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For public clocks, a time warp

By Joe Heim

Early Sunday morning, Father Stephen Planning will clamber up four flights of rickety wooden stairs in the clock tower of St. Aloysius Gonzaga Church on North Capitol Street and change the face of time.

With a slight turn of a small gear, the new president of Gonzaga College High School will reset the clock to reflect the end of daylight saving time. Its four faces will remind the city's denizens below that the hour they thought had just ended has, in fact, just begun.

Early last year, the clock, which was built during the Civil War by Brother Blaise Walch, a Jesuit clockmaker, began showing its age. It had become reliably unreliable. School officials worried that it had ticked its last tock, so they shut it down and ordered a full restoration that took four months to complete.

But there's a question Gonzaga might have considered before laying out thousands for the repair: Why bother? Public clocks, after all, have outlived their necessity. From our smartphones and computers to our microwaves and coffee makers, we are surrounded by clocks. If we need to know the time, we look down, not up. Why cling to a vestige of an era that has evaporated?

The answer, to paraphrase Monty Python, is that public clocks are only a little bit dead. On their road to obsolescence, they have taken a surprising detour and are seeing a burst of popularity that is baffling even to the people who make them.

"It is beyond us," says Jim Verdin with a laugh. The fifth-generation president of Verdin, the country's oldest maker of public street and tower clocks, says that 20 years ago the Cincinnati-based company sold about a dozen street clocks a year. In recent years, it has averaged 200 to 300 a year — ranging in price from \$10,000 to \$50,000 — and demand is increasing.



A view of a public clock by Verdin on Eighth Street SE in the Barracks Row district on Capitol Hill.

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"I don't know whether it's nostalgia or pride or something else," Verdin says. "We're not smart enough to figure that out."

What Verdin does know is that towns, colleges, small businesses and even country clubs have been installing the clocks at a rapid clip and that new orders shot up even as the economy tanked.

Karl and Carrol Kindel bought a Verdin clock as a gift for their Capitol Hill neighborhood, installing it on Barracks Row in March. The couple, who have lived on the Hill for 40 years, say the clock reinforces a sense of neighborhood.

"It's a throwback to when people lived in smaller towns and there was a clock on the High Street," Karl says.

The couple embrace the nostalgia the clock symbolizes, and they say it has carry-over effects.

"A clock is very much like a building. There's a constancy to it," Carrol says. "Businesses come and go and things change, but this is something that anchors the neighborhood."

Weighed down

If a working clock anchors a neighborhood, a broken clock can weigh one down. No one expects public clocks to match the official time of the United States (that is kept in Boulder, Colo., where scientists at the National Institute of Standards and Technology have developed a “quantum logic clock” that they say will not gain or lose more than a second in about 3.7 billion years), but a neglected clock can say more about its location or its owners than it does about the actual timepiece. And broken public clocks abound, be they too expensive to repair or simply abandoned.

Some lag by minutes. Some by hours. Digital clocks displaying time and temperature are often comically wrong about both. But perhaps the most devious clocks are those with two or more faces displaying completely different times — such as the one above the Gap on Wisconsin Avenue in Chevy Chase — as if taunting you to decide which is right.

Of course, some clocks have simply stopped. And while a stopped clock is right twice a day, that is no consolation to people such as Tom Bernardin who labor, often futilely, to bring attention to the clocks that time forgot. Fifteen years ago, the New York resident launched Save America’s Clocks (yes, there’s an organization for everything) declaring that, “A non-functioning clock further erodes our faith and commitment in the future of urban America.”

Bernardin is happy about the resurgence of public clocks and the influx of new ones, but his focus is on repairing existing ones.

“So many of the old ones are sitting there frozen and rotting,” he says. Bernardin acknowledges that there’s not a lot of money around to throw at fixing old public clocks, but he hopes that they won’t be abandoned forever. “People need to start paying closer attention to those ones. Someday they’ll see the light.”

The District has its fair share of prominent broken clocks, but is also home to a number of notable working ones, including the Old Post Office Pavilion’s commanding timepiece, the minimalist clock in front of the Four Seasons Hotel in Georgetown and Calvary Baptist Church’s handsome tower clock at Eighth and H streets NW.

Calvary’s original spire was blown away by a tornado in 1913, and its clock and tower were destroyed by lightning in 1947. The structure was rebuilt — and a new electric clock was added — seven years ago as part of a historic preservation effort in the city’s downtown. It has long been one of the

most visible clocks in the District, and legend has it that John Wilkes Booth checked his watch against it before going into Ford’s Theatre and assassinating President Abraham Lincoln.

The city also includes one of the country’s most authoritative clocks. The Master Clock at the Naval Observatory on Massachusetts Avenue NW keeps the official time for the Department of Defense. A digital readout in front of the property is the public face of that clock.

Visual and practical appeal

The resurgence of the clock is not entirely about timekeeping, of course. “A clock is an architectural beauty point. It’s like adding a garden or a fountain,” says Brandie Morris, director of marketing for Electric Time, another of the country’s leading public clockmakers. Based in Medfield, Mass., the company is also enjoying the clock boom. Thomas Erb, the company’s president, says a clock’s appeal is visual and practical.

“People want to just look up and see what time it is instead of pulling out their iPad,” he says with a laugh.

Ultimately, though, every clock will be judged by the time it keeps.

Early Sunday morning, when we turn back time (a trick we play each fall that lets us pretend that we control the universe and not the other way around), public clocks will either fall in line or fail us further.

If the clocks are right — on churches and in classrooms, on stores and in bars — they tell us that things are in order, say clock advocates such as Bernardin. They tell us that people are paying attention. If a clock is wrong, maybe everything else is, too.

For Gonzaga’s aptly named Planning, a clock enthusiast who proudly shows off two antique clocks in his office and another that he made himself, having the Gonzaga clock working is a sign that the institution is alive and well.

“It’s a symbol of the school,” he says cheerfully. “It has a strong sentimental value and provides fond memories for the students here.”

He’s especially pleased that the church’s original clock, which was painstakingly refurbished by Stephen Hunt of Waldorf, was not replaced with an electric clock. That would have been simpler and probably more accurate, but much less interesting.

“Thank God they didn’t do that,” Planning says.