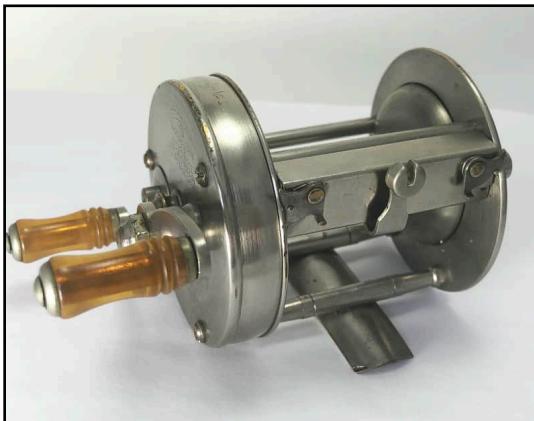


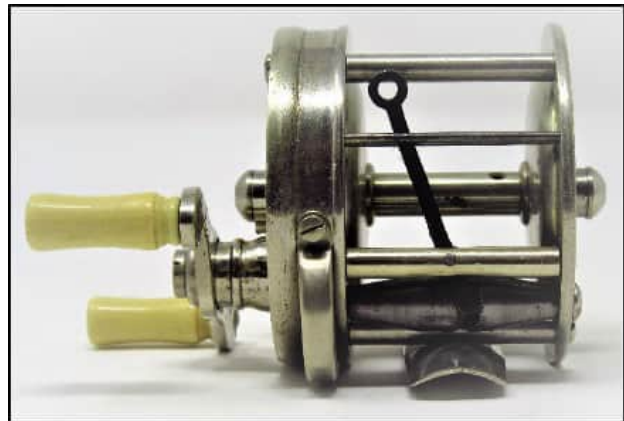
# The Reel News



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# Village museum holds **reel** treasures

By David Lehmann

An unassuming, repurposed, school annex building in the little village of Caledonia, New York houses three rare fishing reels that just may have belonged to the godfather of American trout fishing, Seth Green.

## Seth Green

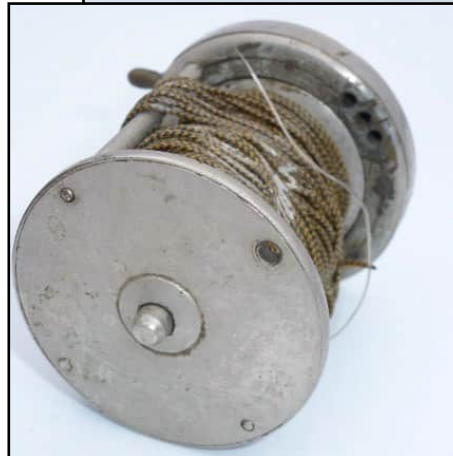
Green is rightly considered the “founding father” of American fisheries science, and arguably did more to expand and preserve American sport fishing opportunities than any other American, before or after. Born in 1817 in what is now suburban Rochester, New York, he developed an early love for fishing and a fascination for fish life history. As a boy, he was said to spend long days fishing and observing fish habits in the Genesee River, from his family’s small boat. Seth lived with his parents until 1837 and helped support his family through his fishing, hunting, and trapping success and likely also working in his father’s tavern. In 1837, the country fell into a depression, and Seth left home with the goal to help better support his family as a commercial fisherman. This career move was both financially successful and educational. He observed how many natural conditions could adversely affect fish propagation and began to develop ideas about how detrimental conditions could be re-engineered and controlled through aquaculture. By the mid-1850s, Green ran the largest commercial fishing business in New York State and reportedly employed over 100 fishermen (Black, 1944).

In 1864, Seth acquired property along Spring Creek in Caledonia, about 20 miles southwest of Rochester, and developed the first fish hatchery in the Western Hemisphere, which was later transferred to and operated by the state. Although his initial work was with brook trout and salmon, the hatchery and stocking efforts expanded to rainbow trout, bass, shad, and brown trout. He is credited with introducing rainbow trout in the eastern U.S., American shad to the western U.S., expanding the range of smallmouth bass, and reestablishing fisheries across the U.S. that had been decimated by pollution and overfishing. By the early 1870s, he was widely recognized as the foremost fisheries expert in the world.

Green was also recognized as an exceptional fly fisherman and tournament caster (Moorefield, 2013). He was a prolific writer, authoring books about fish



James Haywood multiplying winch in white metal. The reel is missing its foot.



culture and sport fishing, a huge number of government reports, and regular columns for scientific and sporting

periodicals. Seth Green died in 1888, after he was gravely injured in a carriage accident.

## Big Springs Museum

The Big Springs Museum is a 10,000+ square foot facility storing and displaying local relics and historical items from the village of Caledonia (population about 2,200) and the surrounding area. The museum was founded in the mid-1940s by the Big Springs Historical Society, which previously had been chartered by the state and had been acquiring and storing historical artifacts since 1937. With lots of square footage to cover the history of a relatively small population, the museum is able to provide detailed portrayals of the area’s past, including that of the original Caledonia hatchery, another private hatchery which began around 1870, and local sport fishing.

Three of the items on display are fishing reels that museum documents attribute as once belonging to Seth Green.

Unfortunately, a paper trail unequivocally tracing these reels back to Green's possession has yet to be established nor have photographs been found that clearly show Green with these reels. The ages of the reels are consistent with Green's ownership, and there are documents likely dating back to the 1940s or 1950s indicating the reels belonged to Green. One of the reels was donated by a local philanthropist, and the other two reels may be part of a donation of items to the Historical Society by Green's daughter, Alice. What is certain is that each reel is very unusual, if not unique.

**Reel 1: Haywood winch, circa 1801 to 1829**

This reel is 1 11/16<sup>th</sup> inches in diameter with 1 3/4 inches long pillars. It has a brass drag lever behind the faceplate, steel screws, and an unusual bulbous bone handle. It is missing its foot. The reel is stamped on the faceplate "HAYWOOD" and "BIRM<sup>M</sup>." The "HAYWOOD" stamping is double- or over-stamped. The stamping is characteristic of reels produced before Haywood's death in 1829 (Lodge, 2014). Although Haywood reels are early and a bit scarce, they are not rare. However, all documented or photographed examples of Haywood reels of which I am aware are composed of brass. This reel appears to be constructed from either nickel or German silver (a copper, nickel, and zinc alloy). Although both nickel and German silver were experimentally being used in Europe when this reel was manufactured, neither metal saw widespread use in England until after 1830.



Seth Green fishing in the Caledonia trout ponds during the 1880s and, at right, a closeup of tackle



3-inch Billingham reel in the Big Springs Museum collection.



Big Springs Museum reel on left and typical Billingham patent stamping on right (Right photo courtesy of Ed Prichard)

A museum record describes this reel as a "small diameter" "Green model." As Seth Green would have been only 12 years old in 1829 (the latest likely production date for this reel), the reel certainly was not a "Green model." However, it is conceivable that the reel belonged to and was used by Green, who had used rods and reels to fish, even as a boy (Green, 1888).

**Reel 2: Billingham fly reel, circa 1873-1880.**

This nickel-plated brass reel is 3 inches in diameter and is stamped with both the 1859 and 1873 patent dates, indicating it was produced between 1873 and 1880 (Schottenham, 2023). The patent date stampings on this reel are unusual in that the

first patent, and the second patent date, are reversed from what is typically encountered. "AUG 9" is stamped parallel to and below "1859," and "&1873" is stamped sideways and to the right of "1859."

A museum record describes this reel as a "Green model, mfg'd by Billinghamurst, Rochester." Other than the unusual stamping, the reel appears to be a standard Billinghamurst 3-inch reel. As documented in a series of ORCA "Reel Talk" posts during April 2019, early advertisements for the 1859 patent reel described as being manufactured by Billinghamurst & Green. Seth Green reportedly developed the conceptual design for the novel reel, which Billinghamurst then engineered and produced (Green, 1901). Based upon numerous photographs, Green clearly favored using the small-sized Billinghamurst reel when fly fishing during his later years, but whether or not he used this specific reel is purely speculative.



Top and bottom views of the museum's Vogel reel, likely a prototype designed by Seth Green and produced by John O. Vogel. Note use of the modified Billinghamurst Y-shaped support apparatus, visible on the bottom of the reel.



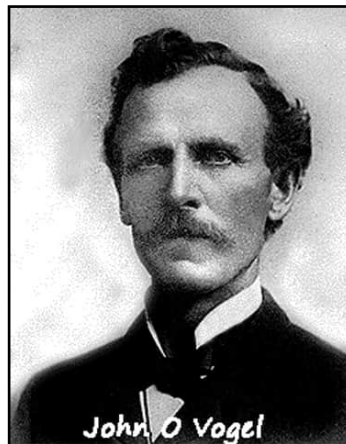
At left are two side views of the reel, displaying the tin rim band and line opening

because of the increased depth of this dual-disk reel, it can hold approximately twice as much line as a similar diameter Billinghamurst reel. Second, line lays relatively flatly on the dual-disk reel and is less like to get

**Reel 3: John Vogel dual-disk sidemount fly reel, circa 1879 to 1888**

This 3 1/2 inch diameter sidemount reel is composed of nickel-plate brass and tin. It has dual central disks that are joined by the approximately 3/8th inch pillar-like central portions of wire hoops. Each disk has three large perforations and is connected to an outer wire rim by the 24 wire hoops. There is a basal, Y-shaped, reel support bar above the foot that is a modified line guide and cross bar apparatus from a Billinghamurst 3 3/8th inch fly reel. The reel support bar holds a tin side band in place. There is a single rectangular line opening in the side band.

The advantages of this design over a traditional Billinghamurst-style birdcage reel are two-fold. First,



John Vogel and Rochester's iconic Mercury statue, at right, for which John Siddons & Son produced the copper sheeting





Top, bottom and side views of dual, tin disk reel, likely produced by John O. Vogel. Note similarities in disk attachment and materials used with the Big Spring Museum's reel.

tangled or crimped between lower coils.

This reel, the best documented of the three in the Big Springs Museum collection, is described in one acquisition record as the "original model" of a "skeleton design," which was "invented by Green." The reel was donated to the museum by a local philanthropist and is described in a record from the donor as a "handmade early fishing reel by John Vogel of Siddons Foundry in Rochester, NY."



Green's personal handmade, hand-painted tackle box, housed at the Rochester Historical Society.

John O. Vogel was born in Prussia in 1843. His family emigrated to the United States and moved to Rochester between 1849 and 1853. In an 1866 Rochester city directory, he is listed as a "tinker," and he is listed as a "tinsmith" in 1867 and 1868. Vogel joined John Siddons & Son, a metalworking and plumbing firm in Rochester. In 1881, John Siddons & Son produced the copper plates used to construct one of Rochester's most iconic statues, an image of Mercury, which currently graces the roof of a prominent downtown office building, relatively close to the stretch of the Genesee River where Green developed his love of fishing. In 1889, the firm was incorporated as The John Siddons Company, with Vogel listed as the firm's superintendent (Peck, 1908). Vogel became a vice president of the firm in 1890 and continued in that role until he died in December 1894.

The likely Green-designed dual-disk fly reel may not be the only reel Vogel made. A 3 1/2 inch diameter, 16 hoop, sidemount reel in Jim Schottenham's collection was also possibly produced by Vogel. Although the overall construction of Jim's reel is much more polished than the Big Springs Museum's example, the similar dual disks with

through-hoops and use of tin are unknown from any other sidemount reel manufacturer. If the reel in the museum's collection is the original prototype, designed by Green and manufactured by Vogel, Jim's reel is likely a finished pre-production or production model. Based on the scarcity of the reel, the design likely never went into full-scale production.

#### Acknowledgments

The Big Springs Museum provided me full access to reels, as well as work and photographic space. Meg Donegan from the museum assisted greatly in finding museum records and files. Jim Schottenham of the American Museum of Fly Fishing shared information and photographs of reels. Craig Barber uncovered the biographical information by Seth Green's son, Chester. Thanks to all; your help was invaluable.

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**A John Vogel reel, probably based on a prototype by angler Seth Green.**