

Hamilton Watch Co. Collection

Keeping Time by Keeping Records

By Claire Moclock (PA)

The history of watch-making in America is hard to discuss without mention of Hamilton Watch Co. Their early commitment to equipping the railroad industry with precise timekeeping is unmatched, not to mention their role in the first U.S. Airmail flights, production of the first electric wrist watch, countless contributions to military defense, and Hollywood cameos. Hamilton's largely known achievements are reflected in their collection of company records, which I have the pleasure of working with as a Research Fellow and Project Archivist here at the NAWCC Archives.

Before this fellowship, I did not know much about Hamilton, or horology for that matter. I do know, however, that there are people who dedicate their lives or pastime to studying these things, in the same way that I will always be devoted to photography, and that's why I'm here. The


Hamilton Co. records can show, just through their physical form, and tell, through reading their content, of the social, economic, and political functions of company culture. In contrast, the collection also details the complex technical creation of their products through blueprints, drawings, and research reports. My goal is to make this information easier to access and navigate for researchers and the general public. Above all else, I want to share what this process entails, the importance of preserving the materials, and some observations I have made about Hamilton and their record-keeping practices throughout my experience.

As I got to know Hamilton, I started to think of them as the Kodak of watch-making. To my surprise, magazines from the late 19th and early 20th centuries validated this impression, with Kodak and Hamilton advertisements often appearing next to each other (Figure 1). From photographing products to photo-forming metal watch parts, I have observed that a spectrum of photographic processes were integral to Hamilton's research, development, and production of timepieces. This is in part due to the era in which they functioned as a corporation, but it also reflects the iterative and exploratory nature of design and engineering work. Regardless, Hamilton was deliberate and thorough in documenting all aspects of their research and production. Their record-keeping practices of the past have ultimately influenced my current experience as an archivist, and will undoubtedly shape that of future users.

The bulk of the records were created between 1920 and 1960. Today, the materials used to create and store them are in various stages of deterioration, which is shaping my experience in certain ways. The process of processing this archival collection involves, among many things, removing rusty staples and clasps from papers. A lot of the paper is acidic, which stains neighboring items over time. Photographic film from the same era is prone to off-gassing a vinegar odor and becoming brittle. This is especially apparent when opening a box or envelope that contains negatives. All of these aspects can be influenced by storage condition and environment over time. While the past storage conditions are largely unknown, I'm re-housing the materials in acid-free folders and boxes designed for preservation.

Of course, Hamilton's record-keeping is not the only thing that has shaped the content, context, physical form, and overall experience of the collection. There is an idea in archival theory that we are what we keep, and we keep what we are.¹ In other words, what evidence we choose to

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Safety in Travel

More glowing tribute cannot be paid the accuracy of the modern watch than this—in all the complexity and immensity of railroad traffic hardly a single life is imperiled, or a dollar lost, because of imperfect timekeeping. Remembering then that the

Hamilton Watch
"The Railroad Timekeeper of America"

is carried by over one-half (56%) of the railroad men on American railroads where Official Time Inspection is maintained, it is only fair to assert that the Hamilton Watch has played no small nor uncertain part in ridding travel of one of its greatest dangers—danger arising from inaccuracy of time.

Trains are dispatched on "hair-line" schedules by Hamilton time—because Hamilton time is "travel safe."
Hamilton Watches are made in correct sizes for men and women and sold by jewelers everywhere.


Movements only are \$12.25 and upward. Complete watches, certain sizes, are \$38.50 to \$150.00. Ask your jeweler about them; also about fitting your present watch case with a Hamilton movement.

It illustrates and describes the various Hamilton models and is a book well worth reading if you are thinking of buying a fine watch.

Write for "The Timekeeper"
HAMILTON WATCH COMPANY Dept. A LANCASTER, PENNSYLVANIA

The very essence of efficiency.

The Vest Pocket KODAK



Right as a watch in adjustment and in the refinement of every detail. Literally small enough for the vest pocket, yet takes pictures $1\frac{5}{8} \times 2\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and of such perfect definition that enlargements may be made to any reasonable size.

Has Kodak Ball Bearing shutter with six diaphragm stops, minimum achromatic lens, Autotime scale and brilliant reversible finder. Loads in daylight with Kodak film cartridges for eight exposures. A hand lens makes it always ready for quick work. Lustrous black metal finish.

Price, \$6.00

Kodak Catalogue, free at your dealer's or by mail.
EASTMAN KODAK CO., ROCHESTER, N. Y., The Kodak City.

Figure 1. Kodak and Hamilton advertisements from *Scientific American*, Vol. 108. Munn & Company, 1913. Page 368.

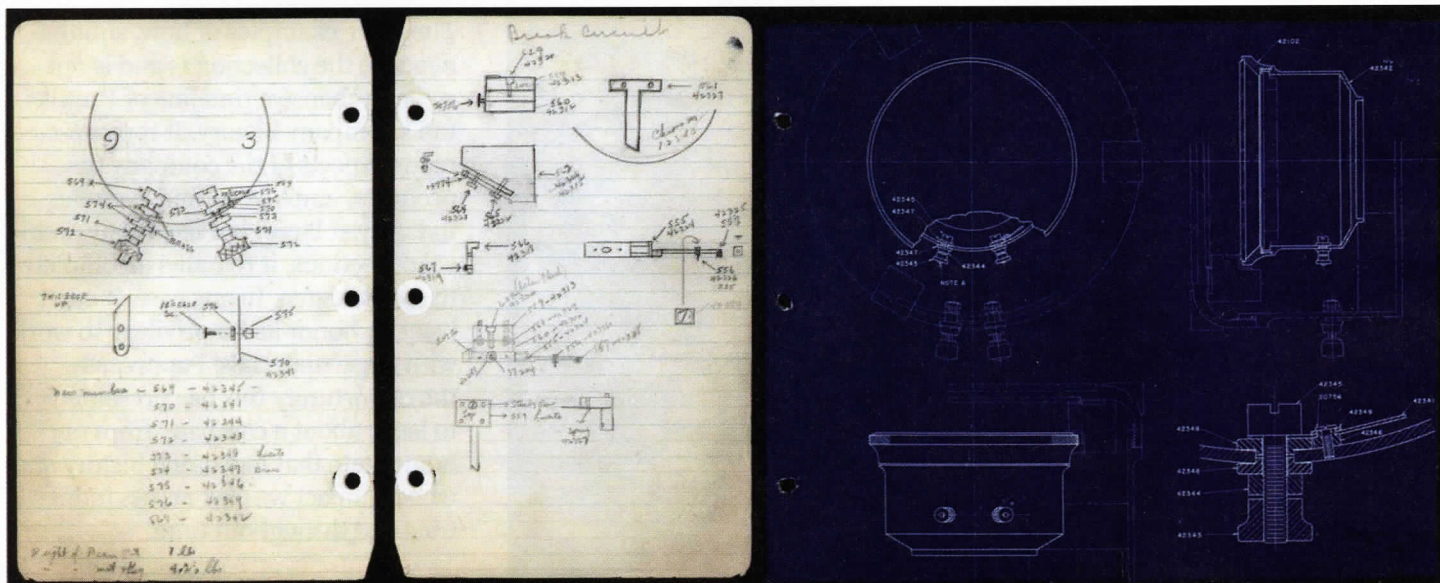


Figure 2. Leroy May's notes on the Hamilton chronometer. 1941–1946. FROM THE HAMILTON WATCH CO. RECORDS COLLECTION. BOX 23 OF 47.

preserve today will shape how something or someone is remembered in the future. With this theory in mind, I was disappointed to find that the majority of the collection was bound for a landfill when discarded by the new owners in the 1980s. Their abandonment of the records communicated a lack of value or sense of importance for items with historic value. If the materials were not salvaged, the tangible beginnings of the company would be lost as well as the documentation of the names, faces, tools, and processes that made Hamilton products what they were.

I wish we knew more about the decisions that led to the discarding, recovering, and delivering the materials to the NAWCC, as well as details of where, when, and how it all transpired. We do know now that the CEO of the Swatch-owned, Swiss-based Hamilton Watch Co., Sylvain Dolla, is very thankful and appreciative of the outcome, in which the NAWCC came to possess and preserve the Hamilton heritage. He has visited the Museum, seen the archival collection, and approved the funding for my Fellowship. He calls the NAWCC and its Museum the guardians of the Hamilton brand history. For now, I'm working with a portion of what we are fortunate enough to have with us, 47 boxes worth of records.

The collection contains all different types of materials that span just over a century. This includes some legal documents of Hamilton's predecessors, the earliest of which is a deed between Augusta Bitner and The Adams & Perry Watch Manufacturing Co. from 1874. Hamilton's record-keeping practices have mainly resulted in a multiplicity of blue prints, white prints, tracings, sketches, and photographs. Given my background in Visual Studies and photography, I find these documents to be the most intriguing items, especially for the precision, mathematics, and attention to detail necessary to produce them. However, they cannot stand on their own, as there are

layers of correspondence, memos, and reports associated with the renderings and images I find so impressive. One of the most fascinating things about the collection is being able to see the evolution of a watch part from a rudimentary handdrawn sketch to the final blueprint (Figure 2). Even further, this comes full circle when I pivot away from working in the archives and spend time photographing the actual timepieces and updating their records in the Museum collection. Although I can make direct connections with physical aspects of the records, I will never personally know what it was like to work for or at Hamilton. Thankfully, other parts of the collection will be able to speak to this experience for years to come.

For some, working at Hamilton was a way of life; for others, it was just a job. Many of the envelopes I am going through note that their contents are from "G.E. Shubrooks files." Typical of the era and industry, Hamilton had employees like Shubrooks, who started work in their teens or twenties, progressed through different departments and positions, and retired 40 years later. For the majority of his career at Hamilton, Shubrooks was chief chemist. His record-keeping was impeccable; many of his letters, memos, and reports indicate (in very polite notes to his secretary) where they should be filed. Some of the most revealing and informative items in the collection come from his personal files. For instance, his desk diaries humanize his role at Hamilton by illuminating the social structures of his department, mostly as he would reflect on conversations with colleagues. Moreover, his photo albums document company picnics and events as well as other aspects of his personal life.

Opposite of individuals like Shubrooks, were countless employees who circulated in and out of manufacturing or clerical roles, perhaps not identified anywhere in the collection. Although we are fortunate to have such

detailed documentation from Shu-brooks, there are many perspectives and experiences associated with Hamilton that this collection does not account for, especially those of women. Photographs and advertisements show us that women were present in the early days of the company and took part in manufacturing jobs alongside men (Figure 3). One might speculate that they typed the vast majority of the reports and memos I handle, yet their names rarely appear on anything. While of great interest, this is a topic that requires research beyond the scope of my current work but I would encourage exploration in the future. Likewise, I have shared certain things in hope of inspiring even one person to reflect upon their creation and retention of information, especially in our digital age.



Figure 3. Employee working at a machine with blueprints in background. FROM THE HAMILTON WATCH CO. PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION. CIRCA 1950.

These are examples of how, simultaneously, the collection is and is not a comprehensive timeline of Hamilton's company history. It represents many aspects of the company (its products, employees, and even the industry at large) but like many archival collections, it remains incomplete to some degree. In any case, it has been an honor and a privilege to work with these materials. I appreciate the opportunity this has presented to learn about a company from my home state that had a rich history and whose impact was felt across industries and throughout time.

Reference

1. Cook T. We are what we keep; we keep what we are: archival appraisal past present, and future" *Journal of the Society of American Archivists*. 2011; 32:173-189.