

Bedknobs, Broomsticks and... Door Knobs!

By Patricia Kelleher Bartram

A very obvious item used in our daily lives that we don't give much thought to, are door knobs. We use them all the time when entering and exiting our homes, individual rooms, offices, and almost any locales we visit and they are an integral part of today's interior design and home décor, as well as security.

Door Knob History

Perhaps surprisingly, door knobs and door hardware did not come into use until after the time of the American Revolution. Earlier, it was common to use latches or leather straps to keep doors closed and people used locked boxes for keeping safe their valuables.

From 1830 to 1873, more than 100 U.S. patents were granted for door knobs. The earliest were made from a variety of materials. Pressed-glass and cut-glass door knobs were popular, while knobs made from porcelain or ceramics were mainly imported from Europe. Wooden knobs were common but became less popular as the metal knobs were introduced. The new metal door knobs were generally made out of iron or steel and often covered entirely or in part with a veneer of bronze or brass.

It was in 1878 that an African American inventor who had been born enslaved, Osbourn Dorsey, was issued patent #210,764 from the U.S. Patent Office for a "door holding device." His was the first patent for a door knob and internal door-latching mechanism and it is Dorsey's design that was the first documented patent fit for manufacturing. His invention quickly spread across the industrialized world, fueled by the Industrial Revolution.

Special Door Knob in Boylston History

The Boylston Historical Society and Museum's collections include a large, heavy metal door knob with lock and key that played a part in the manufacturing history of Boylston. It is the door knob that was affixed to the front door of the Sawyer's Mill factory.

It measures 12 inches in width by 7 inches tall, 1½ inches deep, and is accompanied by a 6½ inch long key. It is very heavy, made of thick iron. It was used to close and lock the Sawyer's Mill factory for the final time by the factory's then superintendent, James Nelson Ball, on Sunday, 9 April 1899. He did so after the last and



**Heavy Metal Door Knob, Lock, & Key
from Lancaster Mills Factory**



**Antique Key from Heavy Large Door Lock
A Witness to Boylston's Industrial Past**

oldest worker, Mrs. Anna Whelan Lawless, left the building. One hundred and seventy-one years after Joseph Sawyer built a saw mill that was to be the beginning of a bustling complex of manufacturing mills, the closing of the factory in 1899 was, along with the destruction of the village of Sawyers Mills, part of paving the way for the development of the Wachusett Reservoir.

It appears that Mr. Ball took the door lock, knob and key when the building was demolished, because it was ultimately donated to the town by his brother-in-law, John J. Keough (1856-1922), the husband of Mary Spaulding Ball of Boylston and sister of James Nelson Ball. The piece was first held by the Boylston Public Library, but then given into the BHSM collections in 1976.

Future of Door Knobs?

Given how technological advances have opened the door (pun intended) to the development of smart devices that are providing keyless and knob-less entry it is clear to see that 50 years from now door knobs, keys and locks may well be things of the distant past.

Acknowledgements:

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Boylston Historical Society and Museum, Inc. Collections, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts

Did You Know? Door Knobs Through History, Schlage, schlage.com

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