

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

Of Clocks and Trains: The Life and Death of Joseph Dyar

Jan Albers, former Executive Director, Henry Sheldon Museum

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On a recent visit to the Concord Museum, in Massachusetts, I was surprised to see a beautiful banjo clock that looked remarkably similar to one that hangs in my office at the Henry Sheldon Museum. I knew that it was one of three in the Sheldon collection that were made by Middlebury's most talented 19th century clockmaker, Joseph Dyar. The Massachusetts clock's label said, oddly enough, "Banjo Clock, Joseph Dyar, Concord." Concord! Didn't those good people know that their clock must have been made by our Joseph Dyer of Middlebury?

This required investigation. Both clocks were made by a Joseph Dyer who was born in 1795 and died in 1850, so it was likely the same man. Who was he, and how did he come to live, and die, in a little college town in Vermont?

The Sheldon Museum's library, collections records and old newspapers furnished a great deal of information on the talented craftsman. He was, indeed, from Massachusetts, having been born in Boston on June 16, 1795. By the time he was twenty, Dyar was already working as a journeyman clockmaker in Concord, in the shop of Lemuel Curtis. While there, he also learned the silversmith and jewelers trades, as these crafts were commonly practiced together.

**Banjo Clock, Joseph Dyar, 1820-51.
Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum**

Curtis, and his partner, fellow clockmaker Joseph Dunning, moved to Burlington, Vermont, in 1821, leaving Dyar to take over the Concord business. A year later, Dyar joined them in Vermont. By the next year, the young clockmaker decided to set up business on his own, and moved south to Middlebury. His first advertisements appeared here in 1822. His shop carried many luxury goods, including the clocks, watches from England and France, silver tea sets and tongs, thimbles, gold beads and earrings, spy glasses, thermometers, flutes, violins, bugles and his own coin silver spoons. In 1836, he also wanted his customers to know that, “He would attend faithfully to watch repairing.”

The Henry Sheldon Museum has a number of examples of Dyar’s work. There are two of the banjo clocks, one with a glass panel painting showing sailing ships and the other graced with Apollo in a chariot. Dyar would not have done these paintings, leaving them to itinerant “clock artists” like William Lewis and Benjamin Curtis, who traveled New England decorating such works. There is a third mahogany lyre clock with brass trim—a shape Dyar and John Sawin are credited with popularizing in Boston.

The Museum’s collection also contains a number of coin silver spoons, a lovely ladle and a pair of elegant tongs, stamped with either ‘J. Dyar’ or ‘J. Dyer.’ The disparity in the spelling of his name is thought to have come about because the die maker who created Dyar’s first silver mark spelled his name wrong. He seems to have used both versions interchangeably.

Joseph Dyar came to Middlebury with a young wife, Love Brooks, of Lincoln, Massachusetts, whom he had married in 1819. They had two girls and a boy before her premature death in 1826. In November of the following year, he married Harriet Byron Tyler, of Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire, with whom he had two more daughters. The Sheldon collection contains a delicate silhouette thought to portray one of Dyar’s wives, dating from the mid-1820s.

Dyar soon became a well-known and well-respected member of the Middlebury community. He was civic-minded, helping to start the fire company and serving in various local trusteeships over many years.

The life of this talented craftsman ended tragically due to a freak accident. On the 22nd of February 1850, Joseph Dyar left his shop, located on the Main Street section of the building that preceded the Battell Block, next to the bridge, headed back to his wife and children in the family home at 26 Seminary St. The sidewalks were icy, so he chose to walk in the middle of the street.

Just at that moment, the new train—which had only begun passing through downtown Middlebury two months earlier—came through on the track under Main Street, giving a loud blast of its steam whistle. The as-yet-unfamiliar noise startled a pair of horses that were attached to a lumber sleigh and tied to a post in front of Harmon Sheldon’s store on Merchants Row. The Middlebury Register stated that the frightened animals “ran violently up the street.” Dyar, “not seeing his danger, was thrown down by the horses,

one runner of the sleigh passing over his head, and dragging him a short distance before he was extricated.”

There was no hope of recovery. The newspaper stated that Dyar, “was taken up senseless, and remained so, most or all of the time, until he died, about twenty-four hours later.” He had lived in the town nearly thirty years, during which time “he earned an enviable reputation for integrity and uprightness.” At the time of his death, he was only 55—a man who might have created many more beautiful objects, if he had been given the time.

The museums of Middlebury and Concord are honored to share their claim to the craftsmanship of the talented Joseph Dyar. Our two lovely towns are lucky to have museums where his legacy is remembered and preserved.