

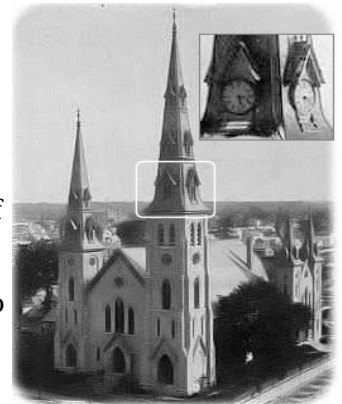
Clocks of Bay City, Michigan

by Jim Petrimoulx

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The earliest clocks appeared in public buildings starting as early as the 14th century. These usually being placed in churches. The first public clock in what would become the United States was mounted in Boston in 1668. In the mid 1800's two of the largest producers of Tower and Street Clocks were the Seth Thomas and E. Howard Clock Companies. The clocks not only provided the time for the area surrounding the installation, and in many cases this was the sole source of the correct time, the clocks also became a source of civic pride and also for their owners. Of the clocks I researched, E. Howard supplied two tower clocks; Seth Thomas did installations of four tower clocks and 1 street clock. The Johnson Service Company provided 1 tower clock.

The clock installed in the west tower of the First Baptist Church, July of 1880, located at the southeast corner of Center & Madison Streets was supplied by the E. Howard Company of Boston, Massachusetts. From the time of its installation it is referred to as the "City Clock". I do not know what kind of relationship there was between the First Baptist Church and the city, but it mentioned in several newspaper articles and records of the Common Council of Bay City proceedings that maintenance was the responsibility of the city, at least until 1936. Fred Maynard, who was the City Hall caretaker and whose job it was to maintain the clock, said this was the best clock in the city. He mentioned one problem, that being the clock on Madison showed a five minute difference, but said that just means the people on Madison get to work earlier then those on Center. The clock survived until the church was torn down in 1963. The clock works were salvaged by a collector from Midland, a man named Peter Wright.



Ten years later in July of 1890, W.H. Prescott of the E. Howard Clock Company, the same man who installed the clock in the First Baptist Church was back in Bay City installing another clock in the Michigan Central Railroad Depot on Jackson St. Fire damaged the building and it was torn down. Once again the clock works were obtained by Peter Wright.





The Seth Thomas Clock Company of Connecticut was responsible for the clock in the Westminster Presbyterian Church, located at the northeast corner of Midland & Wenona Streets. The church was dedicated in December of 1883; this clock according to the same records was maintained at times by the city. The original clock was replaced in 1921 by a new clock, maker unknown.

Grand Trunk Railroad chose Seth Thomas to supply their tower clock when they built a depot in Bay City located at Seventh & Saginaw Streets. This clock was installed in 1913 and survived until the depot was torn down in September of 1955.

Following the Grand Trunk installation Seth Thomas supplied a smaller clock above the main entrance for the First National Bank & Bay County Savings Bank who shared a building at the southeast corner of Center & Washington Avenues. This Building was built in 1915.



My personal favorite of the tower clocks in Bay City is that which was on the northwest corner of John & Linn Streets. It was also a Seth Thomas clock. Stephen Swart a jeweler built a beautiful store at that location in 1891. He had a lot of personal pride in his store and his tower he special ordered from Seth Thomas. Instead of the usual numbers or Roman Numerals marking the hour Mr. Swart had starting where the number nine would be and continuing to the place of the number three, were the letters S T E P H E N and then starting from the position of the numeral eight to the number four were the letters S W A R T. In front of the store was a double faced street clock also a Seth Thomas, it had the usual Roman numerals on its faces. The building remains, but the clocks do not survive, nor do I know what became of them.



In 1896 during the time Bay City's City Hall was being constructed, bids were received from the Seth Thomas Company and the E. Howard Company to supply the tower clock for the building. Another bid was given by the Johnson Electric Service Company; they earlier had been awarded the contract to supply the heating regulation equipment. They were new to the clock business and they employed pneumatic control for the clock, rather than the system of weights and pulleys. By a unanimous vote on May 19, 1896 the bid for \$1254.95 was accepted. Nine other clocks plus a master clock which drove the whole system were supplied for an additional \$225.00. A guarantee of ten years was included and no payment was to be made until six months of the successful operations of all clocks were completed.



The Johnson Electric Service Company did not make clocks for a long period, this was an idea of Warren S. Johnson the head of the company, he died in 1910 and his sons dropped clocks as a line of business. During their time in business they made a large floral clock for the 1904 Exposition in St. Louis. They also supplied clocks for the City Halls in St. Louis, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Colorado Springs, Heightstown, New Jersey and Grand Rapids.

Due to an article published by "Ripley's Believe It Or Not " it was thought by many that water pumped from the river was the driving force for this clock. Ripley's article stated the clock was stopped because fish had plugged up the intake line supplying the clock. An article published in the local paper said this brought many laughs throughout the city. I believe the story was a total fabrication and was perpetuated by the humor it invoked in the city. In Warren S. Johnson's patent and in articles about the other clocks in the previous mentioned cities, pneumatic power was the impetus for the operation of these clocks. In specifications for the Bay City clock and the Philadelphia clock they mention a hookup to the building water supply to drive a backup air compressor in case of a failure in the primary compressor. This was the only role that water played in the operation of these clocks. I have contacted tower clock collectors and they all agree that in very early tower clocks there were water driven models. They never heard of and seriously doubt Warren S. Johnson ever would have designed such a clock.

Vandals took parts of the clock and in the 1960's; Peter Wright obtained permission to remove the remaining works of the Clock.

Incomplete records of the Seth Thomas Company mention other installations in Bay City, these were not identified and research as yet has failed to find them. One was a street clock installed in 1922, a tower clock in 1912 and another tower clock in 1917.