

## **Bringing Back an American Square Piano Name Board.**

The one singular feature of any square piano that has nothing to do with its sound, but commands our attention, is the name board. Early squares displayed latinized calligraphic masterpieces that gave the maker's name and frequently, the place of business and even the date of manufacture. As squares evolved, this tradition continued, generally dropping the date by the first decade of the new 19<sup>th</sup> century as it became obvious that the clients would rather not remind their guests how old the instrument had become! In its place, arrays of flowers, garlands, and other foppery could be found over the whole expanse of the name board, which to the trained eye does as much to date the instrument as an actual number.

In America, this tradition continued, and particularly between 1820 and 1835 the name board was awash with gold and classical motifs of acanthus leaves and fern heads, again giving the makers name and exact address. In 2009, one of the friends of square pianos heeded a call to rescue a square from an unimproved warehouse of a major movie studio. The prop department was clearing house, and everything was to go to a home or the dump. Among the seven squares was a William Geib, from about 1830-32. One of the prominent New York makers in young America, Geib enjoyed a reputation of high quality and elegant design, and this one displayed elements of both, featuring an early string plate but a scaling that more nearly bespoke the high Federal Period piano sound, light, crisp and still distinct through the treble.

All that said, the poor thing stood as a wreck. It had seen water and plenty of it, the keys had been painted white, and it had undergone more than one attempt to do some level of restoration. While none of this is too much of an impediment to the steely-eyed old piano enthusiast, there was one defect that if left uncorrected, would remove much of the charm even after a successful return to playing condition. The name board was a disaster, as seen below.

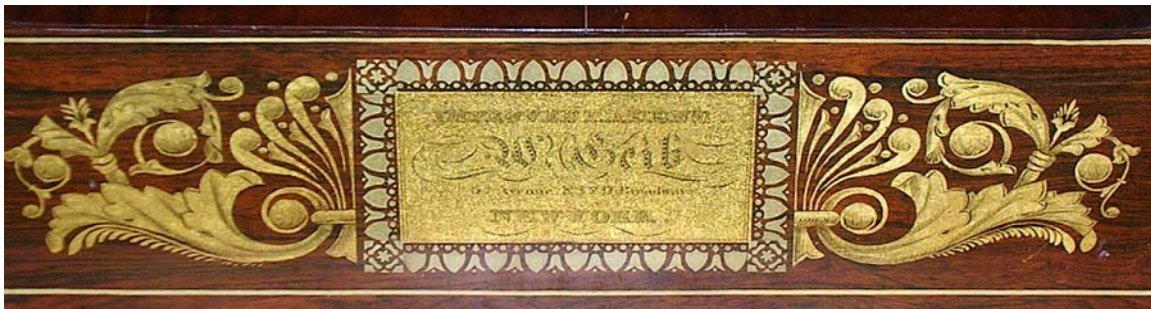


What had once been a marvelous display was now in shattered pieces. On careful examination with the piano safely in hand, it was obvious that the ENTIRE name board was covered in one continuous varnish transfer decal, with simulated mahogany or rose wood beneath, and the gold insignia in the middle, with gold banding around the perimeter, all on a salmon colored gesso base. One can only imagine the technique needed to successfully transfer a decal of this size without wrinkles or bubbles each and every time to its proper position on the curved name board! Now, water and time had taken their toll. Even the most ardent advocate for 'original' would conclude this was a lost cause.

But the piano was to come back to life, and the name board should follow. So little was left that we could only photographically document the fragments for later use. Measurements could be taken to allow us to know what a full size version would look like and where to place it on the name board. Fortunately, another friend, Edward Swinson, had a sister instrument for sale from a year or so earlier, and the decal was nearly identical.



Edward was kind enough to send us a full frame picture, and while we could have wanted even more resolution, it was enough to complete the project. As you can see, this is a very prominent feature and one that would diminish the instrument if entirely missing.



How to proceed? Obtaining such a decal was laughable; piano transfer decals available today are limited to modern or semi modern big run names. Nothing like this has ever been available outside of the original shop. Following our documentation, the discussion started around how to develop the real or faux wood background. Modern wood graining techniques look ludicrous at this close of an inspection. This is highly sophisticated and involved, and unless you examine it microscopically, it presents as a real wood look. While the challenges of developing a similar looking base in oils were discussed (and might have proven successful) it was decided to use thin mahogany veneer that matched the still-existing top trim.

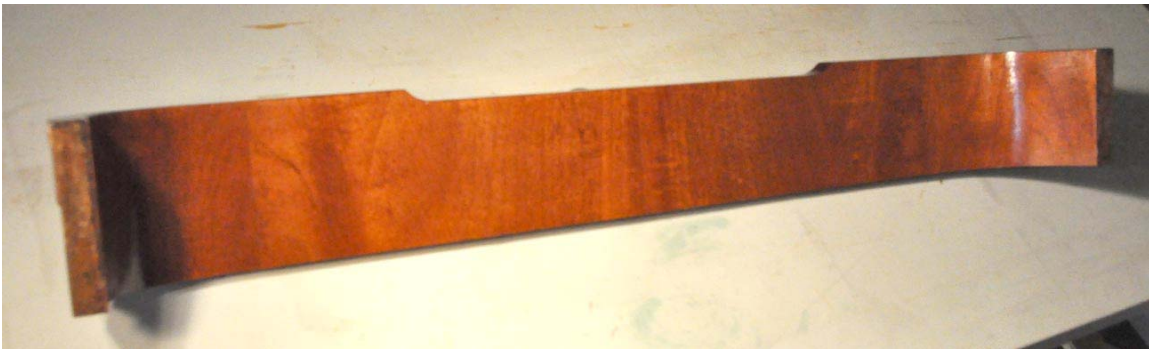


The next task was to place some clear sticky tape on the name board and remove all that would come away cleanly with the tape, as reference material. Then the whole face was cleaned in Formby's finish remover and medium steel wool to get back to basic wood, which was probably ash or similar.



The grain was originally intended to run the length of the name board. With water and the elements, the base of the name board is now a complex combination of cupped areas, which was under-appreciated on first glance. An attempt to veneer down a long sheet of mahogany with the grain length-wise left pockets in the corners where no veneer could

not be forced to go down, since the long section was already curved in a cupped position, and the corners were hardly flat either. This veneer attempt had to be removed, and a cabinet scraper applied to the base to at least remove some of the cupping. We next decided to veneer with the grain vertical, and this ultimately proved highly successful, as the grain is no longer fighting the steep corners and the center cupping is nearly gone. With the grain filled and a topcoat of Tung oil on, we now at least have a name board that is presentable if somewhat plain.



Now we turn our attention to the central decal. The metallic inks used at the time often contained a small amount of real gold powder, along with brass and sometimes silver. These inks tended to give a more brilliant look than modern paints and lacquers, even the ones that profess to be 'gold leaf'. Real leafing looks far more similar, though even more brilliant. The advantage of leafing is that rather neat borders can be obtained if the masking is done correctly. It was decided to leaf the design on.

Now we needed a full size image of the decal. The picture Edward sent us was taken into photo shop, the contrast enhanced, and then the dark outer areas replaced with white to make the tracing easier.



We then used the 'free transform' feature to correct for a slight tilt up of the camera when the original was taken (as seen above before correction). We needed a perfectly rectangular box. The design is actually too long for the paper in the inkjet printer, but it is easy to crop it into two sections, print them out on a single piece of paper, and then cut out and rejoin. Now we have a perfect template of the original.

Acetate on hand from an earlier project was laid out over the design and all the features cut out with a hobby knife. This was given a light coat of spray adhesive and then laid on the name board, being careful to space it with wax paper until the placement could be gotten just right, per the original measurements.



A thin acrylic spray was then put on to seal the mask edges to the name board. After drying, the gold size was carefully painted into the unmasked areas. A little creep, if it happens, is not too detrimental, as the mask will absolutely determine where gold will go.

I used the 'patent' gold leaf now available that comes on a paper backing. It is not real gold, and frankly, that would have been preferable as it is more fragile and will leave even better seam edges, but this is serviceable and far easier to handle. The trick with adhesive size is not to rush it. It needs to be hard and still tacky. If you attempt to lay the leaf on too early while the size is still soft, the gold will split and tear and make a mess! Here we have the gold laid in and resting.



Once it has been carefully rubbed into all the cut out areas, the paper is removed, and the mask gently raised up, breaking the gold leaf and leaving the unwanted residual behind. Fear not, small areas that are not well covered can be retouched with a little free hand size painted in and press the leaf on. It will only remain where size was painted.



Even the most artistically challenged will be able to fill in the hatching detail, and with our photos to guide us, we can draw all this in with dark oils and a fine brush, of after a matt varnish spray, India ink and quill pen. If it doesn't quite match the original it can look close enough to make a good fit to the instrument. After all, the original was almost certainly done on a metal plate or similar with hard engraving tools (by highly skilled people dedicated to this sort of task) and we are painting on wood.



Original



Copy

Now comes the hard part. The label reads, in four lines, all in different fonts:

Improved Patent  
W. Geib  
3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue & 170 Broadway  
New York

Were we to try to reproduce this freehand, on the still somewhat uneven surface of wood and varnish, we would probably end up with a mess. Time to turn to the computer again. We can actually make up a water transfer decal using the laser or ink jet compatible papers that are available for such things, and produce a credible label.

First we make a picture of the center panel and get it to the right size upon printing to exactly fit the gold panel. If we had a very high-resolution photograph we could use Photoshop or similar to turn all the gold areas white, which would print as clear. Lacking that we will need to reproduce the graphics we see.



We need to work through the fonts. From details left behind, we can get a fair idea of what the first line consisted of. A run through the available fonts on-line at [fonts.com](http://fonts.com) gave a very close match. As an alternate to buying these expensive fonts for very limited duty, we can use the preview pane, type in our phrase, press the 'print screen' button, and take this into Photoshop where it can be cropped and made into the two words as:

IMPROVED PATENT

This can be sized now to fit the area of the first line. The third line is similar to a font found in Word, but with obvious exceptions. Imported into Photoshop, we can erase bits and craft it into a credible version of the original:

3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue & 170 Broadway

Original lightly modified

3<sup>rd</sup> AVENUE & 170 BROADWAY

Heavily modified

The 4<sup>th</sup> line (NEW YORK) is easy, this font is largely still in use and was used as found. But what to do about the name? No font similar to this could be found anywhere. We took the photo, enhanced it in Photoshop to make the lines as bold as possible, and the whole was blown up to about 5 times original size. Vellum paper, (a hard tracing paper), was placed on top and with some care, the name was traced over in ink, including flourishes where visible. The original had many ultra fine tracings and we included as many as we could still see, or the original suggested.



Further refinements in Photoshop, and the whole name assembled over the original, then the original removed.



This can now be printed on the water transfer decal sheet and lifted over the panel. It will not be quite a photographic likeness, but from where we started, we have come a long way. The name board is now a thing of pride and perhaps beauty again.

