

HICKORY DICKORY DOCK

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I like to know what time it is. My house has many clocks (the kinds with hands and a face, I'm not fond of digital clocks). The importance of time to our ancestors varied depending on when and where they lived. In *Albion's Seed*, David Hackett Fischer presents the idea that Puritans considered time as something that should be spent wisely and profitably, that Quakers thought it should be spent meaningfully, and that for English cultures in the South and frontier, it was much less significant.

In agrarian societies, the hours of sunlight determined the most productive hours of the day. The turning leaves of fall heralding the short days of winter were not greeted with pleasure in a time when every hour was needed to assure adequate food to last through the barren winter. For most early settlers, of course, the sun was the major component of time-telling. They may have had a sundial, or at least an informal or pseudo sundial—something that cast a shadow to mark the passing of the hours. During the 1700s, public clocks began appearing in town steeples, the earliest being perhaps that in Ipswich, Massachusetts, around 1704.

At night, candles and lanterns served as informal clocks. Books and museums show candles marked with the hours to tell time, but few households would have wasted a candle on this luxury alone. On the other hand, they did know how much of a candle or how much lantern oil it was appropriate to burn before it was time to retire to bed.

Time was more approximate in early America, and the phrasing quaint to our ears. A 1768 Pennsylvania court heard testimony concerning events occurring “about 10 or 11 of the Clock in the forenoon.” It is interesting how many Bible records of the eighteenth and nineteenth century note not only the day, but also the hour of the events: “about four o'clock in the morning,” “between 9 and 10 o'clock in the morning.” Time was not told in hours and minutes, but in hours and halves or quarters: “about 15 minutes after 8 o'clock in the evening,” “at half past one o'clock in the day,” “at 11½ o'clock P.M.,” “about 11¹⁵ P.M.”

For our ancestors, clocks were often one of the first “luxuries” acquired in a home. In the wills of German farmers in Pennsylvania, it was not uncommon for the widow to be given the use of the mantle clock during her lifetime. One said that the widow was to have the house clock “in her use during her widowhood . . . but not to take it away from my place.”

In understanding our ancestors' possessions, we may need to readjust our vision of what a clock was. “Clock” referred only to the works or “wag,” created by the clock-maker. Until the early 1800s, the wooden “case” was separate, created by a joiner (finish carpenter). A well-to-do family might have a “case clock” or “clock and case,” while a less affluent family might have only a clock, which set on a shelf with the weights and pendulum hanging down or was mounted on a wall, sometimes called a “wag on the wall.”

Virtually no examples of these caseless clocks survive although they were manufactured through the early 1800s. These fall into a category I call “used to death.” The household items of our ancestors that survived to become part of museum or private collections were gently used and often of significant value. Thus, we have extant examples of tall clocks (grandfather and grandmother clocks) and case clocks (mantle clocks), which would have been prized for their cabinetry work. But the plain old “wag on the wall” would have run and told time until it was beyond repair and then been discarded.

In cities such as Boston and New York, European-trained clock makers and repairers had shops, marked by “the Sign of the Dial.” Given the emphasis in New England on the value of time, it is not surprising that improved clock manufacturing developed there, one of the first American industries. Early works were made of metal, with each piece cut separately. Wooden works could be made more rapidly and inexpensively, but were less accurate as they wore. Yankee ingenuity developed a way of mass-producing brass works, lowering the price. These were eventually exported to England, too, the economical price overcoming the scorn for American-made products. In addition to the material of the works, selling points included the length of time a clock ran without rewinding, so you may find mention of a 24-hour clock or an eight-day clock.

Watches were definitely a luxury item, but a few are found in inventories of the wealthiest early Puritans. They continued to be prized and valuable possessions, with a watch and chain or watch and case specifically mentioned in wills. On tax lists, you may find different categories for clocks, wooden clocks, and watches.

Is it time for you to take a look at your ancestor's inventories, tax lists, and wills to find out how they told time?