

WILLIAM BENTLEY (1759-1819), before 1826
James Frothingham (1786-1864)
copy after his own composition
oil on canvas
27 1/4 x 22 1/4 (69.22 x 56.50)
Bequest of Hannah Armstrong Kittredge, 1917
Weis 10
Hewes Number: 8

Ex. Coll.: Possibly commissioned by Hannah Phippen Hodges (1768-1837); to her daughter Hannah Hodges Kittredge (1793-1877); to her daughter, the donor (1834-1916).

Exhibitions:

'Dr. Bentley's Salem: Diary of a Town,' Essex Institute, Salem, Mass., 1977.

Publications:

'Dr. Bentley's Salem: Diary of a Town,' Historical Collections of the Essex Institute 113 (July 1977): 34.

Stefanie Munsing Winkelbauer, 'William Bentley: Connoisseur and Print Collector,' in Georgia B. Barnhill, ed., Prints of New England (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1991), 22.

The Reverend William Bentley was a noted bibliophile, scholar, historian, and linguist. He was the minister of the East Church (Unitarian) in Salem, Massachusetts, from 1783 to his death in 1819. In his remarkable diaries, the manuscripts of which are preserved at the American Antiquarian Society, Bentley recorded local and national events, shipping news, church business, scientific theories, and town gossip.¹ He can be considered Salem's first archivist, recording scraps of genealogical information and town history in his diary. He also commissioned several portraits of prominent New England leaders, most of which were copied after well-known canvases, and placed these replicas in his 'cabinet.'

Bentley graduated from Harvard College in 1777 and, with a talent for languages, tutored Greek and Latin there while looking for a church position. After moving to Salem, Bentley began to contribute political and social commentary to the Salem Register. A Jeffersonian Republican and active freemason, he attracted the attention of Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), who offered him the presidency of the projected University of Virginia. Bentley refused, saying he 'had been so long wedded to the East Church, he could not think of asking a Divorce from it.'² Bentley was elected to the American Antiquarian Society in 1813 and served as a councillor until 1819. At his death, he left the Society his personal papers, numerous prints and drawings,

part of his extensive book collection, and eleven portraits of historical figures. This group of canvases remains the largest single gift to the Society's portrait collection.

The artist James Frothingham studied with Gilbert Stuart (1753-1828), who wrote of his student: '[E]xcept for myself, there is no man in the United States [who] can paint a better head.'³ Frothingham was active in Boston and on the North Shore until 1826, when he moved to New York to continue his career. Several prominent Salem residents commissioned him to paint their portraits in 1818. Stuart's pride in his student was echoed in an 1818 editorial in a Salem newspaper: 'Mr. Frothingham of Charlestown is in this town and has succeeded admirably in his portraits. It is seldom in such variety so much satisfaction is given. He has been patronized by our best families and rises into favor as he proceeds.'⁴ William Bentley's portrait was painted at the request of Salem resident Benjamin W. Crowninshield (1758-1836). The minister's first sitting was on November 23, 1818; he noted his fourth session with the artist on December 18, and in a diary entry for January 8, 1819, wrote: 'Was for the last time with Mr. Frothingham. Portrait said to be good.'⁵

Frothingham made several replicas of this portrait, which was painted in the year before Bentley died and was revered as the last image taken of him. According to family history, Hannah Phippen Hodges commissioned the American Antiquarian Society's copy. The Hodges family was active in the East Church, and Bentley recorded in his diary: 'H[annah] H[odges] was a favorite, often among my chosen friends.'⁶ Just ten days before his unexpected death from heart failure, Bentley officiated at the marriage of Hannah's daughter to Joseph Kittredge on December 19, 1819.⁷ This portrait passed down through the women of the Hodges family until it was given to the American Antiquarian Society in 1917.

¹ William Bentley Papers, 1666-1819, AAS Manuscript Collection. This collection preserves Bentley's diary, daybook, book lists, correspondence, and other personal material. The diaries, given to AAS in 1866 by William B. Fowle, were published by the Essex Institute in 1905. A comprehensive, recent study of Bentley's life and work is J. Rixey Ruffin, 'Merchants and Messiahs: William Bentley and the Failure of Rational Christianity in the Early Republic, 1783-1805' (Ph.D. diss. University of Delaware, 2001).

² Joseph G. Waters, 'Biographical Sketch of William Bentley,' The Diary of William Bentley, D.D., 4 vols. (Salem, Mass.: Essex Institute, 1905), 1: xxi. See also William B. Sprague, Annals of the American Pulpit, 9 vols. (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1859), 8: 154-57.

³ William Dunlap, History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States, 2 vols. (New York: George P. Scott & Co., Printer, 1834), 2: 216.

⁴ Essex Register, December 23, 1818.

⁵ Diary of William Bentley, 4: 561, 565, 569.

⁶ Diary of William Bentley, 4 (June 16, 1817): 459.

⁷ Bentley recorded the receipt of a \$10.00 fee for this service in his daybook.