jersey case and agreed with me that it had been made in England, possibly in the north of the country.

The 13-inch dial with Roman hour and Arabic minute numerals was most likely made by Osborne (Figure 2). Attached to the dial is a false plate stamped Osborne’s Manufactory, Birmingham. The slightly damaged dial looks original in every way, and I could not find any evidence of earlier restorations. What was presumably once a “white” or “off-white” color has faded to a very light gray over the past two hundred years. There are flowers in the dial corners in shades of red and green, surrounded by raised gesso, and a similar flower motif appears in the arch. Even with the help of a black light I was unable to discover whether the oval in the arch center once contained more flowers or, perhaps, the name of a clockmaker, retailer, or even an owner. The small hole between the winding holes is unused but once held the post for the pointer calendar mechanism. A close inspection of the front and back of the dial revealed no names or initials. Nevertheless, I believe that both dial and false plate were made between 1770 and 1800, the period that Brian Loomes calls “Period One” in his book, Painted Dial Clocks. The minute and hour hands are appropriate to the period; the brass second hand and, possibly, the calendar pointer are later replacements.

I took the dial off the false plate to see how the pointer calendar was driven (Figure 3). The upper part of the snail is a 24-tooth wheel that engages with a 48-tooth intermediate wheel. The 31-tooth star wheel is knocked on once a day by a pin close to the center of the intermediate wheel. A jumper spring is attached to the false plate. Whoever made the new pointer calendar mechanism must have concluded that the addition of the false plate did not give him enough space to use the available option of a post screwed into the back of the dial.

So far, nothing very special.

The big surprise came when I took off the false plate and saw a most interesting 8-day movement: five latched pillars and an

Figure 3. Arrow points to intermediate-wheel pin used to advance the star wheel.
unusual rack-striking arrangement (Figure 4). The movement is not signed or numbered. The rack, hook, lifting piece, and gathering pallet are all on arbors that fit between the back plate and cocks on the front plate (Figure 5). Of these, only the arbor with its fixed gathering pallet must be installed between the plates when assembling the movement. The corresponding cock on the front plate makes setting up the strike train much easier. The rack has no spring and only gravity makes it fall. The front and back plates are of high quality and show no casting flaws. Unused holes in the front and back plates suggest that the movement was originally equipped with bolt-and-shutter maintaining power. The latch of the fifth pillar (i.e., at six o’clock) was missing and a new one was made. Stamped into the front plate around the pillar holes are tiny triangular black marks. These marks appear at the pillar holes at the four dial corners, but, curiously, not at the fifth pillar hole. If a reader has ever seen similar marks on a (London) longcase movement, I would be grateful to hear of it. These marks may have been a way of identifying a movement made for another clockmaker. Or, it may have been a mix-up during production, as suggested by Jeremy Evans, formerly of the British Museum (see below). The anchor escapement has a large arbor separation (Figure 6). The type of back cock (Figure 7) was used by Tompion, Graham, and Delander around 1710, as shown on page 174 of John Robey’s *The Longcase Reference Book*. On page 254 of that book I found a picture of a strikingly similar movement signed by Daniel Delander, with a detailed description of the rack striking. Realizing that this movement might be something special, I called my friend Dennis Haynes who suggested that I contact Dr. Robey. I did so and mailed a number of pictures to him. His immediate reaction was that this movement had come from the Tompion/Graham workshop and that it had probably been designed by George Graham. The Tompion/Graham partnership lasted just three years, from 1711 to 1713.

Clearly intrigued by the pictures, Dr. Robey asked the opinion of his friend Jeremy Evans, former curator of horology at the British Museum and the recognized expert on Thomas Tompion and George Graham. Mr. Evans agreed that the movement was certainly made by a top London clockmaker but put its manufacture some time after 1720. He thought that the movement could have been made by Richard Colley or Joseph Antram, or another London clockmaker who was closely associated with the “network.” John Robey, however, is still convinced that the movement was manufactured in the Graham workshop. Readers will know that at that time established London clockmakers would regularly supply movements to their network of friends and competitors who in turn sold the completed clocks under their own name.

Let’s return to the history of this clock. This London clock was likely sold to a customer between 1710 and 1725. Some time between those years and the end of the
In the absence of historical evidence, it is not too difficult to imagine an event or series of events that led to the separation of dial and movement. The dial could have been stolen from a clock repairer’s shop where it had been disassembled for service; the dial may have been lost in the move from one house to another after an overly cautious owner packed the movement in one box and the dial in another; but the more likely cause would have been a fire at a time when firefighting and firefighting equipment were primitive or nonexistent, especially in the countryside. This expensive long-case clock may have stood in a manor that burned down. The fire destroyed the case and falling ceiling beams damaged the arched dial to such an extent that it was deemed irreparable and subsequently discarded or sold as scrap metal. However, the movement was miraculously saved. That’s the only thing we know for certain. What we do not know is how long the movement remained in its orphaned state. At some point during the last decades of the eighteenth century it was given to a clockmaker or clock repairer with the request “to make a clock of it again.” This person bought a new white dial with false plate, made a new calendar pointer mechanism and put the thus assembled “marriage” in a new custom-made English mahogany case. Incidentally, that part of the marriage is flawless, because dial, hood door, and mask fit perfectly, thus suggesting that the transition from old movement to new clock happened at the same time and not in various subsequent stages. Whoever did the conversion probably did not realize that he was dealing with a valuable London movement. It might have made more sense to attach it to an old brass dial or perhaps even to a newly made brass dial, even though brass dials were fast losing their fashionable status at that time. Because of changing tastes the owner of the movement may even have insisted that a white dial be used. In this scenario (Osborne white dial, false plate, and English mahogany case) it is most unlikely that the original London clock came to America in the course of the eighteenth century and that the conversion to its present state was done in New Jersey or one of its surrounding clockmaking areas.

That leads to the conclusion that the present clock arrived in America at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was acquired by one of the descendants of the patriarch John Hance for use in the family house in the Rumson area of New Jersey where it remained, except for a 40-year interval in Maine. A strong family awareness and the well-documented history of family members’ continued residence in New Jersey support this view.

I thank the owner of the clock for giving me access to his family documents, including a detailed genealogical map starting with the patriarch, John Hance. I found many supporting facts in the book History of Rumson, New Jersey, 1665-1965, published in 1965 by the Rumson Improvement Association.

About the Author
Peter Tol was born in the Netherlands, earned a law degree at the University of Amsterdam, and spent most of his career as an executive in the reinsurance industry. He moved from the Netherlands to New Jersey in 1975 and is now retired. He has been collecting and dealing in antique clocks for over 40 years. His articles have appeared in Clocks Magazine and Tijdschrift, a Dutch publication. Peter can be reached at pjtolmail@yahoo.com.
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