

## **Prownian Interpretive Essay**

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### ***Description***

The object appears as a rectangular wooden case. The case is hollow and has three glass doors on one side that are stacked vertically. Each door has a small knob on the right side. The two glass doors on the bottom have flowers painted on them. The top glass door is clear and behind it is a clock face with roman numerals one through twelve. The clock face has two metal hands that are black in color. The wood case has two columns. One column on each side of the top two glass doors. The top and bottom of each column appears to be painted gold. The object is 36 inches tall and 18 inches wide. The object weighs 15 lbs. The depth is 4.5 inches. Each of the three doors are opened by pulling their individual knob. Upon opening the top door, it is apparent that the clock face is removeable. Removing the clock face reveals a mounted block of gears and other mechanisms made from brass. On the face of this brass blocks the inscription reads, "Plymouth Hollow". At the bottom of the mechanical brass block is a thin metal rod that descends into the lower sections of case. This rod is about 2 millimeters in thickness. On both sides of this metal rod are two cords made of an unknown material and they also descend into the lower sections of the case. Upon opening the middle glass door, the metal rod and two cords are visible and continue to descend to lower section of case. Behind the middle glass door and behind the rod and cords, are remnants of a paper label that was attached to back wall of case. This paper label reads "Seth Thomas" on the fragments of label that are left and not deteriorated. Opening the bottom glass door exposes the end of the metal rod which is attached to a 3.5-inch disc used as a pendulum. The cords on each side if the pendulum is attached to cylindrical lead weights that are about 4.5 inches tall. The left weight weighs 6 lbs., and the right weight weighs 9 lbs. Examining this wooden case reveals that it is a mechanical interactive device that was used for keeping time. The metal hands on the clock face dial indicate the time of day, while an unseen audio chime also indicates each hour on the hour by striking. Two small holes on the clock face allow insertion of a key to wind the weights to the top of the case. Gravity then allows the slowly falling weights to power the clock and allow the hands to move sixty minutes per hour. The details and style of this clock place it to middle nineteenth century. The columns

and mahogany veneer classify it as an American Classical Empire clock. Most likely the focal point in a nineteenth century home and usually placed on a mantle above a fireplace which gives explanation to the dark patina covering the gold bases of columns. After researching the “Seth Thomas” label and the “Plymouth Hollow” inscription on brass movement, it is revealed that it is a clock produced in Connecticut mid nineteenth century. Researching the Seth Thomas clock company reveals they were a leading producer of clocks during the nineteenth century not only in Connecticut but throughout the United States.

### *Deduction*

The clock is a large and reminds me of a piece of furniture that is stationary and not to be moved very often. The finish of the wood case of the clock is dark stained wood that is smooth to the touch. The type of wood seems to be of high quality and exotic such as mahogany or rosewood. The construction and style appear to be the work of a very skilled 19th century cabinet maker. It is joined by mortice and tenon and most likely glue. The glass doors are painted on the reverse side of glass. The painting is of flower bouquets which are surrounded by gold stenciling. Flowers were surely a common decoration in 19th century homes and without electricity at that time but gold stenciling seems like a premium decoration. Clocks were surely the focal point of a room at that time. Since the clock is used to keep time, it must be wound regularly to raise the weights since it is weight driven. Looking at the clock I realize that the longer the drop for the weights, the longer the clock can operate and tell time. This explains why the clock is so tall. When wound fully, this clock can run for eight days. I think this would have been a luxury clock type in the 19th century because many clocks required winding every 12 hours. The second weight is also wound but instead of powering the clock hands it powers an hourly gong or chime. With clocks being stationary at the time it was made; I think an hourly chime that indicated time would have been a necessity to a household and allowed the inhabitants to be reminded of the time every hour without looking. I also think people had so many chores associated with keeping a household running in the 19th century that it was very inconvenient to go and read the clock. The clock is really an interesting mix of functionality and opulence. I am thinking it is the work of several skilled tradesman instead of one person. The clock invokes a sense of independency or self-sufficiency for me because it does not rely on electricity. When I look at the clock, I feel a real sense of joy. Joy from its attractiveness. It is masculine in its style with bulky scrolls and

columns, but it is also feminine with its pretty flower paintings and gold gilt decorations. It is obvious at first appearance that the clock is very old and the biggest joy it brings me is the connection it makes me feel to people from another period in time. The condition of the paintings on the clock is fading and flaking and this brings feelings of sadness and loss. For me the clock is a portal into another time. Every now and then before I go to bed, I will turn off all of the modern electronic devices and sit and listen to the rhythmic tic toc of this old clock as it runs. It is a loud echoing tic toc that is accompanied by occasional growling of the brass gears that causes the wood case to pop and crack, much like an old hard wood floor. I can close my eyes and imagine a family engaged in evening past times like crocheting or reading by the light from the fire in the fireplace. I feel certain the clock has been a witness to many momentous events for families and this also brings me joy.

### *Speculation*

According to family history, this clock arrived in Mississippi during the 1850's. The exotic and precious materials the clock is made from indicate it was most likely an expensive item and the purchaser had some amount of wealth. Because these materials come from different locations the clock is obviously a composite and mass-produced object. This leads me to start thinking about pre civil war Mississippi. There was a lot of wealth in the southern states due to cotton production and slavery. Were the northern producers and manufacturers taking advantage of the slave economy in the south? I must suspect yes! We know northern carpenters and skilled tradesman were coming to Mississippi to build elaborate Greek Revival, and Italianate homes in town like Natchez and Columbus. We also know that they were followed by master cabinet makers like, Prudent Mallard, J.W. Meeks, and Belter, who set up shops in places like Memphis and New Orleans to meet the demand by planter elite to furnish these homes. Was this clock only afforded by wealthy southern slave owners? I do not think so, but I do think it represents what was viewed as desirable and thriving in Antebellum Mississippi. The style of the clock is certainly American Classical Empire with its sweeping scrolled base and its mahogany ogee trim around the glass doors. I imagine that clocks like this sat on mantels above fireplaces in mansions across the south, but I also suspect that these clocks were desired and purchased by common farmers and town people throughout the south. One interesting oral history detail about this clock that was passed down from my grandfather is that our family purchased the clock on

payments from a northern clock salesman who traveled to Mississippi. This sound like the clock company made it possible for most classes of southerners to purchase one of these clocks. No matter the differences of economic status of the owners of these clocks, the one common trait is that clocks were a treasured necessity that the functionality of most homes revolved around.

### **What is the relationship of a Seth Thomas clock and Antebellum Mississippi?**

Long before I had ever taken a material culture course in graduate school, I had an interest in antique objects and history. My parents were both from Mississippi and accepted jobs in South Carolina after college. I grew up listening to stories from my parents about their experiences growing up in Mississippi and I also occasionally heard about our early pioneer ancestors who went to Mississippi in the 1840's. I also was fortunate enough to get to travel to Mississippi a couple of times a year as a child to spend time with my grandparents and extended family there. My grandparents' houses were old and from another era, especially to a child from the suburbs of Columbia, South Carolina. The furniture was also from another era but obviously built to last. Both sets of my grandparents lived on farms and while they were landowners, that was about the only valuable possession they owned. The land was old too and had been passed down through the generations ever since it was acquired from the Chickasaw Indians. There were also other heirlooms that I learned about at an early age from both sets of grandparents. Quilts, jewelry, photographs, genealogy records, a hunting horn, and then there was the Clock. The clock sat on my maternal grandparents' mantle over the fireplace in Shannon, Mississippi. I remember vividly as a child staring with wonder at it during Christmas and other gatherings at my Granny and Pa's house. I remember that when the adults in the room mentioned the clock, all of them showed a focused and respectable amount of attention to it. What I would give now to be able to remember what was said about the old clock, but I was a child and naturally do not recall. I do remember that it was much older than the 1950's décor that was typical in southern farmhouses, and it sat almost like a monument on the mantle. The only oral history I can remember from that time was that it came from my Grannies grandparents. My last visit to my Grannies house was in 1991, and shortly after she went into assisted living and died in 1996. I pretty much forgot about the clock or even knew what happened to it after her passing. It was not until about 20 years later that I stumbled across it in my parent's attic. In the 20 years since I had seen the clock, my passion for history and antiques had only grown. I immediately acquired the

clock from my mother and in 2010 it accompanied me on my move from the Carolinas to our family's land in Mississippi. After getting settled I reached out to an antique clock repairman who reassembled and serviced the clock. It still worked! And today in 2021 it is still working though I only tend to wind and use it on special occasions. I have always wanted to know more about the clock and our ancestors who purchased it. I especially wanted to know if this opulent looking object indicated my ancestors were part of the wealthy planter class that benefitted from slavery. My love of history also led me to finish my bachelor's in history recently and pursue a graduate degree in Public History. Here I am today taking an American Material Culture course and much of it focuses on an interpretive analysis of an object using the Prownian analysis method. I immediately knew my object would be my clock, and I could not wait to see what the clock might reveal about not only itself, but my ancestors who owned it. In this interpretive essay I will detail the 3 main steps of the Prownian method and what they revealed to me. I will also discuss the sources used and how they were used with each step. Most importantly, I will share my assumptions about how and why this mid-19<sup>th</sup> century clock from Connecticut, ended up in Mississippi before the Civil War.

The first of the 3 steps in the Prownian method are the Description step. The physical description of my clock tells us that it is old. Attractive, with mahogany wood and painted flowers on glass doors. Inside is found a brass mechanical movement, marked "Plymouth Hollow", and lead weights that power the clock. The most important detail of the clock for me was remnants of a paper label inside. This label was barely intact but had enough writing and pattern on it that when compared to an online database of clock labels and the book, "Encyclopedia of Antique American Clocks" by Robert W. & Harriett Swedberg, I quickly identified it as a Seth Thomas "Mahogany Cornice and Column Clock". This clock was manufactured between 1855 and 1860. A second source titled, "Book of American Clocks" by Brooks Palmer, confirmed this date of origin by stating that the Seth Thomas factory moved from Plymouth Hollow Connecticut to Thomaston Connecticut in 1865. One last, and possibly most important, piece of evidence about the date of manufacture of this clock is found inside of the door that exposes the pendulum. In 2010 while attempting to service the clock myself, I discovered some pencil writing on the inside wood back wall that reads "Bought March 1861". I assume my ancestors were commemorating a "special or rare" purchase. What is most important about the manufacture and purchase date is that it places the clock in Mississippi right before the Civil War which lasted from 1861 to 1865.

In my research throughout the description step I also learned that the style of my clock is “Classical American Empire” which came into fashion during Thomas Jefferson’s time as president of the United States according to Patrick L. Stewart. "The American Empire Style: Its Historical Background." These discoveries related to the description of the clock have allowed me to have context about what was happening in Mississippi right before the Civil War. As I move into the Deduction step of my research it becomes Obvious that slavery was still legal but had become a divisive topic for the country. Did that mean that a white family in Mississippi in 1861 was wealthy because they could purchase a Seth Thomas clock? And was that wealth directly associated with slavery? The mix of exotic materials of the clock indicate that it was most likely an expensive object. In “Reconstructing the Landscapes of Slavery”, by TOMICH, D., DE BIVAR MARQUESE, R., MONZOTE, R., & FORNIAS, Mississippi is described as being settled by European slave owning planter elite who came to take advantage of the rich soil for cotton production. These European planters where not new to plantation agriculture but were just expanding westward due to land shortages in the east. This whole process of westward expansion and Indian removal is detailed in. "Andrew Jackson and Negotiations for The Removal of the Choctaw Indians” written by Arthur DeRosier. For the north Mississippi territory, it was the late 1830’s that the Choctaw and Chickasaw were forced to relocate to Oklahoma. This opened the fertile Mississippi lands to farmer and planters predominantly from the Carolinas who came in anticipation of expanding or establishing their wealth in cotton. Naturally, I would assume that my ancestors who owned the clock were among these planter pioneers who came to Mississippi, and that they must have been or become wealthy to have been able to afford this grand clock. I must admit, as I got into the deduction step research, I was not sure I wanted to uncover the slave owning past of my ancestors that may have contributed to the production of my clock. To not whitewash the history of the clock and my ancestors, I decided to move forward in the direction this assignment was naturally taking me. As I proceeded with my research much of my predictions about the clock and its owners came true, but I was also surprised to discover and speculate other probable scenarios about why this Seth Thomas clock ended up in Mississippi right before the Civil War. Seth Thomas began making clocks around 1813 in Connecticut, and his clocks are described in 1830 as being above average level. (Brooks) At the same time the American Empire style of furniture was at its height of popularity. While we do not think of a clock as a piece of furniture today, its size and usual wood cabinetry in 1830

certainly put it in that category. According to Carol Miller, who wrote “Lost Mansions of Mississippi”, the wealthy planter elite in Mississippi furnished their mansions in places like Natchez and Columbus with American Empire furniture. The further I got into my research the more I began to suspect that because of industrialization, the Empire style of furniture, and even Seth Thomas clocks, became available to the lower classes of white Mississippi residents before the Civil War. This is the point that some oral history in our extended family became key in supporting the speculation that our ancestors who purchased the clock were just lower-class farmers. Reaching out to an aunt of mine, my mother was able to retrieve an interesting story about the clock from an elderly cousin with a sharp memory. His story was that his grandparents purchased the clock from a northern traveling salesman, and they purchased it on payments. According to our cousin, this took place on the eve of the Civil War and after the war began the salesman was drafted into service and never returned to Mississippi to collect the remaining balance for the clock. It was assumed by our family at the time that the salesman most likely had lost his life during the war. Other than being a fascinating story, it provides some evidence that our ancestors could not afford to pay for the clock outright, instead making payments. The story also provides evidence that Seth Thomas was mass producing clocks in factories up north and distributing them down to Mississippi through salesmen. The pencil inscription inside of the clock also supports the accuracy of this story as the war began in 1861. The next topic in my research was slave ownership. Was this clock purchased to furnish the parlor of a large plantation home? In 2017 I visited the historic district of Natchez Mississippi. On a tour of one of the mansions I saw a clock nearly identical to mine. It certainly matched the rest of the homes other Empire furnishings suggesting that these Seth Thomas clocks at one time were acquired by the upper-class wealthy of American society. In Mississippi in 1860, a large majority of wealthy residents were slave owners. I could find no evidence of our clock owner ancestors owning a plantation home or slaves. My immediate source for this information was the Itawamba Mississippi 1860 Slave Schedule, however, while we did find some of our ancestors did own slaves in a neighboring county, the Itawamba schedule no longer exists. All of my recent speculations about our ancestors being common farmers despite owning this American Empire clock, were further strengthened by the book, “The Developmental Era of Eli Terry and Seth Thomas Shelf Clocks”, by Snowden Taylor. Taylor describes how industrialization in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century allowed Connecticut clock makers to begin mass producing their clocks in factories

in order to supply demand throughout the nation. Much like any fashionable item today which starts out expensive and scarce, its popularity eventually lands it on the shelves of Walmart. Detailed by Peter Goheen in his book, "Industrialization and the Growth of Cities in Nineteenth-century America.", is the story of 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialization and how it made scarce items available to the masses. Goheen states that the decade following the 1840's was the height of this industrialization which falls right in place for my ancestors purchase. Probably, this clock was just filling a necessary need for keeping time while presenting the latest fashion for aesthetics. I also discovered that American Empire furniture also became industrialized in. "THE STORY OF AMERICAN FURNITURE." By Charles Messer. What I found interesting about this industrialization information is that my experience at several antebellum house museums actually misled my assumptions about class and possessions in antebellum Mississippi society. The Mississippi historical homes that are museums today are not the Vernacular or common homes that were in the majority before the Civil War, sure, many mansions existed and were furnished with Seth Thomas clocks, but even more common farmer residents in Mississippi probably owned empire furnishings and these clocks. What started out as research about my family's antique clock has become so much more. It has become a story of 19<sup>th</sup> century westward expansion, industrialization, and a history of Seth Thomas clocks. This written interpretive analysis has also taken on multiple purposes as it is an assignment but also a written heirloom that can now accompany my clock onto its next owner, whoever that may be. It is fascinating to realize how the story of an object can be lost over just a few generations. I often think about being around my grandparents as a child, and the fact that they were most likely around their grandparents as children, and those grandparents actually purchased the clock and held all of the answers to my questions today. Perhaps my grandparents knew about their grandparent's class status and chose to hide tabooed associations with slavery. Perhaps they were just common farmers and nothing out of the ordinary about them worth passing down to younger generations. All of my research through the Prownian method persuades me to believe the later. I think my great-great grandparents were common farmers. I think empire Seth Thomas clocks could be compared to iPhone 6's. They were exclusive for a short period and then everyone owned one. Mississippi may have had the largest concentration of millionaires per capita in places like Natchez in 1850, but the remaining 99% of the state was occupied by common hard-working farmers and merchants (Pinnen). The clock was a prized possession and heirloom of mine before



my research, but now it is much less mysterious to me. On special occasions, usually at night before bed, when I do wind the old clock up, I sit in the darkened room and the rhythmic “tic toc” guides my imagination into an era of antebellum Mississippi. I can see the clock on their mantle, my great-great grandmother rocking fireside while she stitches a pair of pants, and my great-great grandfather writes in the family bible about the birth of their precious granddaughter, my grandmother Clara Mae.

## Bibliography

**DeRosier, Arthur H. "Andrew Jackson and Negotiations for The Removal of the Choctaw Indians." *The Historian* 29, no. 3 (1967): 343-367**

Outlines Jackson's Indian Removal Act and the dates and locations it was enforced. Some information on the Choctaw treaties which are similar in time period and compromises as the treaties with the Chickasaws. Also puts the removals in context with westward expansion of eastern European planters and farmers.

**Goheen, Peter G. "Industrialization and the Growth of Cities in Nineteenth-century America." *American Studies* 14, no. 1 (1973): 49-65.**

This contained broader information about nineteenth century industrialization in America. More or less the story of supply and demand and how population growth made factory production necessary to meet the needs of Americans in the nineteenth century. It also detailed geographical differences in the U.S. and how it affected production.

**Jenkins, Martha. "Oral History of Clock" Interviewed By Scott Jenkins. (Her Son) 2021**

This is the interview of my mother about the clock that comes from her family. My Mother also asked some older cousins about their memories of the clock.

**MILLER, MARY CAROL. *Lost Mansions of Mississippi, Volume II. JACKSON: University Press of Mississippi, 2010.***

Discusses in detail the planter elite who came to Mississippi to grow cotton. Also briefly discusses the extreme wealth the planters accumulated that allowed them to construct and furnish plantation mansions and town houses in Natchez, Holly Springs, and Columbus Mississippi.

**Palmer, Brooks. 1950. *The book of American clocks*. New York: Macmillan.**

Even though this book was written in 1950, I quickly found my clock. This book also elaborates on the fact that most American clocks were composites that parts were made by different makers and then assembled.

**Pinnen, Christian. *Complexion of Empire in Natchez: Race and Slavery in the Mississippi Borderlands*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2021.**

This book mostly discusses the slave system and how it contributed to the agricultural empire found in Mississippi in the 19th century. Very useful information in understanding the number 1 source of wealth in antebellum Mississippi.

**Stewart Patrick L. "The American Empire Style: Its Historical Background." *American Art Journal* 10, no. 2 (1978): 97-105.**

Discusses how Neo-Classical design influenced the American Empire style. Also, the founding makers such as Duncan Phyfe and John Meekes. Gives a good explanation of the characteristics of American Empire are.

**Stow, Charles Messer. "THE STORY OF AMERICAN FURNITURE." *New York History* 16, no. 4 (1935): 405-14.**

Included a section on Classical American Empire furniture and discussed the leading cabinet makers like Belter, Meeks, and Mallard who produced the highest quality in the early nineteenth century before industrialization shifted to factories.

**Swedberg, Robert W. *Encyclopedia of antique American clocks* / Robert W. & Harriett Swedberg. Publication Date 2004**

This book includes information about identifying Seth Thomas clocks and other Connecticut clock and other clocks. It also briefly discusses the transformation of clock making into mass production in northern factories.

**Taylor, Snowden. *The Developmental Era of Eli Terry and Seth Thomas Shelf Clocks*. Fitzwilliam, NH: K. Roberts Publishing Company, 1985.**

Discusses How Seth Thomas set up and established his clock making empire. Also discusses how he and Terry were two of the original American clock makers who other makers emanated and followed. Details the fine quality and craftsmanship in the beginning of the 19th century that made these clocks so desirable.

**TOMIC, D., DE BIVAR MARQUESE, R., MONZOTE, R., & FORNIAS, C. (2021). The Lower Mississippi Valley Cotton Frontier. In *Reconstructing the Landscapes of Slavery: A Visual History of the Plantation in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* (pp. 19-38). CHAPEL HILL: University of North Carolina Press.**

Discusses mass migration of Europeans into the gulf south during the “cotton boom”. Also details the plantation and slave system that made cotton production possible. A small section on the lower Mississippi Valley Cotton Frontier but lots of great information pertaining to Mississippi.

**1860 Pontotoc County, Mississippi Slave Schedule**[www.genealogy.com/msgw.org/pontotoc/census/1860slave.htm](http://www.genealogy.com/msgw.org/pontotoc/census/1860slave.htm)

I had hoped to find out if my ancestors in Itawamba County Mississippi owned slaves in 1860 but I discovered that unlike Pontotoc County, the slave schedule for Itawamba is missing. I have located ancestors on my paternal side in the 1860 Pontotoc Mississippi Slave schedule.

**"19th CENTURY AMERICAN FURNITURE." *Bulletin (St. Louis Art Museum)* 8, no. 5 (1973): 68-71.**

Discusses the famous furniture makers predominantly in the north but also the industrialization of mass-produced furniture.