

Walter H. Durfee
The Father of the Modern Grandfather Clock
Program by Jay Holloway (2012)

Born: March 23, 1857 in Providence RI

Parents: Elisha A. Durfee and Sarah Law (Allen) Durfee

Ancestors: Quaker ancestors who settled in the area in the 1640's.

Family Info:

Elisha A. Durfee, Walter's father ran Durfee Mill which manufactured clothing during the Civil War they supplied the overcoats to the Union army.

Fred Durfee, his uncle, was a mason by trade and he built the Rhode Island Hospital.

Samuel B. Durfee, an uncle, was a builder and held the office of Superintendent of Highways in Providence.

Education: Walter went to the Providence RI Public Schools and studied to be an architect. After school, he did follow the trade of architecture but quickly left for another field.

In 1877 at the age of 20, Walter went into business for himself selling "antiques" at 295 High Street in Providence RI.



A quick history of the Tall Case Clock in America. Tall Case clocks were mostly English in origin and a few of the early settlers in America brought this knowledge with them to the new country. Brass was expensive and the British limited the export of brass to America. This made the early American brass clocks expensive. Many had English movements in American cases with fewer having American works in American cases. Tall case clocks were a luxury and they carried a high price. They were a non-production item.

In 1806 Eli Terry signs an agreement to manufacture 4,000 clock movements (all of wood) in one year. Skilled craftsmen generally could build 6 to 10 a year. He succeeded in this venture and Terry truly established “mass production” in 1816 with totally interchangeable parts for clocks.

As American manufacturing grew so did the knowledge and ability to produce brass in this country grew. The wood works clocks lost out to the brass works clocks and by the early 1830’s everyone was producing low cost clocks. Tall case clock manufacturing virtually ceased.

Walter’s business plan was to establish a good clientele while developing a reputation for having high quality antiques. To do this he traveled throughout the New England for high quality American and English antiques. He began to purchase ‘tall case clocks’ which we call “grandfather clocks”. Mr. Durfee claimed that he bought and sold over 400 tall case clocks in his first 8 years in business.

By mid 1880, Durfee decided to purchase new English bracket clocks and resell them in his antique shop in Providence RI. It was from this venture that Walter Durfee met the fine quality clock manufacturer in London of Jennens and Sons. Jennens and Sons sold their clocks directly to the public but also through leading jewelry stores in London, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Glasgow, New York and Boston. Jennens saw Durfee as another outlet for their products.

Tall case clocks had a renewed popularity due to the song by William Clay Work know as “Grandfathers Clock”. Durfee took this theme and began to have Jennens & Sons make tall case clocks for him.



Fig. 2 A mahogany case 2-weighted tall clock made by Walter Durfee around 1885.

The traditional design of these “new” Grandfather clocks by Jennens and Sons was:

1. Styled after the early American Tall Case clocks
2. Solid brass movement with a rack and snail strike
3. Movements were usually stamped “Walter H Durfee, Providence” in the middle of the back plate about one inch up from the bottom
4. Most were mahogany cases
5. Solid wooden door
6. Heavy brass dial
7. Simple calendar
8. Seconds bit
9. Coiled Gong strike
10. Moon dial with gold painted stars on a dark blue background

The clocks were being sent unassembled to Providence RI where Durfee would have them assembled for sale. Due to the success of the new Grandfather clocks, Durfee had to open up a new location in Providence, 283 High Street, which he called his manufactory.

In 1886 Walter Durfee on a trip to England meet J. Harrington, an Englishman who had just developed and patented a “bell chime” of exceptional high quality that was used in opera houses and theaters. They were 1.5 inch diameter metal tubes that were nickel plated. They varied in length to provide accurately tuned for pitch.

Walter soon developed a friendship with Mr. J. Harrington and a business arrangement was made making Walter Durfee the sole agent for Harrington’s tubular chimes in the United States. Both parties saw the opportunity to use them in tall case clocks. Harrington was also a sales representative for J.J. Elliott Ltd., clock manufacturer in London. J.J. Elliott produced a clock works to use the tubular bells patented by Harrington. The design had 8 tubes suspended from the back of the clock case with the chimes ranging from 4 to 6 foot with a 9th chime approximately 7 ft. long mounted in front of the 8 tubes to strike the hour.

Walter Durfee made an arrangement with JJ Elliott Ltd. to build a 3 weight clock with quarter hour chime and hour strike on the “new” tubular chimes.



Figures 13-17, left to right. Durfee clock pattern nos. 20, 41, 42, 43, and 44.

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In 1887, Walter Durfee received his first 9 tube grandfather clock. He sold it for \$500. How did this compare to other clocks being sold?

- E. Howard Banjo #5: \$20
- Kitchen shelf clock: \$5

By 1890 Walter Durfee had created a true 'fad' for the high end 'hall clocks'. Everyone who had the money wanted one of his 9 tube chiming clocks. This forced Durfee to spend more time in England pushing the clock works manufacture to produce more products. This 'fad' brought on a nation-wide desire for Durfee's clocks.

Durfee had dealings with Jennens and Sons as an agent so when the demand for his clocks became strong, he understood the mode he needed to enter with an agent system. Walter established exclusive jewelers as his agents:

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|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Tiffany & Co. – New York | Theodore B Starr – New York |
| Tilden Thurber – Providence RI | James E. Caldwell – Philadelphia |
| Bailey Banks & Biddle – Philadelphia | Spaulding & Co. – Chicago |
| Wright-Kay – Detroit | Schwanke-Kaston Co. – Milwaukee |
| Boyd Park – Denver | Mermod - Jaccard – St. Louis |
| J.J. Freeman & Co. – Toledo | Shreve & Co. – San Francisco |
| Nathan – Dohrmann – San Francisco | |

From the first sale in 1887 to 1897, Durfee stated they had sold over 1,000 tubular clocks from \$500 to \$700 price. This was a major revival of the tall case clock in a new design.

How did Durfee drive his success? 3 key reasons:

1. Clocks had to be of the most outstanding, unequaled and highest quality
2. Walter used his architectural background with his knowledge of antiques to have cases of superior design
3. Durfee held the sole rights to the Harrington tubular chimes in the USA

Walter Durfee was aware of the patent running out on the tubular chimes and he strove to expand options. He produced breakfast or meal chimes for use in homes and stage chimes for theaters. Stage chimes were made to be portable so they could be purchased by traveling productions. These chimes were awarded a gold medal at the Mechanics Fair in Boston in the fall of 1895. He sold chimes to theaters in Lyons France, Paris France, Geneva Switzerland, New York, Boston, universities, churches and into the Vatican (which was a \$1,000 sale).

1902 was a major year for Walter Durfee. He saw his first set-back in business. A clockmaker named Bawo from Brooklyn NY began to make a tubular chime clock that was not from Durfee. Durfee sued and Court ruled that the "right of the public, the use of what has been disclosed by the prior British patent, the monopoly having expired, should not be curtailed. A decree may be entered dismissing the bill". In short, Durfee lost the lawsuit and his monopoly on the tubular chimes ended. Competitors began to take advantage of this legal gain.

From 1902 to 1908 Durfee continued to sell the Grandfather clocks with tubular chimes but felt he needed to find another avenue that was not as competitive.

In 1907 Walter Durfee moved into a new field for clocks. He focused on banjo clocks. He only produced 4 banjo style clocks.

1. Willard banjo in mahogany case
2. Willard banjo in the gold leafed presentation model
3. Curtis-style lyre in a 42" model case
4. Curtis-style lyre in a 32" model case

Durfee followed his keys to success in the grandfather clocks:

1. Use the finest mahogany wood for the case
2. Hand finish the cases for the best finish
3. Use polished brass side arms and solid brass bezels for the Willard banjo's
4. Use a finial which was one of three styles: hand carved eagle, cast eagle or acorn. All would be done in 'old gold'.
5. Weight was cast iron or lead painted black. Generally it had his name imprinted somewhere on the weight
6. On the Willard banjo's, they always had his name on the 7 1/2" dial painted in black. He never wanted anyone to think he was forging a copy of Willard's banjo but only that he was making a perfect reproduction.
7. The glass was always convex.
8. All the movements came from the Waltham Clock Company. Waltham placed a serial number on the movements but Durfee had his name or ID imprinted on the plates.

Durfee reached out to find the best 'reverse glass' painter in the New England area. From 1907 through 1911 he may have used various individuals but in 1912 he found Daniel J. Steele who was an expert in Simon Willard clocks as well as a fine artist. Daniel Steele emigrated from Canada to the US between 1900 and 1905 where he may have worked for W.W. Sprau Co. of Boston MA. Mr. Steele may have learned the reverse glass painting trade from W.W. Sprau. He was 24 when he began working with Durfee. The business directory listed him as a dial and glass painter as well as an artist. Mr. Steele produced the glasses of his banjo's and girandoles which Durfee allowed him to sign due to his outstanding quality. Daniel Steele owned an original Curtis girandole. Durfee appears to have stopped most clock production by 1918. Steele continued to paint for Waltham Clock Co. but rarely was able to sign the work. Collectors consider glasses painted by Daniel Steele as "prize" possession. A side note: Daniel Steele died in 1927 at the age of 39. His wife gave birth to their only child, a son, who was named Donald Durfee Steele.

The Waltham serial numbers ranged from the smallest, 5595 to 6377. Most are suspected to be used by Waltham and not Durfee. Many believe Durfee only made about 200 of this style clocks. Only a few Lyre clocks and 6 or 7 girandoles were manufactured. The 1st Girandole is numbered 5665 and manufactured in 1908. The remaining 5 or 6 are believed to be made between 1919 and 1921. We know of a Curtis-style Lyre 32" case with sn# 5828 dated May, 1911.

The final pages of the Walter Durfee story begins in 1914, at the age of 54, when he took on his brother's son, Elisha Chester Durfee as part of his company. Elisha had graduated from Brown University with a BA in History. He quickly became a "clock winder" in the business. A clock winder was employed to go around the area and wind clocks for the wealthy clients. He would inspect the clocks and wind them. If they needed repair, he would advise the client and take the clock back for repair. After a few years of clock winder, Walter taught his nephew the art of clock making and repair. Walter wanted to leave his business to someone in his family.

By 1917 the clock business was changing. The US entered WW-1 in April and Durfee began to focus on repair and service for the clocks he had sold. The clock assembly business was closed down in 1921 and went into semi-retirement. He continued to sell antique clocks and acted as agents for people seeking to purchase or dispose of their antiques.

Elisha Chester Durfee continued the business until his retirement in 1962 with most records thrown away. He passed away in 1968 but prior to his death his home was burglarized and all the old tools, clocks, antiques and remaining records were taken.

The interesting item about Walter H. Durfee, the father of the modern grandfather clock with the 9 tube chime, is that he placed a large mark into the history of horology without ever owning a case factory, a clock movement factory, a dial painting business. He was an orchestrator of the highest degree.