

A Book Review

Timekeeper Edward Duffield

by Lita Solis-Cohen

Bob Frishman's book about Edward Duffield, the man who engraved his name and the name of his city on the dials of 60 surviving tall-case clocks, one bracket clock, two uncased movements, seven surveying compasses, and a sundial, is not the story of a leather-apron artisan. Duffield was a Philadelphia gentleman, a friend of Benjamin Franklin, who took part in the growth and prosperity of Philadelphia, witnessed the formation of this country, and spent a quarter century importing parts and assembling instruments for measuring time and land. Although many citizens, both men and women, carried watches and Duffield imported and repaired them, no watches with Duffield's name on the dial survive.

With its first-rate photography and long and useful bibliography, it should be on every library shelf.

Frishman illustrates all the parts of multi-piece brass and iron disassembled complex clock movements and dials and suggests that all these parts were cast, turned, drawn, scraped, filed, drilled, and milled by tedious hand labor and, together with the tools used to assemble them, were imported from England. He claims that English clocks were preferred to American-made and points out how many English-made movements, their dials engraved with the names of English makers and towns, are housed in American-made cases.

In his chapter on the history of clockmaking in Philadelphia, Frishman insists that more watches and clocks were imported than assembled here and that Edward—after five years of research he knows him well enough to call him by his first name—did not simply buy and sell finished products. Four clocks with spherical-moon lunar indicators found on a small number of English clocks demonstrate his inventiveness. Frishman has nothing to say about the floor-standing cases made for Duffield's clocks, leaving that subject to furniture historians.

No diaries or account books by Duffield have surfaced, so Frishman used public records, letters, inventories, newspaper ads, and even the ledger of Duffield's tailor for any scrap of relevant information. Frishman describes this gentleman clockmaker's civic life during the lead-up to the American Revolution and the first years of the new republic, at a time when Philadelphia was the nation's center for science and culture as well as politics.

In addition to supplying horological services to the city's prosperous citizens and institutions, Duffield took his civic responsibility seriously. He was deeply involved in civic and religious life in Philadelphia. A vestryman at Christ Church from 1755 to 1772, he was a close friend of the Reverend Richard Peters. He contributed to Pennsylvania Hospital, was a director of the Philadelphia Contributionship for the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire, and was a member of the Library Company. He served as the city's tax collector, a city warden, and an inspector of the Walnut Street Jail. In 1768 Franklin asked Duffield to be one of two administrators of the Bray School in Philadelphia, funded by a London-based philanthropist to educate free and enslaved black children.

Duffield's civic involvement in Philadelphia ended in 1775 when he retired at age 45 and moved to his family's farm, Benfield, in what is now Torresdale, where he farmed, held county positions, and supported local schools in Lower Dublin.

Frishman devotes a whole chapter to the Duffield-Franklin relationship. According to a letter to his wife, Deborah, in June 1767 Franklin sent a new book on horology requesting that she "Present it from me to our ingenious Friend Mr. Duffield, with my love to them and their Children." Frishman speculates that the book was *The Principles of Mr. Harrison's Time-Keeper, with Plates of the Same*. Franklin had paid a visit to the Harrison shop to see John Harrison's clock that allowed

ships to determine their longitude at sea. Franklin appointed Duffield co-executor of his estate, first in his will of 1757 and then in the final version in 1790.

Franklin visited Duffield at Benfield in June 1776 when Franklin was part of the Committee of Five appointed by the Continental Congress to draft the Declaration of Independence. In 1777 Franklin's daughter, Sarah Franklin Bache, fled her home in British-occupied Philadelphia and sheltered at Benfield. She wrote to her father that Duffield had hired a weaver to weave cloth for military uniforms. The Bache children continued to visit Benfield during the hot summer months in the following years.

Edward Duffield had inherited the Benfield house and farm from his grandfather Benjamin Duffield, who with his wife, Elizabeth, left Hull in Yorkshire in 1678 on the *Shield* and arrived in Burlington, New Jersey. Frishman says four years later they saw William Penn step off the *Welcome*. Though not Quakers, the Duffields were accepted into the new colony. After Benjamin Duffield was established, his father, Robert, age 70, came from England and settled in Dublin Township while Benjamin continued with land purchases and the construction of houses, ships, and stables in Philadelphia. Land holdings he inherited from his grandfather and father gave Edward Duffield the means to devote time to horology and public service. He died at Benfield in July 12, 1803, and is buried alongside his wife, Catherine, in All Saints' Torresdale Episcopal Church cemetery in a tabletop grave. Edward's son Benjamin, a doctor, predeceased him in 1799 at age 46, weakened by yellow fever, and is buried at Christ Church burial ground. Benjamin's two sons did not follow his profession, but his three daughters married doctors he had trained. Edward Duffield's son Edward Jr., a farmer, and executor of his estate, lived unmarried at Benfield until 1836.

In the foreword author and collector Jay Robert Stiefel calls Edward Duffield "the least known of three prominent Philadelphia clockmakers who held the most coveted horological position in eighteenth-century Philadelphia: Keeper of the State House Clock." The others were Thomas Stretch and David Rittenhouse. Duffield was the second keeper of the State House clock, which was completed and installed by the first keeper, Thomas Stretch (1697-1765). When Duffield retired to the country in 1775, David Rittenhouse (1732-1796) took over.

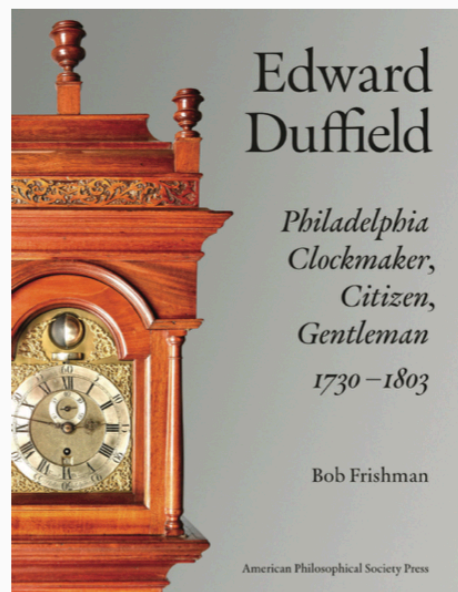
Frishman is not able to tell us how Duffield learned his trade. He left no diaries, letters, or apprentice papers, and he rarely advertised his services although he practiced his trade for a quarter century before the American Revolution put a stop to English imports.

Edward Duffield was part of Philadelphia's scientific community. Just a year after he was elected to the American Philosophical Society, he was asked to make an accurate timepiece needed for the observation of the transit of Mercury on November 9, 1769, and he

Edward Duffield: Philadelphia Clockmaker, Citizen, Gentleman, 1730-1803


by Bob Frishman

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supplied it in just under three weeks.

Books about Rittenhouse (*David Rittenhouse: Philosopher-Mechanic of Colonial Philadelphia and His Famous Clocks*) and the Stretch family (*Stretch: America's First Family of Clockmakers*) by Donald L. Fennimore and Frank L. Hohmann III, like this book on Edward Duffield, were funded in part by Edward W. Kane, a Concord, Massachusetts, collector and researcher, who also underwrote the book *Claggett: Newport's Illustrious Clockmakers* about the Claggett family of Newport, also written by Fennimore and Hohmann. Kane's support makes it possible to buy this book on Edward Duffield with its first-rate photography and long and useful bibliography for just \$60. It should be on every library shelf.

Frishman said that when he was asked to write the Duffield book he volunteered immediately, and it was a labor of love. Having repaired 8000 clocks, sold 2000 antique clocks and watches, and published 100-plus articles himself, Frishman claims that the fact that Duffield mostly repaired timekeepers rather than made them should in no way lessen our respect for his expertise. He says there is nothing easy or routine about repairing intricate mechanical machines ranging from pocket watches to room-size movements and that Duffield made only two to five clocks a year. He contends that "Edward Duffield Philadelphia" engraved on clock dials "confirmed to its initial purchaser, just as it does today, that the clock was a highly valuable object that he was proud to finish, sign, and sell." 

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