

The Doorknob Collector

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PRESSED FOR SUCCESS

THE GLASS KNOBS OF ENOCH ROBINSON

BY RHETT BUTLER

The listing in Historic New England's collections data- base was startling: it indicated that there was a group of pressed glass doorknobs that included an actual patent model from the hands of Boston-born machinist and inventor Enoch Robinson (1801-1888), a pioneer of the glass industry in the United States.

It had taken me several years to confirm Robinson's leading role in the development of pressed glass, as the history of glass manufacturing is dominated by names like Bakewell Glass of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Deming Jarves and the Boston and Sandwich Glass Company in Massachusetts. Finding this particular doorknob in Historic New England's collection was remarkable. Signed by the inventors Robinson, Draper, Lord-it had never been identified as a patent model. Dated 1836, it is an artifact of the transformation of the United States from an agrarian British territory to a rapidly industrializing society.

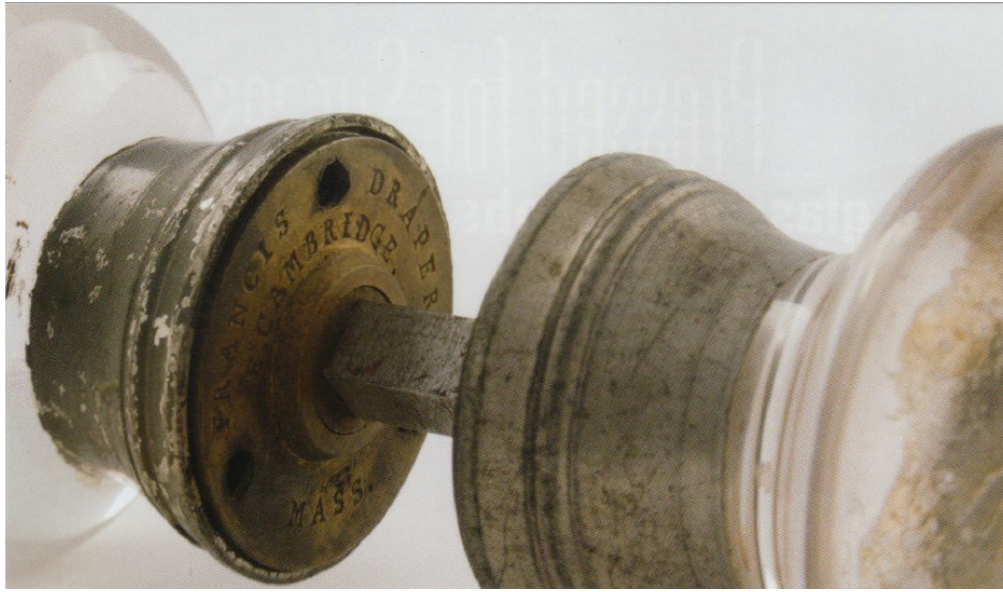
This model and others in the group are part of a small collection of glass doorknobs that the Smithsonian Institution donated to Historic New England in 1927. Pressed glass objects such as door and cabinet knobs were products of cutting-edge technology that developed about a decade after the War of 1812 ended. The inscribed names on the knobs document when this technology eclipsed



Above: The model submitted for US Patent 65, filed October 20, 1836, described as "Ferrule Knob for Doors, &c." and signed by Enoch Robinson, Francis Draper, and Joseph H. Lord.

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Below: Engraved "Francis Draper, E. Cambridge, Mass.", this doorknob may have served as a model for Draper's US Patent 1,784, dated December 10, 1840



the expensive, labor-intensive production method of using mold-blown and hand-cut glass forms that had been created by premier manufacturers like New England Glass Company. The first "finished" article exported from America, pressed glass helped make the United States a major exporter of manufactured goods, and the glass press machine revolutionized glass manufacturing around the world.

Clear glass knobs offered

a glistening object of curiosity and wonder at a time when most knobs were made of wood, cast iron, or imported English brass. Hold-blown and hand-cut glass knobs were laborious to make and could be afforded only by the wealthy. Robinson's glass press, a machine that efficiently pressed molten glass into molds patterned with designs, transformed the industry. Ten years before Robinson, Draper, and Lord's 1836 patent, Robinson and Henry Whitney of New England Glass filed for a patent on their glass press: US Patent 4,553X for "Making Glass Knobs for Doors." Recognized as the earliest surviving patent for pressed glass, it establishes Robinson as the creator of this revolutionary process.

Robinson came from a long line of machinists. He got his start as an eight-year-old in the cotton factory where his father worked building machinery, putting cotton through a bale breaker to loosen the tightly matted bales for a dollar and a half a week. Later, when his father made tools and machinery for Norton Hills, a button manufacturer in Attleboro, Massachusetts, Enoch apprenticed with him as a glass cutter, making glass buttons and small glass spangles. He fulfilled an order of spangles for New England Glass and then, hired by Henry Whitney, began working for that firm in 1825.

A restless innovator, Robinson cast about for glass products to experiment with, settling on furniture knobs; these small, simple forms allowed him to try out more cost-effective manufacturing techniques. This led to the historic US Patent 4,553X of 1826 and his machine, which could make pressed glass knobs for a quarter of the price of blown-glass ones.

Robinson's pressed glass set the standard- as soon as the knobs hit the market companies seeking to emulate the success of New England Glass began copying them. An 1831 court case documented evidence of patent infringement on Robinson and Whitney's invention, with the verdict being so important to the glass industry that Bake-

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well Glass had representatives in the courtroom waiting to hear the decision. Robinson and Whitney won the case and immediately began negotiating to grant Bakewell rights to use the glass press west of the Allegheny Mountains.

Partnering with machinist Francis Draper of New England Glass and Joseph H. Lord, an agent for the company, Robinson filed a series of patents starting in 1836 that show his evolution of discovery and technology. In 1837 he and his brother, George Washington Robinson, filed a patent that would become the standard for making glass knobs. Robinson's work won many commendations, including gold and silver medals at the Third Triennial Exhibition of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association in 1841. Exhibition committee members stated that they were "unanimous in their opinion that those [knobs], of both high and low cost, are better adapted to the wants of their fellow countrymen, than those from any other manufactory in the world."

Building on his success, Robinson began exploring using blown glass to create medallion doorknobs that portrayed spectacular cameos of notables in American history. The Benjamin Franklin cameo in-crustation glass doorknob in Historic New England's collection was modeled and signed by Christian Gobrecht (1785-1844), the third chief engraver of the United States Mint.



Left: Robinson, Draper, and Lord signed this "Socket Knob for Door, Commode, &c" model for US Patent 98, filed September 2, 1836 .

Right: Robinson crafted this glass doorknob using a Benjamin Franklin cameo modeled and signed by Christian Gobrecht, who served as the third chief engraver of the United States Mint 1840-44.

Robinson moved on to work with metal, inventing locks and security systems, windlasses (hoisting equipment) , and even perpetual motion machines. The New York Farmer and Mechanic proclaimed in an article about America's first National Exhibition of 1846 that Robinson and his work remain "pre-eminent, both for quality and price, in which he cannot be surpassed." His story-and that of American manufacturing-can be found in the pressed glass doorknobs at many historic houses in New England . Octagonal or circular, intricately detailed or with a smooth mushroom shape, each knob serves as a record of Robinson's legacy and early American ingenuity.



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A 1927 DONATION BECOMES CLEAR

The day I found information about three glass doorknob patent models in Historic New England's online collection database, it wasn't so much what I didn't find-it was what I couldn't see. There were no photographs of the doorknobs, only the description "Doorknob" for each of the three artifacts. In all three descriptions, the knobs were ascribed to "Robinson, Draper and Lord (Maker)." Knowing that there never was a firm or a maker that did business as "Robinson, Draper and Lord," I became very interested in learning more about these artifacts.

Historic New England kindly fulfilled my request for images of the doorknobs. The photographs showed that the signatures- Enoch Robinson, Francis Draper, and Joseph H. Lord-were inscribed under

the knobs. This confirmed a hunch I had about the attribution in the database: signatures such as these would only be required for submission of a model to the United States Patent Office in Washington, D.C. "Robinson, Draper and Lord" existed only as a patentee trio.

These patent models had come to Historic New England as a donation, care of founder William Sumner Appleton. Appleton had a hunch about the maker of the artifacts, much in the same way that I had concerning the Historic New England database attribution for the doorknobs. In penning an acknowledgment of receipt to the donor, the Smithsonian Institution, Appleton expressed his delight in the gift by mentioning that "we have come across just such door handles as these in the old Robinson house, built perfectly round, in Somerville, Mass., and I notice that Robinson, Draper and Lord were the patentees. Doubtless investigation would show that this is the same Robinson."

Indeed, Appleton was correct in making the connection that Enoch Robinson was the architect of the Round House (1856), which still stands in Somerville. Likewise, my supposition that Historic New England's collection contained a Robinson doorknob patent model was precise.

(This article originally appeared in the Summer 2018 (Vol. 19, No 1) issue of Historic New England magazine.)

In Memorium

Al Jehning (Member #55)

Albert Robert Jehning died unexpectedly on Sunday, February 25, 2018 at the age of 88 years young. Surviving family to Al: his beautiful wife Audrey, their six children, seven grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

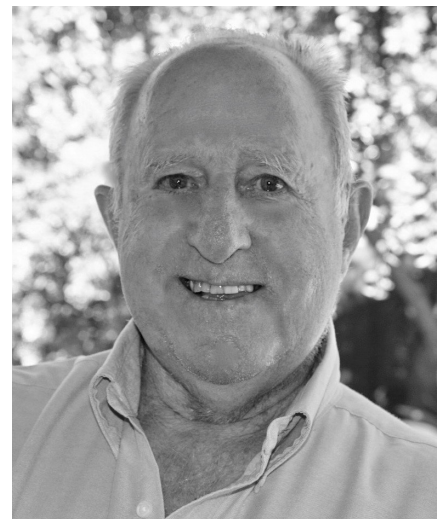
Al was born on September 3, 1929 to Lucille Helen Hanzel and Gustove Jehning in Plainville, CT. He was in the United States Navy from 1948 until 1953, serving in Korea.

Audrey and Al were married at the Church of our Lady of Mount Carmel in Redwood City on May 16, 1953. In 1972 Audrey and Al bought a family owned business -Mountain View Door Closer, Key and Lock service in 1972 in downtown Mountain View. He remained the owner until 1999. After retiring Audrey and Al kept their passion for keys, antique locks, and safes by opening the 'The Jehning Family Lock Museum' in 2003. He was very proud to give tours at the museum where he enjoyed meeting people and hearing how far they traveled to visit.

He was an accomplished athlete in high school in pole vaulting, football and running. He ran numerous 10Ks and completed the Oakland marathon at age 56. He loved his tennis and he played doubles every weekend with Audrey for 25 years at Cuesta.

He spent the last two years - from February 2, 2016 to February 18, 2018 taking care of Audrey. Al will be greatly missed by his family and friends.

Mr. Jehning was one of the early members of the ADCA, joining in the early 1980s. Because of retirement after many years of business commitments, Al and Audrey were finally able to attend their first convention in 2009 at Hartford, CT.



THE EMBLEMATIC LIFE OF NEW YORK INSURANCE COMPANIES

BY PAUL WOODFIN

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century many Americans had begun to consider what life would be like for their families if they were no longer around to provide a living. Life insurance became a popular investment to address this need. Three of the largest insurance providers constructed buildings for their headquarters in New York, but also built regional offices to evidence their financial success and security to their customers. The hardware found in these buildings often provided more permanent evidence than the buildings themselves.

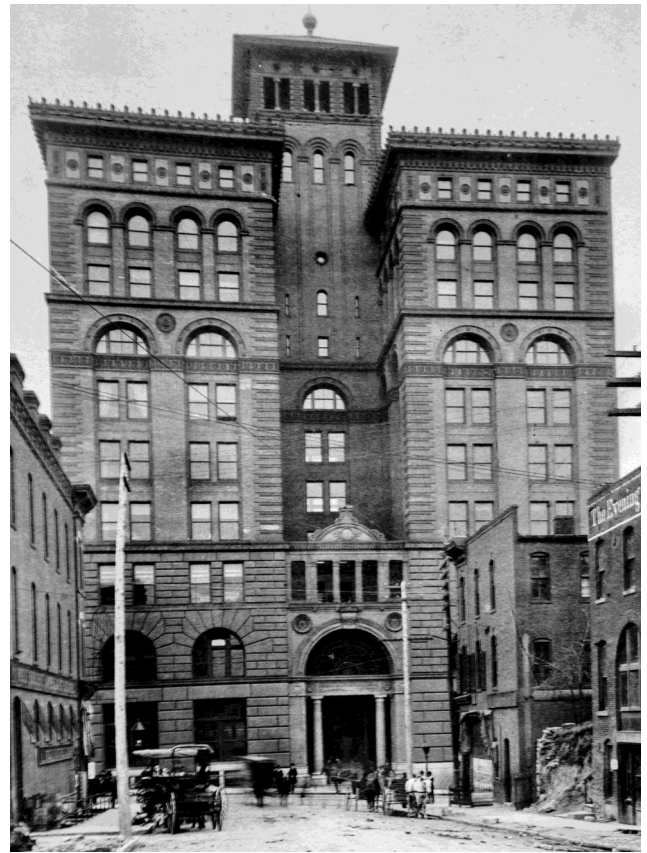
New York Life

The oldest of the three companies, New York Life, was founded in 1845 as a mutual insurance company. By the late 1880s the company sought to expand their reach to other parts of the country and continent by building branch offices in growing cities, providing both good real estate investments and regional support for the insured. Two of these buildings were designed

by New York architects McKim, Mead & White in Kansas City (1888) and Omaha (1889), both using the same design for a 12 story office towers of brick, brownstone, and terra cotta (at right). Both of these buildings feature NYLIC seals around the entranceways in terra cotta and a

bronze sculpture of an eagle designed by Louis Saint Gaudens. The company hired Babb, Cook & Willard to design buildings for Montreal (1888), Saint Paul (1889) and Minneapolis (1890). In 1894 Jenney & Mundie designed their Chicago office building.

Finally the company decided to expand their home office at 346 Broadway, and in 1894 hired architect Stephen Hatch to design a Italian Renaissance-style which covered the eastern half of the block which fronted on Lafayette Street. During construction Hatch died, and so McKim, Mead & White were hired to complete the building. As the expansion was completed, New York Life asked their new architects to design a replacement for the 1870s original home office, keeping with Hatch's design style from the just-completed expansion. By 1899 the project was completed, featuring a prominent clock tower above the Broadway entrance (at left). Throughout the



new home office bronze doorknobs featured the NYLIC seal (P-47240). New York Life has actually has an interesting tradition of giving pieces of architectural salvage as awards to their highly regarded agents. The New York Life Retired Managers Club has an excellent website which includes a page of memorabilia including several doorknob award photos.

The doorknobs were prominent awards, along with golden terra cotta roof tiles from their current headquarters building (1928-Cass Gilbert) on Madison Square. The Broadway building became public offices and later offices for the City of New York. The City later sold the building to a builder for residential conversion. Did any of the other buildings use emblematic hardware? Given the number of NYLIC doorknobs seen on the market over the years, the likelihood that some of the other buildings used the same hardware is likely, but unproven. The Kansas City and Omaha buildings featured the seal on the exterior, but unfortunately more than a century and a quarter of renovations and remodeling have left at least the Omaha building without any original hardware. All but the Saint Paul and Minneapolis New York Life buildings still stand and are in use today.



Equitable Life

The Equitable Life Assurance Society was founded in 1859, and by 1870 had built a large Second-Empire style headquarters at 120 Broadway. Equitable Life also chose to invest in real estate around the country with regional office, and built two buildings by Boston architects Andrews, Jacques and Rantoul in Des Moines (1891-at left) and Denver (1892). Burnham & Root designed the building in

Atlanta (1892), Barnett, Haynes & Barnett designed the Saint Louis office (1894), and Sperry & Carson designed the Baltimore office (1894). Jenney and Mundie designed the Chicago office in 1892, next door to the New York Life building.

In January 1912 Equitable Life's headquarters caught fire and burned, with little surviving besides more than 40 million dollars locked securely in fire-proof safes. Equitable Life began planning a new building several years earlier by D. H. Burnham & Co., so Ernest R. Graham completed a 40 story white terra cotta skyscraper (at right) which completely filled an entire city block, which resulted in many complaints about natural light being blocked. The 1916 zoning law was a result of the extreme design for the Equitable Life building, mandating setbacks to assure that some natural light reaches the street.





The hardware for Equitable Life's Des Monies building (and possibly Denver as well) featured a simple iron knob with a large E on the face by P & F Corbin (P-70900, at left). The 1915 headquarters building in New York featured a brass E knobs (P-70940) in both entry and passage sizes, also by P & F Corbin. As of a few years ago, some of the New York hardware was

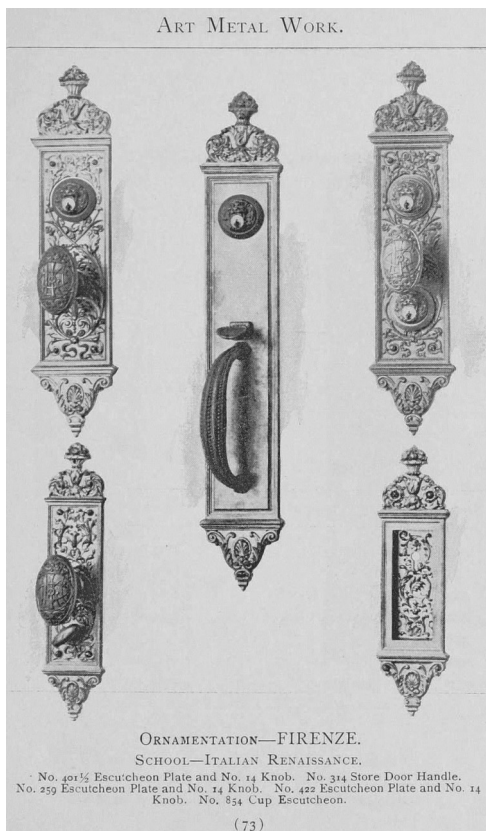


still in place and being used by the tenants.

All of the Equitable Life buildings still stand except for Des Moines, Atlanta and Saint Louis, although the Chicago building did receive a new façade around 1940.

Metropolitan Life

The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company was established in 1868 and after the Panic of 1873 focused their life insurance business toward policies for working men to help their families. The company continued to grow, and by 1889 decided to build a new home office at the southeast corner of Madison Square Park. Architect Napoleon LaBrun designed a Renaissance Revival office building, 11 stories in height, and over the next two decades expanded the building to encompass the entire block except for the parcel occupied by the Madison Square Presbyterian Church. The office building (at right) was outfitted with rich interior finishes, including hardware by Yale & Towne with plates in the Firenze pattern and MLICo oval door knobs (P-46210, catalog page at left).



In 1907 Metropolitan Life bought the Madison Square Presbyterian Church and built them a new home across 24th Street, allowing the company to build the tower to complete their office block. The Metropolitan Life Tower in 1909 was the world's tallest building for several years until the Woolworth Building was completed in 1912. The tower used a simplified MLICo logo (P-46200. bottom right) for the hardware, which is also by Yale & Towne.

Time has not been good to the Metropolitan Life office buildings. All of the 1890s-1907 buildings were rebuilt in the 1950s in an art modern style, leaving none of the historic architecture. The ornament on the tower was markedly simplified in the 1960s when the modernization effort was completed.

References:

- New York Life Retired Managers Club, <http://www.nylrmc.org/memorabilia.html>
- Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metropolitan_Life_Insurance_Company_Tower
- Historic American Buildings Survey, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mo0432/> and <https://www.loc.gov/item/ia0064/>
- Some photos from the Library of Congress, Detroit Publishing Company library, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/det/>
- Rebecca Kuehn at Kutak Rock LLP, Omaha, NE



In Memorium

Lois Hatch (Member #7)

Lois Hatch, 98, one of the founding members of the ADCA, passed away on May 14, 2018, in La Crosse. She was born Aug. 17, 1919, to Leman and Flora (Larsen) Hatch in rural St. Croix County, Wis., near the village of Boardman. She attended the Boardman School through eighth grade and graduated from New Richmond High School in 1937. She graduated from U.W. River Falls (then River Falls State Teachers' College) and attained an MA degree from Denver University, Denver.

Lois was an elementary teacher, working for a few years in Bloomer, Wis., Nekoosa, Wis., and Shawano, Wis., before coming to La Crosse, in 1950. She taught at Franklin and Hamilton Schools, before being assigned to the new Harry Spence School in 1953. She retired from teaching there in 1983.

Lois liked to travel and enjoyed several wonderful tours, including trips to Canada, Alaska, parts of Europe and Asia. After retirement, she enjoyed attending one or two Elderhostel weeks each summer. She was an active member of St. Luke's United Methodist Church and the United Methodist Women. She was a member of the La Crosse County Historical Society, the Humane Society, the La Crosse Retired Educators, Delta Kappa Gamma, and the Coulee Rock Club. After retirement, she enjoyed doing volunteer work at the La Crosse Public Library and also delivered Mobile Meals for 14 years.



State National Bank Building Newark, New Jersey

The National State Bank had been in business for a century when they contracted with New York architect Cass Gilbert to design a new skyscraper office home for their institution. Gilbert had just completed the design for his office building masterpiece in Manhattan, the Woolworth Building, and welcomed the opportunity to build the second skyscraper in Newark.



The National State Bank building is located on Broad Street adjacent to the historic First Presbyterian Church. The building is finished on three sides because the south wall faces the church, which has stood on this site since 1787. The bank and the church signed an agreement which would prevent future redevelopment of the church site in exchange for an annual payment to the church and a promise that the bank would always draw the shades on the windows facing the church on Sunday.

The first floor of the building is dominated by a large banking hall as was typical for 1912, with marble and other embellishments throughout. The floors above the banking hall were offices for the bank and professionals serving the needs of the Newark community. The bronze hardware (P-20380) is by Yale & Towne and features a seal for the bank.

Unfortunately, the bank after a series of mergers vacated the building, which sat empty for many years. In 2014, the building was renovated into a boutique hotel, preserving many architectural details of this storied past, helping Newark move forward with her 21st century renaissance.



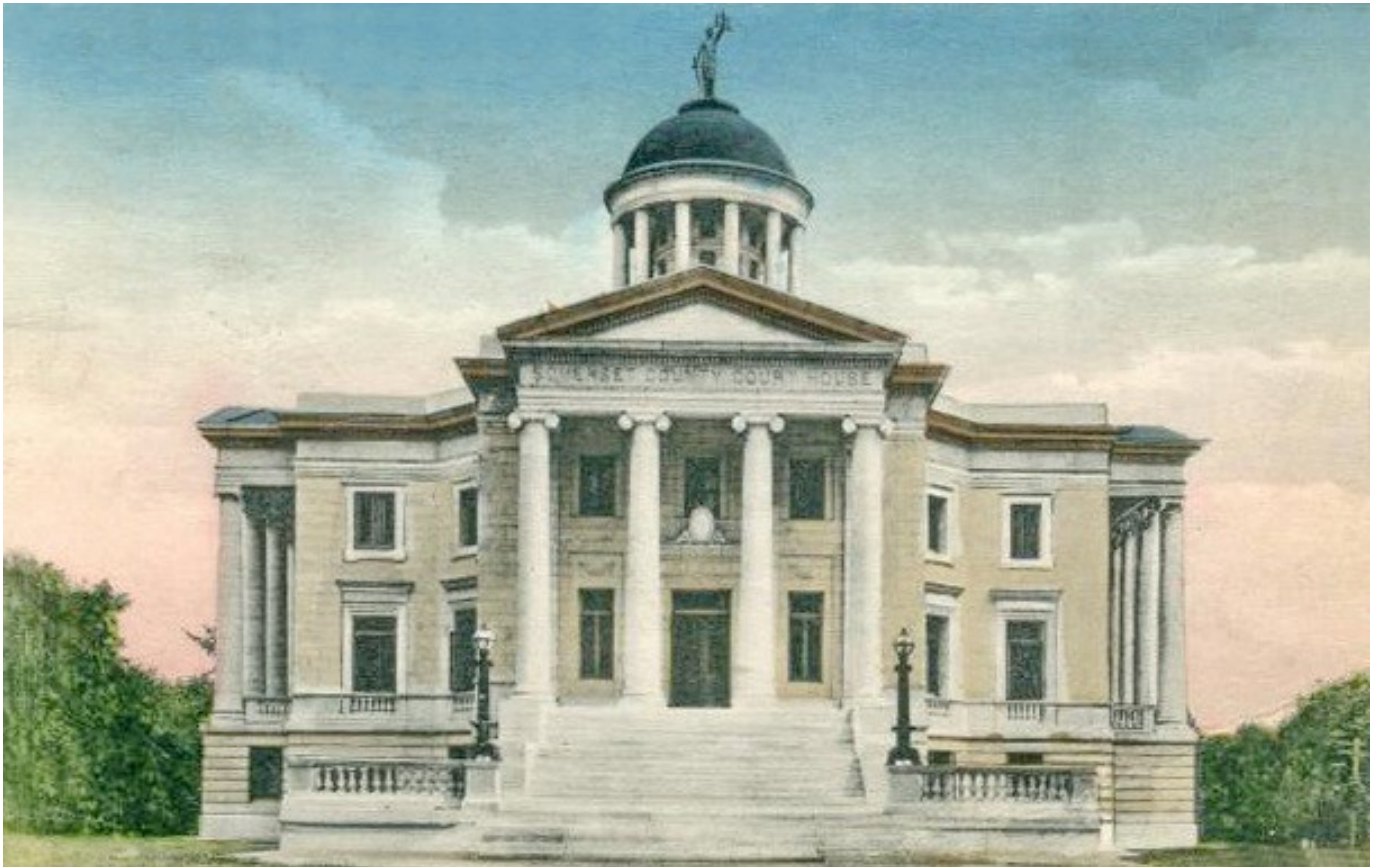
Source: National Register, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/AssetDetail/NRIS/77000866>

Somerset County Courthouse Somerset, New Jersey

Somerset County is one of the oldest counties in America, having been established by charter in 1688. The current courthouse was designed by famed courthouse architect James Riely Gordon, a Virginia-born, Texas-raised designer who built fifteen courthouses in Texas in styles ranging from Romanesque to Beaux Arts before moving to New York in 1904. He designed classical-styled courthouses in New York, Maryland, and New Jersey, along with the Arizona State Capitol.

Somerset County wanted a modern building by 1907 to serve the growing population, and by 1909 they were able to move into a handsomely decorated classical structure with gilded dome and columns in the rotunda, grand staircases, and doorknobs of the county seal throughout.

Fortunately, the county chose to meet the increasing office and court needs by acquiring the First Dutch Reformed Church next door and building new structures behind the courthouse and church. While the courthouse and church have been modernized in the interior, the buildings are together on the National Register of Historic Places.



Reference: National Register listing, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/AssetDetail/NRIS/89001216>

The Making of a Hardware Collector

A Series of Articles about Why ADCA Members Collect Hardware

In some of the early issues of The Doorknob Collector, our founding members were asked to record some of their experiences and memories of collecting, and especially doorknobs. We will feature some of the early articles along with ones that hopefully current members, young or old, will share.

Allen Joslyn
Montclair, New Jersey

When I started collecting? I am not sure I remember. As far as I can recall, I have always been doing two things: collecting doorknobs and eating sushi. But I cannot have been doing both things long before sushi arrived at these shores. So let me think a little more . . .

But I do remember some signal moments. One day in a local antique show, I caught a glimpse out of the corner of my eye – amazing, a doorbell with the Geisha knob. I was sure nobody else around had any idea what it was, so it ended in my bag. I took it to the first Convention I actually attended, in Winnipeg, in 1988. Soon Steve Rowe was using every device he could think of to separate it from me, and I was desperately trying to say “no” so he would believe it. Finally I found a way - by stating my price – something that would make a real difference to me (and to him): silver Porsche Boxster. That worked, and I still have the doorbell. And, eventually I broke down and bought a red Boxster.

Another great “Geisha” moment was when my wife found four entry “Geisha” knobs at another antique show. These two items set me off on a 30 year hunt for the related knobs, hinges, padlocks, and the one rimlock. Still looking, but afraid I pretty much have them all now. However, next week is the Convention and who knows ?

One thing I regret about doorknob collecting was that it took me so long to actually attend a Convention, not only because of the good hardware to be had there, but equally because of the good fellowship. I missed meeting a number of the early members, but now I can meet the new members. And may they increase!



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