

The Skeleton Clock

A Gift to John B. Gough

By Carrie Crane



John B Gough was a resident of Boylston from 1848 until his death in 1886 and a temperance movement speaker of great renown. Gough, at a young age of 25 was already struggling with severe alcoholism. This low time in his life was exacerbated by the loss of his wife and child due to illness. He was poor of wealth and soul. But in 1842, Gough found his way to a temperance movement meeting in Worcester, MA and by taking the oath of sobriety, he took the first steps in turning his life around. And quite a turn it was. Over the next few years, having seemingly found his calling, he embarked on a career as lecturer, speaking on the evils of alcohol and the benefits of abstinence. Starting locally, he gained a significant reputation as a motivating speaker as plainly described in this temperance periodical article from the Worcester Waterfall, December 31, 1842.

“We understand that this talented and worthy young mechanic is about to commence the business of lecturer on temperance. We wish him success; and we have no doubt that he will be eminently successful in his labors. He possesses, we believe, most of the elements of a popular speaker. He expresses his views in plain and intelligent language, without effort; and what he says comes warm from the heart. With good powers of mind, and a lively fancy, added to wit and humor, he cannot fail to please and amuse with his bright and glowing pictures of things as they exist; while he instructs the mind with sound views and principles, and warms up the heart with kind and generous feelings and sentiments.”

As John Gough’s reputation grew, he was asked to speak in locations farther and farther from his Worcester, Massachusetts home. As he traveled more, his income grew, and he was able to buy a piece of land up on a hill in Boylston and built a fine home he called ‘Hillside’. In 1853, he received his first invitation to speak in Great Britain. He spent much of the following year touring England, Ireland and Scotland. He writes in his autobiography about one engagement where he received a very special gift.



John B. Gough

Lecturer

BSHM Photograph #1976.130

“On March 1st, [1854], I went down to Greenock, and delivered a lecture in the "West Blackhall Chapel." On entering the committee-room, I noticed on the table, a very beautiful skeleton lever clock, such as I had never seen before. Approaching it, I said, " Oh ! what a beauty." I hardly knew at first what it was, and began to examine it. Some of the gentlemen looked embarrassed, as I made inquiries, and soon I detected my name on an engraved piece of silver hanging in front of it; when flashed on my mind the fact, that it was intended for me. I turned away confused, and it was immediately covered with a cloth. I heard afterward that it was intended for a surprise, to be presented to me on the platform after the lecture; and they had inadvertently left it exposed, and I saw it. I was very sorry, too, for during my speech, the thought of that clock, and the coming presentation, which I dreaded,

would force itself into my mind. I was bothered, and, until I had become absorbed in my theme, embarrassed by it; —but the presentation came off; a very beautiful speech was made by George Turner, Esq., to which I replied awkwardly, and with some blundering; and the beautiful clock, with its silver face, rosewood stand, and glass shade, was mine,—and it now adorns the mantel (sic) of my dining-room at Hillside.”



Gough Skeleton Clock Details

Left: The plaque honoring John B Gough. Esq. of Boylston, Mass., U.S.A.

Right: The intricate gearing of the clock exposed by the Skelton design.

Donated to the Boylston Historical Society Museum

Estate of Richard Warren Marble and Helen “Elizabeth Knight Marble

French clockmakers were the first to develop these clocks in the mid-1700s but they did not catch on. It was not until the 1800s that the Skeleton clock became a popular style of mantel clock, particularly in Britain. Clock manufacturers began eliminating the cover and designing open clocks which exposed the gearing and movements, hence the name *skeleton* clock. Advances in machining and semi-automated tooling allowed for the manufacture of this kind of clock at an affordable cost to many. Some clocks were simple in design, other quite complex and others still added additional geared mechanisms such as an orrery (a small model of the orbit of the planets). They were quite beautiful to look at and revealed the complex workings of time keeping.

The clock that was given to John B Gough and is now on display at the Boylston Historical Museum is 17”h (20” including glass dome) x 10” w x 6” d. The frame is built with front and back matching scrolled gold colored metal plates and an elegant silver, roman numeral dial is mounted on the front. The working mechanism consists of numerous gears. Affixed to a marble and rosewood base. The workings are protected from dust under a glass dome. There is no manufacturer’s name on the clock, but it appears to be very much in the style of a well know British clock maker, Evans of Handsworth. This company was a leader in clock design in the 1800s and was known for excellence in technology, in particular the eight-day workings, and magnificent design. Visit the museum and examine this magnificent clock for yourself.

Acknowledgements:

A Traveling Man’s Dressing Case, Carrie Crane, Boylston Historical Society and Museum, 2022
https://www.boylstonhistory.org/category/A_Travelling_Man_s_Dressing_Case/c159

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Editor, Nancy O’Loughlin Filgate, Curator, Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc., Boylston, Massachusetts

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https://www.boylstonhistory.org/category/John_B_Gough/c82

<https://www.ebsco.com/m/ee/Marketing/titleLists/tpa-coverage.pdf>

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