National Watch & Clock Museum: From the Basement to the Top

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Editor's Note: Updated information has been added to the author's original article.

The National Watch & Clock Museum in Columbia, PA, is the largest and most comprehensive horological collection in North America, attracting visitors from around the world. Its Greek-inspired architecture makes it seem as if it has existed in its regal form for centuries, but its opening 40 years ago stemmed from humble beginnings.

Beginnings

The Museum opened to the public on November 6, 1977, attracting more than 15,000 people per year (Figures 1 and 2). When it opened its doors just a little over 40 years ago, it had fewer than 1,000 items on display. Today, the Museum holds over 12,000 items, many of which have been donated by members of the NAWCC, watch and clock collectors, and horological enthusiasts.

Figure 1, right. An invitation to the Museum opening in 1977.

Figure 2, below. Front view of the Museum, circa 1977.

The roots of the Museum can be traced back to 1952, when it originated as an "embryo museum" in the basement of National Association of Watch & Clock Collectors (NAWCC) Secretary Earl T. Strickler. Years later, the first floor of his home on North Third Street in Columbia, PA, became a private museum for members of the NAWCC. As membership grew, a separate building was purchased at 514 Poplar Street to be the NAWCC headquarters.

In 1971 a Museum Acquisitions Committee was formed to solicit donations of watches, clocks, and related items to begin their own museum and to expand the collection of books for research and lending library services to members. Clocks were displayed along the office walls on pegboard panels. The museum was a gathering place for members and was not open to the public, but within a few years it was apparent that the museum collection required its own exhibit space.

Meanwhile, at the home of Earl Strickler, sickness had struck the household and two days later Earl died unexpectedly of a heart attack on May 26, 1974. Community members were shocked at the loss of their great friend and quickly organized a memorial fund in his honor. According to an article by J. E. Coleman, he was "A man of quiet courage" who was "a good citizen, good friend, jovial companion, and a strong champion for all great causes of his community and association." He was also described as a man who "followed four guideposts for his way—integrity, compassion, wisdom, and wit."[1] His contributions to the NAWCC and the National Watch & Clock Museum will always be remembered and greatly appreciated.

Expansion

The building that housed the headquarters and library was more than doubled in space in 1976, and a commitment was made to expand the collections and open them to the public. On November 6, 1977, the Museum opened its doors to the public for the admission price of $1. In December 1977 one of the two bimonthly periodicals of the NAWCC, the *Bulletin*, listed many intriguing donations: the Springfield, Illinois Mason model pocket watch donated by C. C. Badeau; a Boettger & Wittig demagnetizer circa 1902 donated by Col. Turner W. Gilman; and an 1885 ladies' key-wind pendant watch of the J. B. Gondy & Co. of France, donated by Mrs. W. H. Altman. The *Bulletin* article continued, "The entire NAWCC Collection has been moved from its previous display area around the walls of the computer room into the new Museum."[2]

Almost every piece in the Museum had been donated by NAWCC members, who were watch and clock hobbyists, collectors, antique dealers, and professional watchmakers, clockmakers, and jewelers. The size and quality of the collection reflected the astute management and the generosity of the members. Within 10 years the Museum collection increased from less than 1,000 items to more than 6,000. In 1985 another grand opening was celebrated with a gallery addition that doubled existing exhibit and library space, and in 1986 another addition alleviated the new establishment's "growing pains."

Stacy B. C. Wood wrote in 1985 that there were "no funds in the budget to buy objects. In this way, the museum is unique. The Museum, like all other major museums, has a statement of purpose. Ours reads: To collect, record, preserve, provide public access to, and to interpret the horological history and material achievements of the world in a manner consistent with the highest professional standards."[3]

The Engle Clock, a towering goldleaf-edged monument clock the size of two piano crates found in a New England barn, was the first item purchased by the NAWCC in 1988. After a year of restoration by John Metcalfe and other volunteers, it went on display to the public on September 19, 1989 (Figures 3 and 4).

After another renovation project to accommodate more growth (Figures 5 and 6), the Museum re-opended on October 23, 1999. This was

Figure 3, far left. The Engle clock.

Figure 4, left. A peek inside the Engle clock.

Figure 5, above. Under construction, circa 1998.

Figure 6, below. The Museum, getting closer to its reopening, circa 1998.

described as a "tremendous success and the harbinger of many more achievements for the museum and the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors. This event underscored the dedication of the Association and staff members—a cooperative effort that resulted in one of the single, most important and highly publicized days in the association's history."[4]

Modern Day

In today's Museum (Figures 7 and 8), the exhibits focus on timepieces spanning more than four centuries of horological developments. From the largest collection of nineteenth-century American clocks and watches to timepieces from Japan, China, Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Russia, the Museum contains more than 12,000 different timepieces. The Museum is dedicated to furthering the study of horology through collections appreciation and research.

The Museum's Lending Library is the largest U.S. horological library outside of the Library of Congress. The Library maintains copies of more than 21,000 U.S. horological patents and has an outstanding collection of nineteenth-century trade publications. Its

Figure 7, below. Museum lobby.

Figure 8. The Museum's exterior today.

resources are used to document timepieces around the world.

The how and why of timekeeping is emphasized throughout the Museum. Antique and modern tools for making watches and clocks are displayed and described. The clocks, watches, and related items are in near-mint condition, and many are operating; however, some are not in operation to avoid damaging delicate and unique components.

40th Anniversary

On November 29, 2017, more than 160 NAWCC members, staff, friends, and supporters gathered to celebrate the Museum's 40th Anniversary. Several sponsors and their representatives attended from around the nation and around the world. Many NAWCC Board Members were also present.

Figure 9. The cover of the Museum's 40th anniversary booklet.

Attendees enjoyed meeting, connecting, and sharing in the festivities of the evening. They also had the opportunity to take the first look at the RGM 40th Anniversary Watch, which was donated to the Museum. The watch was auctioned in January 2018 for $7,200.

A 40th Anniversary commemorative booklet (Figure 9) is now available through the NAWCC Gift Shop (giftshop@nawcc.org; 717.684.8261 ext. 211). The 44-page, softcover booklet provides an overview of the Museum's collection with beautiful photography and helpful information.

Since the grand opening in 1977, the Museum has substantially increased its collection and prestige. From the origins of time with nonmechanical devices to the advanced clocks and watches today, the Museum displays the many, intriguing methods of timekeeping throughout human history. *Tempus Vitam Regit* (Time Rules Life), the original motto of the NAWCC, continues to shape the horological world on display at the National Watch & Clock Museum.

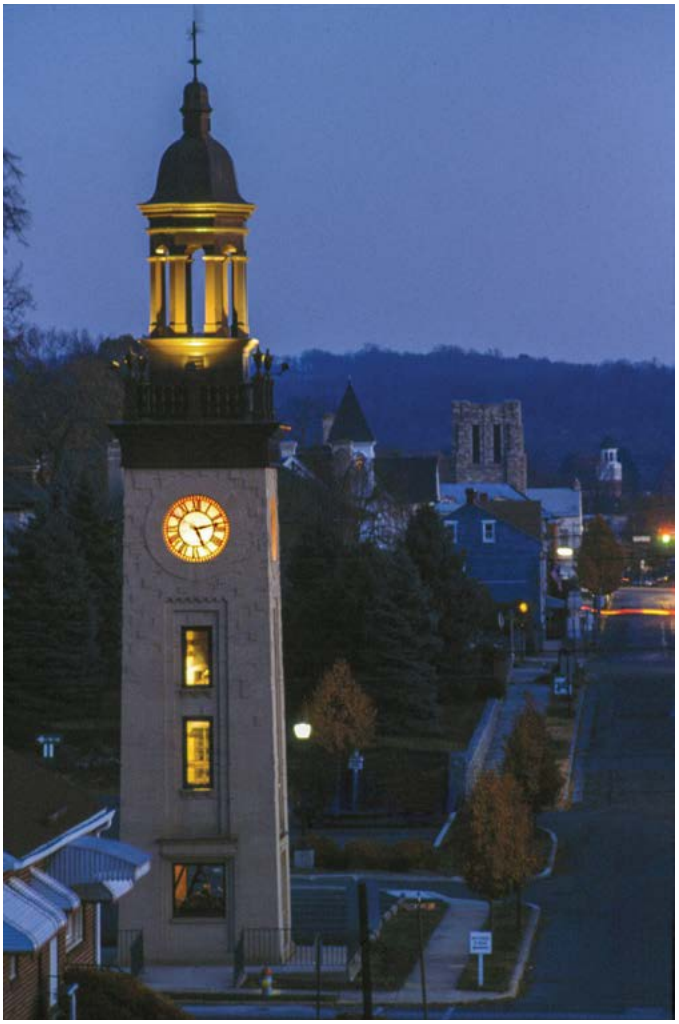

Figure 10. NAWCC tower clock overlooking Columbia, PA, at night. COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL WATCH AND CLOCK MUSEUM.

Notes

1. Coleman, J. E. "Earl Taft Strickler… A Man of Quiet Courage." *NAWCC Bulletin*, No. 172 (October 1974):562–564.
2. Wood, Stacy B. C. Jr. "The NAWCC Museum." *NAWCC Bulletin*, No. 186 (February 1977):76–77.
3. Wood, Stacy B. C. Jr. "Concerning the Donation of Objects to the NAWCC Museum." *NAWCC Bulletin*, No. 234 (February 1985):77.
4. Fletcher, Ralph. "Your Museum—Providing for the Future." *NAWCC Bulletin*, No. 324 (February 2000):5–6.

References

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