

# André-Charles Caron—A Watch Maker's Shop (*boutique d'horloger*) on rue Saint-Denis, Paris, Circa 1750

## Part 2

By Robert St-Louis (CAN)

Part 1 of this article, published in the July/August 2019 issue of the *Watch & Clock Bulletin*, introduced the reader to a Parisian *horloger* (watch/clock maker) named André-Charles Caron (1698-1775), whose name appears on a watch movement dating from around 1750, acquired by the author. Caron's origins and a biographical summary of his life were presented. This was followed by a brief history of watch-making in Paris from its origins up to the time of Caron's career, starting in 1722. The article continued with a description of his *atelier* (workshop) on rue Saint-Denis in Paris, where he exercised his profession from 1730 until his retirement in 1761. Part 1 concluded by describing two notable horlogers who worked in Caron's atelier at the time the aforementioned watch was produced, namely his son Pierre-Auguste, and his *compagnon* (journeyman) Jean-Antoine Lépine, who was to become an important figure in horological history. Part 2 continues the narrative by telling the remarkable story of André-Charles Caron's only son Pierre-Auguste, who aimed to follow his father's footsteps in horology, until Fate determined otherwise. The article will conclude by narrating the final trajectories of the lives of the three horlogers who had worked side by side in Caron's atelier, around 1750.

### Becoming an Horloger, and Beyond

From a young age, Pierre-Auguste Caron had a keen interest in music. With the help of his five sisters,



Figure 1. Man with feathered cap, half-length, playing the lute; after a drawing by Pohl after Strozzi. c.1750-70 British Museum number 1949,1008.258. PUBLIC DOMAIN.

he became a very proficient musician, especially on the harp, but he could also sing, play the flute, viol, and other instruments. From participating in family musical soirées, he went on to play music in the street with friends, to impress rich passersby who may give them money, and, of course, young ladies of Paris. The experience he gained as a youth in performance and entertainment no doubt assisted him later in life, as we shall see. But at the time, this aspect of Pierre-Auguste's life interests disturbed his once-Protestant father, who more than once complained about his "wretched music." Because he had only one son, André-Charles intended Pierre-Auguste to follow the family tradition and become an horloger as well, which led to some friction between the father and son in the latter's adolescent years.

After attending an arts and trade school in Alford until the age of 12 (learning mainly French, Latin, and history, and where his genius for letters went unrecognized), Pierre-Auguste embarked in 1745 on his eight-year apprenticeship in his father's atelier. Not only would he learn the complex and intricate craft from the instructions of his father, who was an accomplished horloger, but he also greatly benefited from his father's principal worker, Jean-Antoine Lépine, who had joined the firm the year before. Lépine was later to become one of the significant horlogers in France, inventing around 1770 a new type of watch design (using small bridges instead of a full plate, and a going barrel instead of a fusee) that was to bear his name, and influence all watch makers who came after him, including the illustrious Breguet. But his major accomplishments occurred after he had established his own atelier, when he had taken over the business after Caron's retirement. Evidently, the worker Lépine and the young apprentice were both learning from the elder André-Charles, during the late 1740s.

Though young Caron acquired the skills of the horloger in such qualified company, his other interests would not entirely leave his attention. In the evenings, after supper, he would often go out with his harp and engage with friends in music-playing on the street, near taverns or restaurants, possibly earning some extra money to complement the stipend or weekly allowance that his father gave him for his work in the family shop (Figure 1).

Parisian nightlife has always been a beguiling mistress, especially for a charming and gifted musician like Pierre-Auguste. He probably came home late on many instances,

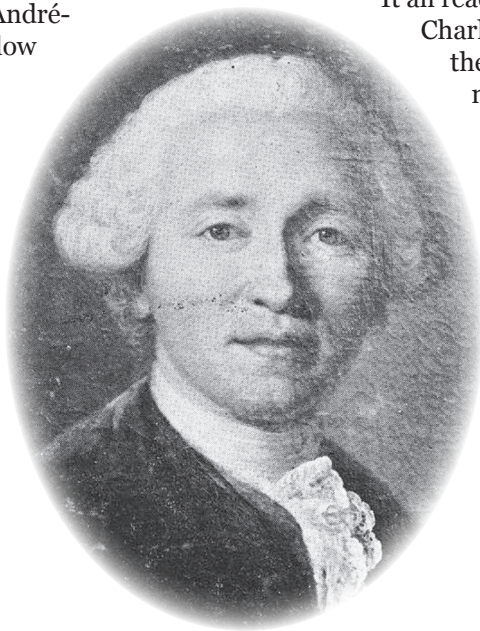
and his escapades likely affected his concentration at the bench the following morning, which did not sit well with his disciplined father. Being late for Sunday mass also raised the ire of the devout André-Charles, who would deduct money from his son's weekly allowance depending on how late he got to the church. Because of his reduced allowance, it was also rumored that to acquire some spending money, Pierre-Auguste may have done some work on the side, or sold parts and components from his father's atelier.

It all reached a tipping point when André-Charles became so frustrated with his son, then around 18, that he took the extreme measure of banishing him from the family home and workshop. Pierre-Auguste was taken in from the street by family friends who interceded with his parents to take him back. But his father persevered for some time in his intent on teaching his son a lesson, and breaking the hold that the "wretched music" and his nightly adventures held on him, and compromised his ability to learn the venerable trade of the horloger.

After a few weeks, figuring that the lesson had gone long enough, André-Charles wrote a letter to his son which included a contract detailing six constraining conditions. Only upon accepting to uphold these, would Pierre-Auguste be accepted

back into the family home and into the atelier to complete his apprenticeship. If he infringed on these terms, the consequence was that he would be sent out of the house and atelier forever. Some of these explicit conditions were probably typical of what a master horloger expected at the time from his journeymen, apprentices, and other employees, but they also included terms aimed at correcting the wayward tendencies of a vivacious adolescent, and can be summarized below:

- Not allowed to make, sell, or repair any timepiece or part of which, unless directed to by his father
- Obligated to rise at six in the summer, seven in the winter, and work until supper, at whatever tasks his father gave him to do
- No longer could have suppers in town nor go out in the evenings
- Allowed to go out with friends only on Sundays and holidays, but needed to be back home by nine



**Figure 2.** Portrait of Jean-André Lepaute (1720-1789). PUBLIC DOMAIN.

- Could only play the viol and flute (not the harp), after supper on working days, without disturbing the father nor the neighbors
- Would earn a quarter of whatever business he brought in, if he devoted himself dutifully to the business

In closing, the father wrote: “*Earn more than what I promise you; but remember that I shall give nothing to words, henceforth I need only actions.*”<sup>2</sup> André-Charles also gave his son some advice that was to prove useful not only in his development as an horloger, but in other future occupations in his life. It illustrates the father’s ambitious expectations for his son, and is prophetic regarding Pierre-Auguste’s future horological accomplishments: “*I intend you to employ the gifts that God has given you with the sole aim of becoming famous in your profession. Remember that it is shameful and dishonorable for you to move slowly ahead in your trade, and that if you do not surpass everyone you will not deserve the least consideration. The love of such a beautiful profession must enter your heart, and solely occupy your spirit.*”<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting to note, as we shall later see, that despite his father’s admonition to his son that he should focus on learning the horological profession rather than devote so much time to his “wretched music,” it was the latter that was to prove more advantageous to the budding horloger’s life path, even after, in the years following, he had finally attained the distinction of *horloger du Roi*.

Pierre-Auguste signed the letter and thankfully returned to the home and atelier. He put aside his musical and other interests, devoted himself to learning the higher aspects of the horological art, and evidently never gave his father any future cause for concern about his dedication to the craft. No doubt, his co-worker (and future brother-in-law) Jean-Antoine would have been very supportive and helpful to the young man, having himself grown up in a family of watch makers.

In 1753, as his apprenticeship was reaching a successful completion, a famous incident occurred involving Pierre-Auguste and a well-respected *horloger du Roi* (clock maker to the King) named Jean-André Lepaute (Figure 2), whose atelier was situated in the highly esteemed Place Dauphine. Lepaute was a celebrated horloger who had crafted many superb clocks for the King and his various residences. He regularly visited the workshops of other horlogers, networking with fellow craftsmen, and getting a sense of what new things were coming up in this evolving trade. During a visit to André-Charles Caron’s atelier in July 1753, Caron’s son proudly showed him a new watch escapement that he had been working on for some time, which he called *double virgule*.<sup>1</sup> This escapement (Figure 3), which eliminated the verge

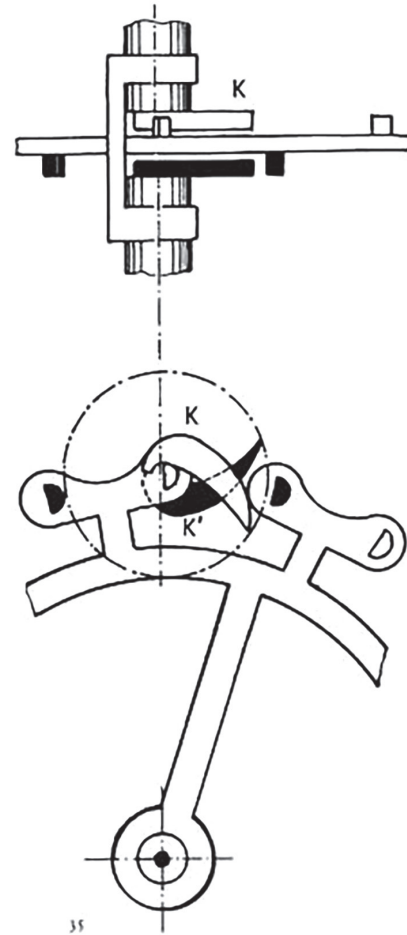


Figure 3. Diagram of double-virgule escapement. PUBLIC DOMAIN.

and some associated components (e.g., the potence), is rather sophisticated and difficult to construct, which is a testament to the competent horloger that Pierre-Auguste had become, and to the support and guidance provided him by his father and co-worker Lépine (who later developed and used a less complicated single virgule escapement in his watch construction).

At first Lepaute did not understand what he was being shown, but eventually he realized its potential and asked the young man to lend him a prototype of his design, on the pretext of taking it back to his shop to study it in more detail. Unbeknownst to young Caron, Lepaute had his workers incorporate it into a clock that he intended to present to King Louis XV, and wrote a notice to the distinguished Académie royale des sciences claiming the invention as his. When Pierre-Auguste learned of this he demonstrated, for the first time, the writing and debating skills that were to characterize his future career beyond horology. He wrote letters (possibly with his father’s help) to the editor of the *Mercure de France* that were published in the newspaper and indicated that the invention was his own and had been appropriated

*Extrait des Registres de l'Académie Royale  
des Sciences, du 23 Février 1754.*

**Mrs Camus & de Montigny qui avoient été nommés Commissaires dans la contestation mûe entre les sieurs Caron & le Paute, au sujet d'un échappement dont ils se prétendoient tous deux inventeurs, & dont la décision a été renvoyée à l'Académie par M. le Comte de Saint-Florentin, en ayant fait leur rapport, l'Académie a jugé le 16 Février, que le sieur Caron doit être regardé comme le véritable auteur du nouvel échappement de montres, & que le sieur le Paute n'a fait qu'imiter cette invention ;**

**Figure 4.** Excerpt from Académie des sciences decision 23 Feb 1754. PUBLIC DOMAIN.

unfairly by Lepaute. A mere apprentice was taking on one of the most well-known and respected horlogers of the time, and the readers of the newspaper, who also included courtiers and noblemen, were fascinated by this unfolding David versus Goliath story.

Pierre-Auguste also wrote to the Académie royale des sciences (probably at the suggestion of his father, who had dealt with the Académie during his naval invention days in the 1720s) and urged them to investigate his claim and render a fair decision. The Académie took on the case and carried out a very thorough investigation that spread over many months. The officers interviewed numerous witnesses, reviewed documents and prototypes submitted by Caron and Lepaute, and ultimately concluded, in February 1754, that Caron was indeed the creator of the new escapement. This decision was also published in the *Mercure*, and although Lepaute was embarrassed he had to yield to the decision of the Académie (Figure 4). Pierre-Auguste was presented with an official certificate by the Académie, which he always treasured. In a dusty box among his personal papers was, discovered decades after his death by his biographer Loménie,<sup>2</sup> a large-scaled watch movement made in copper or brass, inscribed: “caron filius aetatis 21 annorum regulatorem invenit et fecit 1753” (Caron’s son, aged 21, invented and made this regulator in 1753). Undoubtedly, this was a prototype of his famous double-*virgule* escapement, which Pierre-Auguste had always kept as a reminder of his first invention, made when he was only 21 years old.

No serious harm seems to have resulted from this incident to Lepaute’s reputation and business, as he continued to build highly regarded and expensive clocks

for royalty and rich patrons. The affair, however, elevated Pierre-Auguste from a mere watch maker’s apprentice to a Parisian sensation. Relishing in his success, he became even better known to the readers of the *Mercure*, and also to the Royal Court itself. The King invited him to demonstrate his invention and commissioned him to construct a watch for him. Young Caron also built one for the King’s official mistress, Mme. de Pompadour—this latter one was very small, only about 1 cm in diameter, and fitted to a ring.

As was discussed in Part 1 of this article, the majority of watches produced by Parisian horlogers in the 18th century, were not in fact built entirely “from scratch” by the watch maker, but rather made up of parts and components purchased from external specialized craftsmen. There were instances however, such as the novel and unusually small watches just described (presented to the King and Mme. de Pompadour), where an able horloger like Pierre-Auguste would have needed to craft the watches almost entirely himself (in this case with possible help from other craftsmen in his father’s atelier, most notably the very able Lépine). One watch he is reputed to have made for distinguished clients opened up like a flower, and the mechanism was veiled by a delicate “fishnet” of gold and precious stones.

Sadly, no watch or clock featuring Pierre-Auguste’s signature appears to have survived to this day. This is not surprising because his career as an horloger was quite short-lived, and it is well known that even for famous and prolific 18th-century horlogers like Julien Le Roy, Berthoud, and Romilly, only a very small percentage of their products have survived to this day (Adolphe Chapiro,<sup>3</sup> in *La Montre Française*, has estimated survival rates of only 2% to 3%, or less).

The episode with Lepaute and the Académie demonstrated that Caron’s son had clearly proved himself worthy of his father’s ambition toward him. He had not only become “famous in [his] profession,” but had outdone one of the major horlogers at the time (Lepaute). Soon, like his father before him, he was named horloger du Roi and was allowed to frequent the royal corridors of power in Paris and Versailles. This provided him not only with several influential and distinguished horological clients in Paris (especially among women who were captivated by his elegant looks and demeanor), but also with an opportunity to rekindle and apply his musical talents. Interestingly, he became for some time the harp teacher to the King’s daughters, and also organized and conducted intimate concerts at Court for the royal family. His musical exploits in the Royal palaces helped provide him with even greater influence and patrons at Court than had his early horological accomplishments.

A painting of Pierre-Auguste Caron by Court painter Jean-Marc Nattier dates from 1755, when he was only

23 years old and had already accomplished much (Figure 5). It is telling that instead of clutching a watch or watch-making tools, as one would expect of a budding horloger, he is holding and pointing to a piece of sheet music, which illustrates vividly where his deeper passions resided (i.e. music and literature).

A couple of stories provide useful insights into Pierre-Auguste's personality, and are worth telling here. His early successes entering the realm of high society and nobility at Court and in the corridors of power made him many enemies: noblemen and courtiers who were envious of the young upstart who had gained the favor of the King, his daughters, and their entourage. One day, a courtier, attempting to "disconcert the protégé" of the princesses, approached Caron who was standing with a group of noblemen and ladies, and asked him to examine his fine watch, which he claimed was defective. In so doing, the courtier reminded him in front of his noble entourage that he was after all just the son of a tradesman. Caron resisted, saying that it had been a long time since he had done that kind of work, and that he had "become very inexpert and awkward." The courtier insisted, and Caron reluctantly took the watch, held it high to pretend to examine it, and let it slip from his hands and break upon the stone floor. He bowed and said to the courtier, "I had warned you sir, of my extreme awkwardness," and walked away, no doubt smiling, surrounded by his admirers.

Another time, jealous courtiers started a rumor which reached the King's daughters (who at the time were being trained on the art of harp playing by their adored, dashing, and charming teacher Pierre-Auguste), that the upstart was very negligent of his father, and treated him cruelly. Young Caron got wind of this, and invited André-Charles to accompany him at Versailles the next day, giving his father a grand tour of the palace, introducing him to influential people he knew, and happily spending the day with him at his side. Later, the princesses asked Pierre-Auguste who was the old man with whom he had been seen around the palace and young Caron told them it was his dear father. The princesses realized the lies they had been told, and immediately forgave their beloved music teacher.

Buoyed by his successes at Court, Pierre-Auguste briefly launched his own *boutique d'horloger* on rue Saint-Denis in 1755, located about four blocks from his father's shop

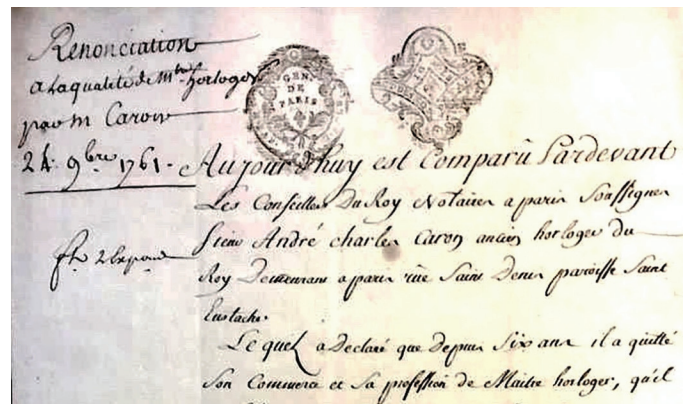


**Figure 5.** Portrait of Pierre-Auguste Caron by Nattier, 1755, Bibliothèque-musée de la Comédie-Française. PUBLIC DOMAIN.

(near rue de la Chanverrierie). But as he later admitted to a friend in a letter, he "suffered between its four windows." Clearly, young Caron possessed ambition, talents, and skills, and a burgeoning network of influential and powerful contacts and patrons, which were to lead him to a life beyond the workbench of even a renowned horloger. Thus a most gifted and able young craftsman, who, had he continued, could have become one of the true great names in the pantheon of French horology, turned his back on the profession of his father and grandfather. Pierre-Auguste Caron de Beaumarchais had finally become like one of those well-dressed noblemen who used to visit his father's atelier, and who he had probably long aspired to emulate. The opportunities lying in front of him, in this momentous century, must have seen almost limitless.

With Pierre-Auguste no longer in a position to take over the mantle of horloger from him, André-Charles turned to his longtime *compagnon* and by then son-in-law Jean-Antoine Lépine (he had married Caron's daughter Madeleine-Françoise in 1756, the same year that Pierre-Auguste married his first wife under some controversy), and made him his business partner.

As Pierre-Auguste climbed the ladder of Parisian society and became wealthy through influence, marriage, and the sheer force of his personality and temperament, envious members of the nobility and Court continued to shun and often ridicule him because of his humble origins, calling him a mere "son of a tradesman." To be formally accepted as courtier and member of the nobility, and aspire to more



**Figure 6.** Excerpt from André-Charles Caron's renunciation, November 24, 1761. PUBLIC DOMAIN.

serious roles and responsibilities in French political and administrative circles, his father André-Charles needed to officially resign his title of *horloger du Roi* and close his business. This was done in 1761, resulting in André-Charles's official retirement (at the relatively young age of 63) from his career as an horloger (Figure 6).

It is outside the scope of this article to do justice to Pierre-Auguste's incredibly interesting and fruitful life and career,<sup>4</sup> yet some highlights will be mentioned here. He married a recently widowed woman of some wealth in 1756, whom he had met as a client at his new atelier. His parents did not approve (the widow not having completed the usual year of mourning) and did not attend the marriage, but one of his witnesses was the son of the legendary Parisian horloger Julien Le Roy, Jean-Baptiste Le Roy, a renowned physicist and member of the *Académie royale des sciences*, which illustrates the quality of contacts and friends that Pierre-Auguste had been making at the time.

Although his wife died less than a year later of a fever, the marriage had provided him some financial means and given him some contacts to launch into new endeavors beyond horology. He purchased an official role and title in the royal administration,<sup>5</sup> and also adopted the name "Caron de Beaumarchais," or Beaumarchais for short, named after a wooded country property that his wife's first husband had owned and loved. This name, which sounded more aristocratic, was probably another means for Pierre-Auguste to distance himself from his past as the son of the horloger Caron.

During the years after he left his father's atelier on rue Saint-Denis, Beaumarchais led a tumultuous, fascinating, and legendary life (Figure 7). He won and lost fortunes; was married three times; held positions in the French Court; navigated the corridors of power; made many friends and probably more enemies; traveled on diplomatic missions throughout Europe on behalf of the French King; supported the American Revolution by running arms at great personal cost and risk; survived the French Revolution with his head intact, but penniless; edited and published Voltaire's voluminous complete works using his own money; defended himself in some very public court cases; wrote some highly popular personal memoirs; and penned timeless works of theater, notably *The Barber of Seville* and *The Marriage of Figaro*.

Given such a rich and eventful life, an auspicious start as an horloger can easily be lost or dismissed as irrelevant, and some of the biographical works on Beaumarchais barely mention his early profession.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Pierre-Auguste's celebrated early horological accomplishments are worth noting, especially given the fact that he shared the same atelier for several years, no doubt exchanging ideas and innovations, with his father André-Charles, himself a respected horloger du Roi, and most notably with his brother-in-law Jean-Antoine Lépine, who was to become one of the great watch-making innovators of the late 18th century, and who would almost single-handedly change the way watches were made from that point on.



**Figure 7.** Portrait of Beaumarchais later in life. Palace of Versailles Collection. PUBLIC DOMAIN.

Pierre-Auguste Caron de Beaumarchais died in his sleep on May 18, 1799, just as the momentous century was coming to a close. He was 67 years old. His remains reside in the Cimetière du Père Lachaise, in Paris.

### **The Faithful *Compagnon* and Business Partner**

Jean-Antoine Lépine remained a loyal and supportive member of the Caron family, as he had been a faithful *compagnon* in André-Charles Caron's atelier for many years. After taking over Caron's business following the latter's retirement in 1761, his own important career took flight, and

he himself became an *horloger du Roi* who presented remarkable timepieces to the King. Through his brother-in-law Beaumarchais, Lépine made contact with the famous French writer and philosopher Voltaire, and set up a watch-making shop in Ferney, a small community near the Swiss border where Voltaire had settled in his later years, and was trying to promote a watch-making industry to rival Geneva's. There is a famous story about George Washington, who in 1789 had asked his emissary in Paris, Gouverneur Morris, to find him a "good, simple watch." After visiting several Parisian horlogers and consulting some knowledgeable people, Morris was told that Lépine was at the "top of the profession," and arranged to buy two watches from him, one for Washington, and one for himself.<sup>7</sup>

Jean-Antoine created many innovations in watch design and construction which include:

- A keyless winding mechanism (by pumping the pendant)

- A new repeating mechanism in 1763, which did away with the need for a chain
- The use of “wolf’s teeth” on wheels and pinions, for smoother meshing
- A new caliber with single plate and individual bridges for moving parts
- Key winding and hour setting from the back of the watch, through holes in a cuvette
- Early use of the cylinder and virgule escapements in France
- Esthetic use of Arabic numbers on the dial (which was later taken up by Breguet)

Jean-Antoine and Madeleine-Françoise produced three grandchildren for André-Charles, two sons who chose not to follow the watch-making trade, and a daughter, Pauline, who married Lépine’s Swiss-born journeyman Pierre-Claude Raguet, who was himself to take over his father-in-law’s business when the latter retired in 1794. Thus, both Lépine and Raguet inherited their watch-making businesses after marrying their master’s daughter, and after their master’s sons had chosen not to pursue the watch-making trade. Raguet adopted the name Raguet-Lépine because of the reputation and marketability of his father-in-law’s name.<sup>8</sup> He and Pauline had one son, Alexandre, who briefly took over the family business after his father’s death in 1810, and then sold the firm five years later, thus bringing to a close the family business that André-Charles Caron had founded

almost 100 years earlier. Jean-Antoine Lépine died on May 31, 1814, by then a blind man, at the venerable old age of 93 (Figure 8).

In the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest is a painting by the French artist Louis-Léopold Boilly, a prolific Parisian painter of late 18th and early 19th centuries, entitled “A Visit to the Grandfather” (Figure 9). Another version of the painting was sold at auction some years ago and is entitled “La famille Beaumarchais-Lépine.” It depicts a touching family scene, painted between 1792 and 1794, which features several members of the Lépine and Caron (Beaumarchais) families. Standing at the far left is an old man, Jean-Antoine Lépine, conversing with a seated young man, his son-in-law Pierre-Claude Raguet-Lépine. The elegant woman standing in the center is Jean-Antoine’s daughter Pauline, married to Raguet. An unknown woman is seated at a table where Pauline appears to be serving coffee to another old man seated on the right, dressed in a distinctive red suit and wearing a fancy wig. This man is André-Charles Caron’s only son, the famous Pierre-Auguste, better known then as Beaumarchais. Standing between Beaumarchais’ seated legs is the young son of Raguet and Pauline, Alexandre, who would one day inherit the family watch-making business that his father had inherited from his grandfather Lépine, when the latter retired (around the time the painting was made).

Raguet-Lépine died in 1810, followed by old Lépine in 1814, then 93. Lépine’s grandson Alexandre took over the business but sold it in 1815 to an outside firm, and then

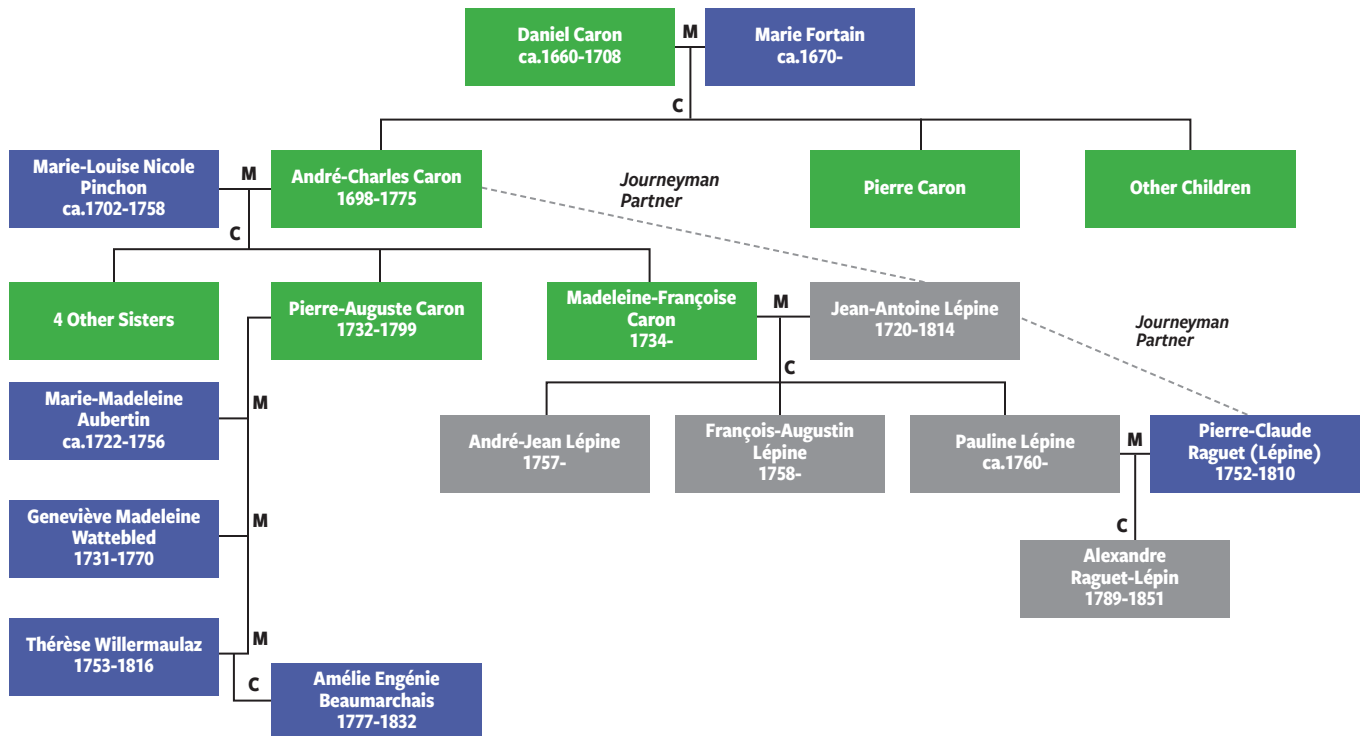


Figure 8. Caron-Lépine family tree. PRODUCED BY THE AUTHOR.



**Figure 9.** *A visit to the Grandfather* (AKA *Portrait de la famille Beaumarchais Lépine*) by Louis-Léopold Boilly, circa 1792-94. Budapest Museum of Fine Arts, inventory number 687. PUBLIC DOMAIN.

had a successful career as a politician. At the time the painting was commissioned, Pierre-Auguste had only a few years left to live and the century was coming to an end. This painting represents a moving, intimate scene, where the two old bench-mates from 40 years before at André-Charles Caron's watch-making shop on rue Saint-Denis, are reunited to share a happy family moment together.

### Coda

The financial successes achieved by Beaumarchais allowed him to support André-Charles in his old days, providing him a pension until his death. André-Charles's first wife Marie-Louise had passed away in August 1758. In 1763, his son purchased a hotel on rue Condé, where he moved in along with his father and two of his sisters. In January 1766, with some encouragement from his son, Caron remarried to a 62-year old widow named Jeanne Guinchon, who sadly died only two years later. Many years later, just a few months before he died, André-Charles surprised the whole family by getting married again to a much younger and rather opportunistic woman who had been caring for him in his failing health. This woman evidently intended to ransom the famous Beaumarchais, because the old man had no fortune to bequeath to her. Pierre-Auguste ended up having to pay her 6,000 francs to avoid an embarrassing public trial.

Through it all, André-Charles Caron and his son maintained a loving relationship and a correspondence that only ended with the old watch maker's death on October 23, 1775. A touching letter survived in Beaumarchais' papers<sup>2</sup>, written to him by André-Charles only a few weeks before his death.

My dear friend, my dear son, this name is precious to my heart, I take advantage of a brief respite from my excessive pain, or rather the rages that subject me to convulsions, only to thank you tenderly for what you sent me yesterday. (...) If you go back to England [where Beaumarchais was sent on a mission by Louis XV], please bring me back a flask of the salts that are administered to those, like me, who fall into fainting spells. Alas, my dear child, maybe I will no longer have need for them on your return. I pray the Lord each day of my life to bless you, reward you, and to protect you from any accident; these will always be the wishes of your friend and affectionate father. If you can, please leave your London address to [Caron's son-in-law] Miron, so that if something should happen, I can send you my final benediction. Caron.

At André-Charles's funeral, Lépine and his other son-in-law, Miron, are identified as witnesses, but not his



son Pierre-Auguste, who was possibly away travelling in Europe on official or secret business for the King, and may have been unable to return in time. André-Charles Caron was buried in the cemetery of the church Saint Jacques de la Boucherie, where his son Pierre-Auguste had been baptized. Only the majestic gothic tower now remains, in a lovely city park.

Thus ended the life of this interesting man who had lived, guided by a deep religious conviction and an undeniable concern for quality of work, during three quarters of a momentous century. Born in an unfavorable environment, within a Protestant family suffering the disadvantages of French society at the time, André-Charles had managed, through perseverance and determination, to embark on a path that had led him to exercise an honorable profession that he much loved, surrounded by a family in which music, literature, and theater made for warm and happy evenings at home.

For 40 years, he oversaw a horological business that, although not as financially successful as some of his contemporary competitors, distinguished itself by the quality of the horlogers and workers who chose to work with him, notably Jean-Antoine Lépine, who would become one of the great French horlogers, and who undoubtedly benefitted from all the lessons he had received from, and the endless conversations he would have had with, his maître-horloger and his gifted young son. Caron's atelier on rue Saint-Denis can thus be seen as an "incubator" for two great young men who left their mark in the decades which followed. Neither of their life trajectories would likely have been quite the same had they not benefitted from the insights, guidance, and encouragement provided by the old maître-horloger Caron.

André-Charles also had the honor of having brought into the world and raised, occasionally with needed and formative discipline, an intelligent, courageous, and passionate young man who, after a brief but successful career of horloger, provided his father with greater joy and pride through his numerous and diverse initiatives and accomplishments. During his long and inspiring journey under the name of Pierre-Auguste Caron de Beaumarchais, he was one of the most fascinating men in a century that so deeply marked the history of France, and of the Western World.

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The author wishes to thank the many contributors on the following forums who provided insights into his Caron watch, and on related subjects: NAWCC - European & Other Pocket Watches; Forum à Montres (France) – discussions sur les montres de poche.

## Notes and References

1. The double virgule (or double-comma or double-hook) escapement was developed by Pierre-Auguste Caron and had some advantages over other escapements at the time. However, it was difficult to construct and proved to wear out quickly if not oiled frequently. It was quickly abandoned and very few were made. The cylinder escapement became more popular and replaced both the virgule and double-virgule escapements, due to ease of manufacturing and maintenance.
2. Loménie L. *Beaumarchais et son temps* (2 volumes), 3rd Edition, Paris, 1873.
3. Chapiro A. *La Montre française du XVIème siècle jusqu'à 1900*. Paris: Les Éditions de l'amateur, 1996.
4. Several biographies have been written on Beaumarchais, which should interest readers who want to discover more information about this fascinating man's life, achievements, challenges, joys, and tribulations. One of the earliest biographies, by Loménie, used original sources and family documents. It is excellent and has been translated into English.
5. From Venality, the sale of offices in eighteenth-century France, by William Doyle, 1996: "In ancien régime France, almost all posts of public responsibility had to be bought or inherited. Rather than tax their richer subjects directly, French kings preferred to sell them privileged public offices, which further payments allowed them to sell or bequeath at will. By the eighteenth century, there were 70,000 venal offices, comprising the entire judiciary, most of the legal profession, officers in the army, and a wide range of other professions – from financiers handling the king's revenues down to auctioneers and even wigmakers."
6. This is similar to biographies of William Shakespeare, necessarily focusing on his work in the theater around London and not his inauspicious start as an apprentice glover to his father in provincial backwater Stratford-Upon-Avon.
7. The story, and photos of Washington's Lépine watch, can be read here: <https://www.watchtime.com/featured/watch-u-s-presidents-timepieces/>
8. Pierre-Claude Raguet-Lépine also led an interesting life. The business he took over from Lépine must have been quite profitable, because in 1793 he purchased the Chateau Pompadour and grounds for 176,000 livres (around 1.8 million Euros). That year Raguet was a member of the jury to select the decimal time system in Revolutionary France. After the Revolution he was named horloger to the Empress Joséphine, and his clients included Napoleon I and several kings, princes, and ambassadors.

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## About the Author

Robert St-Louis developed an interest in horology some years ago, after his retirement from a long career in public service. In his thirst for knowledge, he has acquired much information from books, Internet sources (such as NAWCC discussion forums), and back issues of horological publications (such as the *NAWCC Watch & Clock Bulletin*). He has also acquired some tools as well as specimens of clocks and watches, and is trying to learn some repair and restoration skills. His interests have gradually coalesced on Parisian watch-makers from the 18th century. He enjoys researching and writing on this subject as well as sharing some of his knowledge with other enthusiasts. Robert is an active participant in NAWCC Chapter 111 in Ottawa and can be reached at rstl9999@gmail.com.

## Appendix: A Caron Watch

Below are a few photos of a watch movement signed “Caron à Paris”, produced by André-Charles’s atelier around 1750 (Figures 10-14). It is one of the rare watches that have survived from Caron, and is numbered “1244.” It is a verge-fusee watch movement, missing the case, dial, and hands. Also missing is the repeater mechanism with which it was originally fitted.

Many watches of that era suffered similar fates to this one because of wars, economic hard times, neglect, ignorance, disinterest, changing tastes, and the movements were often separated from their valuable gold cases (which were sold for gold value). Usually the movements were just thrown out, deemed worthless. Some of them, like this one, somehow survived, discarded in dusty boxes or forgotten in the drawers of ancient desks, and serve to remind us of the excellence and beauty of watch-making in Paris during the 18th century.



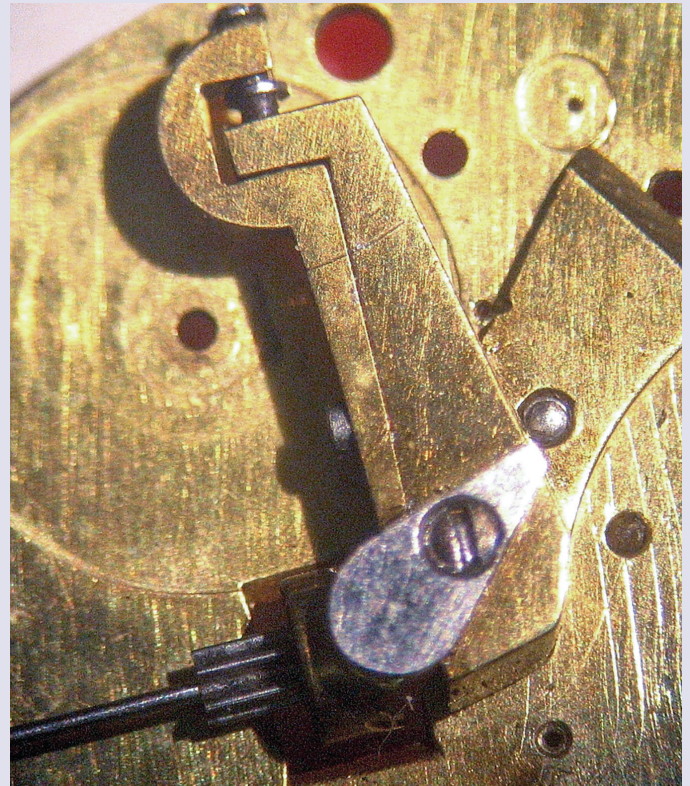
**Figure 10.** A view of the balance-cock side of the watch movement no. 1244 by André-Charles Caron, circa 1750. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION.

Note that the balance cock on the watch is particularly finely carved, and the craftsman (or woman) who produced it ingeniously incorporated the letters of Caron's name into the design (Figure 11). Clearly, this was a watch that the maker was particularly proud of, and wanted to highlight his name in all possible ways.

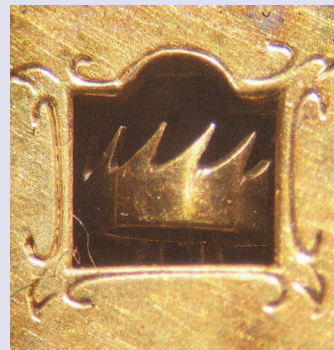
This would likely have been an expensive watch in a gold case produced for one of Caron's affluent customers. Since at this time both Lépine and Pierre-Auguste worked with André-Charles in his shop, it is possible that one of them may have had a hand in finishing or repairing this timepiece. This humble incomplete movement has provided the author with the desire and opportunity to research the life, times, and work of its maker, and document his life to an extent that had never been done before.



**Figure 11.** Caron watch no. 1244, detailed view of balance cock spelling Caron's name. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION.



**Figure 12.** Caron watch no. 1244, detailed view of potence showing quality of construction. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION.



**Figure 13.** Caron watch no. 1244, detailed view of crown wheel seen through decorated plate opening. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION.



**Figure 14.** Caron watch no. 1244, detailed view of star-spoked center wheel. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION.