

Jabez B. Crook, Pioneer Reelmaker

Steven K. Vernon


During the late 1830s, at about the time that J.F. and B.F. Meek produced their first fishing reel in Kentucky, an even greater reel industry was hatching in New York City. John Conroy, an established machinist at 52 Fulton St., began to manufacture fishing tackle and probably made his first reel at least as early as 1838.¹ A future competitor, Jabez B. Crook, born in England in 1815, had already opened a machine shop next door at 50 Fulton St. by 1837.



A very early brass, S-handle reel made by Crook. The rear oil cap is merely a brass disc attached to the tailplate by two screws, and the wooden grasp is unusually long. The inset shows the maker's mark.

By 1840, Crook formed a partnership with Francis B. Lorenberg, another machinist, and the business was renamed Jabez B. Crook & Co. Crook's occupation first was listed as "fishing tackle" in one 1842 city directory, but in another, Crook & Co. was described only as "machinists." Nevertheless, Crook and Lorenberg obviously were specializing in tackle by that early date. Lorenberg left within a couple of years, but Crook continued in the trade until he was joined, in 1846, by James Berry. That same year,

Crook advertised in *The Spirit of the Times* that "Crook's Rods and Reels having won for him golden opinions from all that have used them, he pledges himself to fully sustain their reputation."² In 1848, Jerry Falvey, who eventually would become one of the city's best-known rodmakers and rod-repair specialists, got his start as an employee of the company. At least as early as 1849, George Crook, four years older than, and probably a brother or cousin of, the senior partner, was working in the shop, and he would still be making tackle at Abbey & Imbrie in 1880. It was George who witnessed Jabez B.'s petition for naturalization on April 17, 1852.

 **FISHING TACKLE.**
J. B. CROOK
respectfully informs his customers and the sporting community generally, that he is still at
NO. 50 FULTON-STREET,
where he manufactures and has for sale the most improved Fishing Tackle in all its variety, the quality of which needs no guarantee to insure its giving satisfaction.
Crook's Rods and Reels have won for him golden opinions from all that have used them, he pledges himself to fully sustain their reputation, and continues to merit the patronage of a liberal public.
N. B. On hand, Walking-cane Chairs—the Ne Plus Ultra of convenience to the Invalid pedestrian. Walking cane Rods, the best quality ever offered in the market. Salmon, Fly and Bass Rods. Reels of every size. Artificial Flies and Baits of all kinds. Gun Powder of the most approved qualities.
In fact every article in the sporting line, of the best quality, at the lowest market prices.

An 1849 Crook advertisement

By mid-century, Fulton Street was evolving into a center of the tackle industry. Crook & Co., at no. 50, was next to what was now J. & J.C. Conroy, at no. 52. Thomas Prichard began to make tackle about 1847 a few doors away at 44 Fulton St., Conroy's original address during the early 1830s. John J. Brown already was retailing tackle down the street at no. 125, and by 1847, John Ingham would be selling it at no. 60. By the mid-1850s, George H. Hinton had taken over Brown's business, and Alfred Woodham was selling tackle at no. 160.

Crook and Berry's business thrived, and they not only manufactured reels and rods, but they imported tackle, as well. In 1851, J.B. Crook & Co. was awarded a diploma for "second best fishing tackle" at the Twenty-Fourth Annual Fair of the American

Institute, while “best” was awarded to J. & J.C. Conroy.³ Crook’s rods and reels were judged second best, again, to the Conroys’ a year later.⁴ In 1853, Crook’s was the only firm listed under “Fishing Tackle” in a directory of New York’s “best and most reliable” business firms.⁵ Crook was awarded a diploma for his tackle at the American Institute Fair held in the Fall of 1856 at New York’s Crystal Palace,⁶ despite the fact that James Berry had died tragically on 7/27/1856, before reaching his 37th birthday. The partnership was dissolved by limitation a year later.⁷

DISSOLUTION.—THE CO-PARTNERSHIP
heretofore existing between **JABEZ CROOK** and
JAMES BERRY expires this day by limitation.
JABEZ CROOK,
JAMES BERRY.

Announcement, on July 31, 1857, of the dissolution of the partnership between Crook and James Berry.

Because the Crook and Berry families both played important roles in the company’s future, a bit of genealogy is in order. Crook’s first wife, Ann Lorenberg, probably the sister of his first partner, died on 8/16/1842.⁸ The reelmaker married Berry’s widow, Maria, in 1857, and she and her three children—Elizabeth, Edward, and James Berry, later identified as Crook’s stepchildren—moved into Crook’s Brooklyn home at 152 Concord. The household also would include William Crook, who was born in January, 1858. By 1870, the family moved to Bergen Co., New Jersey. A decade later, the census listed Hannah W. Crook as Jabez’s wife, and their household, still in Bergen Co., included William Crook, now a clerk, Elizabeth Berry, and James Berry, also a clerk. Edward Berry had married another Elizabeth, and the couple lived next door to the Crook household with their son, Eugene. Their son James would be born a year later.

Within a year or so of James Berry’s death in 1856, Crook found a new partner—Eugene J. Mason, who also resided in the Crook household in Brooklyn. Mason left about a year later, but Crook found yet another partner—Joseph Marsden—and he, too, would leave within a year or so. By 1859, both Mason and Marsden were engaged in separate hardware businesses.

Delaware’s Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum owns a brass Crook reel, which has been described in *Metalwork in Early America: Copper and Its Alloys from the Winterthur Collection*, by Donald L. Fennimore, Senior Curator of Metals. The reel, fitted with a curved half-crank with an ivory knob, was the subject of a paper by one of Mr. Fennimore’s students, who provided some interesting details of the firm’s history. In 1855, Crook was paying each of his four employees an average monthly salary of \$50. The shop produced an estimated \$5000 worth of tackle annually, while holding an inventory of raw materials worth about \$1000. In 1857, a credit agency described Crook as “prompt, honest, capable, industrious, reliable and trustworthy.” However, the firm’s fortunes began to slide. By 1860, Crook allegedly had become “deranged,” and the business was being managed by his wife and stepson.⁹

Although some angry creditor may have called Crook “deranged,” the term probably applied only to his business dealings. Crook’s second marriage had taken place only a couple of years before, and he remarried sometime during the 1870s. There seems to have been no hint of “derangement” regarding Crook’s personal life. Nevertheless, he may have

WE DISCONTINUE BUSINESS

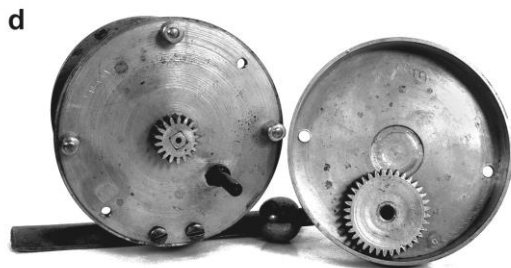
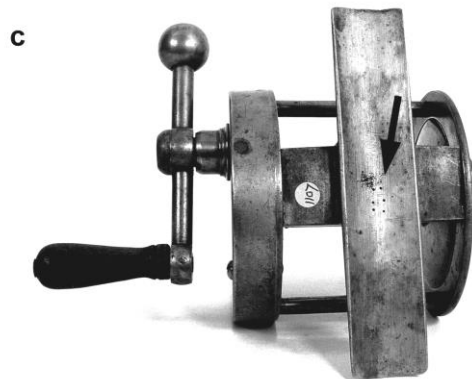
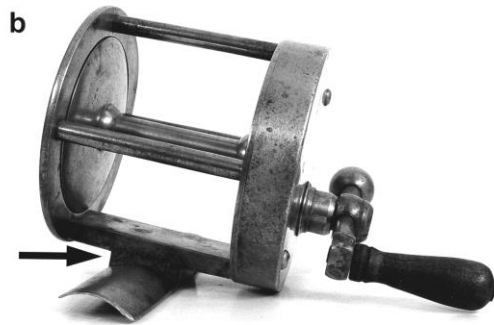
APRIL 24TH, 1920.

And Are Disposing of the Following Lines of
Merchandise at Large Discount.

GAMES	- - - -	30%
CUTLERY	- - - -	35%
FISHING TACKLE	-	40%
LEATHER GOODS	-	40%
SMOKERS' ARTICLES		40%
NOVELTIES	- - - -	35%
GUNS AND PISTOLS	-	20%

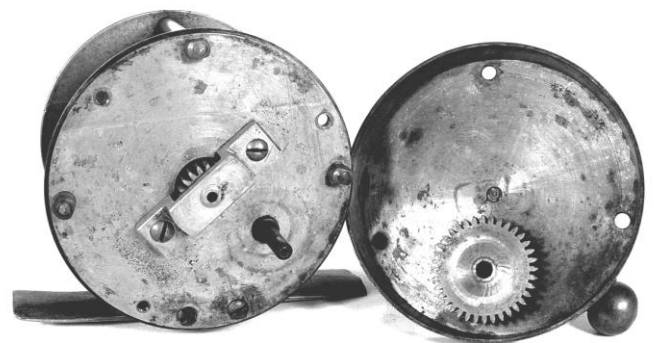
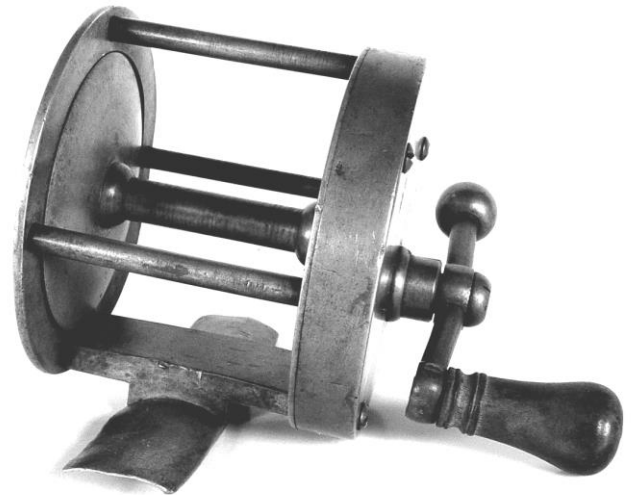
J. B. CROOK & CO., Inc.,
549 Fifth Avenue, at 45th Street, N. Y. C.
Open Until 6 o’Clock.

This advertisement was published on April 23, 1920.



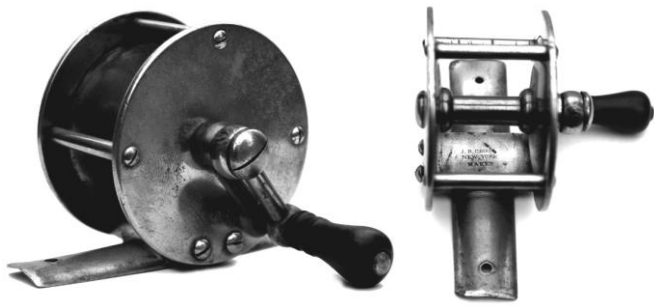
been difficult to work with, a possible reason his partners left in such quick succession.

J.B. Crook & Co. struggled through the next two decades but managed to survive in what was an increasingly competitive market after the Civil War. By the late 1860s, the firm was selling goldfish and aquaria, in addition to tackle, and it added other sporting goods and cutlery to its retail lines of products. After Jabez B. Crook died in 1884, the firm continued to expand its range of sporting goods under the management of Henry M. Crook. By 1885, the company was beginning to come out of the doldrums as both Henry and Jabez B. Crook, presumably the founder's sons by his first marriage, sold their wares at 50 and 52 Fulton St. Those wares included equipment for a wide variety of outdoor sports, including archery, as well as taxidermy



A brass, ball-handle reel made by Crook, stamped with the same die used on the early S-handle reel. (a) The wooden grasp is longer than those used by other makers of the period. (b) The cast foot has a flat cross-bridge. The top of the curved foot does not reach the plane of the lower surface of the cross-bridge (arrow). (c) An unusual array of dots is punched into the bottom of the foot (arrow). Other Crook reels sometimes have such dots. (d) The headplate and inside of the headcap. Each pillar nut has two flat sides. The pinion is seated on a squared spool shaft end.

Another brass, ball-handle reel, also marked "J.B. Crook/New York." (top) The grasp is a more typical size, but the upper curve of the foot does not reach the plane of the lower surface of the cross-bridge. (bottom) The spool is supported by a bearing in a bridge that spans the center of the headplate, an unusual feature. (Collection of Jim Schottenham)

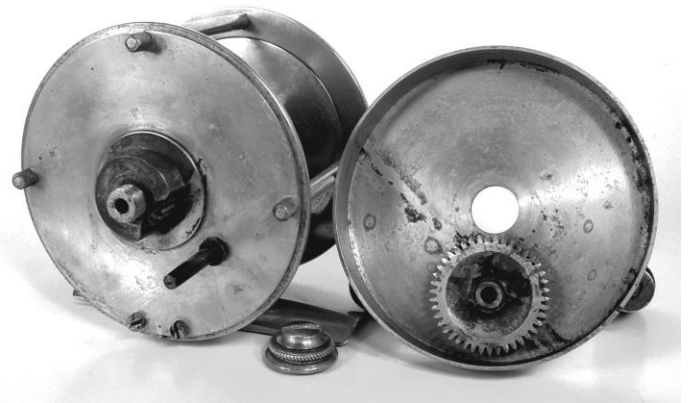


A brass, single-action reel stamped "J.B. Crook/New York/Maker" on the foot cross-bridge. The reel is engraved with a presentation date of 1854. (Photos courtesy of Laurie Bingham)

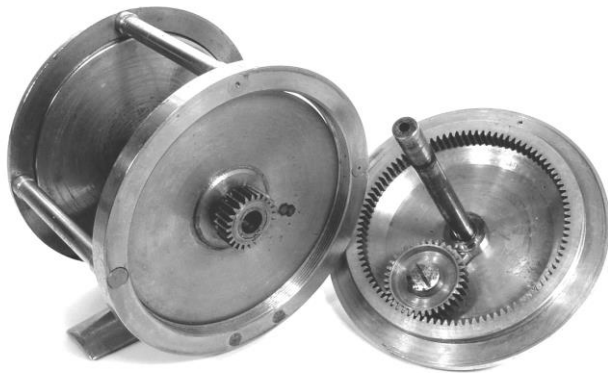
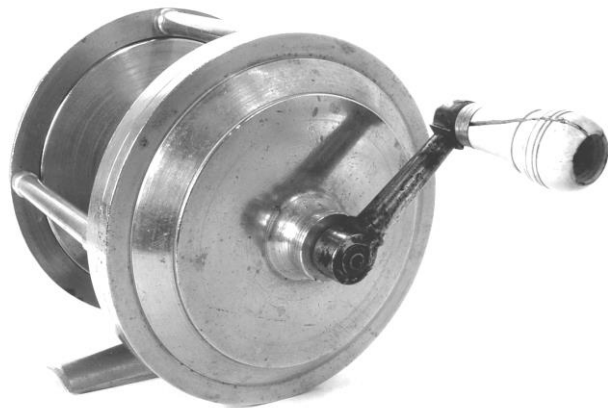
service. In 1890, they opened a second location at 1191 Broadway, but they would leave Fulton St. for good within the year. The firm managed to survive after sustaining about \$2000 worth of damage caused by a neighborhood fire on Jan. 3, 1891.¹⁰ In a bizarre robbery, thieves cut a three-foot-diameter round hole in Crook's quarter-inch-thick show window on the night of March 6, 1895, and made off with \$300 worth of goods.¹¹ By this time, William Crook also was listed in directories as working at the

company, which moved to 1180 Broadway, although he probably had been clerking at his older half-brothers' shop since 1880.

Unlike many of its competitors, Crook & Co. survived into the twentieth century. It was listed variably at 1166 or 1180 Broadway in directories over the next decade. The company appears finally to have been incorporated in 1915, and the Berry family took over where the Crooks left off. The President of the firm was Edward L. Berry, Crook's stepson; Vice-President, James L. Berry, the younger stepson, who had sold tackle elsewhere in years past; Treasurer, James Berry, Edward's son,

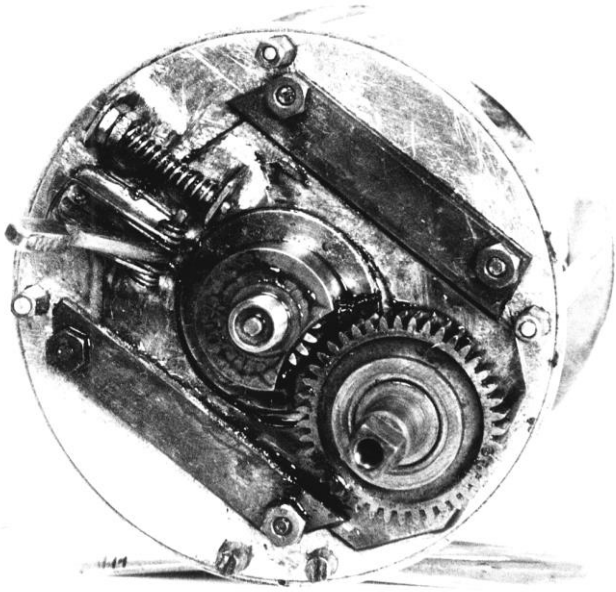


A German silver, S-handle reel marked "J.B. Crook/Maker/N.Y." Unscrewing the knurled oil cap allows the headcap to be removed, exposing the pinion housing.



An unmarked German silver reel with a planetary gear train. Two other reels of similar construction are marked "J.B. Crook/New York."

previously a bank clerk; and Secretary, Eugene Berry, a lawyer and Edward's son. Nevertheless, by 1916, the Berrys no longer ran the company. A new management team included William H. Turrell, President, Russell Marston, Vice-President, and George B. Turrell, Secretary-Treasurer., who leased



This clutch was seen in an unmarked example of the German silver reel shown in the previous illustration. The operating lever, on the left, extends through the rim of the headcap. When released, it allows the plate on which the main gear is mounted to slide along the two tracks and separate the gears. The clutch was probably experimental.

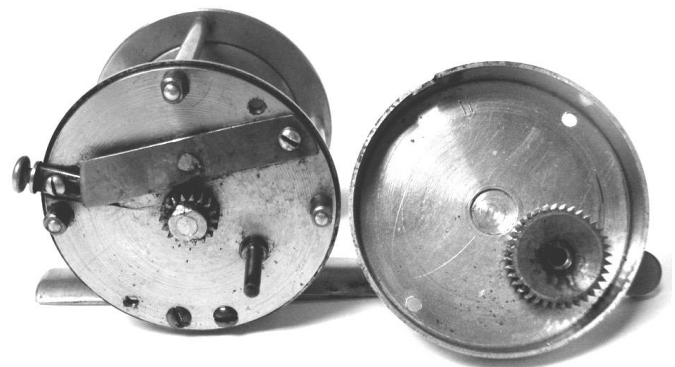
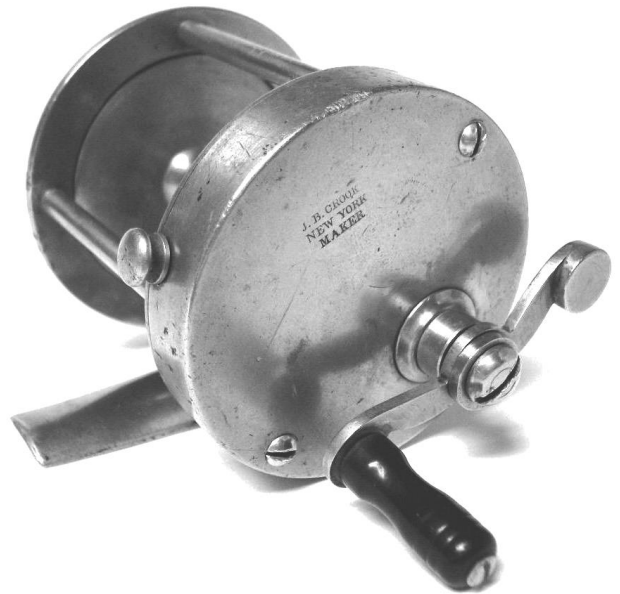
“the store and basement at 463 Fifth Avenue for a term of years” for the firm.¹² The Turrells were “capitalists” involved in a variety of businesses, who probably had bought Crook & Co. Despite the lease, within a year or two they moved to what would be their final location at 549 5th Ave., where they sold “sporting goods, guns, games, etc.” In advertisements in the *New York Times*, featuring a clearance sale of “games, cutlery, fishing tackle, leather goods, smokers’ articles, novelties, guns and pistols,” J. B. Crook & Co. announced that “We Discontinue Business April 24th, 1920.” Without compelling evidence to the contrary, I assume that the ad was correct and that the company finally closed its doors eighty-three years after Jabez Crook opened his machine shop.

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It is difficult to say how long Crook & Co. manufactured their own reels, but it seems unlikely that reels sold after 1875 or so were made in the Crook shop. By that time, the founder may not even have been working there, and it is not known whether or not any of the employees were reelmakers. “Crook”-marked reels from later than

1880 or so almost always have characteristics attributable to other makers of the period.

A fair number of the early “Crook”-marked reels are unusually inventive, in contrast to contemporaneous Conroy products. The majority of the marked reels seen today are brass ball-handle models, but many have features that I have not seen on reels from other sources. For example, a brass S-handle reel shown here has a bearing cap screwed to the headcap, while a non-swiveling disc cap is screwed to the tailplate. The crank includes a pawl to protect the crank nut from accidental removal. Inside, the brass main gear is screwed to a flange on



A German silver reel with an elongated, hard rubber grasp, marked “J.B. Crook/New York/Maker.” The pinion is mounted on a round spool shaft end. The sliding lever that operates the brake spring is anchored by a screw extending through a longitudinal slot. (Photos courtesy of Jason Dennis)

the crankshaft and is supported by a bushing in the headplate. Both the main gear and pinion are seated on round shafts, and the main gear is retained by a wire pin. The rim-mounted, sliding brake lever is secured to the headplate by a screw extending through a longitudinal slot in the lever.

Crook also produced reels in German silver. An extraordinary example shown here has a center-mounted, ivory-knobbed half-crank that turns a planetary gear train. The entire front plate unscrews from the frame to permit disassembly without tools. The crank and pinion are seated on round shafts. Although this particular reel was not stamped, two other examples of the reel bear Crook's mark and are inscribed with 1870 presentation dates.¹³

Another German-silver S-handle reel is stamped "MAKER" beneath Crook's name. It, too, can be disassembled easily by unscrewing the central nut on the headcap, which screws onto the internal raised housing for the pinion. The main gear is seated on the inner round end of the crankshaft. The one-piece, cast foot has a large central hole. I have seen another, unmarked example of this reel equipped with what may have been an experimental freespool clutch, which permitted the main gear to be slid away from engagement with the pinion.



A large, German silver and hard rubber reel marked "J.B. Crook & Co.," probably made in the 1890s, maker unknown.

Again, it is difficult to say with a high degree of confidence, but reels marked only "J.B. Crook" may all have been manufactured in the Crook shop, whereas those that include "& Co." in the mark may have been supplied by other makers. However, we must also consider that, as a retailer, Crook may

have put his own mark on reels made elsewhere but sold in his shop. Therefore, it is conceivable, though I believe unlikely, that only those reels marked "Maker" were actually manufactured in Crook's shop.

* * *

Jabez Crook deserves to be acknowledged as one of the earliest identifiable reelmakers in the U.S. Just as later machinists copied or improved upon features of Conroy reels, it is likely that they also used Crook reels as models. For example, John Conroy has long been credited, without compelling evidence, for the invention of the counterbalanced "ball handle" on New York-style reels. As I hope to show in an accompanying article, it is possible that Crook introduced the "S-handle" New York reel.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Donald Fennimore, Senior Curator of Metals at the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Tom Kerr, Laurie Bingham, and Ted Bingham for their help in preparing this article.

Endnotes

- ¹ Kelly, Mary Kefover, "The Fabulous Conroys, John to Thomas, 1830-1921," *Fishing Collectibles Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Winter, 1990, pp. 4-9
- ² Courtesy of Tom Kerr
- ³ "Annual Report of the American Institute," *Documents of the Assembly of the State of New-York, Seventy-fifth Session*. Albany, N.Y.: C. Van Benthuyssen, Vol. 7, No. 129, 1852, pg. 628. J.J. Brown won a diploma for "second best reels and fine specimens of cotton and flax lines."
- ⁴ *Transactions of the American Institute, of the City of New-York, for the Year 1852*. Albany, N.Y.: C. Van Benthuyssen, 1853, pg. 486. Crook & Co. won a "Highest Premium" for tackle at the 1879 Fair.
- ⁵ *New York Daily Times*, 2/23/1853, pg. 6
- ⁶ *Transactions of the American Institute, of the City of New-York, for the Year 1856*. Albany, N.Y.: C. Van Benthuyssen, 1857, pg. 144
- ⁷ *New York Daily Times*, 7/29/1857, pg. 6
- ⁸ *New York Daily Tribune*, 8/20/1842. Courtesy of Laurie Bingham.
- ⁹ Southworth, Eleanor E., "The Jabez B. Crook Multiplying Reel at the Henry Francis Dupont Winterthur Museum," submitted for the course Base Metals Connoisseurship, May 21, 1984, pp. 8-9.
- ¹⁰ *New York Times*, 1/4/1891, pg. 2
- ¹¹ *New York Times*, 3/7/1895, pg. 2
- ¹² *New York Times*, 3/4/1916, pg. 16
- ¹³ Laurie Bingham, personal communication