



Epes Ellery.
CLOCKMAKER,
N^o 51. Newbury Street.
BOSTON.
Clocks and Time Pieces
by Wholesale, Retail,
and for Exportation.

Fig. 1:
Tall clock signed
by Epes Ellery
(1780–1849),
circa 1803–1810.
Inlaid mahogany.
Courtesy of Historic
New England.



DISCOVERIES FROM THE FIELD

Epes Ellery

A RARE CLOCKMAKER'S LABEL

by Nancy Carlisle

Last year I went to a home in the Back Bay of Boston, Massachusetts, to see an early nineteenth-century tall case clock (Fig. 1) that had been in the owner's family for generations. She was considering donating it to our institution, Historic New England. The maker's name on the dial was Epes Ellery (Fig. 2), a man about whom I knew nothing. We had no examples of clocks in our collections by him, and the usual survey of books, online databases, and calls to colleagues turned up only two pieces of information: Ellery appears in Brooks Palmer's *Book of American Clocks* (1950) as the Newburyport, Massachusetts, maker of a shelf clock; and he was the maker of a pair of silver sugar tongs sold at Skinner Auctioneers in 1991. Historic New England was intrigued by the clock, liked its history of ownership in the Tufts family of Massachusetts, and believed its possible Newburyport connection would augment our considerable holding of Newburyport furniture. We therefore accepted the clock into the collections.

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Fig. 4: Engraved label of Epes Ellery, circa 1803–1810 (from clock in figure 3). Courtesy of Montclair Historical Society. Photography by Richard Goodbody.



Two months later I was visiting the Montclair Historical Society in New Jersey, and while there I toured their 1796 Crane House. On the stair landing stood a tall case clock by (drum roll...) Epes Ellery. Like ours, this clock (Fig. 3) had an attractive Federal-era case, but, unlike ours, a clock dial that included the name of the town where the clock was made — not Newburyport, but Boston.

The Montclair Historical Society's clock had come to them from Paul Revere Everitt, a descendant of the famous Boston silversmith and patriot. While the clock case was, like ours, a relatively common example of the form, the truly exciting thing about it was the label pasted inside the door (Fig. 4). With its classically garbed figure leaning over one clock and a tall case clock pictured adjacent, the label was inscribed: "Epes Ellery/CLOCK MAKER/No. 51 Newbury Street,/BOSTON, /Clocks and Time Pieces./By Wholesale, Retail,/And for Exportation." It seems plausible that Palmer's association of Ellery with Newburyport stems from confusing the street for the town.¹

I was intrigued. How could it be that a relatively unknown clockmaker had such an

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Fig. 2: Epes Ellery (1780–1849), artist and date unknown. Oil on canvas. Descended in the family and owned privately.

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Fig. 3: Tall clock signed by Epes Ellery (1780–1849), Boston, MA, circa 1803–1810. Inlaid mahogany. Courtesy of Montclair Historical Society. Photography by Richard Goodbody.



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Fig. 5: Tall clock signed by Epes Ellery (1780–1849), circa 1803–1810. Inlaid mahogany. Courtesy of Delaney Antique Clocks.

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Fig. 6: Dial detail of figure 5. Courtesy of Delaney Antique Clocks.



elegant label? I can't say I've discovered the answer, but I've learned a few things. Epes Ellery was born in 1780 to a well-connected family in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where his father was a merchant. A cousin, William Ellery, signed the Declaration of Independence. An uncle, Epes Sargent, owned much of Gloucester, and his portrait by Copley, in the National Gallery in Washington, is considered one of Copley's finest.

Epes Ellery is listed in Boston directories between 1803 and 1806 and again in 1809, as a goldsmith, a lapidary, and a jeweler.² He also appears in a couple of court cases in that same period: in 1805, when he sued Ira Bush, a

Boston upholsterer, for the cost of a looking glass Ellery sold him; and in 1810, when he was sued by John and Nathaniel Fowle, Boston jewelers.³ In the 1805 case he was listed as a watchmaker; in 1810, as a jeweler. Around 1810, after marrying Ann Bullard of Watertown, Massachusetts, Ellery moved to Baltimore, served with the army in Maryland during the War of 1812, raised five children, and worked as a goldsmith. At some point he returned to Boston, where he died in 1849.

Since I began this research, three additional clocks by Ellery have surfaced: one owned by Connecticut dealer Kirtland Krump, and now in a private collection; and two owned by



Fig. 7: Clockworks of clock in figure 5.
Courtesy of Delaney Antique Clocks.

Massachusetts dealer John Delaney. Of the latter two clocks, one was just recently discovered, and the other is illustrated as figures 5 to 7.⁴ If anything Ellery made in Baltimore survives, I have yet to learn of it.

The answer to why such an obscure figure had such an extraordinary label lies in the profile of the early New England clockmaker. With a few notable exceptions, clockmakers were entrepreneurs more than craftsmen. Like upholsterers of an earlier era, they assembled work done by many specialists rather than doing the bulk of the work themselves. As a goldsmith and jeweler, Ellery

would have been connected to a craft network whose members produced specialized parts. Ellery himself would have had the metalworking skills required to complete the assembly of a clock. In the case of Historic New England's clock, we know Ellery imported the dial from England, since it is stamped by the Osborne Manufactory of Birmingham (the dial in figures 5–6 was made in Boston.) It is likely he found a local cabinetmaker to make the case, and local metalsmiths to supply parts for the weights and movement (Fig. 7). As a jeweler and goldsmith, he may also have been an

engraver, and so may have produced the clock's label himself. If not, he certainly would have had contact with engravers who could have produced the label for him.⁵

The label suggests that Ellery hoped to use his connections and skills to build a retail, wholesale, and export business in clocks; its ornate design and promise of supply and export suggests he was a man of ambition. Given his connections to a prominent and successful family in Gloucester, Ellery's apparent interests are not surprising. In the economic turbulence that followed the Revolution and preceded the War of 1812, however, Ellery may not have been able to achieve the success he appears to have sought. In an era when many businesses failed, it should not be surprising that, despite his apparent aspirations, so few articles made by Ellery exist. @

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1 Newbury and Newburyport are adjoining communities; the former is often subsumed into the latter.

2 Henry Flynt and Martha Gandy Fales, *The Heritage Foundation of Silver* (Old Deerfield, Mass.: The Heritage Foundation, 1968), 214.

3 Thomas Michie, curator of decorative arts at the Los Angeles County Museum shared this information.

4 Clock specialist Gary Sullivan brought two of these clocks to my attention.

5 It may seem, given the connection with the labeled Montclair clock and the family of Paul Revere, that Revere may have engraved the label. There is no correlation, however, between Revere's labels and Ellery's.