

Short Biography of James Henry Houston

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Firm: Clinkscale (possibly following Rosamond Harding's list) gives J H Houston as active between 1790 and 1799 at Edward Street, Wardour Street, Soho. This appears to have been the main manufactory for the firm. From inscriptions on name boards and street directories we know that this was 95 Wardour Street and the adjoining corner of Edward Street, with a yard off Duck Lane. Additionally, in 1794 Houston & Co. are listed as Piano Forte makers at 54 Great Marlborough Street in Joseph Doane's Musical Directory. Houston was also a music-seller in a partnership known as 'Lewis, Houston, and Hyde' at 45 High Holborn. This brief partnership was formed in March of 1795 and was dissolved on 1 December 1795, and the period before it was wound up probably represents the greatest extent of Houston's musical empire.

Who was Houston? No apprentice record or firm biographical record for James Henry Houston has yet surfaced, and Houston is the only named member of the company. The use of the two Christian names is unusual so it possible that a James Henry Houston who married Elizabeth Rogers at St Mary Magdalene, Bermondsey, on 25 June 1787 and a James Henry Houston who died in March 1814 are our man (the latter was however described as a merchant in Cornhill, so we would have to assume that he reinvented himself in business after his bankruptcy. Indeed there is also a James Henry Houston, Merchant of St Pancras who was declared bankrupt in June 1791, and a James Henry Houston who was baptized at the Chaplaincy of the British Factory in Lisbon, Portugal on 31 July 1764. It may be stretching credulity that these are all the same man). The surname points to Scottish roots but a couple of Houstons are listed as merchants in the city of London in the mid 18th century and James Henry is given the attribute of 'Gent' in some archival records, so he may have had (or claimed to have had) a well-heeled background.

Bankruptcy: Between 1796 and 1799 James Henry Houston was the subject of bankruptcy proceedings (alas all too common at the time; George Garcka had also suffered bankruptcy between 1784 and 1788). The lease of the Wardour St premises was advertised for sale in March 1797, but was not finally sold until March 1799 ('capital manufactory site, with a handsome dwelling house, several extensive tiers of workshops, timber sheds, saw pit, yard, stall & co., a spacious wareroom on the ground floor, compting-house and every other convenience'). I have taken as a working assumption that the inscription 'James Henry Houston' is used on the instruments made between 1796 and 1799: At least one 5 and a half octave instruments signed Houston & Co does exist (EP6464).

Connection with other makers: Houston is known to have made instruments for sale by John Bland (whose business Lewis Houston and Hyde took over, albeit this was short-lived). An example is a square piano in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. A Sun Fire Insurance policy of September 1791 shows that Houston shared the Wardour Street premises with the piano maker George Garcka, who then owned the lease (neither insured any stock or tools with the

Sun, which may imply that there was then no manufacturing there, or perhaps more likely, that the stock was insured under a different policy). The firm of Bates and Company were established in the same premises in 1793 and claimed to be the successors of Garcka (Thomas Bates had been the apprentice of John Geib). Some structural similarities in the instruments made at the time point to a likely business connection between Houston and Bates.

This is also the case between Houston and Tomkison. Tomkison took over the Houston business in late 1798/early 1799 and announced as much in the Times.

There are features between Tomkison's earliest squares and grands that reflect practice in Houston's workshop.

Though we know of no instrument signed 'Houston and Tomkison', at least one square survives with the inscription 'Houston and Lawson', with the Wardour Street address. This may be the Henry Lawson on record as an independent maker from circa 1800.

At least one 5 and a half octave square survives signed 'Alexander Houston, London'. I have no further evidence of this firm or whether there is a connection with Houston & Co.

Surviving Houston pianos: Clinkscale Online (Nov 28, 2012) lists:

4197	Square	Houston, Alexander		UK/England/London	1802 ca.	FF-c4	UK/England?
7043	Grand	Houston, James Henry	1167	London	1790-1799	FF-c4	US/MD/Parkton: Marion V. Runkles, III as of 1987
1748	Square	Houston, James Henry		UK/England/London	1790-1795	FF-f3	US/MA/Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
1747	Square	Houston, James Henry		UK/England/London ?	1805-1810	FF-c4 ?	Unknown
1746	Square	Houston, James Henry		UK/England/London	1800-1810	FF-c4	Unknown
1744	Square	Houston, James Henry	1066	UK/England/London	1810 ca. (1806-1808 - MNC)	FF-c4	Unknown
1743	Square	Houston, James Henry		UK/England/London	1790-1810		US/NY/New York: Private Owner
534	Grand	Houston, James Henry	1246	UK/England/London	1795-1800	FF-c4	US/NC/Hillsborough: Richard Jenrette, Ayr Mount Plantation
7166	Square	Houston & Co.		UK/London		FF-f3	US/FA: McNutt (2008)
6958	Square	Houston & Co.		UK/England/London	1790-94	FF-f3	US/MA/Hingham: Hingham Historical Society
6464	Square	Houston & Co.		UK/England/London	1795 ca.	FF-c4	UK/England/Chelveston: David Hackett
1745	Square	Houston & Co.	1434	UK/England/London	1790 ca. or 1805-1810 (MNC)	FF-f3	US/DC/Washington: Smithsonian Institution

Dates past given past 1800 should be treated with appropriate skepticism, many are derived from guesses and decades-old misunderstandings and have not been corrected.

We find 2 grands (serials 1167 and 1246) and 10 squares (including serials 1066 and 1434) by Houston & Co or James Henry Houston. We know of one more grand and I think more squares to add to the list; might Houston perhaps have numbered grands in the same sequence as squares?

I would be glad to have comment from any quarter. Does a line of piano-making descent Garcka/Bates/ Houston/Tomkison seem plausible, or are we looking more at an accident of geographical coincidence?



A very early 1790s design signed James Henry Houston, not dissimilar in its overall 'early' configuration, and with trestle stand as the George Garka of 1788 below, which was somewhat antiquated in size by that date in any case.





A Houston and Co. 5.5 octave, SN 1192, courtesy of David Hackett.





Note the sweeping cantilevered bridge in the far treble to allow 5.5 octaves and improve scaling and response, reminiscent of a design employed by Culliford and Geib for Longman and Broderip as below.



John Geib for Longman and Broderip.



Houston SN 1772, 5 oct., courtesy of GrahamWalker.