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Letters to Marsh & Chase  
from Graves & Company,  
Musical Instrument Makers

ROBERT ELIASON

GRAVES & Co. made woodwind and brass instruments in Winchester, New Hampshire, from about 1830 until they moved to Boston in 1851. With the use of water-powered machinery they were able to turn out large quantities of instruments, and were undoubtedly the leading American manufacturers in this field before 1850.<sup>1</sup>

A sheaf of thirty-three letters written by Graves & Company to Marsh & Chase, a small dealer in Montpelier, Vermont, provides a unique view of Graves' business, including types of instruments made, materials used, options available, prices, terminology, business procedures, and financial health, as well as indications of the volume of business and the demand for products. These documents were found among the manuscript holdings of the Vermont Historical Society Library at Montpelier.

The letters begin on October 13, 1837, and continue until December 11, 1840. They list the instruments sent to Marsh & Chase to sell on commission, explain difficulties, answer questions, and describe new products. In the first part of October each year, there is a balance sheet listing instruments ordered during the year and the amount remaining unsold. All of the letters are addressed to Marsh & Chase and are signed "Graves & Co." With the exception of the first letter, the dateline is always Winchester, New Hampshire. The first letter has Montpelier, Vermont, on the dateline; no doubt the writer was in

1. See Robert Eliason, *Graves & Co., Musical Instrument Makers* (Dearborn, 1975).



FIGURE 1. Fife in B $\flat$  signed "Marsh & Chase Calais VT." Photo courtesy of the Vermont Historical Society, Montpelier, Vermont.

Montpelier to conclude the arrangements between the two companies.

A letter dated February 23, 1838, refers to a brother in Montpelier in connection with bank drafts and insurance, suggesting that the writer of the letters was Israel H. Smith, brother-in-law of Samuel Graves and partner in the firm from 1836 to 1850. Israel had two brothers, Royal H. Smith, who also worked with Graves & Company in Winchester, and Oramel H. Smith, a lawyer in Montpelier.

The correspondence covers a period of economic depression following the Panic of 1837. Graves & Company often describe their cash position as "destitute" and plead with Marsh & Chase to send payments. The growing popularity of Ned Kendall's Boston Brass Band and The Dodworth Brass Band of New York caused many bands to change from woodwind to brass instruments at this time. The letters document the beginning of brass instrument making which completely dominated Graves & Company's production by 1845.

Montpelier has always been Vermont's state capital and in 1840 had a bustling population of nearly four thousand. It was centrally located and sat astride the main routes through Vermont's low mountains. Perry Marsh and Nelson A. Chase began making and dealing in musical instruments about 1819 in Calais, Vermont, about ten miles northeast of Montpelier. In 1836 they moved to Montpelier and enlarged their business, supplying most of the musical instruments sold in north central Vermont. They may have known the Graves family from earlier years since Samuel Graves worked in West Fairlee, Vermont, during the 1820's, only about 40 miles to the southeast.

As a sample of the Graves & Company marketing area, rural Vermont was probably somewhat slow in accepting any new trends in music brought from Europe. Still, the letters indicate the sale of a

good number of the new key bugles, as well as quite a few of the latest eight-key flutes and thirteen-key clarinets. Boston dealers would probably have ordered more brasses and fewer woodwinds. However, no trend toward purchase of more brasses is discernible in comparing each year's purchases.

The following catalogue of Graves instruments, compiled from the letters, records the number sold of each type. Options of pitch, materials, number of keys, etc., are given along with the prices of the cheapest, moderate, and most expensive models of each type. The descriptions are as they appear in the letters; explanation of the terms, where necessary, is in brackets.

- 78 Fifes in B $\flat$ , C or E $\flat$ ; maple, satinwood, boxwood, cocoa [cocus], Queenwood or Ebony; brass draw [tuning slide]; 1st, 2nd or 3rd quality; plain maple, 29¢—boxwood 75¢—ebony with brass draw, \$2.00.
- 61 Octave flutes and piccolos in B $\flat$ , D or E $\flat$  [modern terminology: A $\flat$ , C, D $\flat$ ]; cocoa only; one or four brass keys; one key, \$1.00—four key, \$2.25.
- 87 Flutes in D, E $\flat$ , or F [modern terminology: C, D $\flat$ , E $\flat$ ]; satinwood, boxwood, rosewood, cocoa, or Queenwood; one, four, six or eight keys in silver or brass; untipt [without ivory ferrules or rings], ivory tipt; without draw, wood draw, or brass draw; puff valved [saltspoon key with wool stuffed leather pads] or plain [flat brass keys for leather pads]; lower C and C $\sharp$  plug keys; one key untipt, 2nd Quality 84¢—4 brass key rosewood without draw \$3.75—6 silver key boxwood, brass draw \$11.25, 8 silver key, cocoa, C & C $\sharp$  plug keys, brass draw, \$21.00.
- 114 Clarinets in B $\flat$ , C, E $\flat$  or F; boxwood, one special of cocoa; 5, 6, 8, 9, 11 or 13 keys in brass or silver; plain, ivory tipt, super or new pattern (1838); 5 brass key in E $\flat$ , \$5.40—9 brass key in C, \$10.00—13 silver key in C new pattern, \$25.00.  
Cocoa, ebony or metal mouthpieces in No. 1, 2, or 3 sizes  
Cocoa and ebony 50¢—metal \$1.00, \$1.12½
- 2 Valve trumpets [first mentioned Feb. 3, 1838] \$26.00
- 22 Key bugles in B $\flat$ , E $\flat$ , or F with a slide or bit to E $\flat$ ; 6 or 7 keys, \$15.00—9 keys, \$18.75; mouthpieces 50—56¢, crooks 50—62½¢, set tuning bits, 75¢.
- 28 Trombones in F bass, B $\flat$  tenor, and F alto; alto, \$9.00—B $\flat$  tenor, \$13.00—F bass \$15.00—Super B $\flat$  tenor, Kendall pattern (1839), \$20.00, Mouthpiece 58¢.



FIGURE 2. Clarinet in C signed "Marsh & Chase Calais VT." Photo courtesy of Avraham Galper, Toronto, Canada.

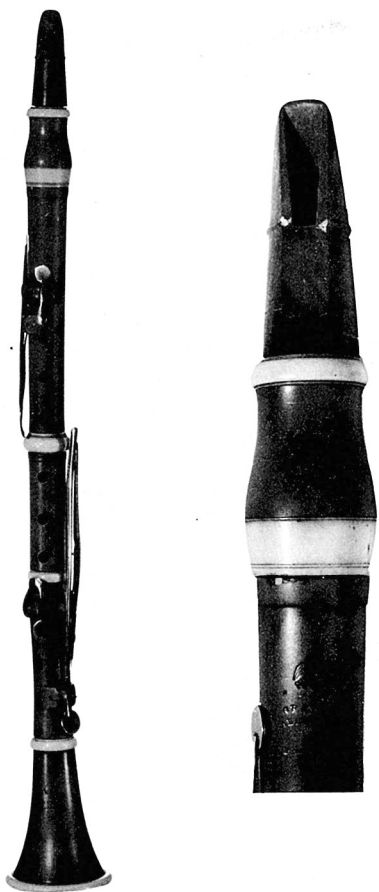


FIGURE 3. Clarinet in C signed "Graves & Alexander, Winchester N.H." Collections of Greenfield Village and the Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, Michigan.

The value of the instruments sold by Marsh & Chase in the year 1837-38 was \$571.21; the next year it increased to \$1,011.08 and in 1839-40 it reached \$1,391.21—a total of \$3,095.52 for the three-year period. At first Graves & Company allowed a 12% discount on orders of \$100 or more. Later this was increased to 25%. Graves also procured instruments and accessories that they did not make and split the profit with the dealer. Specifically mentioned are instruction books, reeds, violins and bows, bass viol bows, French horns, bass horns, and serpents.

The letters document the existence of a broad range of woodwinds and identify several woods used. Although examples of Graves fifes, piccolos, flutes, and clarinets are known, the great variety of sizes mentioned in the letters was not suspected. The woods used include maple, satinwood, boxwood, cocoa wood (cocus), Queenwood, and ebony. Queenwood has been tentatively identified by Michael Zadro as a Brazilian wood known as Angico and Angico Vermelho (*Piptadenia Rigida*).

Several larger brasses, known to have been made by Graves, are not mentioned in the letters. This would indicate that ophicleides and valve instruments called trombaccellos were not yet being made in 1840. Valve trumpets, trombones, and key bugles are listed without any special attention as new products and were probably introduced before 1837.

Passages in the letters illuminate a number of other areas of Graves & Company's business. A letter dated February 23, 1838, notes Luther Buzzell's purchase of the share of the company owned by Albert Mudge; the presence of James Keat, son of the prominent London maker, is mentioned in a letter of November 7, 1838; and the following quotations give an idea of Graves & Company's business procedures:

November 19, 1837 With respect to the 12 percent we will do what is fair and generous so that you shall do as well as we do. We think it would not be best to lower the prices much as they are now as low as can be afforded.

February 23, 1838 But we find it will not answer for us to advance the cash for instruments that we do not manufacture & sell them without any profit—if however you have opportunity to sell any French horns, Bass horns or any other instruments that we do not manufacture we will procure them & sell them to you & divide the profits with you.

November 22, 1839 The trombone we send you is the kind we retail at thirty dollars. Of course, the regular wholesale price would be \$22.50—but we have sold several of them at wholesale in Boston for \$20.00. Therefore, we charge you no more.

In regard to the sales and demand for Graves instruments:

November 10, 1837 Our sales have been altogether beyond our expectation. We have not got but two or three finished instruments in the shop and it will take us about two weeks to finish enough to fulfill our engagements.

February 25, 1839 We have got some more help & hope soon to overtake our customers, but we expect you are almost tired of waiting for us to do so.

November 18, 1840 We conclude you have begun to think we were determined to send you no more instruments, but as usual we have been pretty hard pushed for instruments for the last two months . . . we have sold all we have finished and about as many as we could make for the next six or eight weeks—we send you all we can and at the very earliest moment.

Abundant orders do not seem to have improved Graves & Company's cash position, however:

February 23, 1838 We do not often keep such instruments on hand [instruments they do not manufacture] but get them when ordered. We do not send things because we are almost destitute & they are scarce and high in Boston.

April 17, 1840 We received a draft on Boston for \$75.00 a few days since & we very much wish you could do that trick again next week for we are sorely pressed for cash about Mondays.

August 5, 1840 Yours of July 31st enclosing a fifty dollar bank note was duly received and we presume we need not assure you that it did not come amiss—we have been almost utterly destitute for cash for a long time.

The quality of the company's instruments and improvements are discussed:

May 25, 1838 We shall send you in about a week four 11 keyed B♭ clarionettes, one 11 keyed E♭ clarionett, one or two 4 keyed E♭ piccolos (of cocoa). They are such as we sent to Mr. Kendal [James Kendall, a leading clarinet and trombone soloist of the day] at Burlington last Monday—The clarionettes are of our new pattern & we say they are fifty per cent ahead of anything that can be produced in this country. . . . We are making F bugles with a slide or bitt to reduce [sic] to E♭ that are much liked. We have had several calls from Boston for them.

June 4, 1838 We have received a letter from Mr. Kendall since we wrote you last. He speaks in high terms respecting the clarionettes we sent him.



July 26, 1839 The next tenor trombones we send you will be of a little finer quality and Kendall pattern.

October 1, 1839 The concert flutes we send you are a superior article to those we call 1st quality in our bill of prices.

A few comments about the construction of instruments:

February 23, 1838 We send you all the bugle mouthpieces we have. The cup you will see is of a different shape from those we make now—if you want those with cups in the shape of a funnel please write us.

November 7, 1838 The cocoa clarinet is a splendid toned instrument. You will perhaps notice that the key holes are not bushed. The reason is we find it is better not to put bushings into cocoa.

April 24, 1839 This trumpet is all we have but we have half a dozen now making but it is a long job to make one and it will be some time before they are finished.

Conditions in the shop affecting production:

November 7, 1838 The remainder of the order we will forward as soon as we can get them made which we hope will be before long as Mr. Graves has got sick and we daily expect Keat back.

February 25, 1839 We intended to have sent you some of our new pattern trombones but cannot at this time for want of thin brass which is very difficult to obtain—We sent for some about six weeks ago and have not got it yet, but we hear that it is on the way and we expect it tomorrow.

April 17, 1840 We send you as near your last order as we can—we have done very little for a month past on account of high water.

A question not answered by these letters is the extent to which Graves & Company produced instruments that were sold with inscriptions of other firms. It is entirely possible that Marsh & Chase stamped their name on instruments made by Graves. One clarinet in the collection of Avraham Galper, Toronto, Ontario, is inscribed "Marsh & Chase Calais VT.," but has what appears to be a Graves eagle above this inscription. This eagle appears also on a number of flutes and clarinets marked "J. Ashton Boston." John Ashton listed his firm in the city directories from 1820 to 1843 as umbrella makers and music store, but never as musical instrument makers. If this practice was widespread, Graves' influence may have been even greater than has already been established.



FIGURE 4. Clarinet in C signed "J. Ashton. Boston." Collections of Greenfield Village and the Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, Michigan.

Montpelier Oct 13. 1837

Messrs Marsh & Chase

Care of Graves Co. - Montpelier N. V.

The following Instruments to see a Catalogue

1. F. Bass Horn		\$15.00
1. Bb. Tenor do		13.00
1. F. Alto do		9.00
1. Bb & Key? Bass		16.00
1. Eb 7 " do		15.00
2. 5 Key? B. Clarionets	\$6.00	13.20
2. 5 " - C. do	6.00	12.00
3. 5 " - Eb do	5.40	16.20
1-8 Puff Valve? Silver Key? Bocar Flute		21.00
with Cannon C. & B. Plug Keys		
1-8 Puff Valve? Silver Key? (Extra Bass) Flute		18.50
Cannon C. & B. Puff Keys		
1-6 Puff Valve? Silver Key? Bass Flute		11.25
1-4 " " " " " do		6.75
1-4 " " " " " Bocar do		7.25
1-4 " " " Bass " Case do (without draw)		3.75
3-1 Plain Bass Key? - Patent wood do	\$1.50	4.50
2-1 Puff Valve " " Eb do	1.50	3.00
6 Octave Flutes & Piccolo	1.00	6.00
3. Ebony B. Pipes with Brass cleans	2.00	6.00
6. Boxwood Pipes	75c	4.50
6. Patent wood do	42c	2.52
1. Brass Bangle M. piece		" 56
2 Horns Instruction Books 2/-		" 67
		\$215.65

FIGURE 5. Letter from Graves & Company to Marsh & Chase, October 13, 1837. Photo courtesy of the Vermont Historical Society, Montpelier, Vermont.

Undoubtedly Graves' production was important to the music business in the United States, both in quality and in quantity. This portrait of the sales of one small dealer could probably be multiplied many times before arriving at the total production of the company. Beyond helping to fill out the history of one company, however, the letters provide an interesting source of information about popular types of instruments used in the early nineteenth century and contemporary terminology for these instruments, their parts, and materials.

*Henry Ford Museum*