

# The Connecticut Historical Society



Elizabeth and Mary Daggett of New Haven.  
Painting attributed to Reuben Moulthrop of New Haven, 1763-1814.  
*Courtesy of Miss Mary Allis*

# Reuben Moulthrop

1763-1814

Reuben Moulthrop, son of John and Abigail (Holt) Moulthrop, was born in East Haven, Connecticut, in 1763. In 1792, aged 25, he married Hannah Street, daughter of Rev. Nicholas and Hannah (Austin) Street. Hannah Moulthrop was born in 1767 and survived her husband many years, dying in 1848. Of their several children the first, born 1794, was named Daniel Bowen, after the wax sculptor and proprietor of the New York Museum.

Reuben Moulthrop's first artistic endeavor was as a modeller of portraits in wax and his business that of proprietor of a wax-works museum and traveling wax-works exhibition. Newspaper advertisements of the day show that these exhibitions were placed on view in many towns in Connecticut and as far afield as Boston and New York. Of these wax portraits, extremely fragile and easily mutilated and destroyed, none have survived to our knowledge.

For a number of years the definitive work on the life and career of Reuben Moulthrop has been in preparation; first by William Sawitzky, eminent art historian and scholar and, since his death, by his widow, Susan Clay Sawitzky. Those among us who have had a great interest in the paintings by Moulthrop have long had knowledge of the projected volume and have felt it unnecessary to duplicate the intensive research and expenditure of precious time, to learn more of the life of this artist. As the book is now scheduled for early publication by the New York Historical Society, we are content to await the revelations in the promised volume and will here devote ourselves to showing and discussing some of the portraits in oil by Moulthrop.

When your reporter first came to New Haven from Cambridge, in 1932, among the first of the many portraits to come to his attention were several in the collections of the New Haven Colony Historical Society, representing New Haven people as they appeared in the 1790's or the first years of the 19th century, which to an observing eye were obviously works from the same hand. Very soon thereafter William Sawitzky, while making his initial survey of the portraits in that collection, stated his opinion that these several portraits had been painted by one Reuben Moulthrop of East Haven. These attributions were based, in part, upon comparison with a portrait of Rev. Ezra Stiles in the Yale Collections, which was signed, dated and further established by early engravings which acknowledged Moulthrop as the painter. We became intimately familiar with the Stiles portrait and, using it as a "key" for comparative purposes, agreed very definitely with Mr. Sawitzky's attributions. Thus our knowledge of Moulthrop's work was first established and it was thereafter easy to recognize other examples as they came to our attention.

Several years later the New Haven Colony Historical Society acquired, as gifts and for display in its restored old colonial mansion, the Pardee-Morris House at Morris Cove near East Haven, the portraits of Captain Amos Morris; of his daughter Lorinda; and of the husband she had married in 1788, Samuel Hathaway of Suffield. When William Sawitzky had an opportunity to examine all three portraits he unhesitatingly attributed all to Moulthrop.

Although we deferred to Mr. Sawitzky's superior judgment it was for a long

time difficult to accept these attributions in the case of the two Hathaway portraits. However, through steadily increasing familiarity with Moulthrop's work, new and earlier examples which came to light and a clearer analysis of his methods and technique, it finally became evident that the attributions were correct and that we must accept them as by Moulthrop, and as the earliest examples so far discovered.

At the time they were painted, probably soon after the Hathaways were married in 1788, Moulthrop, at the age of 25, must have been fumbling for a style and was, obviously, quite deficient in technique. Undoubtedly entirely lacking any formal instruction, as were most of the local limners of the day, he was forced to depend on the study of available paintings by earlier artists. In the New Haven locality these would have been quite scarce and mostly the production of such men as John Durand, Ralph Earl, William Johnston and an as yet unknown limner who painted portraits of members of the John Sherman family and others.

Always experimental, throughout his career, we find Moulthrop's work uneven in all periods. There seems to be no steady progression toward an established style which, when adopted, was held to and improved. Moulthrop was to paint in the same year such excellent portraits as that of Ezra Stiles and the mediocre likeness of Amelia Daggett. This unevenness is especially evident in his technique and methods. Where one portrait of a pair has survived in relatively good physical condition its companion portrait will have cracked badly, with the paint film checked and "alligatored" until design and likeness is nearly obliterated. The first has been painted on good cloth, stretched over a firm, well made stretcher and with a selection of oils and pigments which assured its preservation. Its companion, painted perhaps concurrently, or immediately before or after, was done with inferior materials and evident carelessness. This unevenness, or carelessness, is apparent in several other instances and seems to have persisted throughout Moulthrop's painting career. Possibly the explanation lies in the fact that he was actively occupied with wax modelling and his museum and may have painted portraits only as a means of "taking up the slack" during those periods when attendance at his exhibitions fell off.

In all of the artist's early portraits the seeking for style is clearly evident and elements suggested by the works of earlier painters can be seen. In the Hathaway portraits it seems certain that Moulthrop had studied some works of Winthrop Chandler, although none of Chandler's portraits were in this locality, to our knowledge. This influence of Chandler on Moulthrop's first efforts was noted by William Sawitzky and is graphically illustrated by Susan Sawitzky in the check-list of portraits by Moulthrop which was published in the New York Historical Society *Quarterly*, October, 1955. This Chandler influence is marked in the two Hathaway portraits, which stand alone as we know of no others like them in style and handling.

The next three portraits in this exhibition, in point of chronology as we judge they came from Moulthrop's brush, show that this Chandler influence has been almost totally eclipsed by the influence of others. These are: portraits of Mr. and Mrs. James Reynolds and of Amos Morris, father of Lorinda Hathaway. Painted probably 1789-90, they show quite a radical change in style and great improvement in drawing. There is still a suggestion of Chandler, especially in the Amos Morris portrait, but we see in the Reynolds portraits a number of elements from John Durand and, most definitely, from

the portraits of the "unknown" who produced the Sherman portraits mentioned heretofore. In addition to the portraits of John Sherman (son of Roger Sherman) his wife Rebecca Austin Sherman and baby, and separate portraits of two other children, several other portraits by this artist are known. One of these, Elijah Forbes of East Haven, is in the New Haven Colony Historical Society collections.

Hannah Street, mother of Reuben Moulthrop's wife, and David Austin, Jr., father of Rebecca (Austin) Sherman were half-brother and sister, and Reuben certainly had every opportunity to study the portraits of the family of his wife's cousin. The influence of this group on his work was profound.

In the two Reynolds portraits we see, especially in the male portrait, remnants of the muddiness of color in the flesh, flatness and heavy outlining of elements of the design that appears in the Hathaway portraits, deriving from Chandler, while much of the pose derives from Durand. In the female portrait Durand's influence is very apparent in the draftsmanship, notably the arms and hands, one of which holds Durand's inevitable flowers. The influence of our "unknown" is evident in the palette and in the greater attention to detail, the draperies and manner of simulating fabrics. Much the same influences appear in the portraits of Amos Morris and those of Mr. and Mrs. Mix. Others which we were unable to obtain for this show fall into this same transitional group of Moulthrop's portraits.

In the portrait of Bradford Hubbard, painted 1790-91, we see the first example wherein his work is settling into more of an individual style, although he was to continue to be somewhat inconsistent and uneven. This portrait seems to indicate a very strong influence of certain early portraits by Joseph Steward. There has always been the persistent tradition that Steward painted in New Haven early in his career. This is probably correct and Moulthrop either studied his local portraits or those which he painted nearby, c. 1790, such as the portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Dennison and their daughter, or of Mr. and Mrs. Ephraim Williams, all of Stonington. Moulthrop may even have worked with Steward, or received instruction from that painter. So many of Moulthrop's portraits of the early 1790's show close similarities, especially where landscapes are inserted. Moulthrop's drawing and coloration is always superior; his poses less stiff; his technique less dry and chalky.

To further confound confusion we seem to see that Steward had also been much influenced by our "unknown". He may have more quickly settled into his individual style which, about 1790, appealed to Moulthrop and from which he adopted a great deal, improved upon it and individualized the product of the several influences. We have hopes that much of the puzzle will be cleared up in the near future as new findings are revealed.

After the Hubbard portrait those of Ezra Stiles, the Bishops, Smiths, Mrs. Silliman, the Daggett children, illustrate what we think of as typical Moulthrop portraits, painted during the best period in his career.

In the early 1800's Moulthrop again altered his style and technique somewhat, undoubtedly with an assist from the portraits of Richard and William Jennys. The Townsend portraits are almost certainly copies of portraits by William Jennys, with certain liberties taken by Moulthrop in forming the ovals. The use of thinner, smoother canvases and brushwork, creamier flesh tints and a new flatness, are to be seen in most of the portraits of the first few years of the 19th Century.

In his late portraits, particularly those of Ammi Robbins and the Battells, further changes, not necessarily for the better, will be noted. However, it is interesting to note the similarity between the awkward shanks of the figure of Samuel Hathaway, painted near the beginning of the artist's career, and those of Ammi Robbins, near the end. The Robbins and Battell portraits are documented as being painted in 1812 and the letters are on exhibition.

Of the miniature portraits which Moulthrop advertised to paint Mrs. Sawitzky notes one only, that of his wife Hannah (Street). We have noted what appears to be two others; of Henry and Elisabeth (Prescott) Daggett, parents of the Daggett children. These are illustrated in *The Daggett-Daggett Genealogy*, but we have not as yet been able to locate the miniatures.

We present the portraits for your pleasure and perhaps for your instruction. Many of our conclusions and speculations may be "knocked into a cocked hat, c. 1790," and that's the way we want it. If we can learn something new, or have false impressions corrected, the time and energy will have been well expended.

RALPH W. THOMAS  
Curator, New Haven  
Colony Historical Society



## A List of Portraits in the Exhibition

Arranged in chronological order as they were painted, as nearly as can be judged, by the artist Reuben Moulthrop. Asterisk (\*) indicates those portraits attributed by William Sawitzky.

- \* 1. SAMUEL HATHAWAY (1760-1813) of Suffield, Conn. Married Lorinda Morris of East Haven in 1788. Portrait probably painted in that year. Oil on canvas, 52 x 30 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches.  
Lent by: New Haven Colony Historical Society, Pardee-Morris House, New Haven.
- \* 2. MRS. LORINDA (MORRIS) HATHAWAY (1768-1849) of East Haven, Conn. Daughter of Amos Morris of East Haven. Married Samuel Hathaway in 1788. Portrait probably painted in that year. Oil on canvas, 52 x 30 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches.  
Lent by: New Haven Colony Historical Society, Pardee-Morris House, New Haven.
- \* 3. CAPT. AMOS MORRIS (1723-1801) of East Haven, Conn. Portrait probably painted 1789-1790. The radical change in style from that of the Hathaway portraits is undoubtedly due to the new influences of the "unknown" painter, and of John Durand's portraits. Oil on canvas, 43 x 34 inches.  
Lent by: New Haven Colony Historical Society, Pardee-Morris House, New Haven.
4. JAMES REYNOLDS (c. 1754-1834) of West Haven, Conn. Portrait probably painted 1789-1790. Shows more of the influence of John Durand and of the "unknown" painter. Oil on canvas, 44 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 35 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches.  
Lent by: Mr. and Mrs. Bertram K. Little, Brookline, Mass.
5. MRS. MARY (KIMBERLY) THOMAS REYNOLDS (c. 1753-1834) of West Haven, Conn. Widow of Seth Thomas. Married James Reynolds, c. 1788. Oil on canvas, 45 x 36 inches.  
Lent by: Mr. and Mrs. Bertram K. Little, Brookline, Mass.
6. JOHN MIX (c. 1755-[     ]) of New Haven, Conn. Portrait probably painted c. 1789-1790. This and its companion portrait show the approach to what was to be Moulthrop's individual style. Oil on canvas, 32 x 25 $\frac{1}{4}$  inches.  
Lent by: Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection, Williamsburg, Va.
7. MRS. RUTH (STANLEY) MIX (1756-[     ]) of New Britain, Conn. Portrait probably painted c. 1789-1790. Oil on canvas, 32 x 25 $\frac{1}{4}$  inches.  
Lent by: Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection, Williamsburg, Va.
- \* 8. BRADFORD HUBBARD (1760-1825) of New Haven, Conn. Portrait probably painted 1790-1791. The emergence of Moulthrop's best manner. A product of the several influences under which Moulthrop came. Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches.  
Lent by: New Haven Colony Historical Society, New Haven.

- \* 9. REV. EZRA STILES (1727-1795) of New Haven, Conn. Portrait inscribed, signed and dated 1794. The best portrait from Moulthrop's brush yet discovered. Oil on canvas, 36 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 29 $\frac{1}{8}$  inches.  
Lent by: Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.
- \* 10. MRS. MARY (FISH) SILLIMAN (1736-1818) of New Haven, Conn. Wife of Gold Selleck Silliman and mother of Benjamin Silliman, the Yale scientist, who was attending Yale from 1792 to 1796. Portrait probably painted c. 1794. Oil on canvas, 36 x 32 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches.  
Lent by: Fairfield Historical Society, Fairfield.
- \* 11. AMELIA MARTHA DAGGETT (1779-1807) of New Haven, Conn. Daughter of Henry and Elizabeth (Prescott) Daggett. Oil on canvas, 36 x 28 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches.  
Lent by: National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. From the Collection of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch.
12. ELIZABETH and MARY DAGGETT of New Haven, Conn. Children of Henry and Elisabeth (Prescott) Daggett. Elizabeth was born 1786; Mary in 1792. From the apparent ages of the children, the portraits were painted in 1794. Their mother was an aunt of John Sherman who was painted by the "unknown" limner. Oil on canvas, 35 x 28 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches. [Cover.]  
Lent by: Miss Mary Allis, Fairfield.
- \* 13. SAMUEL BISHOP (1723-1803) of New Haven, Conn. He was New Haven's second mayor, following Roger Sherman. Portrait probably painted 1794-1795. Oil on canvas, 34 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 29 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches.  
Lent by: Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.
- \* 14. MRS. MEHITABLE (BASSETT) BISHOP (1728-1811) of New Haven, Conn. Wife of Samuel Bishop. Portrait painted at the same time as the companion portrait, 1794-1795. Oil on canvas, 34 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 29 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches.  
Lent by: Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.
15. REV. COTTON MATHER SMITH (1731-1806) of Sharon, Conn. Portrait painted about 1794-1795. Oil on canvas, 35 x 28 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches.  
Lent by: First Church of Christ, Congregational, Sharon.
16. MRS. TEMPERANCE (WORTHINGTON) GALE SMITH (1732-1800) of Sharon, Conn. Wife of Rev. Cotton Mather Smith. Portrait painted at the same time as the companion portrait, 1794-1795. Oil on canvas, 35 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 29 inches.  
Lent by: First Church of Christ, Congregational, Sharon.
17. REV. THOMAS ROBBINS (1777-1856) of Norfolk, Conn. First Librarian of The Connecticut Historical Society (1844-1856). Portrait signed and dated 1801. Oil on canvas, 30 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 29 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches.  
Collection of: The Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford.
18. REV. ENOCH HUNTINGTON (1739-1809) of Middletown, Conn. Portrait probably painted 1802-1803. Oil on canvas, 40 x 35 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches.  
Lent by: Middlesex County Historical Society, Middletown.

19. MRS. MARY (GRAY) HUNTINGTON (1744-1803) of Windham, Conn. Wife of Rev. Enoch Huntington of Middletown. Portrait probably painted 1802-1803. Oil on canvas,  $39\frac{1}{4} \times 35\frac{3}{4}$  inches. Lent by: Middlesex County Historical Society, Middletown.
- \*20. GEN. HENRY CHAMPION (1751-1836) of Westchester, Conn. Oil on canvas,  $46\frac{1}{4} \times 36\frac{1}{2}$  inches. [See below.] Lent by: Richard Huntington Cole, West Hartford.
- \*21. MRS. ABIGAIL (TINKER) CHAMPION and daughter of Westchester, Conn. This picture could be either of two dates, 1798 or 1803. The date given in *The Champion Genealogy* by Francis Bacon Trowbridge is 1798. Family tradition has it that the girl is Maria Champion who was born in 1791, making her six years old. If the girl is Eliza, who was born in 1797, then the picture could have been painted around 1803. Oil on canvas,  $46\frac{1}{2} \times 37$  inches. Lent by: Mrs. Eugene Ballard, Hartford.
22. MRS. MARY (THOMPSON) TRUMAN (1777-1838) and daughter AMELIA of New Haven, Conn. Wife of Capt. Daniel Truman. Their daughter Amelia was born in 1802. Family tradition states the child is Amelia. The child's gown is the same as the Daggett baby's of an earlier period; yet Mrs. Truman's gown and headdress place it in the early 19th Century. Portrait painted about 1804. Oil on canvas,  $38\frac{1}{2} \times 37\frac{1}{4}$  inches. Lent by: The New York Historical Society, New York, N.Y.
23. MRS. EUNECIA (STREET) STEBBINS (1759-1817) of East Haven, Conn. Wife of Rev. Stephen W. Stebbins of East Haven, and half-sister of Reuben Moulthrop's wife, Hannah. Portrait probably painted about 1805-1806. Oil on canvas,  $30 \times 24$  inches. Lent by: Howard S. Ransom, Orange [Conn.].
24. EBENEZER TOWNSEND (1742-1824) of New Haven, Conn. Portrait probably a copy after William Jennys. Portrait painted c. 1806, after Jennys's visit to New Haven. Oil on canvas,  $34\frac{1}{2} \times 27\frac{1}{2}$  inches. Lent by: New Haven Colony Historical Society, New Haven.
- \*25. MRS. THANKFUL (BARNARD) TOWNSEND (1751-1828) of New Haven, Conn. Wife of Ebenezer Townsend of New Haven. Portrait probably a copy after William Jennys, with Moulthrop variations. Painted c. 1806. Oil on canvas,  $34\frac{1}{2} \times 27\frac{1}{2}$  inches. Lent by: New Haven Colony Historical Society, New Haven.
26. REV. AMMI RUHAMAH ROBBINS (1740-1813) of Norfolk, Conn. Portrait documented as having been painted in 1812. Oil on canvas,  $59\frac{1}{8} \times 59\frac{1}{8}$  inches. Lent by: Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.
27. MRS. SARAH (ROBBINS) BATTELL and daughters SARAH (1810-1878) and IRENE (1811-1877) of Norfolk, Conn. Wife of Joseph Battell of Norfolk. Portrait painted in 1812. Letters referring to this and the preceding portraits are on display. Oil on canvas,  $31\frac{1}{2} \times 27\frac{1}{2}$  inches. Lent by: Yale University, Summer School of Fine Arts, Norfolk.



James Reynolds



Mrs. Mary (Kimberly)  
Thomas Reynolds

Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Bertram K. Little