

In New England, time stands still — at least if you look at the clocks

By [Mike Damiano](#) Globe Staff, Updated June 15, 2023, 8:51 a.m.



The Old South Meeting House clock (on the right) in downtown Boston was incorrect, while the Jewelers Exchange Building clock was on the money. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

A funny thing happens on the drive up Massachusetts Avenue, if you're paying attention. As the minutes tick by, the clocks — mounted on sidewalks, in church towers,

or hanging over storefronts — keep their own erratic time.

It's just after noon, but outside a bank in Cambridge's Central Square, a clock's hands point to 11:35. A few miles up the road, outside the Whole Foods in Arlington Center, it's 5:43. In Lexington, time stopped at 9:11, according to the clocktower overlooking the famous Revolutionary War Battle Green.

Across New England, public clocks — some of them hundreds of years old and once the focal points of town squares and urban centers — have slowed to a crawl or simply stopped.



The two faces of the clocks outside Whole Foods in Arlington Center simultaneously show the wrong time. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

There are a host of reasons clocks stop working, according to the region's clock

maintenance professionals, an aging cadre of men and women who have been building and tinkering with clocks for decades. Motors burn out. Hands get stuck. Human minds forget to wind a crank.

But there is also a more overarching — and existential — problem: smartphones.

“Everyone has a cellphone with a clock,” said Jeffrey Gonyeau, a Dorchester preservationist, informally known as the Keeper of the Clock, who winds and adjusts a historic clock in Peabody Square every week.

Last Thursday morning, he opened a cubbyhole in the clock’s pole and wound the gears a dozen or so times. Then he stepped back — and pulled out his iPhone to check the clock’s time. It was on the money. It almost always is, he said, as long as the temperature doesn’t change too much.



Jeffrey Gonyeau wound the clock in Peabody Square in Dorchester. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

But a clock with a conscientious keeper isn't the norm.

There are stopped or wrong clocks in Dover, Concord, Brookline, and Newton. In the South End, the North End, Roxbury, and Beacon Hill. They are affixed to churches, hardware stores, historic landmarks, and an optician's office. Some are mechanical, driven by gears older than any living human. Others are electric, run by motors that burn out after 20 or 30 years.

"I don't even look up anymore," said a bike messenger who didn't want to share his name, gesturing at the clock (three hours off) of the Old South Meeting House towering over a bustling Downtown Crossing plaza. "They should fix it. It's a shame."

With a perfectly accurate timepiece always within arm's reach, however, what is the point of looking up? Genna Kane, a Boston University academic studying urban development and historic preservation, said she hadn't noticed how many clocks were broken, even as she studied the buildings they were attached to.

"The fact that I didn't even notice shows how our mediums of information, like the Internet, have shifted to be more diffuse, to something less visible that doesn't require you to be in public space," Kane said.



ie clocks at Winters Hardware in Belmont, made by Electric Time, do not show the correct time. (DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF)



oth sides of the sign show a different, incorrect time. (DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF)

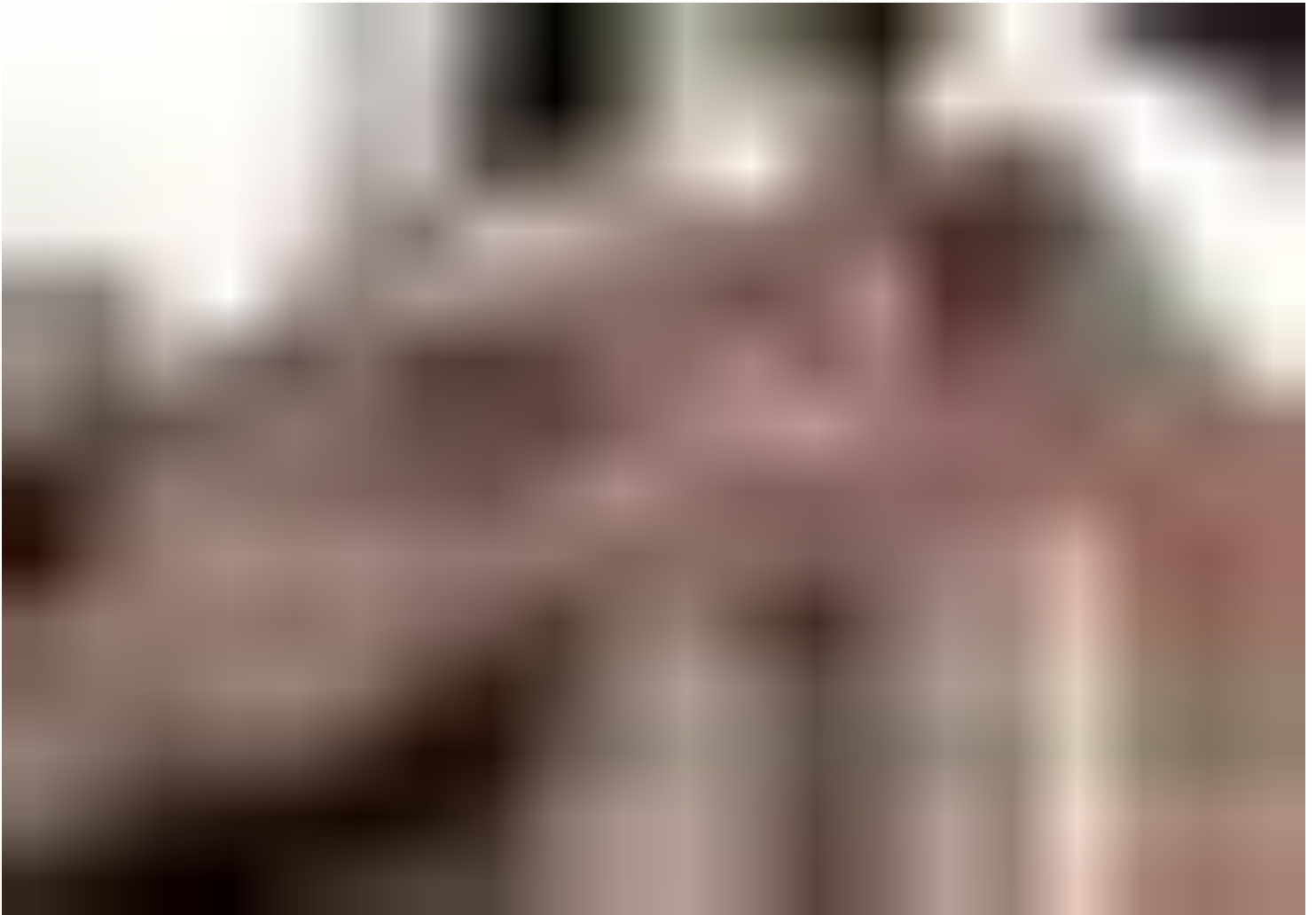
Clocks, then, become an afterthought even in this region that venerates its history and was once among the timepiece-making capitals of the world. Waltham was known as Watch City for its watch factories. Medfield is still home to Electric Time, one of the world's biggest electric street clock companies.

Brendon Roy, who manages capital projects for Cambridge, said he was surprised to

learn recently that he is now in charge of a bad clock. When the city bought a building on Mass. Ave., no one noticed that the property included the clock mounted on a pole by the front door. Now, he said, “we’re told we own it.”

Roy had no idea what was wrong with the clock (off by 25 minutes) or how it worked, he said. And fixing it was not exactly a top priority. He was still hiring consultants to inspect the property for any issues. “Frankly, we don’t even know what’s wrong with the building yet,” he said.

Some New England clocks stopped decades ago, said Greg Vasale, a 74-year-old industrial worker who fixes church-tower clocks as a side gig. Then COVID made things worse.



A view of the clock faces displaying the wrong time at the Old West Church in Boston. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

David Twiddy, the operations manager of the Old West Church in downtown Boston, said his church's clock (stuck at 3:46) broke down during the pandemic and has not been maintained since. "The pandemic cut off a lot of things and that was one of them," he said.

But even before the pandemic, the clock only ran sporadically. Once every three months, Vasale would climb the tower to grease and wind the machinery — a half-dozen brass gears encased in metal housing and attached to long shafts that spin the clock's three dials. It would run flawlessly for a week, and then it would stop again because no one at the church knew how to wind it, Twiddy said.

There is a solution to this problem: electrification. A motor can be installed to wind the clock periodically and or to spin the hands all the time.



David Twiddy, operations manager at the Old West Church, said its clock hasn't been maintained since the pandemic. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

But motors bring their own issues.

In Westford, the clock at First Parish United, an 18th-century white clapboard church overlooking the town common, is stopped at 12:33 because the motor quit and had to be sent away for repairs. Even when the motor is in place, though, the clock is finicky.

Mary Lyman, a member of the congregation, said it falls to her husband, Ed, to reset the clock manually whenever there's a power surge, as well as twice a year for daylight saving time. But Ed's getting older and the clock tower is tall. Mary Lyman is not sure

who will make the climb and keep the clock running when he can't do it anymore.

“There's always these young guys who say, ‘Oh, yeah, I'll do it. Then they go up there once and never come back again,’ ” she said.

The responsibility of keeping New England's clocks running now falls to a handful of men and women who are almost all in their 70s or older.

Perhaps the king and queen are Rick and Linda Balzer in Freeport, Maine. They have been making and repairing mechanical clocks since 1970. They built a tower clock at Colby College and maintain clocks at Harvard University and in Boston, including the clock in Peabody Square wound by Gonyeau, the Dorchester preservationist.

They are in their late 70s, but seem “ageless,” their son, Chris Balzer, said. Chris, also a master clockmaker, focuses on grandfather clocks and wall-mounted indoor clocks. He said he'll probably pick up the slack in the tower clock business when his parents are gone.

It's less clear that Vasale, the moonlighting clock repairman, has an heir apparent. As he's aged, he said, he has had more trouble crawling into the nooks and crannies of centuries-old clock towers. He needs his adult granddaughter to help.

“She's spry. She can crawl in there,” he said. But they have trouble getting their schedules to line up.

For Vasale and other clock keepers, the work is a passion, shared by a select few.

There is little interest these days, Vasale said, in keeping a good machine running.

“Today everything runs on a battery,” he said. “It's meant to be thrown away. But there's other things out there that are meant to last more than one lifetime.”



The stopped clock on the tower of the Charles Street Meeting House on Mount Vernon Street in Boston. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

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