

# Preserving the Tower Clocks at Fort Monroe, Virginia

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At Fort Monroe, in Hampton Roads, Virginia, there are two tower clocks that have never been modified from their original installation. This article is intended to bring well-deserved awareness to these clocks. Both are in near-original condition and have never been electrified in any manner.

The first one, located in Building 83, the Fort's Post Office and Customs House, is well documented. It is a Seth Thomas Model 5, dating to 1898, with four dial faces.

The second, which has a more mysterious past and predates the other in design, is a Seth Thomas Model 15 striker in Building 5, the post's main barracks building. Records indicate that it was ordered by the U.S. government for Fort Monroe in the summer of 1880.

Both clocks are wound weekly and kept active today by a team of Fort Monroe volunteers.

Fort Monroe was a United States Army post that was closed as part of the Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC) in 2011. Today, the fort is managed in partnership with the National Park Service and the Fort Monroe Authority, a political subdivision of the Commonwealth of Virginia.



**Fig. 1: U.S. Post**

**Office Building built in 1898 at Fort Monroe, VA**

Fort Monroe is one of many "Third-System" forts built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Construction started on the fort and its surrounding buildings in 1819. It is similar to Fort Adams in Newport, Rhode Island, as both were designed by Simon Bernard and built following the War of 1812, after the Coastal Fortifications Board decided to increase fortifications around the United States.

**Figure 2: One of four clock faces in the tower of the Post Office Building at Fort Monroe. It is regularly wound on Wednesdays at 11:30.**



The Post Office Building houses the Seth Thomas Model 5 clock, which has four dials in the clock tower. The tower features a two-story atrium built in 1898. The clock is listed in Seth Thomas records as having been sold in May 1898.

**Figure 3: Reflection of the clock face in the window of the Post Office Building clock tower.**

The weights are interesting in that they are painted with what appears to be delivery instructions. In the stacked configuration, the weights read “Seth Thomas U. S. Post Office Building, Fort Monroe VA. Care

G.S. N.Y. by Boat”.

**Figure 4: Weight of the 1898 Seth Thomas tower clock in the Office building at Fort Monroe. Markings on the side reads *Thomas clock, W.S. P.O. Building Fort Monroe VA Care G.S.N.Y. By Boat.***

Our *Clock Maintenance Team*, consisting of the author compatriots David Stalfort and Doug Daniels, last adjusted the Model 5 clock in December, 2015. The elected to leave the speed adjustment constant and adjust time every couple of weeks, contending that if the clock within 1 minute and 30 seconds of Atomic Time, the reading from the face was close enough to accurate. Typically, the clock will gain or lose well less than a minute a week, depending on temperature and humidity.



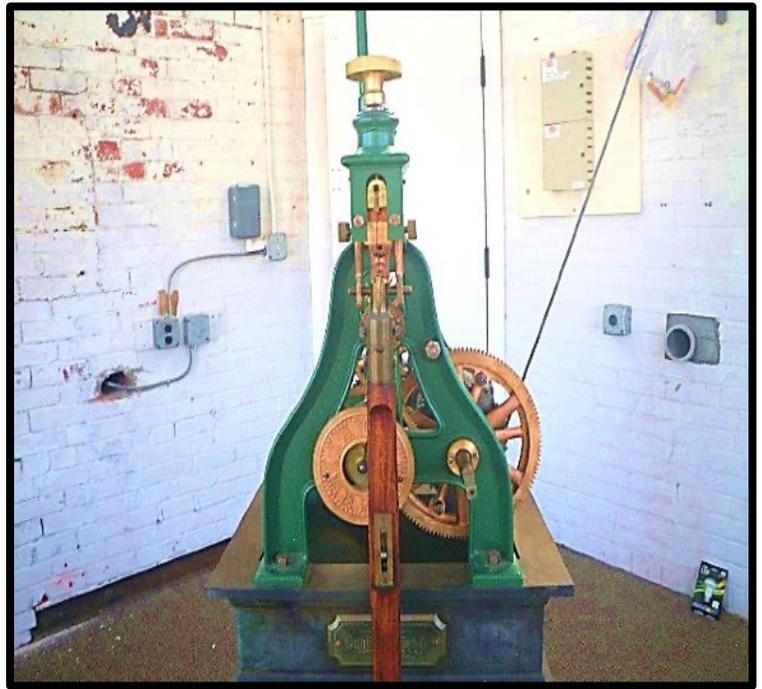
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During the summer months, the clock is advanced a minute or two every few weeks, and during the winter, the clock is backed off to remain within that tolerance. This system works well for us.

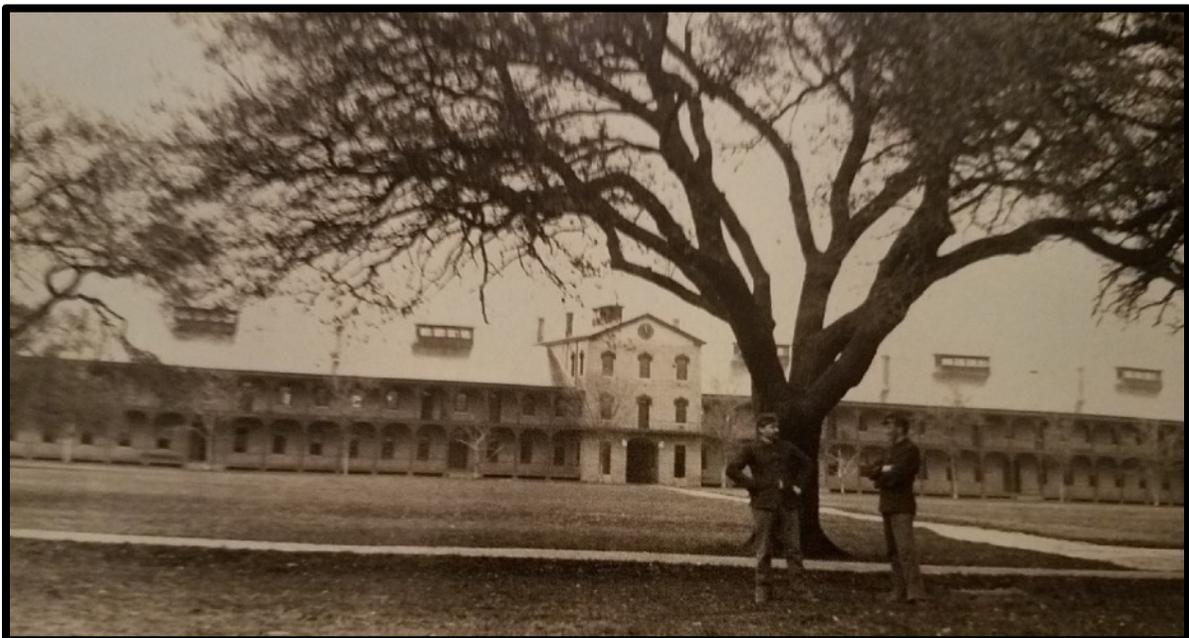
**Figure 5: Seth Thomas Model 5 pilot dial and pendulum rod crutch.**

**Figures 6&7: Full view of the S.T. Model 5 movement in the Post Office Building tower, and close-up of the escapement.**

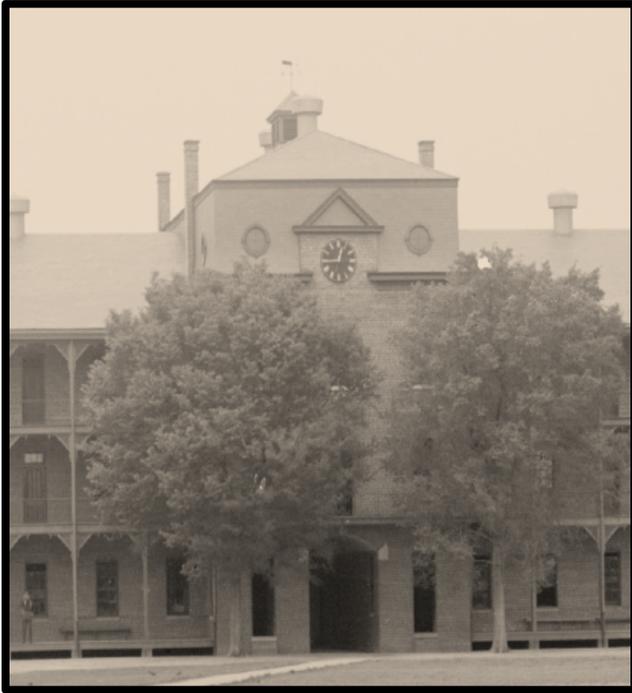


The Main Barracks Building (See **Fig. 8 below**) overlooks the Fort's Parade. The building's central section attic houses the "Seth Thomas Model 15 Striker." The building was originally constructed in 1879 as a two-story structure with a three-story central section below a gabled roof. The clock, which was ordered in 1880, was installed in the building's south gable on the parade.

In 1903, the two wings were raised to three stories, with the addition of the current Dutch style roof and square cupola (See **Figure 9 below**).



**Figure 8: The Main Barracks Building during the 1880s. Note the clock face with black dial in the building's south gable.**



**Figure 9: Ca. 1903 photo of the Fort Monroe Main Barracks Building.**

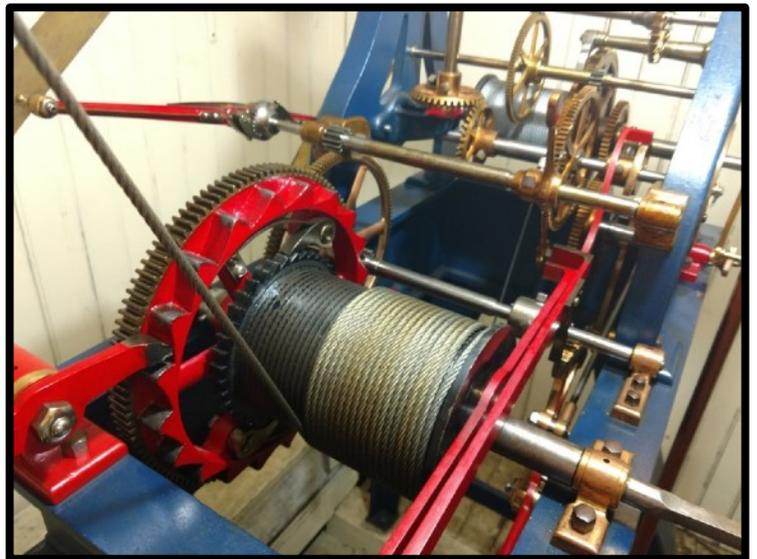
The building's "tower" section includes the cupola that houses a bell minted at the T. F. Secor (New York City) Foundry in 1849. (See Figure 12). The clock still strikes this bell on the hour. The origins and previous use of the 1849 bell are unknown.

In 2019, evidence was discovered that the Model 15 striker pendulum spring may have previously been broken and repaired. When an old piece of tape was removed from the floor under the clock, an indentation that matches the size and diameter of the point of the pendulum was revealed.

(See Figure 13).

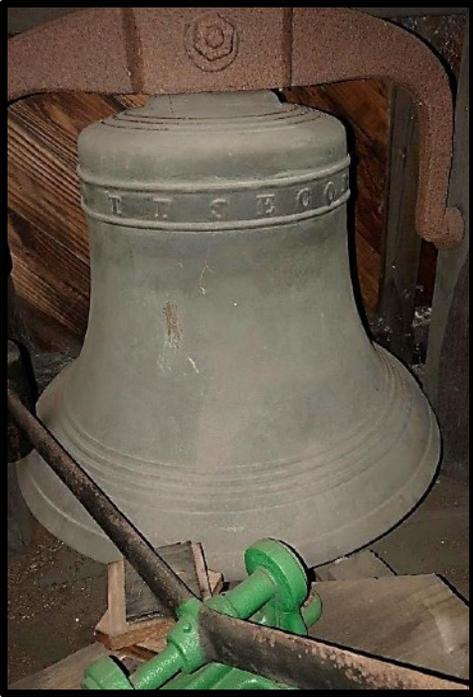


**Figure 10: (Left) Seth Thomas Model 15 Striker in the Main**



**Barracks Building at Fort Monroe. There is no label plate on the clock and the origin of the red and blue paint scheme**

is unknown.



**Figure 11: (Below) Weight drum, strike side on the Model 15 clock.**

**Figure 12: The 1849 bell cast by T.F. Secor, New York City. In 1850, the Secor firm was purchased by J.P. Morgan. The original location and use of the bell is unknown.**

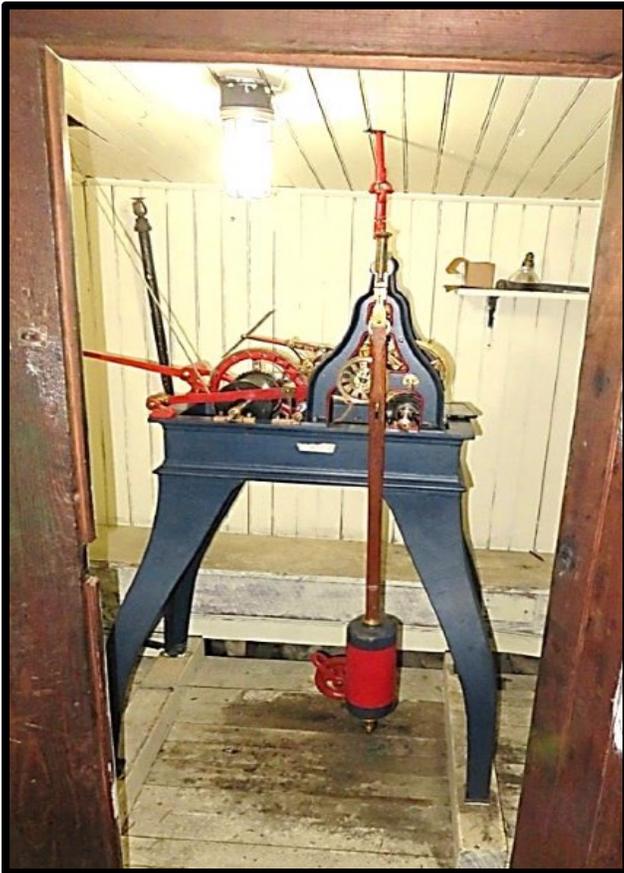
This clock does not have the pendulum catch system found on the 1898 Model 5, so if the spring were to break, the pendulum would fall to the floor. Coincidentally, the 1880 record of the Model 15 Clock in the *Seth Thomas Order Books* also carries a related comment:

“Feb 15/97 – ordered new pend spring”, suggesting the spring had broken sixteen or so years after the clock was first put into service. We believe the dent in the floor represents evidence of the spring breaking.



**Figure 13: Indentation in the floor of the clock room in the Main Barracks Building, possibly resulting from a broken pendulum suspension spring. The size of the dent is similar to the point on the pendulum rod.**

**Figure 14: (Below) Main Barracks Building looking across the Parade from the Algernon Oak. The tree dates to prior to 1607.**



We are currently talking with past caretakers, learning about who operated the clocks while Fort Monroe was an active military installation. We have heard some interesting stories, most of which involve the junior officers charged with winding and care of the clocks. Typically, new caretakers received little instruction. The survival of these machines through this lack of expertise speaks to their durability.

**Figure 15: Seth Thomas Model 15 housed in the Main Barracks Building at Fort Monroe.**

The clocks are currently wound each Wednesday at 11:30 a.m. by volunteers who meet in the lobby of the Post Office Building, now the headquarters of the Fort Monroe Authority, at 20 Ingalls Rd.

The Model 5 clock can be accessed by a staircase within the building. Timekeepers can readily provide tours to the public, pending approval from the Fort Monroe Authority.

Unfortunately, the clock in the Main Barracks Building requires climbing a complex ladder. Due to safety concerns, the Fort Monroe Authority only allows employees and volunteers of the Fort Monroe Authority or the National Park Service to visit this fantastic clock.

**Figure 16: “Classic” Army signage for the clock in the Main Barracks Building. The shaft is 40 feet long supported by two posts.**





**Figure 17: Model 15 dial motion works on the rear of one of the four dials in the tower of the Main Barracks Building at Fort Monroe. Note the top-hinged dial access door – a nice arrangement!**