

Of all the silversmiths and jewelers working in Indiana around the mid-nineteenth century, none was more prominent than Washington Houston Talbott. More silver bearing his name, or the name of his company, exists today than that of all his contemporaries combined, not a small tribute to this self-made craftsman and businessman who rose to considerable prominence in the city of Indianapolis.

Washington Houston Talbott (he was generally known as W.H. Talbott, and one biographer even lists him as William H.) was the son of William and Mary (Houston) Talbott. The progenitors of William had originally come from England and settled in Talbot County, Maryland. At one point, William and Mary Talbott lived in Bourbon County, Kentucky, and it was there that our subject was born on March 29, 1817.

Several years later, the family moved to Charleston (Clarke), Indiana where Washington Houston remained until he was about seventeen years of age. Whether he worked in the jewelry business in Charlestown is not known, but about the year 1834 Washington Houston moved to Indianapolis (Marion) and began working at the shop of Daniel A. Webb, one of the earliest silversmiths and jewelers of that city. Perhaps Talbott served an informal apprenticeship with Webb, but in any case one biography states that Talbott learned his trade from Daniel Webb.

Early in 1835, Webb sold his business to his former partner, Elliott Foster and removed to Nashville, Tennessee. Talbott continued in the employ of Mr. Foster for several years and may have even been a partner in that business for a time. A spoon marked ELLIOT & TALBOTT is in the collection of the Indiana State Historical Society. Sometime before 1845, however, Talbott acquired Elliott's jewelry business and by that year was advertising "Talbott's Cheap Jewelry Store."

After earning a reputation as one of the most dashing bachelors of the town, Washington Houston Talbott married Elizabeth Coram Tinker of Cincinnati, Ohio and formerly of Maysville, Kentucky. Their marriage took place in 1848, and the two surviving children of that union were William H., and Mary Cleves.

By virtue of his skill as both craftsman and businessman, Talbott managed to build his business into a considerable enterprise by mid-century, and the firm of W.H. Talbott & Company seemed to be the most successful of the many jewelers' shops located in Indianapolis in the 1850s. Just who the "& Company" was during this period in time is not clear, but it is known that S.P. Bailey was in business with Talbott about this time, and silver cups bearing the maker's mark "Talbot, Bailey & Co." are extant. It is strange that no advertisement or official record has come to light linking Talbott and Bailey together as business partners. In fact, very little is known about Bailey, although silver items bearing his mark show him to have been a fine silversmith.

On January first, 1853, W.H. Talbott and James Allen announced in *The Locomotive* (Indianapolis) that they had formed a partnership, the business to be known as Talbott & Allen. The advertisement also stated that Mr. Allen would "be in charge of the establishment." indicating that by this point in time Talbott may have had other business interests and was no longer active in the the day-to-day operation of the firm. However, by January of 1854 Talbott was advertising alone, and later that year an advertisement for James Allen appeared in the *Indiana Morning Journal* stating that he was "formerly of the firm Talbott & Allen."

About the year 1850, Talbott's shop was located in the Capitol House Building, later the business removed to Number 24 East

Washington Street. Whether W.H. Talbott actually made any of the silver articles which bear his name is a matter of conjecture. The Author speculates that spoons and other items which bear Talbott's earliest mark probably were made by him, while later items bearing the mark of W.H. Talbott & Co. may have been made in the manufactory which was part of Talbott's jewelry business.

A number of silver cups and other awards of the Indiana State Fair are extant which do not bear the mark of any maker. It has been the contention of the Author that most of these award pieces were made in Indianapolis rather than contracted to firms out of state which produced silverware. It was only after examining the records of the Indiana State Board of Agriculture for the years 1852-1856 that sufficient evidence appeared to substantiate that contention. The Treasurer's report for the 1853 State Fair showed that the firm of W.H. Talbott was paid a total of \$1939.85 for silverware used as awards at that fair. Said prizes consisted mostly of silver goblets (cups) and sets of silver spoons. Occasionally, a silver pitcher was awarded for a particular important event. Along with the fact that the firm of W.H. Talbott & Co. had in their employ a number of trained silversmiths, including S.P. Bailey, George W. Minter and Robert Bacon, it is quite possible, even logical that these rather simple pieces of hollowware were proudly produced right there in the bustling town of Indianapolis. Why were these goblets unmarked? Perhaps for the same reason that so many similar pieces of that type went unmarked. That is, there are no flat surfaces on a goblet, making it very difficult to stamp with a maker's mark.

Another proof that Talbott & Co. were manufacturing silverware was found in the Second Annual Report of the Indiana State Board of Agriculture, which listed prizes awarded for the Second Indiana State Fair (1852). It lists the awarding of a prize to the

Talbott firm for submitting a case of silverware of their own manufacture, which was said to be “of the first style of workmanship, and evidently of the purest metal.”

Apparently, Talbott was responsible for producing most of the silver awards for the Indiana State Fairs from at least 1853 to 1855. Records indicate that in 1856, the order for most of the silverware used as prizes was given to the firm of E.J. Baldwin & Co., also of Indianapolis. Baldwin too, is known to have been manufacturing silverware at that time.

We know that by 1857, the firm of Bacon & Minter (Robert Bacon and G.W. Minter) was advertising as silversmiths and gave the firm’s location as “behind W.H. Talbott’s establishment,” indicating that they were producing silverware for the Talbott shop. Interestingly enough, the 1850 census for Marion County (Indianapolis) lists W.H. Talbott’s occupation as silversmith, while the 1860 census gives his occupation as merchant, with assets of some one hundred and twenty thousand dollars.

It seems obvious that by the decade of the sixties, Talbott had completely turned his attention from the jewelry business to real estate and political interests, while retaining part ownership of his jewelry business. During the early part of the decade the firm of W.H. Talbott & Co. consisted, in addition to Talbott, of George M. Jennison and H.L. Nelson, the latter two being in charge of the actual operation of the business, which was considerable. In 1863, Talbott was elected president of the State Sinking Fund, and later filled the same office for the Indiana and Illinois Central Railroad. He was also active in Democratic politics and served as chairman of the State Democratic Committee.

By 1866, Talbott apparently sold his interest in the jewelry business to his partners, Jennison and Nelson, the firm being advertised in that year as Jennison, Nelson & Company. After

the Civil War, Talbott's interests included the Gatling Gun Company, of which he was president. It was while he was on a business excursion to Europe in behalf of that company that he contracted a severe cold. Although he managed to return to Indianapolis, his health quickly deteriorated and he died at his home on Ohio Street.

Talbott's death notice appeared in an Indianapolis newspaper on March 13, 1873, which indicated that his obsequies had taken place several days earlier.