Eli Terry Biography

Eli Terry

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Biography

Born in East Windsor, Connecticut, Terry was apprenticed to a master clockmaker at the age of fourteen. At that time, clocks were considered to be a status item of little practical value, for the rigors of daily life were regulated by the sun or by the amount of oil in an oil lamp. Thus, clocks were custom built by hand, mostly of wooden parts.

In 1793 Terry had opened his own clock-shop in Plymouth, Connecticut. He had heard of Eli Whitney 's methods and saw the potential in his own business. Terry adapted his machines to be powered by water and hired several workmen to cut the individual wheels, cogs, and other clock parts which he later assembled to make the finished clocks.

Terry put his system to a test. In 1807 he formed a partnership with Seth Thomas (1785-1859) and Silas Hoadley to build 4,000 clock-works for Connecticut businessmen Edward Porter and Levi Porter. This huge order was considered impossible for any one man to complete in his entire lifetime, but Terry promised to do it in three years. He made good on his promise, and his success showed the feasibility of adapting mass production techniques to the building of clocks. It was also a very profitable venture, and after this initial run of 4,000 clocks, Thomas and Hoadley bought out Terry's interest in the business, and became very successful in their own clockmaking ventures.

Terry went on to invent the wooden shelf clock (or mantle clock) which featured a system of weights and pulleys suspended within the clock on either side of the face and placed within an attractive case. His innovative production methods and interchangeable parts allowed Terry to build as many as 12,000 clocks per year. An extensive network of " Yankee Peddlers" hawked these popular wooden clocks, mass-produced by Terry and Thomas, door-to-door all over New England, and both men made their fortunes in the venture.

Terry retired from the clockmaking business in 1833, turning the venture over to his sons and other family members. By the time of his death in 1852, Terry's innovations had earned him ten patents for improvements to clocks.