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REPORT

A Tall Clock with a Duncan Beard Nameplate

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At the Historic Odessa Foundation, on October 7, 2015, I examined an eight-day walnut tall clock with a dial bearing the nameplate of Duncan Beard of Appoquinimink, Delaware. This report records my observations regarding authenticity and condition of the clock.

Clock case

The tall clock has a scrolled pediment above an arched door. Four fluted colonnettes mark the corners of the bonnet. The clock waist has engaged quarter columns and an arched, solid figured walnut door. The clock base has engaged quarter columns and a figured walnut panel with rounded corners. The clock stands on four ogee bracket feet.

The pediment scrolls have stamped brass ornaments dating from about 1825 in their centers. The scrolls themselves and the uppermost molding of the cornice appear to be out-of-period additions. In addition to the shallow curve of the scrolls—a shape that does not embody 18th century design—all of the back surfaces of the scrolls, bonnet top board, and cornice moldings are stained to disguise their newer surfaces. Clear evidence of their original color and the applied stain is visible in the corners where the scrolls join the bonnet top. Evidence at the ends of the two molding strips that make up the present cornice molding show significantly different sawing as well as subtle color differences. All evidence considered, it is likely that this clock bonnet was originally a flat-top, decorated at the cornice with the single, lower molding, which may have been lowered slightly from its original position.

The entire clock base is a replacement, except, perhaps, for the figured walnut panel in front, whose grain and color match that of the waist door and may have been salvaged from the original base. Typically, the backboard of a tall clock is a solid board from the waist (and sometimes from the bonnet) to the feet. In this clock case, the tulip poplar backboard joins another board of distinctly different color and age a few inches below the waist moldings. The narrow vertical backboards flanking the new board also appear to

be later. Inside surfaces of all of the feet reveal that they are replacements. Markedly different color and grain of the front of the base indicates that it is replaced. The restorer erred in constructing the engaged quarter columns in the base. In contrast to the universal 18th century practice of making the capitals and bases from separate blocks of wood—as evident in the waist columns—the base column capitals, shafts, and bases are made from a single piece of wood.

The heavy score line visible on the front façade and proper left side above the waist molding (between the narrow waist of the case and the wider base section) suggests that the present waist molding is a replacement. The score line marks the location of the top of the original molding. That the score line is not visible on the proper right side does not mitigate this conclusion.

The present bottom board of the case has split into two pieces as the result of broken winding cords and dropped weights. The broken board is part of the replacement campaign. It should be repaired.

An interesting feature original to this clock case entails a mechanism to lock the bonnet door from within the key-locked waist door. Evidence exists of the posts of a U shaped iron ring that originally projected toward the inside of the clock from the bottom rail of the bonnet door, opposite the hinged side. This U ring slid into a rectangular hole cut into the wood mask around the dial opening of the bonnet. By reaching one's hand up into the bonnet, one could slip a piece of wood through the U and into a slot on the inside of the moldings that support the bonnet, thereby locking the bonnet door without the added expense of an additional lock and key.

Clock dial and movement

The brass dial with moon arch and cast spandrels has Roman numerals marking the hours, Arabic numbers counting minutes, a seconds dial, a date aperture and a nameplate bearing the engraved name “Duncan Beard” in script and the location “Appoquinimink,” also in script. The eight-day movement has a strike with a repeater mechanism.

The brass dial and movement are of 18th century origin. However, each is unrelated to the work of Duncan Beard. Although separate nameplates applied below the dial center were an 18th century practice, Beard is not known to have used them. Every Duncan Beard dial known to the author is engraved with Beard's name and “Appoquinimink” in block letters across the top of the moon arch, where this dial displays stylized floral vine engraving. Beard's dials also display highly accomplished leafy engraving in the dial center, which is undecorated in this clock. Beard's beautiful engraving often substitutes for cast spandrels in the dial corners. The moon dial of this clock has painted stars that are significantly smaller than those encountered on Beard dials.

The clock movement is distinguished by a front plate with projecting tabs at the top corners into which the upper two dial feet (which secure the dial to the movement) are pinned. The T shaped front plate is not representative of Beard movements, in which all

four dial feet are pinned into the corners of a rectangular plate. T shaped front plates appear commonly on Thomas Crow movements, as well as movements by several other American and English clockmakers.

Summary

This tall clock has a case that has undergone substantial repair, alteration, and enhancement. Addition of the present pediment to what was likely a flat-topped bonnet suggests that the restorations did not follow the original features of the clock, which results in an object that has lost its historical authenticity.

In a similar vein, incorporation of a nameplate identifying the dial and movement as work of Duncan Beard represents another historical falsehood. In addition to the nameplate, the engraving style and content does not parallel Beard's work at all. The movement and dial were originally the work of another, less accomplished and notable clockmaker.