

# Repairing watches is a ‘dying’ art, but this Wayne watchmaker is turning away customers

by Allison Steele, Updated: December 23, 2019



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Peter Whittle helps people get their time back.

From behind the counter of his [Wayne repair shop](#), he brings life to 19th-century pocket watches, antique European clocks, and modern Rolexes. He's dissected thousands of timepieces, and sifted through millions of tiny metal pieces to diagnose their ailments.

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Digital watches and cell phones may have replaced traditional timekeepers for many, but in the 20 years since he opened Whittle's Watch Works, the demand for his services has only grown. Open three days a week, Whittle's shop takes in more than 1,000 watches a year, sometimes 10 in one day. Several times a year, he turns away customers for a month so he can catch up.

Sixty years ago, there were more than 50,000 independent watchmakers in America. These days, the number [has dwindled](#) to fewer than 6,000, according to [Bureau of Labor estimates](#). As skilled watchmakers have retired or taken jobs with watch manufacturers, few new craftsmen have joined the industry — and business has boomed for people such as Whittle.

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Whittle, 64, knows his profession is a dying art — but it doesn't seem that way when his small storefront is filled with customers.

“People say no one wears watches anymore,” Whittle said in an interview. “But at home, somewhere in a drawer, you might have your mother’s watch, or your grandfather’s watch. And one day, you might find that you want to get it repaired.”

## Restoring memories

Growing up on Long Island as one of seven siblings, Whittle remembers taking apart his father’s watch as a child, but said his interest in clocks lapsed. After college he worked for a company that dredged canals for ships. Then he met a jeweler who noticed Whittle’s attention to detail, and suggested he try watch repair.



Owner and watch repairman Peter Whittle shown here working at Whittle's Watch Works, in Wayne. Peter Whittle has operated his watch repair shop for 20 years. Over the years, as the number of watch and clock repairmen declined, his business has increased. He now has so many customers that he often has to close his shop to catch up.

At the Joseph Bulova School of Watchmaking in Queens, Whittle learned the basics on disassembling watches, replacing parts, and lubricating the tiny gears that keep a watch ticking. Before he even graduated he was offered a job with Wayne Jewelers, a longtime fixture at the center of the Delaware County town. A decade later, Whittle was accepted into WOSTEP, an [elite watchmaker’s program](#) in Switzerland that enrolled about a dozen students a year. There he studied advanced approaches to watch repair, training on machines he’d never before seen, and learning to manufacture new parts to fix timepieces.

He met his wife, Lucienne, at a Swiss cafe. When they returned to Pennsylvania, he opened his shop on South Wayne Avenue, just down the street from the jewelry store where his career began.



The desk of owner and watch repairman Peter Whittle shown here at Whittle's Watch Works, in Wayne. Peter Whittle has operated his watch repair shop for 20 years. Over the years, as the number of watch and clock repairmen declined, his business has increased. He now has so many customers that he often has to close his shop to catch up.

Surrounded by soothing ticks and gentle chimes that are punctuated by an occasional clang from clocks that crowd his shop's walls, the bespectacled Whittle said he's been busy since the day he opened. He doesn't advertise, and barely has an online presence, but people knock on the door even when the closed sign is up. During office hours he wears a long white coat that makes him look like a surgeon, which he is, in a way.

He's worked on everything from 1970s-era watches powered by the humming of tuning forks to a 1645-era clock inherited from his parents. Customers have cried at seeing heirlooms repaired. Occasionally, he has the pleasure of informing a collector that a watch is worth many times its purchase price. More often, he's had to let someone know that a watch is a fake.



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Whittle's services can cost very little, or hundreds. Working on Rolexes, each with about 225 pieces inside, costs an average of \$700. He'll place a watch on a smooth wooden table behind his counter, where his tools are displayed in his front window like a miniature operating theater, then take it apart with tiny screwdrivers, peering through his jeweler's magnifying glass — called a loupe — while he picks apart the belly with tweezers.

In the back of his one-room shop is a row of tabletop machines used to service luxury watches, such as Cartiers or Patek Philippes. One device uses vibrations to shake loose particles of dirt; another tests for leaks, and a third simulates the pressure of being 1,000 feet underwater.



A Rolex watch is on a timer at Whittle's Watch Works in Wayne. Peter Whittle has operated his watch repair shop for 20 years. Over the years, as the number of watch and clock repairs declined, his business has increased. He now has so many customers that he often has to close his shop to catch up.

But many clients bring in more modest projects, like the customer who owns several Rolexes but recently spent big to restore a cheap Timex. Or Joseph Caprara, a Wayne resident and watch collector who has been coming to Whittle's for more than a decade. Of the dozens of vintage timepieces he's brought to Whittle, one of the most memorable was an inexpensive windup his mother wore.

"What he's really doing sometimes is restoring memories," Caprara said. "Sometimes a watch is worth a lot more to a person than what you'd think."

## **How electronic watches stir business**

In recent years, some watch companies have tightened their restrictions on spare parts, creating additional challenges for independent watchmakers such as Whittle. If a luxury brand won't sell a needed part, Whittle turns to eBay or makes it himself. Otherwise, customers must mail the watch to the company to get it fixed.

"It makes it harder for the smaller guys, and if a customer can talk to the person who's doing the work, I believe they prefer that," said Ficklin, of the Watchmakers-Clockmakers Institute.



Watch repairman Peter Whittle lifts the protective cover off of a pocket watch, at Whittle's Watch Works in Wayne.

Recently Ficklin's group launched public-awareness campaigns with the goal of attracting newcomers to the industry, [like a mobile watchmaking classroom](#). There are six watchmaking schools in the country, including the [Lititz Watch Technicum](#) in Lancaster County, a tuition-free program established by Rolex to address the industry shortage. A watchmaker's average starting salary is around \$45,000, Ficklin said, and many earn \$75,000 within a few years.

Though the proliferation of cell phones has led to fewer people wearing watches, Ficklin sees hope for the industry in newer devices like Apple watches, which he says are bringing back that sense of a physical connection with a wristwatch. And like traditional timepieces, the marketing around computerized watches often links the device to emotional experiences: a nonathlete training for a first marathon, a parent monitoring his child's diabetes, people whose watches have become an essential part of life. Ficklin believes that as long as people feel those strong emotional ties to watches, there will be careers in watch repair.

And Whittle is the proof. "If you have a piece that's sentimental," Whittle said, "you will spend the money it takes to have it restored. But you have to trust the person who's doing it."



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