

Possible Artists of the Sage Paintings

Although the two portraits of Enos and Eunice Sage are unsigned, we might speculate just who the artist might have been. In researching Ammi Phillips, the volume *Ammi Phillips Portrait Painter, 1788–1865*, was consulted and in it several possible influences were mentioned. The following are of particular interest:

“The twentieth century investigator is led to wonder how Ammi Phillips’ interest and talent were developed. What might he have seen in the way of portraits in or near Colebrook? How closely did he observe the painting styles of portraits hanging in houses near his, and did he adapt their artists’ mannerisms in forming his own style? If painters were close by, did Ammi learn through study of their work or was he apprenticed to one of them? There are no sure answers to any of these questions. There are, however, indications of direct and indirect influences in the several painting styles that he employed in his long career.”

“In his boyhood, there were in western Connecticut at least four painters whose work was probably known to young Ammi. In 1796, when he was eight, Jonathan Edwards, Jr., the distinguished son of an even more distinguished theologian, was installed as minister of the Congregational Church at Colebrook. Edwards remained in Colebrook until 1800. During his pastorate the Connecticut artist Reuben Moulthrop painted his portrait, probably in Colebrook. Today this hangs in the Yale University Art Gallery. While it is unlikely that young Phillips knew Moulthrop, it is likely that he saw this and another portrait by the same painter and that he was influenced by what he saw.

Following Edwards’ departure, Colebrook Congregationalists used the church in Norfolk, six miles away, where the Rev. Ammi Ruhamah Robbins had been pastor since 1761. (The painter had been named for his uncle, who was, in turn, named after the Norfolk pastor.) In 1801, Robbins’ son Thomas sat for Reuben Moulthrop in East Haven. Like Edwards, he is shown in an alert pose, seated in a decorative 18th century chair, probably of Connecticut origin.”

“Ammi Phillips could have known the Edwards portrait only briefly before the minister’s departure from Colebrook. However, young Robbins’ portrait was probably brought to Norfolk shortly after it was painted, and his acquaintance with it might have been longer.

Before Phillips broke with home ties in Colebrook, the paths of several other painters may have touched or crossed those of Phillips and his family. In February 1806, Nathaniel Wales advertised his skills in Litchfield as a sign painter and as a painter of likenesses ‘on canvas or glass, for eight dollars each.’ About that year, Wales painted portraits of Mr. & Mrs. Nathan Sage, possibly in Middletown. His signed portrait of Mrs. Sage and Phillips’ very early painting of Chloe Judson in 1811 illustrate similar poses and styles. While Wales’ approach is expert and precise, Phillips’ is a groping, blunt attack.”

“A line for investigation of the possibility that Ammi Phillips knew or studied with Wales in Litchfield at the age of 18 lies in the fact that one Samuel Phillips of Windham, had served under a Capt. Wales in the Revolutionary War. Because the painting of Nathaniel Sage is one of the key works in the identification of Wales’ portraits, it may also be worth notice that on May 26, 1801 Samuel Phillips sold land that he had previously ‘bought of Enos Sage.’”

As the Phillips farm and that of Enos Sage were only about one mile apart, (Sage living at what is today 23 Sandy Brook Road and Phillips on Shantry Road about opposite 77, the home of Robert Jasmin), it is a certainty that the families knew each other intimately.

Enos Sage's father moved from Chatham, Connecticut (now Cromwell) to Sandisfield, Massachusetts in 1765, and his son Enos came to Colebrook and built the house and barns that still exist in 1797.

This has to make a strong case for the artist of our portraits as being Nathaniel Wales. The next step for the Colebrook Historical Society is to obtain an expert opinion. The results may shed additional light on Ammi Phillips' background as well as possibly identifying the artist who created the portraits of Enos and Eunice Sage.