

The Terry Clock Company's Fishing Reels

Steven K. Vernon



Two of the Terry Clock Company's earlier fishing reels. Although the reel on the right has a rod clamp, the two are constructed similarly.

The first identifiable fishing reels made in the United States were constructed by a watchmaker, George Snyder, in Paris, Kentucky, ca. 1815. Over the next century, some of the finest reels ever to retrieve line were made with exquisite precision by watchmakers and clockmakers in Kentucky and elsewhere. Some, such as Benjamin F. Meek of Frankfort, Ky., are better known today for their reels than for their horological work. Although the angling equipment of these individuals is prized by collectors, not all of the reels made by clockmakers display such high-quality workmanship. This article draws attention to the long-ignored reelmaking activity of the Terry Clock Company, which appears to have become an important adjunct to the firm's mass-production of complicated clocks.

The history of Silas B. Terry and his various clock companies has been described by Chris H. Bailey, Managing Director of the American Clock & Watch Museum, Inc.¹ It is a story propelled by Terry's acclaimed inventive energy, yet fraught with business failures. Within two years of its incorporation in

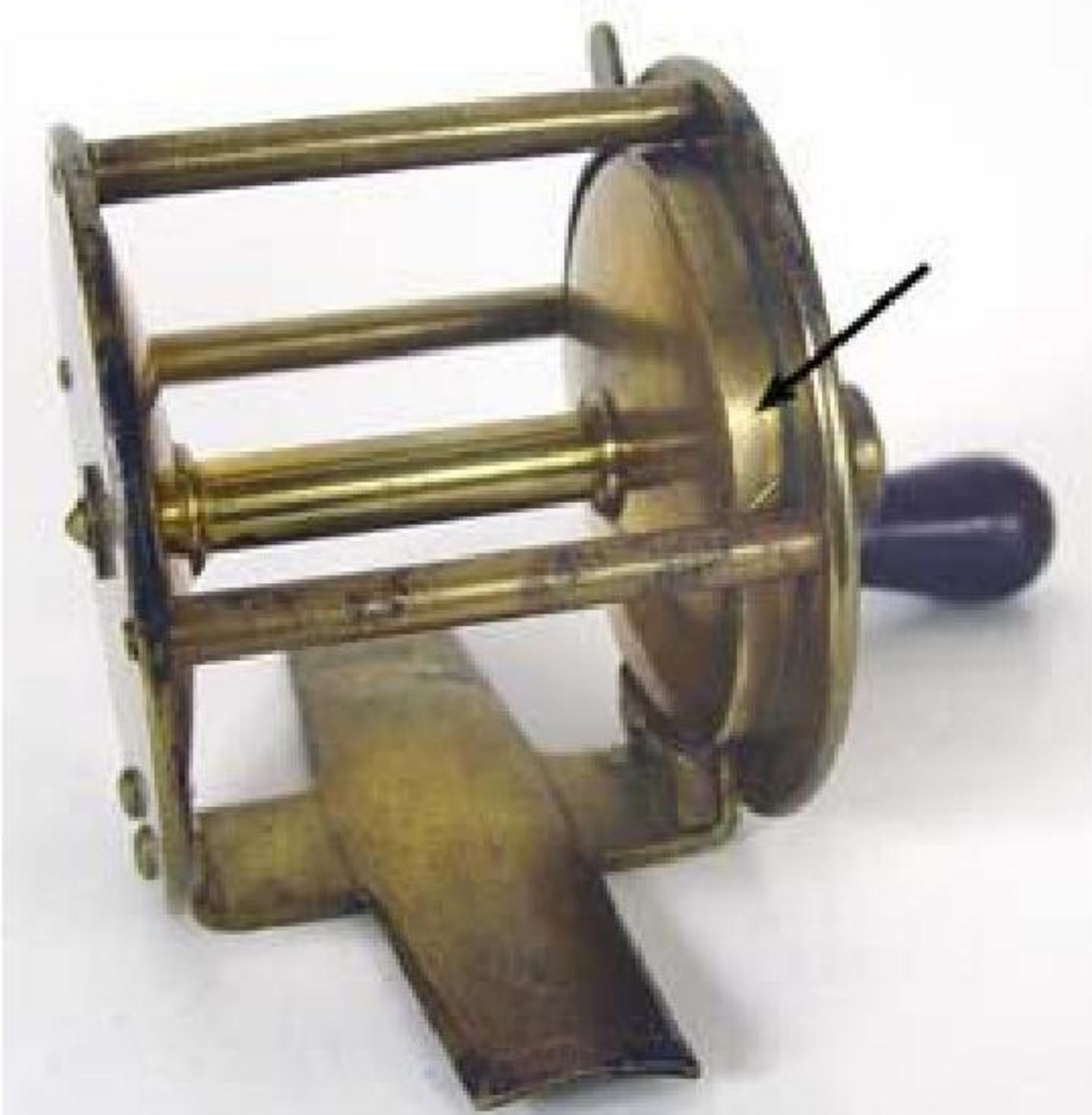
1869, Terry's last firm, the Terry Clock Company, of Waterbury, Conn., began to involve itself with the manufacture of fishing reels. Whether this new venture initially represented a "hobby" of Terry's or a far-sighted plan to vary the company's product line may never be known. However, a growing body of evidence indicates that the Terry company became a major reel manufacturer within the next decade. This "sideline" may have enabled the firm to delay somewhat its eventual declaration of bankruptcy in mid-1880.

On November 14, 1871, Silas B. Terry was granted U.S. patent no. 121,020, which he assigned to the Terry Clock Company. The "invention relates to an improvement in fishing-reels, the object being to simplify the construction and adjustment of the reel." The reel's design contained three salient features:

1. A circular flange attached to the inner surface of the front plate formed a housing for the two multiplying gears. As Terry mentioned, fishing reel gears usually were housed between two plates or between a plate and a "cap" (cover).

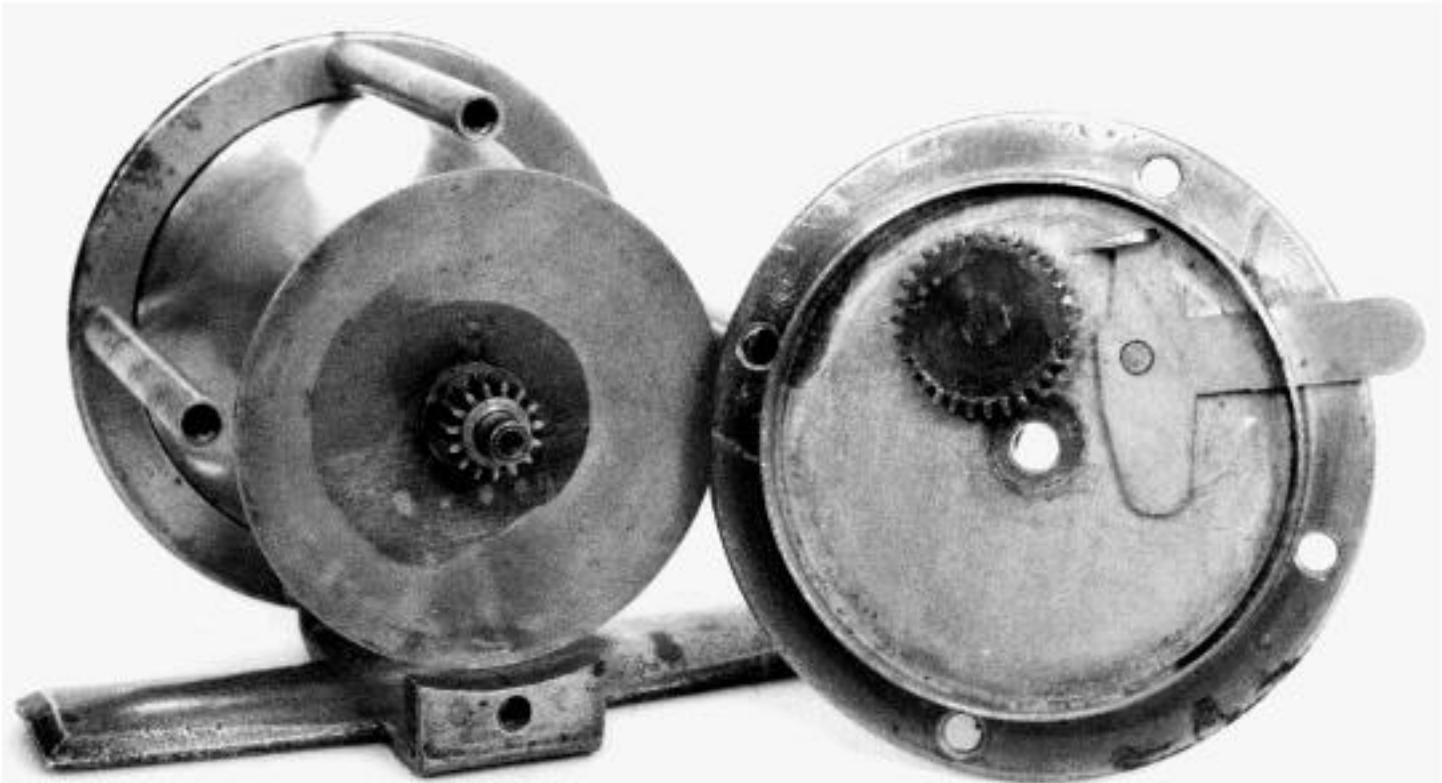
2. The reel foot was stamped and formed from a single piece of sheet metal. Conventional reel feet were soldered, riveted, or screwed to one or two bars fastened between the plates or were made from heavy castings.

3. Drag could be applied to the spool by means of a U-shaped stud that rubbed against the inner surface of the rear spool flange. As the stud was mounted on the end of a rod that spanned the space between the plates and was fastened with an adjustable nut, the drag pressure could be varied.



This view of the larger early reel shows the sheet-metal foot and the circular flange that forms the gear box (arrow). The foot is attached by two rivets and a screw, which enters a supporting block. Such blocks were often used with the patented foot.

Terry's reel was anachronistic at its moment of invention. American reelmakers had been providing protective caps for the spool bearings since the 1830s. A thumb-controlled, adjustable brake had been invented in 1864, and it exerted more evenly distributed pressure more conveniently than did the Terry drag. The Terry design included a click as well as a stop, a pawl that could be jammed between the gear teeth to prevent spool rotation. Few, if any, stops had been used on American-made reels since the 1830s, although some imported British reels still employed them. Perhaps Terry's experience with clock escapements influenced the design. Nevertheless, Terry's one-piece reel foot was innovative, as its use on thousands of reels of various styles over the next decade or so would demonstrate.



The patented gear box of this early reel also houses a lever-operated stop. The pawl at the upper end of the lever can be pivoted and wedged between the main gear teeth.

Reels made by the Terry Clock Company are relatively common collector items. However, many are identifiable only by their incorporation of the easily recognized foot, which may or may not be stamped with the patent date. I am aware of only two reels marked with the Terry name, although some bear the marks of other companies. Yet it is clear from the five-page inventory of reel parts in the bankruptcy papers filed in 1880² that the company had been manufacturing thousands of reels of varying styles and sizes, in brass and German silver. It would appear that most or all of them were made for the trade.

I have encountered fewer than a half-dozen reels that incorporated the gear box invented by Terry, and two are shown here; neither is marked. One is fitted with the patented foot, and the other bears a rod clamp similar to those used by British reelmakers during the early 19th century. The clamp is riveted to a frame-bridging bracket formed like the patented foot. Both reels are equipped with stops but lack the click and adjustable drag described in the patent. Each foot bracket is fastened to the plates with two rivets in the rear and one screw in the front, another indication of British influence on the reels. American reelmakers long had employed four fastenings for the foot, a stronger design. The flanges for the gear boxes are merely thin strips of brass whose edges were soldered to the front plates after they were formed into circles. Whether this brass-saving, but labor-intensive, method was truly cost-effective is a moot point.

Mr. Bailey's history reproduces an advertisement from the 1873 Waterbury city directory that listed the various styles of reels made by the company.³ It is probable that the company had begun to manufacture them about the time the patent was granted and that the reels shown above represented two of their

TERRY CLOCK CO.,

65 Washington Street, - - - CHICAGO, ILL.
 FACTORIES, PITTSFIELD, MASS.
 MANUFACTURE A FINE LINE OF FISHING REELS:
 PLAIN REELS, MULTIPLYING REELS,
 BALANCE HANDLE REELS, CLICK REELS,
 STOP REELS, RUBBER REELS,
 REELS WITH DRAG,
 NICKEL PLATED REELS.

All polished reels have gold finish.
 PRICES FURNISHED TO THE TRADE UPON APPLICATION AND GOODS SUPPLIED EITHER
 FROM PITTSFIELD, MASS., OR 65 WASHINGTON STREET, CHICAGO.

20-25-44

An advertisement published in the March 1, 1884, issue of
The American Field.

earliest models. Reel manufacturing continued (and probably increased) after Terry's death in 1876 until the company declared bankruptcy.

The subsequent reelmaking history of the company is even murkier. Within about a month after its sale, the company was relocated to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where the *Sun* announced, on August 11, 1880, that the Terry Clock Company "...also make fishing reels..."⁴ However, there is little hard evidence of the firm's reelmaking activities after 1880. No records of reel manufacture or sales were found in a search of company invoices by a descendant of H.S. Russell, one of the three partners who purchased the firm and reincorporated it in Pittsfield.

Oddly, it is a little-known company in Indianapolis, Indiana, that provided clues to the Terry Clock Company's further adventures in reelmaking. Incorporated in 1882, the American Reel Company sold a reel with an innovative click and an unusually high (10:1) gear ratio.⁵ A patent for the reel was

granted on January 31, 1882, to two of the firm's founders, Warren Ohaver and Taylor O'Bannon. The patent drawings included features, including the foot, of Terry reels. Examples of the reels employ the Terry foot, usually marked with the Terry patent date, and are replete with design and mechanical features similar to those on Terry reels. For these reasons and without any further evidence of a link between the two firms, the manufacture of the American reels was attributed to the Terry Clock Company. (Reference 5 also describes the features common to the reels.) American Reel Company appears to have gone out of business within two years or so.

An advertisement published in *The American Field* on March 1, 1884, throws some light on the Terry reelmaking activities. Placed by the Terry Clock Company, it describes a variety of reels manufactured at their Pittsfield, Mass., factories. It offers "Prices furnished to the trade upon application and goods supplied either from Pittfield [sic] Mass., or 65 Washington St., Chicago." When this branch office was opened is not known, but it is possible that it had been available in time for American Reel and Terry representatives to discuss the new Indianapolis reel in Chicago. It is also possible that Terry's success with the American reel stimulated the establishment of the Chicago office.

The plethora of Terry reels evident at shows and in individual collections suggests that the company continued to manufacture reels after 1884, at least until its reorganization as the Russell & Jones Clock Company in 1888 and, possibly, until that company's discontinuance in 1893. In fact, it suggests that the Terry Clock Company was one of the country's larger suppliers of fishing reels during the 1870s and 1880s. It produced both fly reels and multiplying ball-handle reels that are readily acquired by collectors. An 1882 ad even mentioned an "automatic" reel. However, not all used the easily recognized, patented foot, so collectors are encouraged to use other criteria to determine if their unmarked reels may be Terry products. Unfortunately, the precise dating of the Terry reels remains enigmatic.



A 25-yard fly reel with the patented foot. The simple wooden knob on the half-crank is seen frequently on Terry reels.



A nickel-plated ball-handle multiplier with the Terry foot. The shape of the headcap screw heads and the asymmetric crank are typical of Terry multiplying reels.



Another plated ball-handle reel with a conventional cast foot. The reel can be identified as a Terry product by the asymmetric crank, the simple wood knob, the screw heads, and some decorative grooves on the tailplate. This reel also has a rim-mounted brake control.

End notes:

¹ Chris H. Bailey, "Silas Burnham Terry/Manufacturer, Pauper and Would-be Horologist," in *The Terry Clock Co.'s Catalogue and Price List of Terry's Patent Clocks*. Bristol, Conn.: American Clock & Watch Museum, Inc., 1981, pp. 25-51

² Terry Clock Company bankruptcy papers, Waterbury District Probates #7966, 1880. Inventory recorded July 15, 1880, pp 22-27.

³ Bailey, *op. cit.*, p. 45

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49

⁵ Steven K. Vernon, "Who's Yer Reelmaker?" *Fishing Collectibles Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Summer, 1989, pp. 4-8