

A Gold Watch Enabled the Louisiana Purchase

by Irénée du Pont Jr. (DE)

The first step in developing the above title's outrageous claim was a letter of May 27, 2011, from NAWCC Executive Director Steven Humphrey decrying the NAWCC Library's lack of information on Parisian watchmaker Samuel du Pont (1708-1775).

Because the watchmaker was my quadruple-great-grandfather, I accepted Humphrey's invitation to lunch and a Museum visit.

The second step was a visit to the NAWCC Museum, to which I brought a mysterious antique watch to be analyzed. During the visit, Humphrey gave me a copy of *How the Watch Was Worn* by Genevieve Cummins.

The third step was reading the book. It is an exciting text on the sociology of manners and customs that surrounded watches in the past. What I had thought of as sissy stuff was actually an emerging technology that impacted men and nations.

THE ANTIQUE WATCH

My mother's estate passed to me a small chest containing four gold watches. Three "modern watches" of the 1890s had belonged to her father, her mother, and to her as a young woman. The fourth was a large antique watch with no identification. Fifty years later, in 2011, I wondered which ancestor had owned this antique. Finding its approximate date of manufacture might provide an answer.

My visit to Columbia included the School of Horology, where School Director Jim Michaels, an expert on antique watches, pulled the movement from the case for examination. He gave the following information:

The subject watch is a "quarter repeater" of French origin (when the pendant was depressed, it gonged out the hour followed by the number of quarter hours). The case is marked: LF 3976 K18.

Its style and verge movement indicate a date of manufacture between 1790 and 1820. Few verge movements were made after 1820 because modern escapements offered superior timekeeping.



Much of the repeater action had been removed, including the gongs, the hammers, and some wheels. Based on various watchmaker markings on the back of the case, the watch had been repaired or serviced 11 times.

I left the watch with Michaels, who returned it to operating condition as a timepiece, but did not attempt to replace the missing parts needed to restore it as a quarter repeater.

PROVENANCE

The subject watch must have belonged to a forbear, or my mother would not have kept it with her own, her mother's, and her father's watches. She did not keep treasures of her childhood.

Her male forbears who were mature between 1790 and 1820 were:

- GGGF Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours (1739-1817)
- GGGF Jean Francois Dalmas (?-1808)
- GGF Francis Gurney Smith (1784-?)
- GGGF Thomas Mackie (1753-?)
- GGGF Keating Simons (1753-1834)
- GGF Thomas Wigfall (1768-1843)

Pierre Samuel du Pont stands out among the above as the one who needed a gold watch. Little is known of Jean Francois Dalmas other than his limited resources. The same goes for Smith, Mackie, Simons, and Wigfall, who were agrarians in South Carolina, where gold watches could not have survived the Civil War.

Pierre Samuel du Pont had brought his two sons and their families to America in 1800. After futile efforts to establish Pierre's visionary sheep plantation, the sons found other means for livelihood. Pierre, bored with formative America, returned to the excitement of Paris in the service of Emperor Napoleon. He needed a flashy gold watch to join the high flyers, circling about the emperor. The 11 service events mentioned above indicate that one owner kept the watch in working order for an extended period. Beside the watch, Pierre had another asset to help his relationship with the emperor. He knew Thomas Jefferson, minister from the United States to the court of King Louis XVI of France, and had been informed of the American's desire to acquire the Louisiana colonies. He was therefore in a position to promote France's part in President Thomas Jefferson's 1803 Louisiana Purchase.

Pierre died while living in the house of his second son, Eleuthere Irénée du Pont (1771-1834), the gunpowder maker. My mother and father were second cousins, both descended from the gunpowder maker, so the watch could have been passed down to either of them. Their fortuitous marriage ensured that it landed in mother's wooden box to show up in her estate.

ARGUMENT

In 1803 Napoleon Bonaparte sold his Louisiana colonies to the United States: a win-win deal. Napoleon received sixty million francs (11.2 million dollars), which he needed to pay his army. The United States increased its land area by a very large amount. Within three years, the agreement was formalized. Total expenditures came to \$27.3 million, and specified boundaries included all of the North American continent not claimed by the United States, Canada, Russia, and Spain. Thus, the area of United States grew threefold at a cost of four cents per acre.¹

This amazing deal had its origin three decades earlier, when in 1785 French-speaking Thomas Jefferson relieved Benjamin Franklin as minister to the court of King Louis XVI. Swirling about the king was a vast array of courtiers, philosophers, and politicians, some of whom, including one Pierre Samuel du Pont (1739-1817), had a genuine interest in theories of government. Pierre was the son of Huguenot watchmaker Samuel du Pont (1708-1775) and Anne Alexandrine de Montchanin (1720-1750). His education by a former priest ended when his mother died and his father insisted on the completion of his watchmaking apprenticeship. He made one watch and then left to support himself as a writer, with a simple, easy-to-read style.

Pierre became a disciple of Robert Jacques Turgot, the long-standing proponent of economics as a natural law



Pierre Samuel du Pont
(1739-1817)

that can lodge prosperity on a free populace under a limited government. Turgot's death in 1781 left Pierre among the leaders² of those who advocated these principles, which the "American Experiment" was then testing. Thus Pierre had a burning desire to seek out Jefferson. The two men with similar ideas sealed a close friendship.³ Jefferson bluntly stated, perhaps while enjoying adult beverages, that the French colonies in Louisiana should join the United States. Out of loyalty to his king, du Pont would have been non-committal, but he didn't forget Jefferson's desire for the colonies.

The French Revolution intervened. Jefferson went home to continue his political career; du Pont bought a print shop to publish his writings that on two occasions

landed him in La Force Prison, which he survived. By 1799 Pierre Samuel du Pont, with his two sons Victor and Eleuthere Irénée, both with growing families, had had enough of chaotic France. They emigrated to the United States to establish a sheep farm; but the farm never had a chance. By 1802 the sons had found other means for supporting their families, and Pierre got bored with colonial life. He returned to Paris to find excitement among the lights and shadows of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte.

While selecting a suitable wardrobe, Pierre noted that a personal display of watches was the badge of belonging among those within eyesight of the emperor. Both ladies and gentlemen often adorned themselves with more than one watch strung on elaborate chains with accessories. Genevieve Cummins describes the role of watches: "Winding of the watch in the presence of others might be a pleasant little gesture of polite swagger."⁴ Pierre obtained an 18-karat gold, "quarter repeater" as his passport into the circle of prestige.

Pierre quickly learned that the emperor was strapped for cash. Napoleon had amassed a great army to start his romp through Europe, but at this stage of the game, the spoils of victory were not covering his costs. Pierre remembered his old friend Thomas Jefferson, now president of the United States of America. Perhaps with the help of his watch, he made contact with the emperor. He pointed out that the British Navy was blocking all intercourse with the Louisiana colonies, rendering them useless to France. Pierre gave reason that President Jefferson would pay handsomely for title to those colonies. The idea clicked. Napoleon snaggged enough to pay his army for a long campaign and Jefferson easily won reelection to his second term. But this was not the end of the watch's glory.

Pierre carried on in Paris taking various positions among the emperor's tumultuous domestic affairs. He kept close to Talleyrand, that master dude who thrived

through France's kaleidoscope of regimes. They both became disenchanted with Napoleon, so in 1814, when the European Allies forced the emperor to abdicate, Pierre was named secretary general of France's Provisional Government. In this office he signed receipt of the Act of Abdication directly under the former emperor's signature, an honor to be sure, but containing a hazard that Talleyrand deftly avoided.

On the news that Napoleon had escaped from imprisonment on the island of Elba, Pierre grabbed his watch as he leaped aboard the next boat to America, now eager for the quiet life on the Brandywine Creek at his son's gunpowder factory.

Three years later he found excitement again when the charcoal house caught fire in the powder factory. Pierre at age 77 insisted on serving in the bucket brigade. Cold, tired, and wet, he succumbed to pneumonia. Thus Pierre Samuel du Pont became the first member of the family to lose his life in the service of E. I du Pont de Nemours and Co., the firm that still bears his subtitle.

NOTES

1. "Louisiana Purchase," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1946.

2. Eugene Daire, *Physiocrates: Quesnay, DuPont de Nemours, Mercier de la Riviere, l'abbé Baudeau, Le Trosne* (Paris: Librairie De Guillaumin, 1846): p. 316.

3. Pierre Jolly, *Du Pont De Nemours Apostle of Liberty and the Promised Land* (translated and

copyright by Elise du Pont Elrick, 1977): pp. 70, 74.

4. Genevieve Cummins, *How The Watch Was Worn* (Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club Ltd., 2010): p. 14.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Irénée du Pont Jr., born January 8, 1920, is the son of Irénée du Pont and Irene S. du Pont (second cousins).

He attended Tower Hill School, Wilmington, DE, and Dartmouth College for two years before transferring to Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he received a B.S. in mechanical engineering.

Mr. du Pont was a test engineer for Ranger Aircraft Engines, Farmingdale, NY, before going to E. I. du Pont de Nemours and Co. in 1946. He performed engineering and supervisory work at industrial sites and Wilmington offices and laboratories. He retired in 1978 as senior vice-president and served on the board of directors from 1959 to 1990.

Mr. du Pont married Barbara Batchelder of Hanover, NH. They have one son, four daughters, 13 grandchildren, and 7 great-grandchildren.

His horological interests include Westclox alarm clocks. Mr. du Pont writes of the photo at left: "The image shows a Westclox America received on my fourth birthday and a preowned Pocket Ben carried for 20 years, until promotions required a wristwatch (In a meeting you can't sneak a peek at a pocket watch.)."



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