

The Welch, Spring & Company

by
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Brooks Palmer, in his book, *The Book of American Clocks*, defines the Welch, Spring and Company of Bristol, Connecticut, as "a partnership of Elisha N. Welch and Solomon C. Spring, between 1868 and 1884, specializing in high grade regulators and calendar clocks using the Gale and B. B. Lewis patents." Although Palmer's definition is basically correct, it does not do justice to the Welch, Spring and Company. It fails to mention that it was operating at a time when the entire clock industry was geared only to mass production, and the idea or thought of quality and workmanship was gone. Industry's primary goal was to produce thousands of clocks a year for the domestic and overseas markets. Manufacturing had reached a point where only volume and economics counted. That is why the Welch, Spring and Company was so unique at this period of time; it did specialize in making high grade regulators, shelf models, and calendar clocks, in which quality and craftsmanship took preference over mass production.

The success of the Welch, Spring and Company was brought about by three men, each completely different from the other, and as fate would have it, they were drawn together. Through their individual talents they were able, for a short period of time, to bring back quality and craftsmanship to the Bristol clock making industry. These three men were Elisha Niles Welch, the financier; Solomon Crosby Spring, the manager and design engineer; and Benjamin Bennett Lewis, the inventor. But, before we go any further, let me give you a small biography of each man up until that day in 1868 when the Welch, Spring and Company was formed.

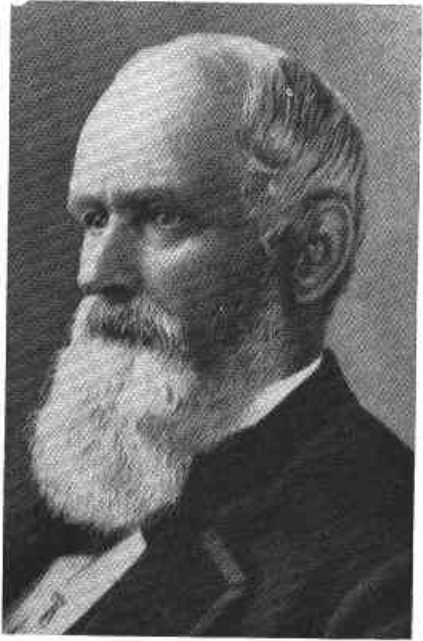


Fig. 1 E. N. Welch (1809-1887)

E. N. WELCH

Elisha Niles Welch, the financier (Figure 1), was born on February 7, 1809, in Chatham, Connecticut, to George Welch and Zelenda Niles. Elisha's father moved to Bristol in 1826, and set up a foundry on Laurel Street. At this location, the Welch family made cast iron weights for weight driven movements which they sold to the Bristol clockmakers in exchange for finished clocks. It was at this time that Elisha's father sent him out on the road to sell the finished clocks that they took in exchange. In 1831, Elisha had formed a partnership with Thomas Barnes and started marketing clocks under the Barnes and Welch label. In 1841, at the age of 32,

he was able to loan money to J. C. Brown of the Forestville Manufacturing Company. J. C. Brown was unable to repay the loan until 1845. In 1843, Welch's father died and by 1844, Welch had accumulated enough money to purchase the family's foundry on Laurel Street.²

By the age of 35, he had developed a keen knowledge of business and economics for he became a master at lending money, a perfectionist at buying bankrupt companies, and a genius at purchasing manufacturing facilities that produced products that other clockmakers had to buy. By 1850, Elisha Welch was well aware that a person could be very successful as a sheet brass supplier to the Bristol clock industry. He, therefore, helped establish the Bristol Brass and Clock Company and became president of the firm.³

In 1850, he again loaned large sums of money to J. C. Brown. By 1856, when the J. C. Brown Company became insolvent, Elisha Welch was in a position to use his financial skill to purchase the bankrupt firm. Not only was he wealthy enough to do this, but at the same time, he was also able to purchase two other insolvent Bristol firms — the Forestville Hardware and Clock Company and the Frederick Otis Case Shop. Eight years later, in 1864, to consolidate his clock holdings, he formed a joint stock corporation, the E. N. Welch Manufacturing Company, by issuing \$100,000 worth of stock. Elisha Welch purchased \$70,000 worth of the stock himself while his son and two sons-in-law each held \$10,000 worth of stock.⁴ The company's records show that it was formed for the purpose of "combining and manufacturing of various kinds of metals, rolling the same and converting them into various articles for sale, such as plate or sheet brass, clocks and clock movements."⁵ Elisha Welch served as president of the newly formed company while the other three stockholders served as officers and directors.

E. N. Welch was active and successful in other Connecticut enterprises. He served as president and director of a spoon and fork factory in Bristol

and a lamp-burner factory at Forestville. He was also a major stockholder in the Bristol Manufacturing Company which made knitted underwear. He was one of five stockholders of the First National Bank of New Haven, and a director of the Bristol National Bank and the Travelers and National Insurance Companies of Hartford. He had mining interests in Montana, and financial interests in numerous other manufacturing concerns in Waterbury, New Britain, and Plainville, Connecticut. He was active in politics, represented Bristol in the state legislature, and was a Senator from the Fourth District.⁶



Fig. 2 Solomon C. Spring (1826-1906)

SOLOMON C. SPRING

Solomon C. Spring, the manager and design engineer (Figure 2), was born January 29, 1826, in Granby, Connecticut, to Thomas Spring and Candace Holcomb. Clock making seemed to fascinate him for, at an early age, he ventured to Terryville and gained employment with Silas Burnham Terry. While still a young man, and having learned all he could from S. B. Terry, he moved to Bristol, Connecticut. In Bristol, he was able to gain employ-

ment with Reverend Irenus Atkins of the Atkins Clock Company.⁷ While working at the Atkins Clock Company, Solomon Spring found his real talent in clock manufacturing, producing quality and superior clock cases. It was here he gained experience, developed his skill, and mastered the art of cabinet and case joinery. More than anything else, it was at the Atkins Clock Company that Solomon Spring became enchanted with working with rosewood. For the next twenty years, while in business for himself and a partner with E. N. Welch, he made the rosewood case, one of his trademarks. While Solomon Spring was employed at the Atkins Clock Company, he helped design and develop Atkins' most popular and famous shelf clock, the *London Mantle* model.⁸ Variations of the *London Mantle* design became another one of his trademarks; whenever he had an opportunity to use any part of this design, he would incorporate it into the construction of the case.

In 1864, at the age of thirty-eight, Solomon Spring purchased the land, buildings, and equipment of the old

Birge, Peck, and Company of Bristol, and renamed it the S. C. Spring Clock Company.⁹ Since the S. C. Spring Clock Company never issued a catalog or a price list of its own, it is quite difficult to determine how many styles and models it made under its name or label. At the present time, there appears to be only five individual models that can be positively identified with the S. C. Spring Clock Company. All the weighted regulators and shelf models that can be identified as having been made by the S. C. Spring Clock Company have Ives' rolling pinions and Birge's brass strap movements. Clocks manufactured and sold by the S. C. Spring Clock Company have certain characteristics and design details that prove they are the manufacturer's. To illustrate this point, let us examine three of their five models that were definitely manufactured and sold by the S. C. Spring Clock Company: first, a thirty-hour shelf model; second, an eight-day mantle; and third, an eight-day wall regulator.

The thirty-hour rosewood shelf model, in Figure 3 on the right, is 11



Fig. 3 S. C. Spring Clock Company 30 Hour Model and Atkins London Model (left)

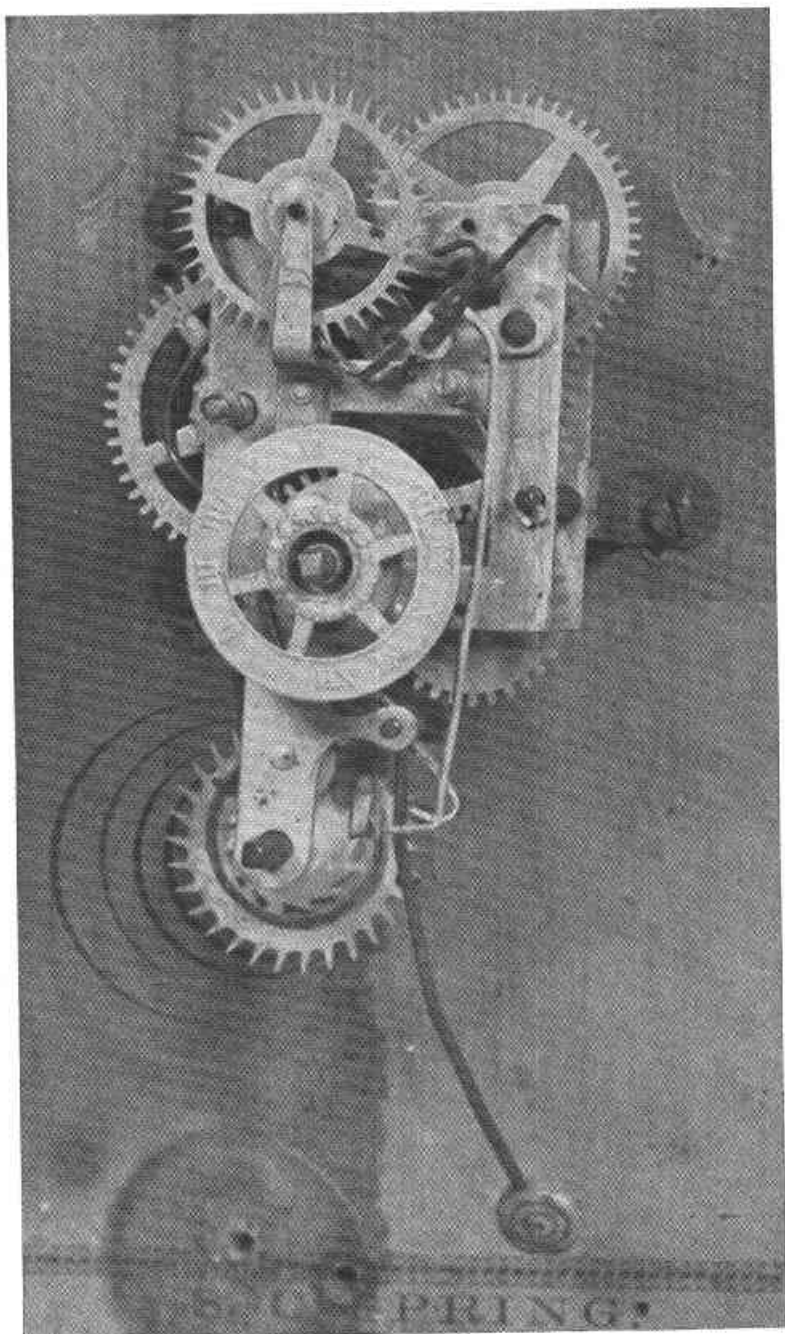


Fig. 4 S. C. Spring 30 Hour Time and Alarm Movement

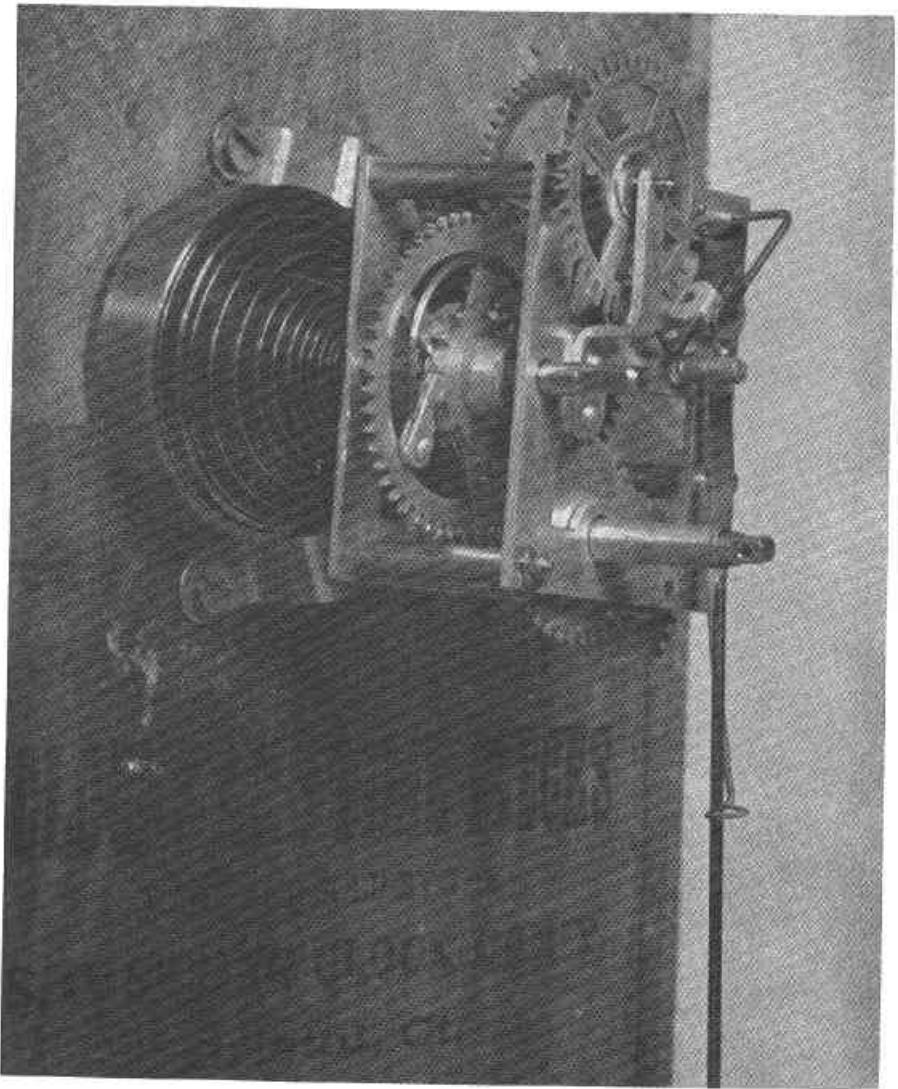


Fig. 5 S. C. Spring 30 Hour Movement with spring between back and backboard

inches high compared to 17 inches for the Atkins London model on the left. Solomon, Spring received design Patent No. 3211 for the clock case on the right.¹⁰ His design patent included any and all variations of the moldings either forming the top, center, or base of the case. Whether Solomon Spring was the original designer of this style case or whether the Atkins Clock Company was, we may never know. Strong indications lean heavily toward S. C. Spring being the designer

because from this basic case design, he made at least ten or twelve more models using this same design while the Atkins Clock Company only used it on the London model. The thirty-hour movement in Figures 4 and 5 is typical of the spring driven movements used by the S. C. Spring Clock Company. Note that in Figure 5 the spring is mounted outside of the movement between the backboard and back plate.

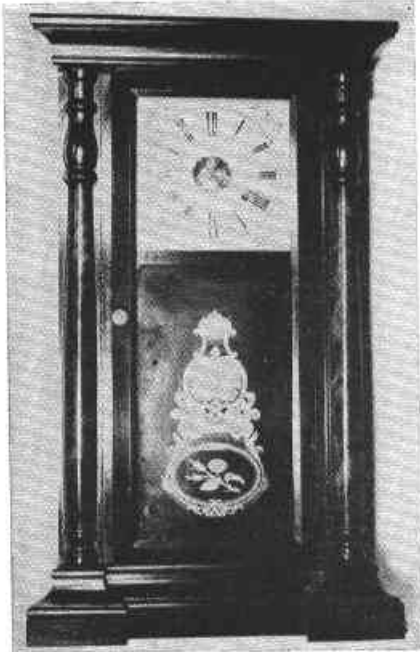


Fig. 6 S. C. Spring Clock Company Eight-day Shelf Model

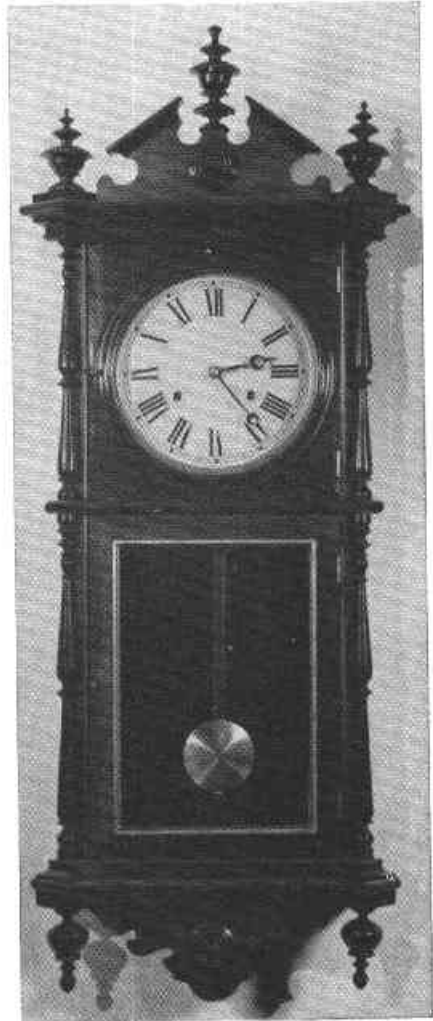


Fig. 8 S. C. Spring Clock Company Wall Regulator

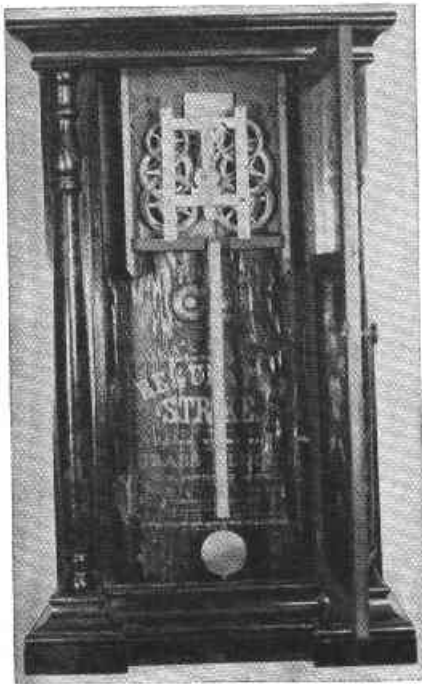


Fig. 7 Movement and Label of Figure 6

The eight-day weighted shelf model in Figure 6 again illustrates the similarity in clock cases produced by the company. This model came in rosewood and rosewood veneer, with or without gold leaf columns, and with the Birge brass strap movement shown in Figure 7. This model was also produced as a calendar clock using the B. B. Lewis calendar mechanism.

The wall regulator in Figure 8 was made just prior to the time when the S. C. Spring Clock Company became part of the Welch, Spring & Company.