

The Doolittle Dynasty Of Connecticut

by **Silvio A. Bedini**

The ranks of early American clockmakers and makers of mathematical instruments contain many families of which several members pursued these crafts, but few had as many members doing so as the Doolittle family of Connecticut. The patriarch was Isaac Doolittle, born in Wallingford on August 13, 1721, the son of Joseph and Elizabeth Holt Doolittle. After having served an apprenticeship with the Wallingford clockmaker, Macock Ward, Doolittle moved to New Haven in about 1742, establishing himself on Chapel Street. One of the most versatile mechanics of the colony, he was appointed Armourer to the Fourth Regiment of Connecticut in 1758. He pursued his craft as a clock and watchmaker for more than half a century, making and selling clocks, silver watches and a variety of other items. In 1763, Doolittle expanded his inventory to include surveying compasses. His talents ranged widely, even including the production of a printing press in 1769; in 1774, he began bell founding as well. In 1775, Doolittle was among the commissioners in charge of erecting a beacon on Indian Hill in New Haven to be used as an alarm in the event of a British attack on the town. In the following year, he had erected a powder mill for converting salt peter into gunpowder, of which he produced large quantities during the American Revolution. Doolittle died at the age of 79 in 1800.

He was succeeded by his son, Isaac Doolittle, Jr., who was born in New Haven in 1759. After serving an apprenticeship with his father, he established his own shop in about 1780. Quite as versatile as his father, he specialized in surveying and marine instruments, and advertised "Compasses of all kinds, both for seas and land, surveyor's scales and protractors, gauging

rods, walking sticks, silver and plated buttons, turned upon horn; also clocks and watches made and repaired, and a variety of other work." After he took over his father's business, the junior Doolittle continued to emphasize his own specialties, announcing that "he repairs watches, makes and repairs Surveyor's Compasses and Chains, Brass Amplitude, plain brass and common Ship's Compasses, Gauging Rods, Quadrants, repair'd &c."

Enos Doolittle, Jr., a nephew of Isaac Doolittle, Sr., was born in Wallingford. After serving an apprenticeship with his uncle, he established himself in Hartford by 1772. In 1788, he announced in the press that, in addition to other items, he also made mariner's and surveyor's compasses, and a few years later he also ventured into bell-founding. In 1785, he was still engaged in making brass and wooden surveying compasses and marine compasses, which he sold not only at his shop in Hartford, but also by means of agents in Saybrook and Middletown. In 1786, he purchased and operated a brass foundry for the production of not only clock parts and instruments, but also andirons, candlesticks and other household items.

Then, in 1788, with a partner, Jesse Goodvear, he undertook church bell casting, which was a successful enterprise, and which he continued until his death in 1806.

His son, James Doolittle, continued the bell founding business, and others purchased his brass foundry and clock businesses. Apparently, in addition to bells, James Doolittle also made surveying compasses.

Contributions to the surveying instrument field were certainly made by the Doolittle dynasty, which stretched three generations. Learning from their predecessor, each Doolittle was able to carry on the family trade, while expanding on the services which they provided. PS

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Vernier surveying compass made by James Doolittle of Hartford. Courtesy of the Chester County Historical Society's Museum, West Chester, Pennsylvania.