

Skinner, Inc., Marlborough, Massachusetts

# Icon of American Horology Sells for \$539,500

by Jeanne Schinto  
Photos courtesy Skinner

The star lot at Skinner's science, technology, and clocks sale in Marlborough, Massachusetts, on November 20, 2010, was an astronomical regulator made in 1868 by Boston's William Bond & Son. Offered with an estimate of \$300,000/500,000, the clock, which measures 71" tall including its painted wood base, sold to a private collector on the

sky, and when a known planet transited it, they knew exactly what time it was. So at that moment they pressed the telegraph key and sent the exact time to the Bond shop in downtown Boston. From there, they would send out standard time to New England, again by telegraph. So Bond's was the first effort to get everybody on the same time schedule. This was

**"This is the most important and technically elegant American-made precision clock that will ever be sold in the United States."**

phone for \$539,500 (including buyer's premium).

Skinner department head Robert C. Cheney called the clock "a horological tour de force" and "probably the most important regulator made in America." That's because it figured into the history of the world's first public time service. Without standard time, American railroad accidents were frequent, and American sailors had difficulty determining their longitude at sea, leading them into disasters of their own. The Bond firm, using this clock, disseminated standard time via telegraph across 19th-century New England.

Accurate to .09 second, according to Cheney, the clock is a cultural icon too. Being in the vanguard of a series of technological developments, it helped lead Americans into the era of heightened time consciousness, a mindset that rules us at our peril to this day.

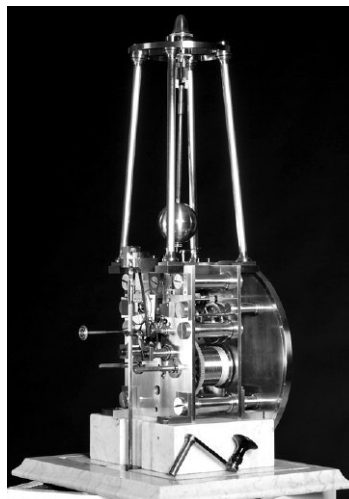
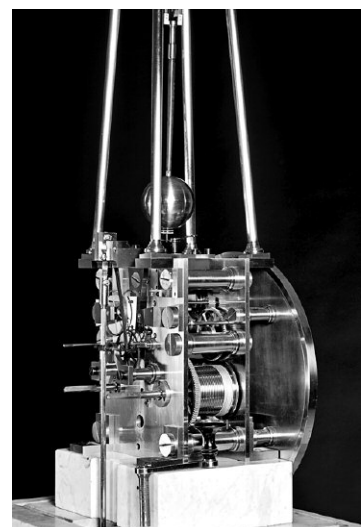
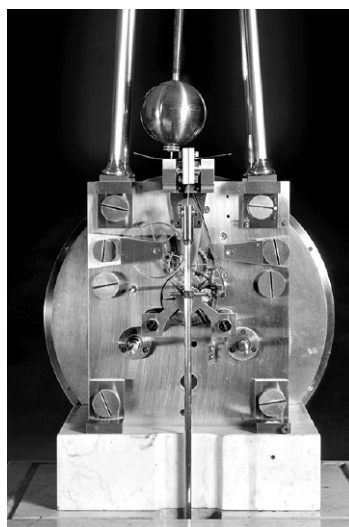
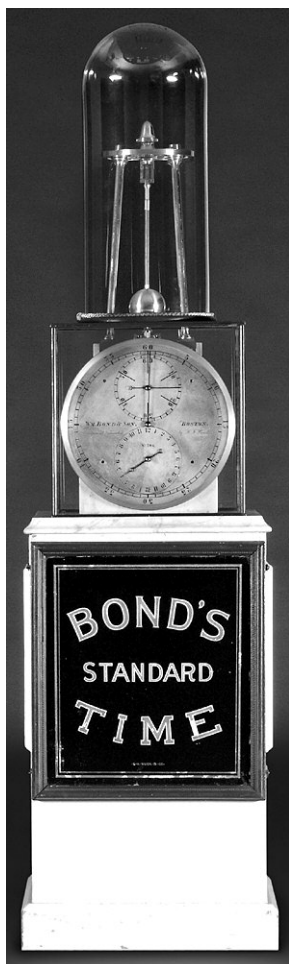
At a gallery walk the night before the sale, Cheney explained how the clock figured into the standard-time delivery system. "They had at the Harvard College Observatory a fifteen-inch refractor telescope with crosshairs. It was aimed at

the first answer."

The Bond firm was founded in 1793 by the first William Bond (1753-1848), who emigrated from Cornwall, England. His son, William Cranch Bond (1789-1859), and the next generation, Richard and George, continued it. The firm remained in the hands of the Bond family until the 1930's when ownership passed to Armenian immigrant brothers named Hekimian. It closed in 1977. The clock, on display at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., from 1982 to 2000, was consigned to the sale by the descendants of its last owner, Suren H. Hekimian (1905-1977).

The winning bidder's main competition came from collector/dealer Jim Cipra of Long Beach, California, who was bidding in person for himself. "This is the most important and technically elegant American-made precision clock that will ever be sold in the United States," he said. "I am in pursuit of the best possible horological objects. In my view, that's the best approach a collector can have, but in this case the person who acquired the clock wanted it more than I."

The sale as a whole was a



The William Bond & Son astronomical regulator, made in 1868, sold to a private collector for \$539,500 (est. \$300,000/500,000). The clock has a single-arm gravity escapement and a constant-force remontoire invented by Richard F. Bond. Only two other clocks like it are known. One was made for Harvard University's observatory, where William Cranch Bond was the first director. It is now in the Harvard University Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments. The other was made for the Bidston Observatory in Liverpool, England and is now in the Merseyside County Museum. This third example was used in the Bond shop.

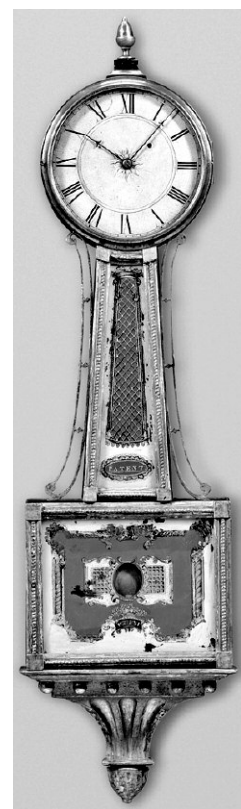
marked success, making it three in a row for Cheney, who took over the department in January 2009. On 695 items offered, 660 (95%) of which sold, the gross was \$1,784,165. That's not counting post-sale deals, which added another approximately \$150,000 to



This is one half of a stereoview showing the storefront of William Bond & Son (occasionally seen written as William Bond & Sons) at 95-97 Water Street, Boston. Sara J. Schechner, the David J. Wheatland Curator of the Harvard University Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments, which owns the Bond daybooks and business records, has checked various advertisements, documents, and price lists and notes that the Bond shop was at various Boston locations on Congress Street, Water Street, State Street, and Boylston Street through the 19th century. Considering her research, this photo dates to some time between 1876 and 1897. Judging from the stereoview mount, it's likely toward the early end of that period. For more information, see the Harvard Web site ([www.fas.harvard.edu/~hsdept/chsi.html](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~hsdept/chsi.html)). Author's collection.



The 56" x 61" painted wood shop sign of William Bond & Son sold for \$1896 (est. \$1500/2500) to Jim Cipra, underbidder on the Bond astronomical regulator. The unidentified previewer is looking at a YouTube video of the Bond clock at work ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOc6hE0Cevo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOc6hE0Cevo)). Schinto photo.



A patent timepiece by Simon Willard, 1805-10, sold on the Internet for \$9187.50 (est. \$15,000/25,000). Found in England, it came with a repair ticket and inscriptions on components that trace the clock to a "Mr. Jones of 4065 Baltimore Avenue, Philadelphia, circa 1870." Known colloquially as a banjo clock, the patent timepiece dates at its earliest to 1802. Pristine examples can run \$100,000, but those examples are rare. Cheney's "Ninety-Five Percent Rule" states that all but 5% of these clocks have problems that keep their prices well down. It means that "you can get a major-looking clock with minor problems for very reasonable money." This one proves the rule. "At some point, its gilding had been enhanced with bronzing paint, and there had been some stabilization to the glasses," said Cheney, "but it's still a pretty darn good clock." Schinto photo.

that total, Cheney said.

Cheney came into this world the son and grandson of clockmakers; the 58-year-old was a clockmaker and dealer for decades. At Skinner he has learned to navigate a number of other specialties. "It's a very eclectic department," he told his gallery-walk audience. "Through the years it's been kind of catch-all for items that other departments either didn't want to handle or that didn't fit into their repertoires." Mechanical music and medieval armor are two of his non-horological responsibilities, but so are such things as a coin-operated fortune teller, a gas-powered bicycle searchlight, and the articulated skeleton of a chicken.

"Certainly we capture all sorts of collecting personae," he said. "But what's most interesting about this department is the kind of international attention that some of these categories generate. When Skinner puts a sale like this on line, we are in essence selling to the world."

Some other sale highlights were consigned by the Higgins Armory Museum ([www.higgins.org](http://www.higgins.org)) in Worcester, Massachusetts. The museum's founder, Worcester industrialist John Woodman Higgins (1874-1961), spent a lifetime building a private collection of arms and armor from medieval and Renaissance Europe, feudal Japan, and ancient Greece and Rome. In 1929 Higgins, whose money came from the manufacture of pressed steel, constructed a four-story steel and glass Art Deco building in Worcester to house it. "He used to waltz around town giving away candy to children in the street while wearing his armor," his granddaughter, Hannah Higgins, told a reporter for *Women's Wear Daily* in 2009.

The museum evolved over the decades into a showcase for pressed steel products of various lands and times, including modern ones. Upon Higgins's death, the building, collections, and an endowment were given to the public. The museum has been redefining its mission lately and deaccessioning duplicates and other

material. At this sale the castoffs included breastplates, back plates, swords, halberds, spears, and helmets, a couple of which were sale highlights.

One helmet, cataloged as a late 15th-century-style German-type jousting helmet, sold to a phone bidder for \$8888 (est. \$200/300). Another, described as simply "a medieval-style helmet," made \$13,035 on the same penny-ante estimate. More typically they fetched prices ranging from \$2015 to \$4740. A steel-engraved French-style half armor and helmet, cataloged as "likely Continental, 19th century," was the top lot of that section of the sale, selling on the phone for \$29,625 (est. \$500/700).

A strong offering of early American militaria came from the collection of C. Keith Wilbur, who died in 2009 at age 86. Wilbur was a Northampton, Massachusetts, physician, and one of his special loves was the American Revolutionary War. (Skinner previously sold his antique medical collection.) "He was an amazing gentleman, and it was my pleasure to have met him," said Cheney. "Doctor Wilbur was just a local GP. He had his office in his home. If you were obese, he'd hand you a cannonball and say, 'That's how overweight you are. Now you set that cannonball down. Don't you feel better? Well, you need to lose thirty pounds because that's what you're carrying around.'"

A graduated set of four 18th- and 19th-century cannonballs from the Wilbur collection was indeed part of the sale and sold for \$1126 (est. \$200/400). Another set of five, undated, brought \$415 on the same estimate. The bulk of the collection consisted of pistols, muskets, rifles, bayonets, scabbards, powder horns, revolvers, sabers, swords, tomahawks, painted military drums, epaulets, gorgets, buttons, canteens, and cannons to go with those Weight Watchers' cannonballs. The top lot of that group by far was a 1780-83 French hanger sword, possibly used in the American Revolutionary War. It sold for \$94,800 to a room bidder who did not

want to be identified.

Wilbur collected related ephemera too. Among those lots was a discharge document signed for Captain John Perry of the 8th Massachusetts Regiment by George Washington in 1783. Along with six pieces of early Massachusetts currency, the single 12½" x 7" (sight size) sheet went at \$8295 (est. \$6000/8000).

"Every school group in Northampton had a turn through Doctor Wilbur's basement," Cheney said. "There was no stronger advocate for American Revolutionary history in western Massachusetts. He was passionate, and that's what collecting is all about."

The clocks went up toward the end of the sale. They attracted numerous luminaries of the local horology world, among them Tom McIntyre of Harvard, Massachusetts; Bob Frascatoro of Upton, Massachusetts; and John C. Losch of Holliston, Massachusetts. Some came from further away. Besides Jim Cipra, they included Tom Grimshaw of Cheshire, Connecticut; Joe Arvay of Mendham, New Jersey, and Sconset on Nantucket; and Charles Grichar of Houston, Texas.

Clock prices before and after the Bond were generally strong—a departure from the last couple of years. The market absorbed 11 tall clocks in succession without a hiccup, at prices ranging from \$1126 to \$24,500. The low of that group was for an "as-found" circa 1750 japanned-cased example, possibly American (est. \$200/300). The high was the price an Internet bidder paid for an 1800-10 Simon Willard in a refinished mahogany Roxbury case (est. \$20,000/30,000).

A few dozen lots later came more tall clocks. A circa 1795 mahogany example by William Cummins—a Simon Willard protégé, who set up his own shop in Willard's Roxbury, Massachusetts, neighborhood—sold to a phone bidder for \$21,330 (est. \$20,000/25,000). Going to the same bidder for the same price was a circa 1810 tall clock by James Doull of

Charlestown, Massachusetts (est. \$20,000/30,000).

Very active throughout the clock portion of the auction, bidder 999 spent \$65,175 (just over the high estimate) for the top tall clock of the day. A circa 1725 Queen Anne walnut example by William Claggett of Newport, Rhode Island, it had previously been sold by Skinner in 1992 for \$25,300—to Cheney in his dealer days. It went from Cheney to a Connecticut collection, and that owner consigned it to this sale.

"The market sees a lot of Claggett clocks but doesn't see many real Claggett clocks, and this is a real one—that's the importance there," said Cheney, who identified its new owner, bidder 999, as a dealer.

Bidders passed up a circa 1790 Aaron Willard tall clock (est. \$40,000/60,000). It wasn't Aaron's day. They didn't want his circa 1825 alarm shelf clock either (est. \$25,000/30,000). At least, they didn't want them at those suggested market levels. The tall clock sold later for \$30,000, and the sale of the alarm clock was pending, Cheney said on Thanksgiving Monday.

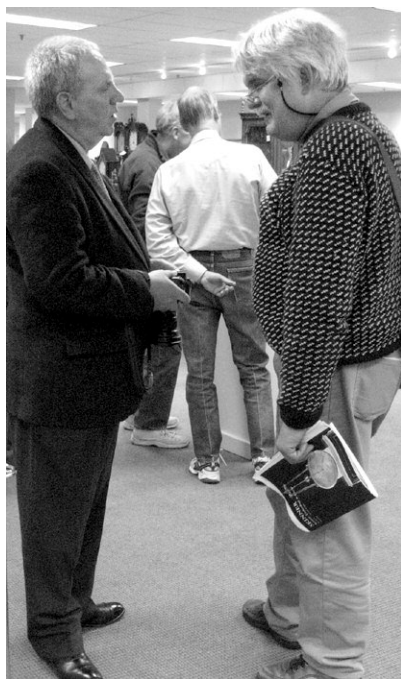
Among other major lots aggressively estimated and declined at the auction were a circa 1815 pair of 20" library globes in Hepplewhite stands by J. & W. Cary of London (est. \$80,000/100,000) and a Civil War campaign chest filled with the artifacts of 2nd Lt. John Davis Edgell (est. \$30,000/40,000). Later the globes sold for \$77,025. As for the chest, Cheney said, "We are talking to interested people about it, and I remain optimistic, because I consider it just such a wonderful thing."

A room bidder did buy Edgell's cartes de visite album containing 30 images of his fellow soldiers and officers, all but five identified with handwritten inscriptions. Estimated at \$700/900, the photos brought \$3851.

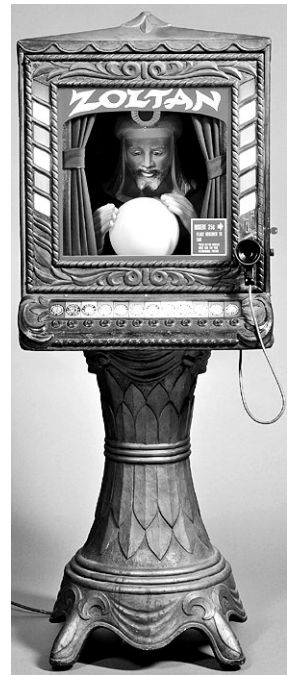
For more information, contact Skinner at (617) 350-5400 or (508) 970-3000, or see the Web site ([www.skinnerinc.com](http://www.skinnerinc.com)).



At his gallery walk on the night before the sale, Robert Cheney pointed out John C. Losch (seated right) of Holliston, Massachusetts, as a clockmaker who used to maintain clocks as complicated as the Bond, including ones at Harvard. Pictured with him are collector David Newsom (seated left) and watchmaker Moritz Elsaesser (in vest). Schinto photo.



Robert Cheney (left) and collector-dealer George Collord of Portland, Maine, at the preview. Collord bought the late 19th-century William Bond & Son chronometer for \$2607 (est. \$2500/4500). Its rosewood brassbound box had a mother-of-pearl plaque marked "Wm. Bond & Son/ Boston." Its padded transport box in walnut was the original. The first seagoing chronometer made in the United States is believed to have come from the Bond workshop, constructed by 23-year-old William Cranch Bond during the War of 1812.



A 73" tall Zoltan coin-operated fortune teller, made of fiberglass in the early 1970's by Prophetron Inc. of Milton, Massachusetts, went to an Internet buyer at \$3675 (est. \$3000/5000). Skinner CEO Karen Keane got a big laugh from the audience when she said, "We were thinking of keeping this for our appraisal department." Zoltan reminded some previewers of the 1988 Tom Hanks movie *Big*, in which a fortune-telling machine named Zoltar turns the adolescent protagonist into a grown-up. For more information about Zoltan vs. the fictional Zoltar, see information posted on the Internet by Clay Harrell of Detroit, Michigan (<http://marvin3m.com/arcade/zoltan.htm>).



Robert Cheney, showing the eight-day time-and-strike skeletonized plate movement of a 26" tall circa 1820 mahogany four-column shelf clock by Heman Clark of Plymouth, Connecticut. The clock sold to an Internet buyer for \$23,275 (est. \$20,000/30,000). Schinto photo.



A first model "Brown Bess" flintlock rifle and bayonet with scabbard, cataloged as having been made in Galton, England during the first half of the 18th century, sold for \$15,405 (est. \$4000/6000). According to a modern string tag attached to this rifle, it was carried by a Private Parker of Buckland, Massachusetts, during the American Revolution. From the collection of C. Keith Wilbur.



Cataloged as "medieval-style," this steel helmet with pivoting visor from the Higgins Armory Museum sold on the phone for \$13,035 (est. \$200/300). It was the highest-priced helmet in the sale.



From a source other than the Higgins Armory Museum came this full-head copper helmet in the form of a lion with pierced holes for the eyes and a repoussé mane. A bidder in the room took it at \$11,850 (est. \$700/900). It was undated in the catalog.



The Higgins Armory Museum's steel engraved French-style half armor and helmet, cataloged as "likely Continental, 19th century," sold for \$29,625 (est. \$500/700) to the same phone bidder who took the highest-priced helmet in the sale. Schinto photo.



A 2 1/2" long 1780-83 French hanger sword from the Wilbur estate sold for \$94,800 (est. \$600/800). With touchmark "MR" and brass hilt with entwined USA on the guard, it is likely an example of the short sword introduced to the American Revolutionary Army Corps of Light Infantry by Marquis de Lafayette. "I am told several of these have been excavated at known Revolutionary War sites," said Cheney. For more information, see *Battle Weapons of the American Revolution* by George C. Neumann (1998).



A collection of sundials did well at the sale, with this one being the most noteworthy. A circa 1700 silver pocket sundial by Butterfield of Paris in a 2 3/4" x 3" felt-lined leather case, it sold to a phone bidder for \$4740 (est. \$2500/3500).



A circa 1795 tall clock by Eli Terry of Plymouth, Connecticut, with eight-day time-and-strike movement, sold to phone bidder 999 for \$26,070 (est. \$15,000/20,000). The cherry case is attributed to either Eliphalet Chapin or Simeon Loomis of East Windsor, Connecticut.



A 19th-century cast metal dental articulator sold on the phone for \$5629 (est. \$2500/3500). It has a hinged jaw with cast brass teeth and gums.

## Joshua Wilder Mirror Clock: An Outtake from Harbor & Home

A 28" tall Federal mirror clock by Joshua Wilder of Hingham, Massachusetts, with eight-day time-and-passing-strike (i.e., just one bong on the hour), sold in the room for \$35,550 (est. \$25,000/35,000) to collector Joe Arvay. The underbidder on the phone was dealer Gary R. Sullivan of Sharon, Massachusetts.

While researching the award-winning *Harbor & Home: Furniture of Southeastern Massachusetts, 1710-1850*, with Brock Jobe and Jack O'Brien, Sullivan located a total of five mirror clocks made by Wilder, including the present one, which sold at Skinner on June 8, 1997, for \$25,300. Robert Cheney recalls that he tried to buy it at that sale but was unsuccessful. A couple of years later, Cheney said he bought it at Christie's for roughly the same price. It went on from there to be owned by others.

Considering that history, this clock is not what anyone would call fresh, yet it sold well yet again. "It's such an outstanding example, both by way of condition and in terms of its unusual form," said Cheney.

Sullivan intended to have an entry on Wilder's mirror clocks in *Harbor & Home*, but space would not allow it. He kindly shared his research for this report.

"All of the Wilder mirror clocks I have examined are unique in that their cases have tombstone-shaped side windows," Sullivan wrote in an e-mail. "I believe the one that just sold at Skinner is historically significant because it is the earliest mirror clock—made by anyone—that I have ever seen. The style of the mirror itself would date the clock to circa 1810 or a little earlier. All other mirror clocks I am aware of would post-date this one by a number of years."

Sullivan continued, "Every New Hampshire example, as well as all the Connecticut-made Joseph Ives mirror clocks, are later. These observations led me to believe that Wilder likely developed the mirror clock. It makes sense, given that Wilder was struggling to produce less costly clocks to compete with the more affordable banjo clocks, being manufactured in Boston, which were less expensive than his tall-case clocks, but which he did not have the right to produce. That business



situation led him to begin making dwarf clocks. The rest is history."

Joe Arvay added points from his own research.

"In 1822, Connecticut clock-maker Joseph Ives received a patent for his looking-glass clock; the document, signed by James Monroe and John Quincy Adams, is in the collection of the American Clock and Watch Museum, Bristol, Connecticut. Ives's patent application letter, dated 1817, is in my collection. Given those dates and Sullivan's research, this Wilder clock is likely the first mirror clock ever produced and is significantly earlier than Ives's. Not only unique, the Wilder clock is in untouched condition. Its diminutive size completes the package."

Sullivan commented on that size.

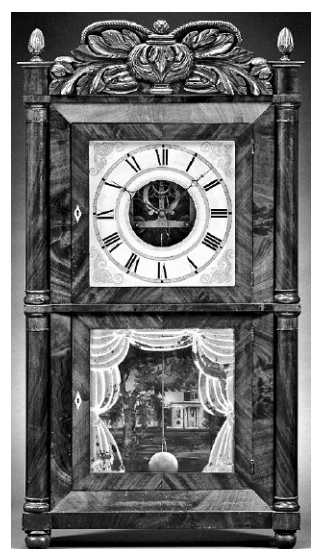
"It is at the smallest extreme of what you typically find in New Hampshire mirror clocks, which are often a few inches taller. The Connecticut mirror clocks are much larger, generally by ten to fifteen inches."

New Hampshire mirror clocks also generally incorporate split baluster mirrors, a later style than the gilt rope front design of this clock, Sullivan said.

-J.S.



A circa 1885 coin-operated cast-iron Picture Gallery Bank by Shepard Hardware of Buffalo, New York, 8 1/2" tall, sold to an Internet buyer for \$5206.25 (est. \$4000/6000).



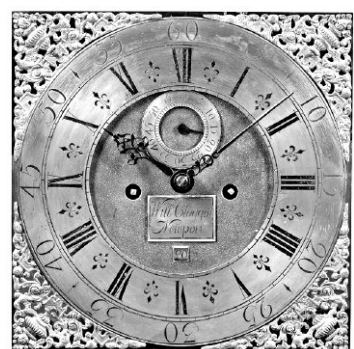
An 1833-39 mahogany Empire shelf clock by Silas B. Terry of Plymouth, Connecticut, with eight-day brass movement and skeletonized front plate, sold to phone bidder 999 for \$11,258 (est. \$5000/8000).



A circa 1795 mahogany tall clock by William Cummings of Roxbury, Massachusetts, sold to phone bidder 999 for \$21,330 (est. \$20,000/25,000). Not shown, a circa 1810 tall clock by James Doull of Charlestown, Massachusetts, with eight-day time-and-strike movement, sold to the same phone bidder for the same price (est. \$20,000/30,000).



A circa 1795 maple tall clock by Jesse Emory of Weare, New Hampshire, with a 30-hour wooden movement, sold to phone bidder 999 for \$23,700 (est. \$10,000/15,000).



A circa 1725 Queen Anne walnut tall clock by William Claggett (1695-1749) of Newport, Rhode Island, with eight-day time-and-strike five-pillar movement, sold for \$65,175 (est. \$60,000/80,000) to phone bidder 999.

