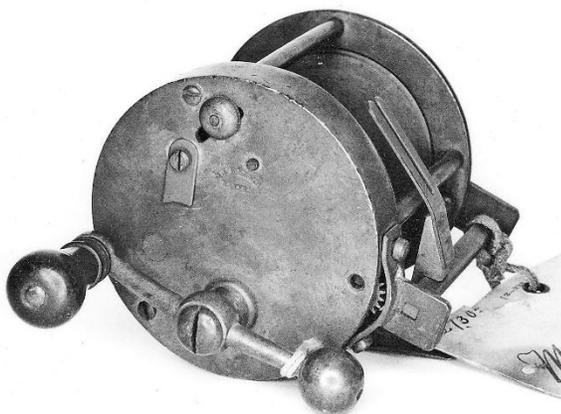


R. & L. Lewis, Reelmakers

Steven K. Vernon

In the early nineteen-eighties, I was privileged to be permitted to examine and photograph the Smithsonian Institution's small collection of fishing reel patent models. The collection included a model of what probably was the first mechanical level wind on a fishing reel: Mark Palmer's 1860 invention. The level wind had been retrofitted to a brass, ball-handle reel whose headcap was stamped "R. & L. Lewis/Makers."



Mark Palmer's 1860 patent model for his level-wind mechanism, retrofitted to a brass reel made by R. & L. Lewis.

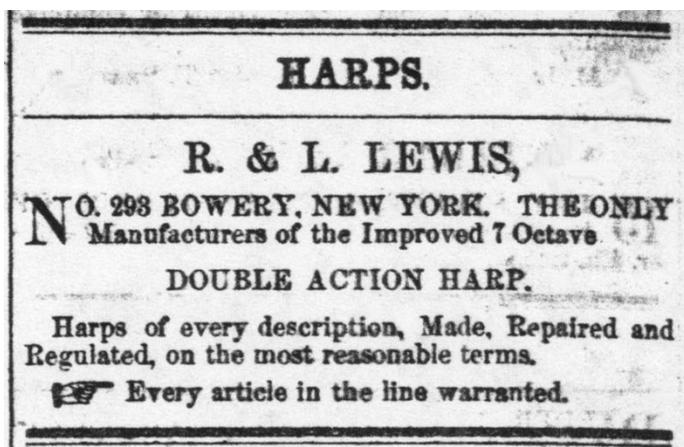
Although the presumptive location of the company was New York City, it took around thirty years to find the Lewis company listed in a New York City directory, as these were not available online until the mid-2010s. The name finally turned up in a Trow's 1853-4 directory for NYC, a hard copy of which I found in Delaware's Winterthur Library. Eureka!, as they say. R. & L. Lewis were harp manufacturers located at 293 Bowery.¹ A bit of additional hunting revealed the inclusion of Laban Lewis, harps, and Rees² Lewis, *fish reels*, both at the Bowery location. Eureka again!

Reese Lewis was born around 1790 in Wales. He and his son, Laban Lewis, born on May 30, 1823, arrived in New York City in 1842. Reese went into business as a watchmaker at 5 Doyer Street. In 1848,

TO DAGUERREOTYPISTS.—TO LET OR FOR SALE, A gallery doing a good business; will be sold cheap, the present proprietor having another business, and cannot attend to both. Enquire of R. & L. Lewis, harp makers, 293 Bowery, above Houston street.

A New York Daily Herald ad, August 7, 1855, offering the Lewis daguerreotype business for sale or lease.

both Reese and Laban were making harps in the short-lived firm of Pitt, Lewis & Company at 15 Rose Street. On June 9 of that year, John Pitt witnessed Laban's naturalization. Also that year, Laban and his wife Mary Ann had the first of their six children.



Lewis ad in an 1856 city directory.

From 1849 to 1852, Laban continued working as a harpmaker and Reese, as a watchmaker, but it is not clear whether or not they worked at the same location. Remarkably, Reese's occupation in one 1852-3 directory was shown as "fish reels," at 47 Eldridge Street. By then, Laban was making harps at the same address. Also remarkably, directories began to list the partnership of R. & L. Lewis, harpmakers, at 293 Bowery from 1853 on. Later advertisements claimed that the business had been established in 1846.



An 1862 Lewis ad.



A Lewis harp, probably made in the early eighteen-sixties.

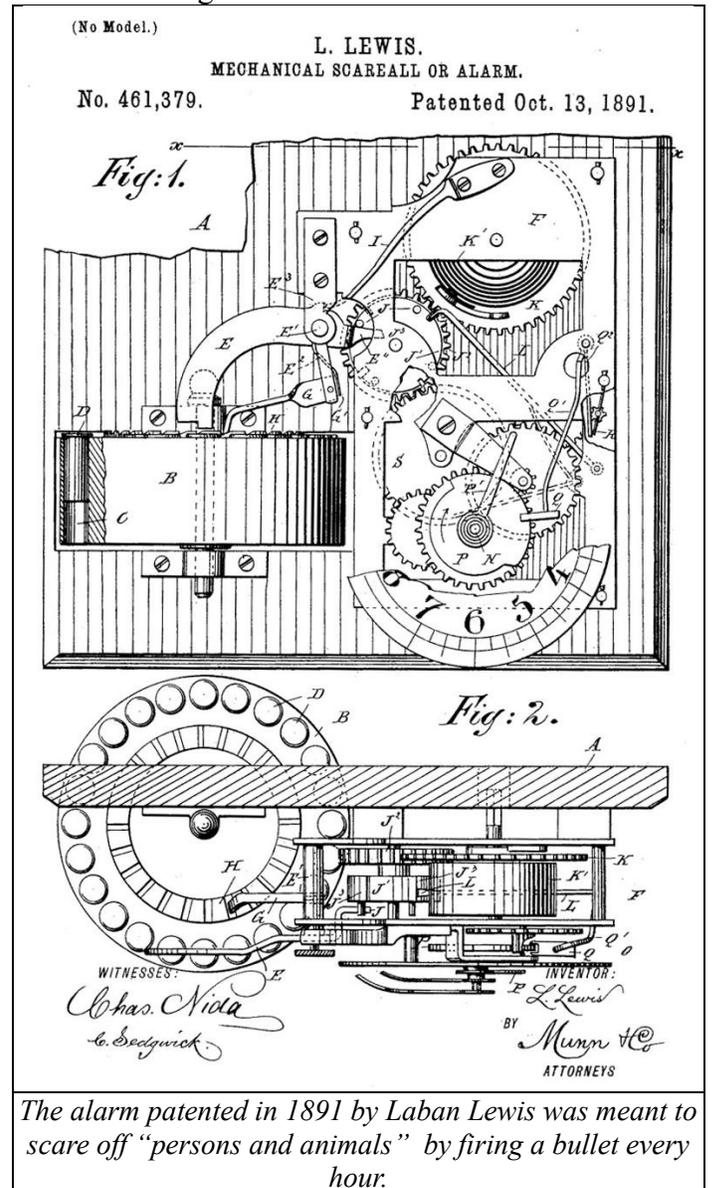
Over the next several years, the Lewises' occupations included harpmaking, daguerreotypes, and fishing reels, the various businesses being carried out at 293 and 297 Bowery.

Lewis harps gained an excellent reputation, and one was exhibited at the Exhibition of the Industry of all Nations, which opened in New York's Crystal Palace in 1853. Alas, the *Brooklyn Eagle* reported that 293 Bowery and some adjoining buildings were destroyed by a fire that broke out at 11 P.M. on the night of February 2, 1854. "It originated in the third story, occupied by Lewis & Son, as a fishing rod and reel, and harp manufactory." The firm had no insurance and lost about £4000.³ The loss probably was a factor leading



The Hotel Glenmere, opened by the Lewises in Canadensis, Pennsylvania, for summer visitors.

to the Lewises' having to sell off their daguerreotype business in August of 1855.



The alarm patented in 1891 by Laban Lewis was meant to scare off "persons and animals" by firing a bullet every hour.

Working addresses of Laban, Reese, and R. & L. Lewis, as shown in New York City directories from five different publishers. Residential addresses are omitted.

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>LEWIS</u>	<u>OCCUPATION</u>	<u>ADDRESS</u>	<u>YEAR</u>	<u>LEWIS</u>	<u>OCCUPATION</u>	<u>ADDRESS</u>
1842-3	Rees	watchmaker	5 Doyer	1857-8	Laban	harps	293 Bowery
1843-4	Rees	watchmaker	7 Doyer		Rees	harps	293 Bowery
1844-5	Rees	watchmaker	5 Doyer		R. & L., & Co.	harps	293 Bowery
1845-6	Rees	watchmaker	6 Doyer	1858-9	Laban	harps	293 Bowery
1846-7	—				Rees	harps	293 Bowery
1847-8	—				R. & L., & Co.	harps	293 Bowery
1848-9	Laban	harpmkr	15 Rose	1859-60	Laban	harps	554 B'way
	Reese	harpmaker	15 Rose		Rees	harps	554 B'way
	Pitt, Lewis & Co.	harps	15 Rose		R. & L.	harps	554 B'way
1849-50	Laban	harpmaker	—	1860-1	Laban	harps	554 B'way
	Reese	watchmaker	295 B.way		Rees	harps	554 B'way
1850-1	Laban	harpmaker	—		R. & L.	harps	554 B'way
	Reese	watchmaker	—	1861-2	Laban	harps	626 B'way
1851-2	Laban	harpmaker	—		Rees	harps	626 B'way
	Reese	watchmaker	—		R. & L.	harps	626 B'way
1852-3	Laban	harps	47 Eldridge	1862-3	Laban	harps	626 B'way
	Rees	fish reels	47 Eldridge		Rees	harps	626 B'way
1853-4	Laban	harps	293 Bowery		R. & L.	harps	626 B'way
	Rees	fish reels	293 Bowery	1863-4	Laban	harps	2 Leroy pl.
	R. & L.	harp manufacturers	293 Bowery		Rees	harps	2 Leroy pl.
1854-5	Laban	harpmaker	291 Bowery		R. & L.	harps	2 Leroy pl.
	Reese	watchmaker	—	1864-5	Laban	harps	2 Leroy pl.
	R. & L.	harpmakers	291 Bowery		Rees	harps	2 Leroy pl.
1855-6	Laban	harps	293 Bowery		R. & L., & Co.	harps	2 Leroy pl.
		daguerreotypes	297 Bowery	1865-6	Laban	harps	9 Leroy pl.
	Rees	harps	293 Bowery		Rees	harps	9 Leroy pl.
		daguerreotypes	297 Bowery		R. & L., & Co.	harps	9 Leroy pl.
	R. & L.	harps	293 Bowery	1866-7	Laban	harps	99 Bleecker
		daguerreotypes	297 Bowery		Rees	harps	99 Bleecker
1856-7	Laban	harps	293 Bowery		R. & L.	harps	99 Bleecker
	Rees	harps	293 Bowery	1867-8	Laban	harps	99 Bleecker
	R. & L., & Co.	harps	293 Bowery		Rees	harps	99 Bleecker
					R. & L.	harps	99 Bleecker

In spite of the newspaper's report that 293 Bowery had been destroyed when "the roof and three floors fell in with a heavy crash," R. & L. Lewis continued to be listed as doing business at that address until 1859—a conundrum. Nevertheless, they advertised their removal of their harp business to 554 Broadway in the *New York Times*, June 16, 1859. The harp business seems to have done well during the 1860s, well enough for the Lewises to find an exclusive agent in Detroit,

Michigan. During the decade, R. & L. Lewis was relocated several times: 626 Broadway (1861-1863), 2 Leroy Place (1863-1864), 9 Leroy Place (1865), 99 Bleecker St. (1866-1868).

Laban and his family spent summers at a home in Barrett Township, Monroe County, Pennsylvania. His wife, Mary Ann, passed away in the late eighteen-sixties. About 1868, the Lewises left New York and moved to Canadensis, Pennsylvania, where Laban had

bought a small farm and what would become the Hotel Glenmere⁴, open for summer visitors. The 1870 township census included forty-six-year-old Laban (“laborer”), his new wife Margaret and their year-old daughter, five of Laban’s children by his first wife, and Reese, who was eighty-years-old by this time. A decade later, Laban was a “manufacturer of fishing reels” and other tackle, and Reese was a “watchmaker.”



The headstone of Laban Lewis and his second wife in the Moravian) Cemetery, Canadensis, Pennsylvania.

Laban achieved local celebrity as the hotel manager. During the eighteen-eighties, he was one of many noble citizens who helped the Pennsylvania fish commission stock local streams with brook trout and other fish. He patented an “alarm,” essentially a clock that fired a bullet every hour “for scaring persons and animals off fields, gardens, houses, &c.” He assigned one-half of the patent to Ely Utt, a nearby farmer. Lewis was elected Justice of the Peace, an office in which he served “with rare ability as a dispenser of local justice.” Reese Lewis died near the end of the century. His son Laban died in April, 1902.



A small, brass reel bearing an R. & L. Lewis stamp (inset) on its raised headcap.



A Lewis ball-handle reel made of German silver.

Marked R. & L. Lewis reels are relatively scarce. Most of the known examples are “standard” ball-handle multipliers of brass or German silver that are similar to early Conroy reels. However, they show a surprising degree of variety in such a small population. For example, the first Lewis I ever acquired was a 2 1/8” brass multiplier with a raised headcap, an unusual feature for a ball-handle reel. Raised caps often were used to cover clicks, usually on tailplates of both British and American single-action reels, rarely on multipliers. Another Lewis ball-handle multiplier employed a stop, rather than a brake, actuated by a rim-mounted, sliding button. Stops were used only infrequently on American reels. There is a finite chance that the stop was retrofitted after it left the shop, but it just as easily could have been customized by the makers.

One Lewis reel was obviously based on a British design. It is a single-action reel with a folding crank,



The rim-mounted, sliding button on this Lewis reel operates a stop, not a brake.



The pin on this stop spring pops into a hole in the spool flange to prevent spool rotation.

one of only two American examples of the style that I can recall. It is not too surprising that many pre-Civil War U.S. makers included salient British features in their earliest products. Even the revered Kentuckian, George Snyder, is believed to have used a Ustonson reel as a model he could improve.



The stop hole in the spool flange is visible.

One feature common to almost all the marked Lewis multipliers that I have seen is the mounting of the main gear post at 6:00 o'clock on the headplate, rather than 4:00 o'clock or so. Some examples were stamped with the Lewis name on the inside surface of the headcap.

A number of John Warrin's "First Quality" reels used similar construction and are "dead ringers" for Lewis reels. These observations lead me to believe that the Lewises made many, if not all, of their reels for the trade.



A single-action reel with a folding crank, similar to many British reels.



The tailcap of the single-action reel is marked with the R. & L. Lewis stamp.

R. & L. Lewis deserves to be ranked among the more important New York reelmakers of the mid-nineteenth century. Their New York-style, ball-handle multipliers were probably as common as those of many better-known contemporaneous makers, and their reels were as well-made as any. Even after they left the city, their reel-making continued for about two additional decades. I hope that, someday, we will learn something about the reels that they made in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania.



A Lewis reel (top) compared with a Warrin "First Quality" reel.

NOTES

1. Bowery was the oldest street in New York City. It purportedly evolved from a Lenape trail and was first named *bouwerij*, “farmland,” by the Dutch.
2. Although his given name was spelled “Rees” in most references, his name was spelled “Reese” in many official records.
3. The pound (£ sign) may be a misprint, as the other values shown in the article are expressed with dollar (\$) signs. The dollar sign was adopted officially in 1785, and in 1789, the pound sterling was valued at \$4.44 compared to the Spanish dollar, which had been the basis of the various colonial dollars. The establishment of the national mint in 1792 set the value of the U.S. dollar at the current value of the Spanish dollar at the London mint. However, it is possible that the Welsh Lewises merely reported their loss in pounds sterling by habit.
4. The hotel is still open. The current owner is not aware of any reels or other artifacts that may have been made by Laban or Reese Lewis.