

John Wheelwright (1592 or 1594-1679), 1803

Attr. John Coles, Sr. (c. 1749-1809)

copied after 1677 image by an unknown artist

oil on canvas

22 1/2 x 18 3/4 (57.15 x 47.63)

Bequest of William Bentley, 1819

Weis 144

Hewes Number: 150

Ex. Coll.: Commissioned by the donor in 1803.

Exhibitions:

1804, Independence Day Celebration, Salem, Massachusetts (as the Reverend Francis Higginson)¹

When the Reverend William Bentley (cat. 8) commissioned this portrait copy, he believed the subject to be the Reverend Francis Higginson (1587-1630). However, the original painting on which this image is based is partially inscribed ‘... is Suae 84 Omini 1677,’ indicating the sitter was eighty-four years of age in 1677.² It was not until the early part of the twentieth century that the sitter was identified as the Reverend John Wheelwright, the only prominent New England minister who was about that age in 1677.³

Wheelwright was born in Lincolnshire, England, and attended Sydney Sussex College, Cambridge, where he became acquainted with the young Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658).

Wheelwright was ordained in 1619 and served as the vicar of Bilsby, England, for ten years before he was driven out of the parish in 1636 as a nonconformist. He migrated with his family to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, where he was minister of churches in Quincy and Braintree. Controversy dogged Wheelwright’s career, and in 1637 he was banished from the colony for supporting the doctrine of Anne Hutchinson (c. 1591-1643), a relative of his wife. He was ‘an opponent of Calvinism to the end, believing that conduct is no evidence of indwelling divine grace.’⁴ During his exile, Wheelwright founded Exeter, New Hampshire, and built a church there. When Exeter was annexed by the Bay Colony, Wheelwright moved again, preaching elsewhere in New Hampshire and Maine until 1643, when he was permitted to return to Massachusetts. Afterwards, he went back to England and wrote several books, including Mercurius Americanus (1645) and Vindication (1654), in which he discussed his anti-Calvinist beliefs.⁵

The portrait of Wheelwright was painted in 1677, when he lived in Salisbury, Massachusetts. Bentley saw this portrait (which he believed represented Francis Higginson) during an 1803 visit to the Boston courthouse with an artist identified only as ‘Mr. Scot.’ Bentley wrote in his diary: ‘Old Francis Higginson, the first minister. This picture has the only claim to be an original & it is the worst executed of the whole. Mr. Scot has promised to give me a copy of this picture of the head only.’⁶ During the following months, Bentley must have discovered Higginson’s death date and realized the portrait could not depict the minister, but might have been of his son John (1616-1708).⁷ Bentley found a different artist to make the copy and recorded in his account book for December 1803: ‘Paid [J]. Coles of Boston for a copy of a painting of John Higginson, original taken in 1677 and kept by the state. The expense of taking was seven dollars.’⁸

‘J. Coles’ could refer either to John Coles, Sr., who listed himself as a heraldry painter in the city directories, or his son, John Coles, Jr. (1776/80-1854), a portrait, miniature, and heraldry painter who was just beginning his career in 1803.⁹ The senior Coles painted coats of arms for Boston citizens and published prints with several artists/engravers such as John Norman (c. 1748-1817) and Benjamin Blyth (c. 1746-82). At the time he was paid for the portrait, ‘J. Coles’ gave Bentley three engravings from a book about the American Revolution.¹⁰ This transaction suggests that the elder Coles with his connections to the print world, was more likely than his son to have been the painter of the Higginson/Wheelwright portrait.¹¹

¹ William Bentley Diary, July 4, 1804, William Bentley Papers, 1666-1819, AAS Manuscript Collection.

² The original portrait, which is larger and shows more of the figure, is owned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and is discussed in Dresser, 1935, 152-55. The original was also copied in 1800 by Henry Sargent (1770-1845), whose version is owned by the Peabody Essex Museum and is listed in Catalogue of Portraits in the Essex Institute (Salem, Mass.: Essex Institute, 1936), 251-52.

³ Dresser, 1935, 154; and Charles K. Bolton, The Founders: Portraits of Persons Born Abroad, 3 vols. (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1919), 2: 649-52.

⁴ Bolton, The Founders, 504.

⁵ For additional information on Wheelwright, see William B. Sprague, Annals of the American Pulpit, 9 vols. (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1859), 1: 83-87.

⁶ Bentley Diary, October 7, 1803.

⁷ Bentley Diary, November 23, 1818. More than fifteen years after he commissioned this copy, Bentley was still trying to determine who was depicted in the original portrait. He noted: ‘I took F. Higginson’s portrait for his son

John's till Cotton Mather on his death says, as I found, that John's was never taken.' At some point Bentley inscribed the reverse of the portrait 'Francis Higginson,' and he exhibited it with that identification in 1804.

⁸ William Bentley Book Accounts, December 1, 1803, Bentley Papers.

⁹ Boston City Directory (Boston: John West, 1803), 34.

¹⁰ Bentley Book Accounts, December 1, 1803. Bentley writes: 'From [J] Coles, no. 1 of Columbian War, a proposed series of Heads and Battles. His no. includes a frontispiece, Lexington Battle, and Gen. Gates.' These prints, which are today housed in the AAS Graphic Arts Collection, were used to illustrate The Columbian War, or Battles for American Independence, printed in New York in 1798.

¹¹ A diary entry made by Bentley six years after he acquired this portrait indicates that he did not think much of the work of John Coles, Sr. On October 25, 1809, he wrote, 'Endeavoring from some imperfect materials to obtain a portrait of my old friend Gen. Fiske. A portrait three quarter face, was taken while he was in the Naval service, but unfinished by Coles & Blyth. They were wretched daubers at best, but they had much employment from the money of privateer men.'