



The Fantasticasmical Imagifactory of Orvellas Gilbert!

Being the Most Complete History of the Gilbert Lock Company to Date by Xavier Blaine

The late 19th century in America was a time of rapid and sometimes astounding changes in building technology. The furnaces of hardware manufacturers burned unceasingly, driven by the demand for products dreamed into existence by the vulpine innovators of the era. In the architectural realm, new technologies and designs for door hardware were being patented every day and none of these inventions may have been more unique than “Gilbert’s Patent” issued in 1876 to Orvellas Henry Gilbert.

Mr. Gilbert is wily prey for architectural historians and hasn’t left much of a record to account for his accomplishments. Though no biographies seem to exist, we know that he was born somewhere in New York in 1824. He traveled into the mid-Western frontier, seemingly employed in the architectural and building professions; a sash lock was patented under his name while he was in Wisconsin in 1874. Two years later he patented his unusual door hardware in Chicago and shortly thereafter moved back to the east coast. By 1879, he had established the Gilbert Lock Company and his products were being produced en masse in Newark, New Jersey.

Gilbert Lock Co. door hardware is a strange and notable breed. Mr. Gilbert’s earliest designs are for a knob that is fixed to the escutcheon plate. A lever is installed next to the knob that is long enough to reach into the mortise lock. When the knob is grabbed, the lever is activated with ones thumb and pushes back the latch bolt on the mortise lock allowing entry into the room. In place of a dead bolt to lock the door, turning the key raises a bar that blocks the movement of the latch bolt. Later adaptations to the design involve a traditional dead bolt for the mortise lock and the demise of the fixed knob and thumb lever. The knobs in the later designs could be turned like traditional door hardware, but they still only served to move a lever that extends into the mortise and that activates the latch.

“Gilbert’s Patent” effectively eliminated the set screws, washers and spindles required to attach a doorknob and was apparently something of a success. In 1879, a mere three years after its invention, it was claimed that Gilbert Lock Co. hardware had been “extensively introduced” and was “claimed to be the best for house-building in existence.” Praise was extended onto Orvellas himself who was described as a “practical and ingenious gentleman, of many years’ experience as an architect and builder.” By 1882, the company claimed annual sales of over \$100,000 dollars and that their hardware was being sold in 2500 hardware stores across the country. This period in architectural history was a ‘cast bronze’ age for hardware manufacturing and Gilbert Lock Co. products were no mere hardware; they were “stationary knob furniture,” a true investment for your home.

Despite their exalted status, the door hardware designs of Orvellas Henry Gilbert are difficult to track down today. Public demand and the attentions of home builders seem to have waned considerably following the explosion of initial interest. In 1889, one architectural critic wrote that Gilbert Lock Co. hardware was disadvantaged in that “the ordinary form of knob and spindle cannot be used with it.” Gilbert knobs could only be used with Gilbert locks and it might be that their exclusive nature proved too problematic to permanently supplant the ‘ordinary form’ of hardware employed by other manufacturers. Critiques such as these cause one to wonder at the role the choices of the average home builder may have played in the evolution of door hardware, but a disinterested industry would not prove to be the ultimate undoing of the Gilbert Lock Co.

Maude Eastwood makes a compelling case, based on designs shown in hardware catalogs of the era, that there was a close business relationship between Mr. Gilbert and the Branford Lock Works. Both companies were manufacturing virtually the same products at the same time, and Branford Lock Works must have had rights to “Gilbert’s Patent” hardware lines even though the patent is issued in Orvellas Gilbert’s name. In 1894, the Yale and Towne Manufacturing Co. successfully purchased the Branford Lock Works. That same year, Mr. Gilbert established a second enterprise, the Gilbert Hardware Co. A lawsuit quickly followed, and it was ruled that the Gilbert Hardware Co. did not actually own the patent rights to the products it was set on manufacturing. “Gilbert’s Patent” seems to have somehow been absorbed by Yale and Towne along with their assimilation of the Branford Lock Works. Although the Branford Lock Works brand was continued by Yale and Towne, Orvellas Gilbert’s designs would only survive for two more years. In 1896, both the Gilbert Lock Co. and the Gilbert Hardware Co. were declared “inoperative and void” by the state of New Jersey on account of unpaid taxes, a rather ignoble end to what could have been a small revolution in door hardware design.

Mr. Gilbert survived the fate of his companies and lived on for another seventeen years. At the august age of 90, he passed away at his home in New York City. Of course, this is not truly the end of the story. As anyone involved in the restoration of old homes will attest to, the artifacts of invention outlast the inventor and the designs of Orvellas Henry Gilbert should be accorded a special place in the history of hardware manufacturing. Those lucky enough to have Gilbert Lock Co. hardware in their home can count themselves as stewards of a truly unique piece of American history.

Sources, mostly found on Google Books (If they’re ever needed):

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