CHAPTER 7

European Pocket Sundials for Colonial Use in American Territories

Sara J. Schechner*

Introduction

The first portable sundials brought to the Americas by European explorers and settlers were not made explicitly for use in those vast and wild lands, but were adapted for the purpose. What kinds were these, and when did types designed especially for use in America come to exist? Who needed or desired them? Where were they produced? What was their geographical range? To answer these questions, this paper will analyze archaeological evidence, household and business inventories, and most importantly, the very rare extant pocket sundials strongly linked to remote forts, tribal lands, battlefields, slave plantations, and colonial administrative seats. By means of close looking and critically thinking about this material culture, we can shed light on the relationship of time to imperialism and the transmission of cartographic and ethnographic knowledge during the colonial period.

* The author would like to thank Irene Castle McLaughlin, Curator of North American Ethnography at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, for reading and commenting on a draft of this paper; Randall Brooks and David Pantalony for helping to locate sundials in Canadian museums; Dolph Druckman for permission to publish his family sundial; and Fei Carnes of the Center for Geographic Analysis, Harvard University, for help in drawing the maps. She would also like to thank the staff of the Adler Planetarium, Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection of Brown University Library, Canadian Museum of History, Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments at Harvard University, Fort Ticonderoga, Fortress of Louisbourg, John Carter Brown Library, Morristown National Historical Park, Neville Public Museum of Brown County, Wisconsin, New-York Historical Society, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, Preservation Virginia (Historic Jamestowne), Rhode Island Historical Society, and Stewart Museum.
Seventeenth Century Stories

“Plantations in their beginnings have worke ynough, & find difficulties sufficient to settle a comfortable way of subsystence,” Governor John Winthrop, Jr. wrote from Connecticut in 1668. No one had time or supplies to make pocket sundials when there were “buildings, fencings, clearing, & breaking up of ground to be attended, Orchards to be planted, High waies, bridges & fortifications to be made, & all things to doe, as in ye beginning of ye world”.¹ A public sundial might be erected on a building, as shown by the Habitation of Quebec constructed by Samuel de Champlain in 1608 (Fig. 7.1) or by the crude slate dials unearthed at the site of Avalon, an English colony established in Newfoundland in 1621.² But pocket sundials? These were an indulgence brought to the New World by the colonists themselves in the first settlements and later by merchants in growing towns. The types transported to America’s shores during the seventeenth century were those beloved in the Old World, and they fit their owners like a well-worn shoe. Three brief accounts of sundials in seventeenth century colonial America show this and establish a baseline from which sundial use diverged in the eighteenth century.

We begin with the most famous sundial: the one that brought Captain John Smith into contact with the Indian princess, Pocahontas, in 1607. It was an unusual, spherical, ivory compass sundial, and the dashing captain boasted that it had saved his life by fascinating his Indian captors in Virginia.³ Smith’s spherical sundial does not survive, but archaeological excavations of the James Fort site have yielded examples of rectangular, ivory diptych sundials made in Nuremberg (Fig. 7.2).⁴ This more common form was apparently preferred