

Bookreview

The Clock and Watch Makers American Advertiser (Being a compilation of Advertisements of the Trade, including those of the Mathematical and Philosophical Instrument Makers, Published in the News-Papers of the American Colonies and States, from AD 1707 to 1800)

By J. Carter Harris

Antiquarian Horological Society, Ticehurst UK, published 2003, ISBN 0 901180 42 4, 51cm x 22cm, 544 pages, Name Index, Subject Index, Date Index. Available at AHS, <http://www.ahsoc.demon.co.uk/pubs.html> UKP 36 (nonmembers)/UKP 24 (members), plus shipping.

Anybody looking for another pretty book about historic American horologists need read no further, there are no pictures in this book, and the layout is strictly utilitarian. But if you are a serious horological researcher, if you are somebody who craves access to hard to find primary source material, you will feel deep gratitude that Carter Harris (currently the Curator at the National Watch and Clock Museum in Columbia PA, USA) in the late 1970s and early 1980s must have spent countless hours sifting through dusty old volumes of major American Newspapers of the 18th century, painstakingly transcribing every advertisement he could find relating to clock and watch makers and related trades.

This labor of love produced 480 pages, containing the transcripts of 2175 advertisements by over 800 tradesmen. The compilation covers the time before and after the American revolution, when there was no horological “industry” in America, just a few scattered immigrant clock and watchmakers trying to squeeze out a living under difficult circumstances. Most components and materials, even basic ones like brass or steel, were imported – and scarce, and demand for timepieces was limited. The advertisements provide a rare glimpse into an aspect of horological history, which up to now has been barely documented, into a time when communication and transportation systems were virtually unexisting, and the only market was local.

These ads run the full scale of detailed product descriptions (often of a specific piece currently for sale), announcements of new business ventures, openings for apprentices, offering of repair services, and the announcements of the captains of trading ships that had reached American ports with varied lists of goods, including horological pieces and related materials. A limited, but fascinating number of entries amount to political lobbying for (or against) certain trade policies and import duties. The advertisements also offer interesting insights into what other – non-horological- products and services these craftsmen offered in this period.

Thanks to the comprehensive indexes the book also is a major reference work providing details on the life, products and business practices of early American horologist unlikely to be found in any of the traditional reference books. Unless you enjoy spending hundreds of hours persueing the historic newspapers yourself –inspite of price - this book

is a good buy. It is a “must-buy” title for any horological library that aims to be a research tool.

Given the propensity of the average reader to prefer ready-made, pre-digested information over access to original source material I am afraid that this book never will be a horological bestseller. Indeed 15 years have passed between the completion of the text and its publication, probably an indication of reluctant publishers. All-the-more the author and the Antiquarian Horological Society deserve our gratitude for taking the risk of publishing this important contribution to early American horology.

Fortunat Mueller-Maerki. Sussex, New Jersey