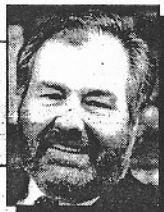


Wright: Early Connecticut portrait painter has his own story to tell

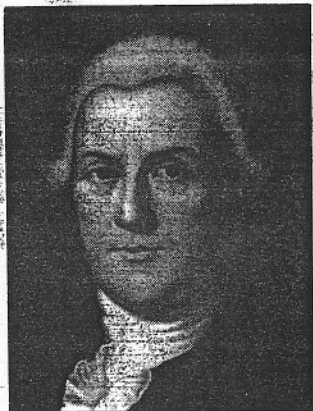


MAY 24, 1996

Tom
Beardsley

There was no intent to write a sequel to last week's article about Scotland native son Samuel Huntington. But during research to locate existing images of America's "first president," an interesting story unfolded regarding the portrait of Samuel Huntington that now hangs in the Museum of Connecticut History in Hartford. Thanks to the museum's curators, Dean Nelson and Dave Corrigan, for supplying a copy of the portrait and the facts behind it.

The Museum of Connecticut History exhibits portraits of all Connecticut's governors from 1639 to the present, including local born men such as Lebanon's Jonathan Trumbull (1769-1784 and 1797-1809), and Hebron's John S. Peters (1831-1833). Many of the por-



the subject, Huntington

traits were painted by a Connecticut artist named George Frederick Wright (1828-1881). Born in Washington, Conn., Wright began painting professionally in Wallingford in the 1840s.

In May 1847, his outstanding talent led to his appointment as custodian at the Wadsworth Athenaeum. He then studied at the National Gallery, returning to Hartford to paint in 1849. About this time he also persuaded state officials to have paintings made of

all of Connecticut's past governors. After some deliberation, Wright was commissioned to paint the portraits, including one of Samuel Huntington.

Wright's portrait of Huntington is a direct copy of that painted in 1783 by the eminent American painter, Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827), who was commissioned to portray each member of the Continental Congress, including its president, Samuel Huntington of Scotland.

Peale was a fascinating character, a renaissance man, a soldier, inventor, painter, politician and founder of the country's first natural history museum, located in Philadelphia. His paintings offer a vivid visual record of America's early history. Among the most well known are "Washington and his Generals at Yorktown" (1781), and his classic portraits of Ben Franklin (1785), John Quincy Adams (1818) and Henry Clay (1818).

Peale's original portrait of Huntington is at the Peale museum in Philadelphia, but the Wright copy is a near perfect reproduction. There are also two other known likenesses of



the artist, Wright

Huntington in existence, one allegedly by Robert Edge Pine (1730-1789), painted in 1785 in a rustic, primitive style; and an image by an unknown artist, painted toward the end of Huntington's life, which portrays an old man in profile, looking to the right. Neither of these bears any resemblance to Peale's original or Wright's faithful copy.

While Peale represents the elite of American art, Wright represents the starving artist, the Bohemian fringe of the

muse. Peale found fame and fortune, whereas Wright died a destitute man in Hartford in 1881.

In outlining Wright's career in 1879, the art critic H. W. French noted that "Few men have possessed the genius, and given the promise of George F. Wright; but his life have been one of varied experiences in which, while he has done much masterly work, he has failed to recognize his own talent." That talent took him to Germany and Italy, and to Illinois in 1860, where he was commissioned to paint two portraits of the Republican nominee for president, Abraham Lincoln.

The Huntington portrait reveals Wright's skills, but his most acclaimed portrait is that of Lebanon's Jonathan Trumbull. When you are next in Hartford, stop by the museum and peruse Wright's outstanding talent and enjoy the other numerous exhibits which portray Connecticut's rich history. *Tom Beardsley, a free-lance public historian, was the scholar-in-residence and co-director of the Windham Textile and History Museum from 1990 to 1995.*

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