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A HISTORY OF THE HARRISON COUNTY TOWER CLOCK

by Cherry Lou Violette

The ornate public buildings erected between the last half of the 19th and first quarter of the 20th centuries were external symbols of the wealth and philosophy of society as a whole. The courthouse built on Peter Whetstone Square in Marshall, Texas is an example of the elaborate Classical Revival style that was so popular in the South. It reflects the confident spirit and rapidly expanding economy of the town at the turn of the century!

The dome of the building was designed with four dormers to frame the dials of a tower clock. A cupola on top of the dome holds the bell. The expense involved in buying and housing a public clock indicates that the town was proud of its conveniences and was willing to raise and spend the money for them.

The clock in the dome is an E. Howard Round Top #2 made by the E. Howard Clock Company which is still in business in Waltham, Massachusetts. It stands as it stood eighty years ago, complete with paint, pin striping and the original framed directions for its operation. It was recently cleaned and oiled but does not run as one weight cable has parted. The other cable and some of the pulleys also need replacement.

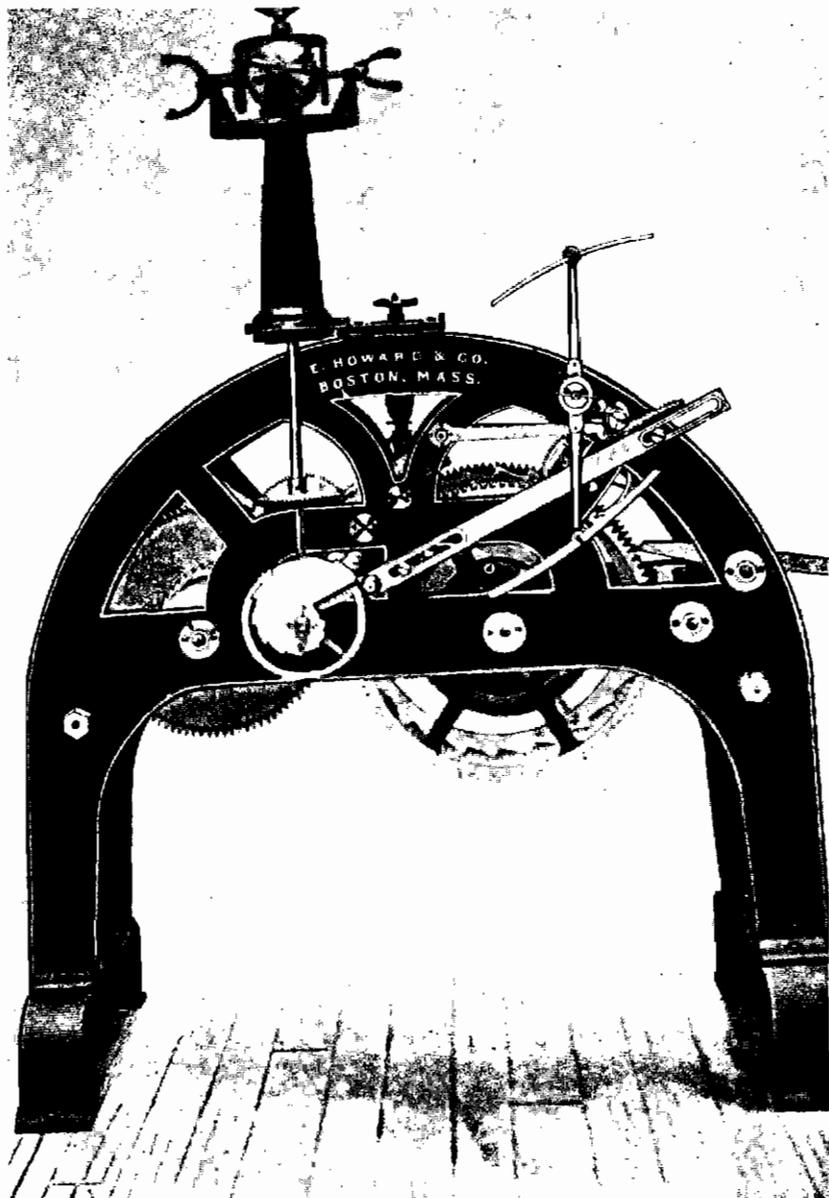
The appeal of an old clock is that it speaks to us in the same voice heard by our fathers and grandfathers. It does not need to be 'modernized' like an old house, or given special 'hands-off' care in an hermetically controlled museum. It is there for us to use and enjoy, requiring only a minimum of care and attention and regular winding.

The E. Howard tower clock was as good a clock as could be purchased in 1900 and many of them are telling time accurately today. Concerning the quality of these clocks, the 1923 E. Howard Clock Company catalog states: "... the reputation of E. Howard clocks for dependability has become so enhanced as the years have passed, that today they are the accepted standard, everywhere, and are recognized as the finest clocks in the world."

The clock in the Harrison County Courthouse is similar to the line drawing which has been reproduced with permission from the E. Howard Clock Company.⁷ It is a striking clock with the time mechanism on the left and the striking mechanism on the right.

The basic difference between tower clocks and ordinary weight driven clocks is one of size. As in any clock, the time-keeping mechan-

ism consists of four different groups of parts: the driving mechanism, the controlling mechanism, the transmitting mechanism and the indicating mechanism.³ The public is usually concerned with only one part of a tower clock, or any clock, and that is the indicating mechanism.



Clock mechanism, similar to the clock in the Harrison County Courthouse on Peter Whetstone Square.

The purpose of a clock is to tell time, so the dial should be easily seen from the ground. The general rule of thumb is that the dial should be about one foot in diameter for every ten feet of height from the pavement. The hours are usually indicated with Roman numerals, known as chapters. The chapter and minute markings should occupy about one third of the dial for clarity.⁴

Dials may be made of wood, copper, metal or stone; however, dials that are illuminated at night are usually made of glass. The four dials in the courthouse are glass with the chapters carried on a metal ring. The catalog states, "We recommend that all dials for illumination over forty-two inches in diameter be made of skeleton iron frame type glazed with ground plate glass."⁵ The cost of the clock with one dial was approximately \$600. Each additional dial cost \$25 for the motion works. Dials were usually made locally with the factory supplying hands and chapter rings.⁶ Unfortunately there is no record of the actual cost of the clock or installation as all financial records from the period appear to have been destroyed.

The hands must be different lengths so they can be easily read from the ground. The tip of the hour hand should just touch the numerals while the minute hand should cover about two thirds of them. The tip of the hour hand should be the same width as the thick part of the numerals while the tip of the minute hand should be the same width as the minute markings.⁷ The hands on the local clock are made of wood for lightness and have hollow metal counterpoises for balance. The counterpoise is painted white so that it can not be seen from the ground and confused with the minute hand. The chapter markings and hands are clearly visible from all parts of Peter Whetstone Square.

The striking mechanism of the clock also has four different sections. Only one, the bell, which is the indicating portion, is of any interest to the general public. The bell above the dome is three feet in diameter and is struck with a fifty pound hammer blow. The upper end of the cable that leads from the clock works and the hammer can be seen protruding from the south side of the bell tower on the dome. The rate of strike can be controlled by adjusting the angle of the blades on the air brake of the strike mechanism. The bell is engraved with the names of the courthouse architects, Gordon and Lancaster; the contractors, Sonnefield and Emmins; the county judge, H. T. Littlejohn; and the county commissioners.⁸ Unfortunately, the bell was given a coat of paint during the recent restoration, resulting in a strident clang. It is possible that this paint could be removed if the clock were ever restored to running order.

This is not the first tower clock to have graced the city, as records tell us of the collapse and fall of a tower clock in the courthouse that

was destroyed by fire on June 7th, 1899. The fire reportedly began when sparks from a tinsmith's fire spread to the many birds' nests under the eaves of the roof." This building was only ten years old when it burned but there are no records indicating the make or describing the installation of the clock.

One of the ironies of the tragedy is that at least one resident of Marshall at the time of the construction of the previous courthouse on Peter Whetstone Square, felt the need for a public clock. In a letter to the editor of the "Texas Republican" on July 19, 1849, he wrote:

Why should not Marshall have a Town Clock! Our courthouse, when completed, will be an elegant building, dedicated to the purposes of public utility, and consecrated as a temple of order and justice. Let us raise upon its summit, to be seen by all, to be admired by all, a dial plate marking the hours, counting the minutes, and measuring the days as they glide past us forever.

He goes on to suggest that a fund-raising project could be undertaken to pay for the clock.

Perhaps some of our public-spirited young men will form a voluntary association, and call upon the citizens generally to receive their contributions. The project has only to be put in motion, and it will be sustained. The ladies will patronize it, and an enterprize never yet failed which they encouraged and assisted.¹⁰

An editorial answer to this letter was published in the August 23, 1849. It said in part:

...it occurs to us that the county revenue should not be appropriated for the purpose of ornament and utility which but a small portion of the citizens could ordinarily enjoy. Those who have the benefit should pay the expense.

We therefore suggest that it be laid aside indefinitely. If this is not satisfactory, let the people of Marshall and its vicinity organize a committee of ways and means, pay over the requisite amount, and the clock will be forthcoming. But, as a caution, we will remark that we have seen in our time, more than one town clock that cost more than it was worth to make it tell the truth, and others that couldn't tell it at all.¹¹

There is no record of whether a clock was ever installed in this courthouse which was used from 1851 to 1888, but the succeeding courthouse was built with a cupola for a clock which apparently ran and regulated the town's activities until its untimely destruction in the fire of 1899.

After the fire, the county commissioners lost no time planning for the construction of a new courthouse. The minutes of the Commissioners' Court on August 16, 1899 record an "Order Authorizing Issuance of Court House Bonds . . . for the purpose of erecting a three story and basement fire proof courthouse."¹²

There are only a few references to the clock in the minutes of succeeding meetings. The first is on October 16th, 1899 and records that "... the letting of contracts for steam heating, plumbing, and electric wiring of courthouse and clock be deferred to Monday, October 23rd." On that date the record shows that "... the electric wiring and clock for (the) new courthouse be deferred until the regular term of ... Nov. 13." On November 13th the wiring contract for \$1641.81 was approved to Ark. & Texas Consolidated Coal & Ice Co. but no mention was made of the clock. On September 19th, 1900, the minutes state: "Ordered that the contract for the clock for the new courthouse be awarded to John H. Cooper according to his bid as filed."

As financial records and invoices from this period apparently have been discarded, there is no way to determine the exact cost of the clock or who supervised its installation. The only other references to it appear indirectly. On May 13, 1901 the city was instructed to move the bell tower from the courthouse lawn, which would indicate that the bell, or a bell, had already been placed in the cupola above the clock. A note on June 17, 1901 indicates that the courthouse janitor was to be paid \$25 a month and that one of his duties was to wind the clock.

Today, eighty years after its construction, the exterior of the courthouse has been repaired and painted. Lady Justicia and the bronze eagles have been strengthened with fiberglass but the clock sits, waiting. It does need minor repair and replacement of the cables and possibly some of the pulleys, but the work can easily be done if the funds are made available. So might we ask, in the words of another Marshall resident of over 130 years ago, "Why should not Marshall have a Town Clock?"

NOTES

¹The E. Howard Clock Company, *Tower and Street Clocks*, a reprint of the 1923 catalog, (Arlington, Va.), 5.

²Illustration courtesy of the E. Howard Clock Company.

³Willis I. Milham, *Time & Timekeepers*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1942, 291.

⁴Ward L. Goodrich, *The Modern Clock* (Fox River Grove, Illinois), 268-271.

⁵*Tower and Street Clocks*, 22.

⁶D. J. Blackwell, Vice President, the E. Howard Clock Company, personal correspondence.

⁷Goodrich, 441-443.

⁸*Marshall News Messenger*, "Courthouse Bell Has Inscription," Nov. 10, 1963.

⁹*Longview Morning Journal*, Oct. 10, 1971.

¹⁰*The Texas Republican*, July 19, 1849.

¹¹*The Texas Republican*, August 23, 1849.

¹²*Minutes of the Commissioners' Court*, 1899-1904.