

# The Doorknob Collector



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**A Publication of The Antique Doorknob Collectors of America**

*A Nonprofit Organization Devoted to the Study and Preservation of Ornamental Hardware*

## WILLIAM H. DIBBLE AND HEMACITE

*By Steve Hannum*

The late 19<sup>th</sup> century was an exciting time in the development of American technology and manufacturing. People were inventing, creating new things and new manufacturing companies were being formed. William H. Dibble was one of those people. Little is known of his early years. He was born on September 4, 1830 in Danbury, Connecticut, the son of Timothy and Esther Dibble.

The 1860 census has him living in Shrewsbury Township, New Jersey as a dentist, with his wife Anna in the home of Lew Johnson. I have not been able to discover where he did his dental training or when he was married. By October of 1862 he had moved across the state to Bordentown Township, south of Trenton, and set up his dental practice. Tax records indicate his payment of dentist license fees in 1862 and 1865. During this time he demonstrated his inventive nature. He obtained two patents for dental apparatuses. The first was # 50,461 on October 17, 1865 and the second # 63,709 on April 9, 1867.

ADDRESS **This Cut changed every month.**

**Dibble Mfg. Co.**

Trenton, N. J.

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**HEMACITE**

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Drawer Knobs,  
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The 1870 census shows that he had moved into Trenton. And the Trenton City Directory shows William's younger brother, Theodore Dibble, living with the family. Theodore was a travelling salesman for the John A. Roebblings' Sons Company. Shortly after this he seems to have moved again across the state to Elizabeth. This is indicated by his election as Treasurer in 1874, at the Fourth Annual Meeting of the New Jersey State Dental Society where he is identified as a resident of Elizabeth. Patents he obtained also identify him a resident of Elizabeth.

While in Elizabeth, Dibble's inventive interest changed and he obtained two patents. They were "Improvement in Process of Making Composition Articles", #192,863 on July 10, 1877 and "Improvement in Composition for Manufacturing Molded Articles", #202,636 on April 23, 1878. In these he describes

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how to use animal blood as a binder for sawdust or other materials to make composition material and to use heat and pressure to make articles.

The use of blood as a binder to make decorative items was not new. Francois Lepage obtained a French patent in 1855. He called his product Bois Durci or "hardened wood". According to secondary sources Brazilian Rosewood sawdust was sieved, then mixed with 15% to 20%, by weight, of liquid blood. This was dried, ground to a powder and molded under heat and pressure. Some of the sources speak of using whole blood, others of blood albumen. The patents obtained by Dibble describe very similar processes. Query whether Dibble's dental background gave him the idea or if he saw something in print about it. Items made of Bois Durci were displayed at the International Exhibition of 1862 in London, and reports of the exhibition were widely circulated. Articles about Bois Durci and its preparation appeared in *The Scientific and Industrial Year -1863* and the *Art Journal* magazine in 1867, both published in France. It is not known how widely these articles were circulated in the US.

Bois Durci has a rich history. A company, La Société du Bois Durci, was formed that produced a large number of items until the early 1900s. From pictures they appear to have a finer structure than Hemacite items. It could be due to the fineness of the sawdust used. For those interested in more information on Bois Durci the website [www.mernick.org.uk/BDWeb/index.htm](http://www.mernick.org.uk/BDWeb/index.htm) is a great source with pictures of many Bois Durci items. The English translations of the articles mentioned above can be found there. There is also a book by Gaston Vermosen, "*Bois Durci Un Plastique Naturel, A Natural Plastic 1855-1927*". According to a review, the book, written in French and English, was privately published in a small edition. Pictures from the book can be found on Flickr. It does not appear that the company made doorknobs.

At this point it appears the Dibble family connection to the John A. Roebling's Sons' Company comes into play. John A. Roebling was a Prussian engineer who immigrated to the United States in 1831. He developed a process for making wire rope for use in the construction of bridges. He designed and supervised the construction of some of the earliest suspension bridges. The Cincinnati-Covington Bridge, later named the John A. Roebling Suspension Bridge, was the world's longest suspension bridge at the time it was finished. While working on what became the Brooklyn Bridge he was injured, developed tetanus and died.

To supply wire for bridges, Roebling built a complex for the manufacture of wire rope in Trenton. After his death, his son, Washington Roebling, and his daughter-in-law, Emily Warren Roebling, continued his work on the Brooklyn Bridge. His son, Ferdinand, took over and expanded his wire rope business. Another son, Charles, founded Roebling, New Jersey and developed other parts of the business.

According to an 1883 Trenton Times article, by September after the award of the July 10, 1877 patent, Dr. Dibble was meeting with several well-known residents of Trenton about manufacturing door knobs. On December 6, 1877 the Dibble Manufacturing Company was formed with a capital stock of \$15,000 with William H. Dibble as president, Ferdinand W. Roebling as treasurer and Theodore H. Dibble as secretary and manager. The article goes on to state that a former pork processing plant property was obtained and specialized equipment designed and built. The company also obtained the rights to the patents and to the registered trademark, "Hemacite", from Dr. Dibble. The manufacturing process is described in one of the patents as follows.

"The machinery employed in the process of manufacture is of the most powerful and accurate character and works automatically with clock-like precision, consequently the product is mathematically and uniformly correct in every particular. In addition to the machinery referred to the industry is supplied with various other machinery for finishing purposes usually employed in the manufacture of door knobs and house trimmings. The material is carefully prepared by the aid of machinery built for the purpose, and is reduced to a powdered form before it is transformed into Hemacite, which properly speaking is result of hydraulic pressure, applied to transform the powdered material into the various arti-

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cles comprising the productions of the industry. In its powdered state the material bears a strong resemblance to brown snuff, and the natural color of Hemacite is ebony black, but it is capable of taking all sorts of colors and shades, which are in nowise effected by the hydraulic pressure.”

William Dibble died on October 2, 1885 in Shrewsbury, Monmouth, New Jersey. In October, 1886 the Trenton Times reported a fire occurred at the Dibble Manufacturing Company that destroyed everything. It reported, “The firm will resume business soon again, but not in the same location, as there have been many complaints of the disagreeable odor arising from the works.” It appears the name of the company was changed to Hemacite Manufacturing Company about that time. It kept that name until at least 1897 but was eventually absorbed into another Roebling company, Trenton Brass and Machine Company.

While the company existed, Hemacite products had a wide distribution with over two hundred jobbers in the United States and Canada. Dibble advertised widely and hemacite knobs were included in articles in *The American Architect and Building News*, *The Builder and Woodworker*, and *Carpentry and Building*. An advertisement from the December 1882 issue of *Carpentry and Building* (see pg. 1) shows the Eastlake design with a bronze inlay and bronze rose. Several hardware manufacturers carried hemacite doorknobs and roses and the Nashua Lock Company had a 14 page section in their 1879 catalog offering Hemacite doorknobs with a variety of their own roses. They also showed hemacite plate and drop escutcheons and drawer and shutter knobs.

One small Dibble Manufacturing Company catalog from about 1885 exists at Columbia University and is part of the Avery Collection of catalogs available on microfiche. This catalog shows five different designs. The colors offered were Ebony, Seal Brown, Leather and Terra Cotta. Today the most commonly found knob was called Eastlake in that catalog. The color of most would be what I would call black or Ebony. But I have seen a knob of a more brown color, which may correspond to Seal Brown. I have never seen any Hemacite knob of a lighter color, which might be the Leather or Terra Cotta color. Other designs were called Star, Japanese, Saxon Shield and an Eastlake design with a real bronze inlay. The Nashua catalog had an additional knob called Westlake. That catalog has the best illustrations of Hemacite items. They are shown below.

The catalog also listed other Hemacite hardware items such as plate and drop escutcheons, and drawer and shutter knobs. Some of these are shown on the page 4.





The company produced a variety of other items. These included house tiles for halls and other articles for house decoration. They reportedly had a contract to produce a back for hair bushes and hand mirrors. Wheels for the then new fad of roller skates were produced. They were more expensive but they did not develop the flat spots which boxwood wheels did. Advertisements for roller skates with Hemacite wheels appeared as late as 1910. I recently obtained a set of furniture wheels made of Hemacite which are marked as Hemacite but unfortunately other hardware items are not. I do not know if non-hardware items were marked.

I have samples of all the Hemacite knobs pictured. I would be interested in getting other Hemacite items. I am especially interested in the bronze rose pictured in the Hemacite ad.

Special thanks should be given to Matt Metcalf and the other people at the Trenton, New Jersey Library as well as our own Rhett Butler for sending me a copy of pages from the 1879 Nashua Lock Company catalog.

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## **The Doorknob Exchange**

Members are reminded that your dues entitle you to advertise items for sale, trade, or wanted at no charge. ADCA is not responsible for any transaction or the condition of the items advertised.

**Wanted:** five cast iron hand rail brackets made by Sargent & Co. in the spider web pattern with a ball tip. See illustration. These are 4 ½” tall and project from the wall 3 7/8”. Contact Vicky Berol, 415-771-9899, [sfgofer@yahoo.com](mailto:sfgofer@yahoo.com).



**RUSSELL & ERWIN**  
**A CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNT**  
**(PART 3); CONTINUED FROM TDC 173**

**FROM THE COMMERCIAL PATHFINDER, NOVEMBER, 1869**

The chief warehouse of the Russell & Erwin Manufacturing Co. at 45 and 47 Chambers street and 23 and 25 Reade Street, in this city, is a double store, comprising seven floors in all, 151 feet in length by 50 feet in breadth, with a total floor space of 52,850 square feet. This is of course independent of the shelf room throughout the building, and it is a noteworthy fact that in November, 1868, when the firm first moved into it, they devoted no less than 80,000 feet of lumber to supply shelves for the several floors [sic]. There is no business which requires so much shelf-room as the hardware business, and there is no store in the United States which contains such an amount of it than this, a careful estimate having elicited the fact that this warehouse contains five miles of shelving. As a further instance of the great increase in the business of the house we may mention that in 1841, when the company first established a salesroom in this city at 92 John street, its business at first was performed there by John K. Bowden and James B. Ogden; and after Mr. Bowden sold out his interest, and his place was taken by Isaac D. Russell, the latter and Mr. Ogden continued for a considerable period to transact the business alone, entirely without clerks or other assistants; while the traffic of the firm is now so vast that it requires 80 persons in the various departments of this warehouse alone.

“The stock includes every description of American Hardware, from the smallest to the largest articles. It is exclusively American, the greater proportion being manufactured by this company, while the balance is in a great measure obtained for their own production, and thus they are enabled to sell merchandise at manufacturers’ lowest rates.

“Their specialties comprise everything pertaining to the hardware furnishing of a building, such as every variety of Rim and Mortise Door Locks; Padlocks of Brass and Iron; Hand-plated Lava, Porcelain and Mineral Knobs; Hand-plated Butts, and Door Trimmings of all kinds; also every variety of Window Springs, Cupboard Catches, and Brass and Iron Bolts; Door and House Bells, Sash Fasteners, Buttons on Plates; Axle, Frame and Screw Pulleys; Drawer Handles, Shutter Screws; Shutter Lifts, Stubs and Plates; Wardrobe, Coat and Hat Hooks; Polished Fire Sets, Brass and Iron Head Shovels, Tongs and Pokers; Hale’s Patent Meat-Cutters; Waterman’s Patent Cast-Iron Bake Pans, etc.

“Among the important recent improvements introduced by this company are their Bronze Door Knobs, Butts and Trimmings, and light and beautiful Steel Keys as a substitute for the ungainly heavy iron and brass keys heretofore in universal use. (To be continued)

## **Down Memory Lane with Maud**

*By Maud Eastwood*

The passing of member, Dean Campbell, made me reminisce. Meeting and interacting with Dean occupies a special part in my memory bank. He was the first buyer of my first book.

The Antique Doorknob was published in 1976. The order was delivered by the publisher to my door in late July. I have a photo of the agent unloading in the driveway. The Tillamook County Fair was to open Aug. 10th. Then came an inspiration, why not reserve a sellers table in the name of my beauty shop, and include some of the books in the display? I had as yet no plans formulated for the book’s sale.

Dean and Edith Campbell were among the many tourists attending this well known and highly advertised fair. I recall them stopping by my table, picking up a book, thumbing through it and asking if it was for sale, as they knew a party who would be interested. The sale was made but not until much later. Following phone calls and personal visits to my home, I was to learn that the book was intended as a gift for Edith’s father, Earl Antrim.



Dean’s knob table  
Number 174

Another early buyer was none other than Rich Kennedy (the order dated October 5th 1976). His contact? Art Smith of Seattle.

When my publisher's agent initially came for an interview, he asked who I was writing the book for. My answer: "Who? I guess for me, but I have enough relatives who will make it worthwhile." All I knew was that Dave Masterson in California had been amassing material to write such a book, had eventually given his material to Len Blumin, who developed the material further to eventually self-publish the indispensable VICTORIAN DECORATIVE ART, all the while encouraging my efforts.

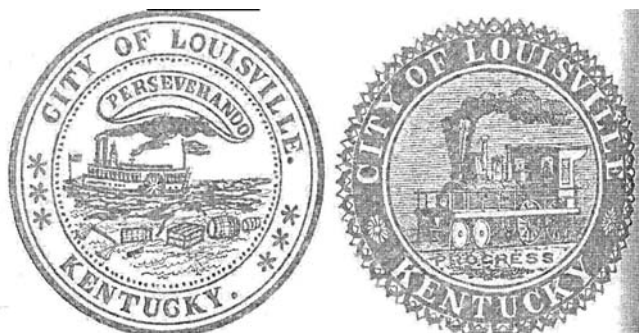


Delivery of my first book

## LOUISVILLE UPDATED



Further to the article in the last issue, we have received permission to use the picture of the Louisville City Hall taken by Brent Moore, shown above. For comparison purposes another picture of the knob is also shown.



Finally we also obtained a copy of Louis V. Hebel's article, "Louisville's Official Signature" in Louisville 17 (August 20, 1966), pp. 14-15, which includes pictures of all four of Louisville's official City Seals. The first Seal (1828-1855) shows a steam boat, the second (1855-1910) shows a locomotive with the word "Progress", but not emerging from a tunnel. (Picture courtesy of Brent Moore, all rights reserved by SeeMidTN.com).





# DALE SPONAUGLE

## ADCA'S TRIPLE THREAT CONVENTION HOST!

*By Vicky Berol*

A man of many talents and interests, Dale is a physician, recipient of numerous awards, as well as Victorian hardware collector extraordinaire, and the exceptional host of three ADCA conventions.

### **1993. Gaithersburg, Maryland.**

Trips to Washington, D.C. included a tour of The White House and Capital, with lunch in the Senate cafeteria; a visit to the Vietnam and Lincoln Memorials, Bureau of Engraving and Printing, The Smithsonian and The National Building Museum. There were 83 attendees. This convention holds the record of "most in attendance".

### **2006. Buffalo, New York.**

There was a great walking tour of downtown Buffalo to admire the handsome and important building facades designed by Louis Sullivan. Then on to The Darwin Martin Complex, a home designed and furnished by Frank Lloyd Wright. Although under extensive restoration, we were treated to a tour and an on-site lunch.

### **2012. Buffalo, New York.**

More Frank Lloyd Wright. Another visit to the now completed Darwin Martin Complex, also "Graycliff", the summer residence for the Martin family, a visit to The Roycroft Campus, and lunch at one of the restaurants famous for "Buffalo Wings". WOW! And of course, the all-important "Buy, Sell and Trade".

Dale attended his first convention in 1990, at E. Windsor, CT. Recognizing his leadership qualities, Dale was elected to the Board in 1991 and from 1995 - 1997, he served as Vice President. Known nationwide as an important collector, Dale has amassed amazing examples of antique builders' hardware. At the 2006 convention, attendees were treated not only to his hospitality, but to see his hardware. It was like visiting a museum.

Dale really knows how to put together a fabulous convention, so - get out your checkbook, make those convention and airline reservations and pack your suitcase. Be ready to be treated to a great time. You won't be disappointed.

See you in Buffalo.



### **2012 ADCA CONVENTION!**

Buffalo Amherst in Amherst, New York, September 12-15.

Theme: "Flora and Fauna" and "Lesser Known Hardware Companies"

See your convention packet or call Faye Kennedy at 908-684-5253

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