

From the *Sag Harbor Express*

A SAG HARBOR GENIUS

BUILT REVERED CLOCKS

One of His Tower Clocks

Has Prompted Controversy

We regale visitors to the village with tales about our whaling ships, our historic homes, and the nation's first Custom House, but we seem to overlook a nationally renowned 19th century scientist who was born, raised and worked in Sag Harbor. Ephraim Niles Byram, among many other accomplishments, built magnificent tower clocks for the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York's City Hall, London's Stone Church, and our own Methodist Church on Madison Street. He also built a clock for the Virginia Military Institute that has become the subject of controversy 160 years after it was installed.

Byram was born in Sag Harbor on November 25, 1809, to Eliab and Cynthia Clark Byram. According to Russella J. Hazard, writing in the October 1956 issue of *The Long Island Forum*, Ephraim grew up a quiet and serious boy, perhaps because he had to survive among seven children. He left school early, finding it difficult to follow set rules, and educated himself in science, mechanics and astronomy. At age 25, he created a mechanical model of the solar system, called an orrery. A Sag Harbor newspaper, the *Republican Watchman* reported in March 1836 that the orrery would be set up in the village Arsenal, with an accompanying lecture by Byram. Later the American Institute of New York requested his creation to be exhibited in Manhattan and awarded Ephraim its Gold Medal.

Ephraim moved on to designing and building clocks, telescopes, even musical organs, and continued to take meteorological observations. His great interest in navigational instruments aboard whaling and cargo ships that docked in Sag Harbor led him to study celestial navigation. Between 1842 and 1866 he repaired and manufactured chronometers and compasses for over 70 ships sailing from Long Wharf. He built his first clock for the tower of Sag's Methodist Church in 1838. Years later church trustees declared that the clock varied less than three minutes a year. As his fame spread, he built clocks for churches in Newton, Mass.; La Grange, Georgia; London, England; and for the 220-ft spire of Louisville, Kentucky's Baptist Church. The clock for New York's City Hall featured glass dials seven feet in diameter.

It was his clock built for VMI in 1852 that has created a horological kerfuffle 160 years later. Apparently when Union Army General David Hunter gutted the Lexington, Virginia military college during the Civil War, Byram's clock vanished and later emerged, a spoil of war, in the tower of the Warren County Courthouse in Belvidere, New Jersey. A couple of years ago when Warren County decided to convert the clock to an electronic mechanism, experts expressed skepticism that the courthouse clock is indeed Byram's VMI clock. The Warren County Express-Times has covered the story extensively, perhaps not momentous news but things do get a little slow in the summer. VMI is conducting its own research and if it turns out that the Warren County clock originally was built for the school, it will be repatriated to the south. Stay tuned.

According to the "Guide to Sag Harbor Landmarks Homes and History," Byram designed his own house on Jermain Avenue, west of Oakland Cemetery, in the manner of an Italianate villa with a campanile where he set up telescopes and hung pendulums. He built his clocks in a shop behind the house.

In 1857 Byram married Cornelia J. Pierce of Elmira, NY (no word on how they met), and they raised three children. The same year he built a clock for the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, his account book reading “Completed Nov. 1857. Set running in tower of Collegiate Hall, May 1, 1858. Price \$940.” In 1929 an academy publication reported “...the dial was of wood and measured five feet across. The hands and numerals were also of wood...for 72 years the clock has given satisfactory service.”

Byram made a grandfather clock for his own Sag Harbor home in 1869. Many years later his daughter Loretta willed the clock to the John Jermain Memorial Library and it was set in the library’s main entrance hall. Director Catherine Creedon reassured us that during the library’s expansion, the 145-year old clock is receiving therapy at Netusil Jewelers in Rocky Point and will have a prominent place in the completed building. In his last years, Byram settled down as a bookbinder and collected volumes on science and mechanics. He passed away on June 27, 1881, ending a life of genius and achievement, deserving to be celebrated by his native village. A pedestal topped by a globe marks the Byram family plot in Oakland cemetery.

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