

Don Michael's Eli Terry Clock

Featured Piece of the Month – May 2021

Jim Tartaglia



I miss Don Michael. He was a good friend and an important member of the EMGW. Don was also a skilled woodworker despite the fact that, by his own admission, he never finished (as in completed) any of his woodworking projects. So, when it was suggested that his wife Cathy would appreciate having some of his major undone projects completed; I volunteered for the Eli Terry clock. Eli Terry was a nineteenth century Connecticut clockmaker, one of the first to mass produce clocks. An early model of his has become widely reproduced over many years. The clock we made in the workshop was a scaled down version of Terry's original clock.

I worked on the bench next to Don when we built the clocks in a workshop led by Bruce Wedlock, a long time EMGW member. The workshop was intended for advanced woodworkers and required that much of the work be done in our own shops between classes. We both made good progress; my clock was made of walnut, Don's of mahogany. We carpoled on the long ride to Bruce's shop and as a result of the whole project I got to know Don much better.





When I received Don's partially completed clock there was good and bad news. The good news was that the frame, door, and lock were completed in good order; the bad news was the turned pillars were just squared turning blocks. The escutcheon needed to be made and inserted, and the clock works were missing. Cathy found the works, tucked away in a drawer, and sent them to me. Bruce sent an extra paper clock face and a set of directions for building the clock to refresh my memory. When I made my clock, I turned the pillars a little over size; on Don's they came out a little undersize. If I ever make another they will be just right. I used a shop-made steady rest to keep the thing turning from whipping. The trickiest part was the escutcheon. I didn't have any ivory and so used a tagua nut, known

as vegetable ivory, sliced into 1/16th inch pieces on the band saw. Gluing the nut to a long stick enabled me to push it through the saw while keeping my fingers safe. Gluing the thin brittle nut to a piece of 1/8 inch plywood with hide glue made it easier to shape without breaking it; when finished dipping in hot water released the glue and produced the finished piece.



The lower portion of the door on these clocks were typically painted with subjects varying widely. I suggested that Cathy look at a bunch of these pictures online and mentioned that their house might be a good choice. She agreed as Don really loved the house, and it would be a good way to personalize the clock. My brother John, the artist in the family, agreed to do the painting and did a nice rendition.



I have a hard time dealing with the death of people I know. I never know what to say to family members and friends. Completing the clock gave me a chance to think about Don; it seemed like the right thing to do. Judging from Cathy's reaction when I delivered it, it was.