

**KINSHIP AND COMMERCE:  
JAMES EARL AND THE BUSINESS OF PORTRAITURE  
IN THE ATLANTIC WORLD, 1785-1796**

by

Lan Morgan

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in American Material Culture

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## **ABSTRACT**

Obscured by a lack of information and over a century of misattribution, the work of American portraitist James Earl (1761-1796) has largely escaped scholarly interest. Despite Earl's oeuvre of illustrious patrons in London, Providence, Rhode Island and Charleston, South Carolina, attention has centered on the New England portraits of his older brother, Ralph Earl, the more prolific and longer-lived of the two artists.

This thesis first serves to clarify Earl's biography, tracing his career in Britain and America, as well as to bringing to light newly discovered evidence of his training under Ralph Earl. It then examines his subsequent American work through the lens of two double portraits by Earl of nearly identical composition, revealing an understudied network of commercial and cultural exchange between Providence and Charleston in the 1790s, on the eve of the American textile revolution. Through these paintings, I explore how Earl was situated at the crux of an increasingly connected Atlantic world at the end of the eighteenth century, and how his portraits functioned within the complicated kinship, commercial and social networks it produced.

## **Chapter 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Obscured by a lack of information and over a century of misattribution, the work of the painter James Earl (1761-1796) has largely escaped art historical interest. Despite Earl's presence in major American art museums, attention has centered on his older brother, Ralph Earl (1751-1801), the more prolific and longer-lived of the two artists. Ralph similarly painted in London, before returning to America in 1785 and capturing the likenesses of patrons in New England and New York. James, however, was a talented artist in his own right, producing canvases in London, Providence, Rhode Island and Charleston, South Carolina. By clarifying the details of his biography and examining his movement, Earl's body of work shows us that he was, in fact, at the crux of an increasingly interconnected Atlantic world at the end of the eighteenth century, held together by the complex sets of kinship and commercial networks. Earl followed the currents of mobility in the Early Republic, training in the great artistic center of London, using his connections to gain commissions in Providence, and following the movement of commerce to Charleston. His sitters, too, exemplify this interconnectivity, as they were part of the sophisticated and outwardly-looking citizens who shaped the intellectual and material life of the greater Atlantic world. In exploring Earl's circulation within these networks, this thesis also aims to think past binaries, such as north and south and Patriot

and Loyalist, and to consider how Americans have historically been connected amongst a diversity of political and geographic associations.

James Earl was born on May 1, 1761 to Quaker farmers, Ralph and Phebe Earl, in Paxton, Massachusetts. How James decided to become a painter remains a mystery, as do most of the details of his early life in rural Worcester County. It is likely that James followed the lead of his older brother, Ralph, who was ten years his senior and had received mild success as a painter in Connecticut before leaving for London in 1778. James, too, removed to London around 1784 and began the artistic training which propelled his successful painting career and high-status English commissions. Earl returned to the United States in 1794, by now a husband and father. Over the next two years, he produced a body of at least 47 paintings. Arriving in Providence, Rhode Island, Earl relied upon his family and social connections to gain commissions amongst the mercantile elite of the city. These connections would in turn help him in his succeeding painting sojourn in Charleston, where many Providence residents had moved or established business dealings. The complicated and overlapping networks that resulted from the strengthening connection between these two cities, and the Atlantic world at large, complicates our understanding of how eighteenth-century citizens thought outside of the political, geographic and social divisions we now ascribe them. Though Earl's foray in the United States was likely meant to be a short-term endeavor, he succumbed to yellow fever in Charleston in August 1796. This cut short a career which doubtless would have positioned him as one of the most talented American portraitists of his era.

## Literature Review

Art historical scholarship has largely neglected James Earl's paintings until now, in part because his over 70 works went unidentified until the early twentieth century. Most of these paintings remain in private hands, though several have made their way into museum collections in recent decades. Earl left no personal documents, save for a will and inventory quickly completed before his death in Charleston. This has made biographical study difficult, requiring methodical examination of the individuals associated with Earl to piece together his movements. Lastly, Earl has long been associated with southern painting, an area of art historical study which until recently has garnered less interest than its New England counterpart. Despite these obstacles, the many surviving portraits from Earl's body of work, and their presence in major museums, proves that there is public interest in the artist and presents the necessity of further study of his work.

Frederic Fairchild Sherman introduced James Earl to the art historical community in his 1935 article *James Earl: A Forgotten American Portrait Painter*. The first of few notable studies, Sherman made the significant identification of several portraits which had long been misattributed to more well-known artists, including Gilbert Stuart, Sir William Beechey, George Romney, and Ralph Earl. At the time, only seven of Earl's thirty or so works completed in Charleston were known. Sherman's scholarship first posited that Ralph's London training only technically improved the "primitive" style he had formulated early in life, whereas James' highly-finished portraiture was a direct

product of his English Academy training.<sup>1</sup> This was the beginning of the prevailing scholarly conversation surrounding the stylistic divergence between Ralph and James Earl. Long has persisted a comparative narrative between the two brothers, that Ralph shifted his artistic style to a suit his New England patrons, while James exploited his international training to satisfy a southern appetite for English-style portraiture. More recently, Elizabeth Kornhauser's in-depth investigation of Ralph's career has brought nuance to the discussion of his stylist modulation for specific New England markets.<sup>2</sup> Though her work makes little mention of James, her scrutiny of Ralph's possible early influences in Massachusetts and his activities in London bring a richer contextual background to this study.

During the 1970's, the William Benton Museum of Art undertook the next close look at James Earl by studying him as part of an exhibition highlighting the Earl family of artists. The accompanying catalogue discussed Earl in conjunction with his brother and his nephew, Ralph E.W. Earl. James Earl's son, Augustus, also a celebrated painter, was curiously omitted. Nonetheless, this was the first and only study which brought together a group of James Earl's American portraits for systematic study and exhibition. To date, no dedicated exhibition focusing solely on James has been staged.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Fairchild Sherman, "James Earl, a Forgotten American Portrait Painter." *Art in America and Elsewhere*, vol. 23, no. 4 (October 1935): 149.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser and Ralph Earl, *Ralph Earl: The Face of the Young Republic* (New Haven: Hartford, 1991).

Robert G. Stewart's 1988 article, *James Earl: American Painter of Loyalists and His Career in England*, provided the most carefully explored study of Earl's career in London, uncovering what little evidence of his time there survives. By identifying his known London sitters, Stewart illuminated Earl's trajectory after 1787, demonstrating that he achieved remarkable success in his ten years abroad, gaining commissions in the top echelons of society. Stewart was not able to substantiate whether or not Earl studied under Benjamin West, as his brother had, a question which is still up for debate. Stewart's investigation of Earl's London sitters, however, led him to categorize Earl as a "painter of American Loyalists".<sup>3</sup> This subsequently reinforced the notion that Earl, himself, was a Loyalist, an assumption which has framed the way in which scholars consider how Earl gained his commissions.

This London study was the result of Stewart's extensive biographical research on Earl in preparation of the first exhibition and biography based solely on the artist. He eventually abandoned the project, and fortunately, left his research papers to the Gibbes Museum in Charleston, South Carolina. Though his focus was to identify and locate the many portraits still held in the families from whence they descended, Stewart's papers have formed the basis for my own biographical work on Earl's patrons. His deep knowledge of Earl's technical tendencies led to the identification of many of the paintings we know to be by Earl today. Since this study was conducted almost thirty years ago, the

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<sup>3</sup> Robert G. Stewart, "James Earl: American Painter of Loyalists and His Career in England," *American Art Journal* 20, no. 4 (1988): doi:10.2307/1594526.



locations of Earl's privately-held portraits have once again fallen into obscurity. Though out of the scope of this thesis, an initiative to relocate the paintings would benefit future research.

Despite some scholarly recognition, a definitive biography on Earl has yet to be produced, thus much of his life and his work remains shrouded in mystery. The detrimental effect has been the perpetuation of apocryphal stories about Earl's life, such as the claim that he arrived in Charleston from London only because his ship was blown off course. Though short sketches about Earl continue to be published in the tomes of American art, they summarily dismiss him as an important member of the canon of eighteenth-century painters, namely because so little has been known about the artist's whereabouts. Therefore, a reassessment of the trajectory of Earl's life through verifiable documentary research is necessary for framing further concentrated study of his body of work.

### **Scholarship and Outline**

In reassessing Earl's known works, and in presenting new facts, this thesis attempts to bring a better understanding of Earl's life and his contribution to American painting. I use this biographical examination of Earl's life to explore a larger transatlantic story, in which late eighteenth-century Americans were domestically and internationally mobile, absorbing and disseminating cultural influence, and interacting with people outside their moral and political affiliations. I also aim to pose an art historical interjection, disputing the current frameworks for viewing artists and their patrons along polemic political, cultural and geographic divisions.

I build upon previous scholarship in several significant ways. First, the discovery of new archival evidence has allowed me to clarify Earl's movement between London, Providence and Charleston. By solidifying Earl's timeline, I hope to provide a more solid contextual basis for the deeper analytical study his work so desperately deserves. Second, I will present evidence of Earl's collaboration with his brother, Ralph, in London, settling, in part, the longstanding question of whether the two ever interacted after their childhood and complicating our understanding of Patriot and Loyalist post-war relationships. Lastly, I aim to dismantle Earl's current regionally-specific designation as a southern painter by demonstrating that each of his known painting locations was equally significant to his career as a whole. Though this has been done, in part, by Robert G. Stewart's examination of Earl in London, I argue that Earl's time in Rhode Island is also worthy of equal assessment, and that his connections in Providence served as the linchpin connecting him to London and Charleston.

In posing these interjections, my thesis will take the following course: Part I will examine Earl's time abroad by focusing on his portrait of Rhode Islander Solomon Drowne, painted in London in 1785. It will examine the nature of Earl's London artistic training and the development of the technical processes he transferred to his American painting career. Because Drowne was a Rhode Island native, this discussion begins to establish Earl's connections in America, while also emphasizing the worldliness and mobility of his sitters. This section will then discuss Earl's potential training under the direction of his brother, Ralph, speaking to his early painting influences, and complicating the idea that their political associations bonded or divided them. Part II

presents Providence, Rhode Island as the location Earl originally had intended to pursue his American painting career. It will examine Earl's worldly and mobile patrons painted in Providence, while also investigating the deep familial roots Earl had in the area. It then focuses on Earl's two double portraits painted in Charleston, *Rebecca Pritchard Mills and her Daughter, Eliza Shrewsbury* and *Elizabeth Paine and her Aunt*, as a lens for examining the shared connections between Charleston and Providence during the late eighteenth century, proposing that the growing social and commercial relationships resulted in a deeply connected and mobile network of citizens.

### **Methodology and Research**

In considering my methodological approach for this thesis, current art historical scholarship has heavily informed the way I have chosen to frame my intervention. Drawing from the work of material cultural-centric art historians and historians like Margaretta Lovell and Zara Anishanslin, I will examine Earl's portraits as material evidence of a given time and culture.<sup>6</sup> Lovell's defines this approach as a process of "synchronic analysis", which she describes as working outward from an object, or group of objects, to understand culture, rather than applying theory or cultural background to better understand an object.<sup>7</sup> I have chosen to analyze only those works which hold a

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<sup>6</sup> Margaretta M. Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution: Painters, Artisans, and Patrons in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Zara Anishanslin, *Portrait of a Woman in Silk: Hidden Histories of the British Atlantic World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution*, 3.

strong attribution to Earl, and wherever possible, works I have seen in person. Few exceptions are made in the case that a sitter's biographical information is essential to my larger argument.

Furthermore, this thesis addresses Maurie McInnis' argument to further integrate Southern painting into the canon of American art, citing the scholarly tendency to privilege northern-centric narratives and regard southern art as a deviation.<sup>8</sup> Exemplifying this north vs. south dichotomy, James and Ralph Earl have long been compared as an example of two artists who shifted their stylistic tendencies to suit northern and southern regional preference. However, new evidence proving that Earl painted a portion of his oeuvre in Rhode Island, as well as the paintings of Rhode Islanders living in Charleston, complicate this notion. They beg the question of what it means to be a "southern painter", particularly if one was born in the north, trained abroad and only best-known for canvases produced in the south. McInnis' also observes that trade networks with Europe, the West Indies and the East afforded southerners visual and material diversity, which should be considered in conjunction with southern art production.<sup>9</sup> By looking at Earl's Charleston paintings, we can see how objects created in one southern location were the result of the constant circulation of people and things around them.

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<sup>8</sup> Maurie D. McInnis "Little of Artistic Merit?: The Problem and Promise of Southern Art History." *American Art* 19, no. 2 (2005): 11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

By examining the full trajectory of Earl's career, encapsulated by a few select portraits, this thesis brings to light the personal, commercial, and geographic complexities of life in the post-revolutionary Atlantic world. In London, Earl trained at the heart of the metropolitan art world, employing the commercial strategies that successful artists used to survive. He adapted those strategies to the American market, relying on the familial and business networks that drove the economy and facilitated the movement of people and things along the eastern seaboard. Earl was responding to a world in which rising wealth and economic opportunity, organized along the lines of family and social networks, encouraged his sitters to take a global outlook upon the world, beyond simple regional conventions. His business of portraiture reflects this market.

## Chapter 2

### JAMES EARL ABROAD

Solomon Drowne, M.D. (1753-1834), arrived in London on January 11<sup>th</sup>, 1785. He had left his native Providence, Rhode Island the month before, “for improvement in the important art of Medicine; though I hope to let nothing escape notice which may inform the mind.”<sup>10</sup> During Drowne’s fruitful visit, he toured European hospitals and medical schools, collected botanical specimens, and acquired the latest medical books. In his spare time, Drowne attended the theater, dined with friends, visited art exhibitions and last but not least, he sat for his portrait. He wrote fondly of these leisurely excursions in his journal, making note of his frequent companion and portraitist, Mr. James Earl. He shipped resulting painting, which we know only from a copy made by Charles Cromwell Ingham (1796-1863) (Fig. 1), back to Providence in March 1785, where it passed through Drowne’s family as a memento of a beloved patriarch.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Drowne, Solomon, *Before Leaving for Europe*, Fragment, 1784, Box A, DF Papers, BULSC, Brown Digital Repository, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:420478/>, accessed November 16, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> The Rhode Island Medical Society commissioned Ingham to copy Earl’s portrait in the nineteenth century, which was then still held in the Drowne family.

While Drowne's original portrait remains unlocated, his surviving journals and letters provide valuable new insight into the early transatlantic activity of American portraitist James Earl. Earl left no personal papers of his own, but by exploring the archival records of his friend, Drowne, I have been able to place Earl in London two years earlier than has been confirmed by previous scholarship. Drowne's papers have also led me to the exciting discovery that James Earl did, in fact, train with his older brother, Ralph Earl, while in London.

In art historian Marcia Pointon's analysis of the artistic scene in 1780s London, she finds that the survival and success of aspiring portraitists depended on their strategic positioning. Competition between painters was fierce, particularly after England had been economically decimated after the war. Horace Walpole wrote of London in 1783, "this town is overrun with painters, as much as with disbanded soldiers, sailors and ministers, half of all four classes must be hanged for robbing on the highway, before the rest can get bread, or anybody else eat theirs in quiet."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, English aristocratic circles followed tight-knit patterns of artistic patronage, relying on artists who had demonstrated their work within their own kinship and social networks. It was exceedingly difficult for new artists to gain entry into these circles without a personal connection. The prescribed course for a young artist – entry to the Royal Academy and, or, an established artist's studio, procurement of a cultural education, living in proximity to other artists and related

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Kamensky, *Revolution in Color*, 311.

businesses, and gaining aristocratic patronage – was not only a recommended, but necessary for navigating London’s complex system of artistic enterprise.<sup>13</sup>

Amidst this backdrop, Solomon Drowne’s insights afford us a clearer picture of James Earl’s ambitious and successful rise as a painter in London. Immediately upon arriving, Earl busily practiced his craft on individual commissions, in collaboration with Ralph, and in the Royal Academy. He enriched his education with European travel, attended the studios of the great painters of the era, including Benjamin West and John Singleton Copley, and he began to publicize his work through exhibition. By the time James Earl left for America in 1794, he had fully realized the goals of his English training and career, having been officially accepted as a student in the Royal Academy, garnered prominent commissions amongst England’s professional and aristocratic figures, and gained public praise for his exhibited work. By understanding how Earl successfully navigated the London art world, situating himself as a high-level professional portraitist of aristocratic patrons, we can later explore how Earl was well-positioned to pursue his business in America.

When Earl’s friend, Solomon Drowne arrived in England, he was 31 years old. His five-month European medical tour was meant to enrich the medical practice he would be pursuing back home. Drowne was well known and respected in his native Providence. He had served heroically as a doctor in the Revolution from 1776 to 1780, and had been

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<sup>13</sup> Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 36.



recently appointed to the Board of Fellows of the College in the English Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations (now Brown University). Later in life, he would serve as professor at the Rhode Island College (also Brown University), and become particularly renowned for his study of medical botany.

Because it was his first visit to London, Drowne relied upon friends for orientation. He must have written to his contacts in preparation, because James Earl anticipated his arrival. One week after landing, Drowne collected Earl's address from the Half Moon Tavern, met him and his landlord, Mr. Glen, at their lodgings in Westminster, and they proceeded on a tour of Westminster Abbey.<sup>14</sup> It was the first of many dinners, walks, and outings with the 23-year-old James, whom Drowne would repeatedly refer to as "friend" and "my worthy companion".<sup>15</sup> Drowne's immediate and continuing familiarity with Earl suggests a previous close association, not only between the two, but their families, as well. In the years following his visit, Drowne and Earl maintained correspondence, and Drowne passed along good wishes from his brother, sister, and neighbors in Providence. Drowne was in close contact with Earl's father, Ralph Sr., who maintained family connections in Providence. In a later letter to Earl, Drowne chided him, "Your daddy told me the other day, that he had written several letters to you, since

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<sup>14</sup> Solomon Drowne, *Journal*, 1/11- March, Box 24, Folder 1784-85, Acc. no. B24 F7, SF Papers, BULSC.

<sup>15</sup> "Walk to several places...[London and Holland]"; Box A, SF Papers, BULSC, Brown Digital Repository, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:420477/>, accessed November 16, 2016.

he has received one from you. In one of them he mentioned the death of his wife. He said he should write again soon by way of York.”<sup>16</sup>

The necessity of personal connection was vital for young James, who, in 1785, had been overseas for less than a year. The circumstances of his own arrival in England remain a mystery, but it can be estimated that he arrived from America sometime in 1784.<sup>17</sup> A familiar face and friendly supporter must have been of great comfort to James. Though many eighteenth-century Americans still considered England the mother country, the society of London was a far cry from the rural town of Paxton, Massachusetts, where he was born, and much larger and more cosmopolitan than the closest cities of Boston and Providence. The many excursions he and Drowne shared likely served as his own introduction to the city’s cultural offerings.

Drowne’s journals reveal Earl’s early residence was in the district of Westminster, suggesting that he immediately aimed to immerse himself in the epicenter of London’s art world. Located below St. James park, the Westminster area was part of a cluster of neighborhoods artists of the Royal Academy preferred to inhabit. In addition to living amongst their fashionable patrons, artists in the Westminster, Piccadilly, Soho, and Mayfair areas of London could work in the vicinity of the craft industries which

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<sup>16</sup> Solomon Drowne to James Earl, April 8, 1786, Box 5, Acc. no. A49141a, SF Papers, BULSC.

<sup>17</sup> I assign 1784 as Earl’s date of arrival based on his obituary, which indicated that he had been in the United States for two years before dying in 1796, and in London a decade before that.

supported their business. For example, Earl would be expected to frame the portraits he created for his clients, which he could easily do in thanks to a high concentration of frame making shops established in the area in the 1780s.<sup>18</sup> Westminster also placed Earl close to the Leicester Fields neighborhood, where Ralph Earl had taken residence the year before, where the American painter Benjamin West ran his painting school and also where John Singleton Copley had held his studio.<sup>19</sup> A brief walk through St. James Park to the north would take James straight to Somerset House, where he could view the exhibitions of the Royal Academy.

Earl clearly took full advantage of these artistic offerings and Drowne was eager to join him. Drowne's diary on Feb 28<sup>th</sup>, 1784 reads,

After breakfast set off for Westminster...Mr. Earl and I walk about the park by Queen's Palace, and green park thro' Picadilly to Mr. Copelay's. See his paintings, etc. Thence to Mr. West's Historical Painting to the king. Excellent pieces here... Come back to the Pantheon in Oxford St., where we see Lunardi's grand balloon. Then return thro' Haymarket by open house and little theater and thro part of park by the grand canal where they are [illegible] to Mr. Glen's. After a cup of tea with [Mr. Glen's] son Jack we got to Covent Garden and see the Siege of Damascus and Magic Crown, or Virtue's Triumph.<sup>20</sup>

Drowne's ripe excerpt provides direct evidence of James visiting the studios of two of the greatest American artists of the period who, had furthered their international acclaim in

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<sup>18</sup> Pointon, *Hanging the Head*, 40-41.

<sup>19</sup> Kornhauser, *Ralph Earl*, 30.

<sup>20</sup> Solomon Drowne, *Journal*, Box 24, Folder 1784-85, Call no. B24 F7, DF Papers, BUSLC.

London. James was acutely aware of Benjamin West, as his brother, Ralph Earl, was a student of his studio. Appointed historical painter to the king in 1772, West had gained renown for promoting the history painting genre as the pinnacle of expression of both literary knowledge and artistic talent. Often using modern subjects while drawing from historical and mythological references, West's painting sensibilities set the tone for aspiring artists, who would need to be fluent in the liberal and mechanic arts, while also being familiar with the masterworks of European painting. That Earl and Drowne attended a historically-themed theatrical show in the same day speaks to this attempt to be well-versed in all aspects of the arts. From his home and studio, West sold tickets for the public to view his paintings, signaling that he was interested in garnering approval not only within England's aristocratic courts, but with a public audience, as well.

John Singleton Copley had emigrated to London from Boston in 1774. His fame as a great American portraitist resonated throughout New England before his departure, and he may have been an early influence on James' brother, Ralph. While living in London, he similarly opened his studio for viewing as a strategic tactic to bolster his reputation. He advertised open studio hours in the London papers, inviting the public to witness the creation of his work, created an air of high anticipation for his own paintings. In addition, he rented exhibition spaces (often, controversially, outside of the Royal Academy), charging the public a fee to view his work.<sup>21</sup> In the year before Earl arrived, Copley exhibited his work *The Death of Major Peirson, 6 January 1781*. Following in

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<sup>21</sup> Jane Kamensky, *Revolution in Color: The World of John Singleton Copley* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017), 300 and 325.

West's footsteps of creating a modern history painting, he depicted Britain's victorious defense of Jersey from the French in 1781. Because he used a scene from recent history with known figures, Copley's work resonated with royal and public audiences. King George III's approval, in turn, earned him permission to complete *The Three Youngest Daughters of King George III (Mary, Sophia, and Amelia)* in 1785, which Earl and Drowne perhaps saw in his studio.

Because James Earl visited the studios of these two great artists, he would have been witness the machinations of the business of publicity and self-promotion in the London art scene. He could observe the kinds of subjects these artists chose, their modes of exhibition, and the audiences they attracted. He was also rubbing elbows with the artists and clients who frequented these studios, and participating in the prescribed rounds of attendance which would give him the cultural awareness to produce his own work for the English market. Copley and West were two artists who worked both within and without the Royal Academy, exhibiting in their own homes and rented spaces. As will be later discussed, Earl began exhibiting in London in an unknown location outside of the Academy, clearly understanding the value of presenting his work at a public venue and building his reputation. He then began exhibiting exclusively at the Academy in 1787 until his death, choosing to show portraits of his patrons who were aristocratic and publically recognized. Later in Charleston, evidence suggests that Earl opened his own studio to younger artists, which may have been the influenced by West's model.

### **The Earl Brothers in London**

In studying Drowne's papers, this thesis makes the exciting first discovery of James working with his brother, Ralph Earl, in London. These passages are exceptionally useful to our understanding of the Earl brothers, as no conclusive evidence of Ralph and James ever crossing paths after childhood has previously come to light.<sup>22</sup> In an enlightening journal excerpt dated February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1785, Drowne notes, "Go to Mr. Glen's, where see Mr. Ralph Earl, who alters my picture".<sup>23</sup> In a later letter to his wife, Drowne describes the portrait again: "This was chiefly done by that worthy youth J. Earl; his brother had a touch at it; and it is thought a good likeness and a fine piece of painting."<sup>24</sup>

James' brother, Ralph, had been living in London since 1778, driven there during Britain's occupation of America for his Loyalist allegiances. He stayed until May 1785, leaving only a few months after Drowne's arrival, with whom he did not seem to share the same close relationship as he did with James. Drowne mentioned seeing Ralph occasionally with James, primarily when painting, and asked Ralph to transport a trunk of his belongings to his mother-in-law on his return journey to Boston.

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<sup>22</sup> The only previous proof of contact between the brothers was in 1768, when both were recorded in the Leicester Academy schoolbook, *The Youth's Instructor*. Stewart, *James Earl*, 35.

<sup>23</sup> Solomon Drowne, *Journal*, Box 24, Folder 1784-85, Acc. no. B24 F7, DF Papers, BULSC.

<sup>24</sup> Solomon Drowne to Elizabeth Drowne, March 9, 1785, Box, 5, Acc. no. A49138, DF Papers, BULSC.

Ralph's encouragement and success in London must have influenced James' decision to train abroad. By the time James arrived in London, Ralph had gained entry into Benjamin West's studio and exhibited four works at the Royal Academy. He had made a name for himself painting well-heeled Londoners, including several prominent military and professional figures, such as member of Parliament, *Colonel George Onslow*, and his portrait for *A Master in Chancery Entering the House of Lords*.

The older and more experienced of the two artists, Ralph likely gave a measure of finish or correction to James' work. The possibility of a mentoring, or even collaborative, relationship is further reinforced by a later journal entry, in which Drowne notes that he went, "to a house in Grace Church Street, where J. Earl and his brother are painting"<sup>25</sup> Ralph's artistic mentorship likely echoed the Earl brothers' early lives in Massachusetts, though how Ralph became introduced to painting remains a mystery. The brothers were born to Protestant farmers in the soon-to-be-incorporated town of Paxton (then still part of Leicester). Located in Worcester County, the small town remains rural to this day. This would not, however, have precluded the Earls from accessing the biggest urban painting center around them, Boston, at just under 50 miles east. Drowne's association with the Earls, too, reminds us that the family's network was wider than their rural roots. They were intimately connected through family and friends to Providence, Rhode Island,

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<sup>25</sup> "Go to Mrs. Draper's...[London]"; Box A, DF Papers, BULSC, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:420475/>, accessed November 16, 2016; A future investigation into the inhabitants of Grace Street in 1785 might help to identify their project and illuminate whether the two were working simultaneously in a studio or together.

which was situated on the opposite end of the Blackstone River. This essential corridor afforded the agrarian towns of central Massachusetts access to an international trading port. Elisabeth Kornhauser has suggested the influence of New Haven painter Henry Pelham on Ralph Earl, and through him, an introduction to Pelham's half-brother in Boston, John Singleton Copley. Ralph would express great admiration for Copley over the course of his career.<sup>26</sup> Whatever their initial stimulus, Ralph and James were both proficient painters by the time they each individually reached London, six years apart. Ralph had been working in Connecticut for several years, and many of his early paintings are known. In contrast, nothing painted by James before he left for London has been uncovered. The fact that he was clearly a sufficient painter by 1785 suggests that he was already working prior, and presents the possibility that some of his early works may still exist, unattributed, in the Worcester area.

Ralph Earl entered the London art world during a particularly pivotal moment for painters in England, as they were beginning to professionalize their trade and forge their identity as learned participants in the liberal arts. No longer satisfied with the status of tradesmen, the prominent artists of the period sought to elevate their craft beyond mere commercial production.<sup>27</sup> The new modern painter saw himself as a gentleman; his paintings would not only reflect his finely-honed technical skills, but also his formal

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<sup>26</sup> Kornhauser, *Ralph Earl*, 10

<sup>27</sup> Susan Rather, *The American School: Artists and Status in the Late Colonial and Early National Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 103.



education in scientific, classical and historical studies. In 1768, a group of artists, spearheaded by Benjamin West, signed a petition for a royal charter, which enabled the inception of the Royal Academy of the Arts and marked the beginning of organized artistic goals and an official system of training and exhibition. The resulting Royal Academy provided young artists with the rigorous training they would need to compete in the London market and granted them exposure through exhibition to the high-level patrons of London society.

Ralph chose to exhibit at the Royal Academy on four occasions, but never attempted the demanding application process to becoming a formal Academician.<sup>28</sup> Instead, he joined the studio of Benjamin West, which had become a magnet for young, aspiring American artists seeking training amongst their kinsmen and a greater degree of technical sophistication, before bringing their skills home. Ralph Earl was part of a second generation of West's American students, who included Charles Wilson Peale, William Dunlap and Gilbert Stuart. Little is known of Ralph's time under West, but he clearly benefitted from his training and professional reputation. Before leaving in 1785, he took out a newspaper ad in New York stating, "There is a very capital Portrait Painter, Mr. Earl, of Massachusetts, scholar of Copley, West and Sir Joshua Reynolds, and of great eminence in that branch, on the passage to the continent, where in all probability, he

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<sup>28</sup> Kornhauser, *Ralph Earl*, 28.

will soon take a very capital lead.”<sup>29</sup> Ralph leveraged his experience with West, and possibly exaggerated his connection to Copley and Reynolds, knowing the names of London artists had cultural currency and recognition in America.

Dorinda Evans found no convincing evidence that James Earl ever studied with West in her study of his American students, nor has this thesis not been able to further substantiate a link between the two. While James may not have worked directly with West, he no doubt benefitted from the training Ralph received in his studio, and the artistic connections Ralph made through West’s school.

### **Paint and Politics**

The newfound relationship between Ralph and James calls into question previous assumptions about how much their political affiliations dictated their personal lives and career choices.<sup>30</sup> In 1774, the town of Leicester elected their father, Ralph Earl Sr., as a representative in overseeing matters relating to the country’s separation from Britain and to watch for the “conduct of Tories”.<sup>31</sup> During the war he served as Captain in Colonel Samuel Denny’s regiment, and later in Colonel Danforth Keye’s regiment in Providence, at least through 1778. Surviving militia lists and payroll documents indicate that many of

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<sup>29</sup> Advertisement, *Connecticut Courant and Weekly Intelligencer* (Hartford), May 10, 1785, as reproduced in Kornhauser, *Ralph Earl*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Ralph was a Loyalist and James has been assumed to have followed in his footsteps, in opposition to their extended family of ardent Patriots. While Ralph certainly moved to London because of his convictions, whether James did the same in 1784, and whether it truly caused a rift between their family is up for debate.

<sup>31</sup> Kornhauser, *Ralph Earl*, 8.

the Earls of Leicester and Paxton joined Ralph Earl Sr. in his militia or with members of their extended Worcester and Providence network. Ralph and James' middle brother, Clark, for example, enlisted under Col. Ephraim Doolittle's regiment (a family friend), and close cousins James and Joel enlisted under their uncle, Ralph Earl Sr.<sup>32</sup>

The younger Ralph Earl moved out his family home to New Haven, Connecticut, soon after rejecting his father's call to join his militia.<sup>33</sup> In 1778, he was driven from New Haven for his refusal to take up arms, making a hasty escape from the country by posing as a servant to British Captain, John Money. He followed Money to East Anglia, England, where he painted for a time before living in Norwich, and finally, London. Ralph's connection to the aristocratic Money was key in helping him gain entry into the tightly knit patronage circles in England, and likely aided his eventual entry into West's studio, around 1783.<sup>34</sup>

James' relationship with Ralph in London, and the two with Solomon Drowne, complicate our notions of polemic divisions between political factions. Given the rebellious circumstances of Ralph's escape to London, and his avoidance of military

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<sup>32</sup> For a basic summary of Earl family members and their service. Many are indicated to be from Paxton or Leicester and can easily be traced to James Earl's family. Massachusetts and Secretary of the Commonwealth. *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War. Vol. 1-17*. Boston, MA, USA: Wright & Potter Printing, 1896-1908, 149-151.

<sup>33</sup> Kornhauser, *Ralph Earl*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

duty, it has been assumed that he was estranged from his family in Paxton. David R. Brigham has conjectured that Ralph's landscape *Looking East from Denny Hill*, painted for Thomas Denny Jr. (1757-1814, of the same Denny family his father fought with in the Revolution) in the Paxton area in 1800, almost two decades after the close of the war, signified his reconciliation with his family and former community in Massachusetts.<sup>35</sup> Ralph's relationship with James in London, however, indicates that he was at least in contact with his youngest brother. He also appeared to have maintained a relationship with Drowne, his father's friend and a Patriot, who had his address at No. 2 Leicester Field, Westminster, in his personal effects.<sup>36</sup> By 1785, Ralph had moved to 12 Bowling Street, perhaps needing a larger residence to accommodate his new bride, Ann Whiteside. This earlier address (likely his 1784 address, when he was known to have lived in Westminster), signifies their earlier contact.<sup>37</sup>

Lastly, it is very likely that he was on good terms with his father by the time he returned to America in 1785. Drowne wrote to James in 1786, "Your brother + wife have been here. She likes Prov. vry much. They are in N. York, where I hear he has a

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<sup>35</sup> David R. Bridgham, "Painting Stories in the Land." *Common-place.org*. Vol. 01, no. 3 (March 2001). Accessed February 13, 2017, <http://common-place.org/book/painting-stories-in-the-land/>.

<sup>36</sup> Within the Westminster district, this might be where James also lodged under Mr. Glen, feasibly taking Ralph's place after he left. "Mr. Ralph Earl," fragment, Box 25, Folder: Solomon Drowne, Miscellaneous, DF Papers, BULSC.

<sup>37</sup> Kornhauser, *Ralph Earl*, 30.

good deal of business,” followed in the next clause by a conveyance of a discussion with their father.<sup>38</sup> The close phrasing between Ralph Earl and Ralph Earl Sr. implies that Drowne saw the two in the same trip, but recognized no ill will between them.

James Earl’s political convictions are less clear. Evidence of his early life is spare and presents no clues to his allegiance one way or the other. Robert G. Stewart correctly drew the connection that several of Earl’s sitters in England were American Loyalists, including Samuel Goldsbury, William and Hannah Jarvis and their family, Robert Carey Michell, Francis Welch, and Dr. Samuel Stearns. James has since been labelled a “painter to the Loyalists”, with the implication that he, too, was a Loyalist.<sup>39</sup> His Loyalist portraits, however, account for only seven of his at least thirty London canvases. It seems more likely that Earl gained these commissions as a result of the social circles he participated in, prioritizing monetary and reputational gain over political allegiance. Dr. Samuel Stearns, for example, was a neighbor in Paxton. Earl supported his petition to the British Government, verifying that he upheld the Loyalist cause in America, but himself did not identify as a Loyalist nor ever file his own petition, as Ralph did. James may also have met some of his Loyalist patrons through Ralph, though surprisingly, Ralph’s clients all firmly belonged to the English gentry.

While it is tempting to analyze James and Ralph Earl’s careers by their political affiliations, it distracts from the more poignant issue of the ambiguities of living abroad

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<sup>38</sup> Solomon Drowne to James Earl, April 8, 1786, Box 5, DF Papers, BUSLC.

<sup>39</sup> Stewart, *James Earl*, 35.

in the midst of revolution and nation building. Though the facts on James Earl's politics are sparse, we can reframe our understanding of his career in alignment with the current scholarship which considers war-time expatriates as a politically blended network of Americans abroad. Historian Catherine E. Kelly argues in her chapter *Looking Past Loyalism* that not all Americans in London during and after the war were ardent Loyalists to the crown; many moved with the hope of continuing their educational, social and professional lives without interruption.<sup>40</sup> Even those who called themselves Loyalists held varying degrees of opposition to the war. Copley, for example, considered himself politically neutral, but went abroad to further his painting career and remove his family from Boston's conflict zone. What brought many of these Americans together was their status as expatriates, bonded together by the need to create a community amongst an English society who still viewed them as provincial.

By the time James Earl arrived in London in 1784, the war was over. As historian Jane Kamensky describes, it was an uncertain and fraught period for Americans living overseas, who could no longer claim citizenship to a larger empire, but were forced to define their place amongst the newly divided boundaries. National identity in many ways overtook political allegiance. Defining the new "American" and what it meant to come from this bold and entirely self-fashioned country intrigued and captivated intellectual

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<sup>40</sup> Catherine E. Kelly, *Republic of Taste: Art, Politics, and Everyday Life in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 124-126.

thought of the period.<sup>41</sup> Whether James, Ralph and their patrons defined themselves as “Loyalist” or “Patriot” and felt comradeship or opposition in that vein is doubtful and likely not relevant to their painting careers. Instead, it makes more sense to think of the Earls circulating within their opportune networks.

### **The Portrait of Solomon Drowne**

The collaboration of James, Ralph and Solomon Drowne, all individuals of varying and undetermined political sympathies, is visually encapsulated in the portrait of Drowne. Although Ralph assisted, Drowne considered the portrait to be primarily by James, and it therefore represents James Earl’s earliest known work. Sent to Providence in 1785, it may also have functioned to spread word of Earl’s talent amongst his friends and relations in Rhode Island, where he would return to paint nearly a decade later.

Drowne sat for four sessions with James (excluding Ralph’s alterations), later paying him five pounds, one shilling for the portrait, and two pounds, six shillings for the frame.<sup>42</sup>

Elizabeth Drowne requested that Solomon have a portrait taken during his trip, though it seems she did not specify by whom. Her request took advantage of Drowne’s presence in London, which was known in America for its particularly high concentration of portraitists. In the capital city alone, at least 111 portraitists were known to be active in

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<sup>41</sup> Kamensky, *Revolution in Color*, 312.

<sup>42</sup> Solomon Drowne, *Journal*, Box 24, Folder: 1784-85, Call no. B24 F7, DF Papers, BULSC.

the 1780s, though some estimations put the number closer to 800.<sup>43</sup> Providence, by comparison, had the wealth to afford portraiture, but few local artists. At mid-century, nearby Newport was the thriving monetary capital, attracting the likes of Robert Feke, Joseph Blackburn, and John Wollaston. By third quarter of the century, Providence overtook Newport in wealth and connection, but had few local artists of note. They may have relied on itinerant portraitists, and artists based in Boston.

Elizabeth Drowne's request also speaks to nature of extended travel in the eighteenth century, in which portraiture helped to visually reinforce the connection between separated loved ones. Drowne wrote of the portrait to his wife, "I hope you will not be displeased with the shadow of an affectionate partner, however small."<sup>44</sup> As Margareta Lovell writes, in the absence of a portrait's subject, the likeness functioned as both a sentimental token, as well as a reminder of the sitter's position within the family line.<sup>45</sup> In his prolonged absence, the portrait served as Drowne's proxy, and would continue to do so in the case that he did not return from what was often a perilous transatlantic journey. This seems evident in his decision to sit for his portrait immediately after arriving, and to send it to his wife months before his return. Drowne also recognized this reality in a letter to Elizabeth, in which he forwarded instructions for his trunk

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<sup>43</sup> Pointon, *Hanging the Head*, 40.

<sup>44</sup> Solomon Drowne to Elizabeth Drowne, March 9, 1785, Box 5, Acc. no. A49138, DF Papers, BULSC.

<sup>45</sup> Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution*, 10-11.



containing biological samples he sent overseas: “[I] request that it may be kept in a dry place, as it contains some things...which will be of consequence to me if I live.”<sup>46</sup>

We know Drowne’s portrait today through the copy painted by Charles Cromwell Ingham for the Rhode Island Medical Society in 1863. At the time, the original was still in the Drowne family. Though a formal analysis of Earl’s early technique cannot be drawn from the copy, the painting nonetheless provides a general sense of the conventions Earl was working with by 1785. Because Ralph oversaw James’ progress, it lends clues as to if or how Ralph influenced James’ work before he formally trained at the Academy.

Seated at three-quarter view, the half-length portrait of Drowne follows the standard composition for British portraiture of the period. Earl places his subject before a draped red curtain, a common convention of European portraiture, which serves to delineate the space between sitter and background and produces a theatrical effect. The drawn curtain reveals a bookcase full of uniform volumes, a trope often used for portraits of professional men, and one that could be easily copied from available print sources. In Earl’s later English portraiture, he would begin to adopt backgrounds with sketchily painted landscapes and tempestuous skies, elements favored by his teacher at the Royal Academy, Joshua Reynolds, and artists such as Thomas Gainsborough.

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<sup>46</sup> Solomon Drowne to Elizabeth Drowne, April 6, 1785, Box 5, Acc. No. A49138, DF Papers, BULSC.

This configuration is one that Earl would repeat for portraits of American professional men, including Doctor Cephas Price of Worcester (painted in Charleston, ca. 1796), Declaration of Independence signer Edward Rutledge of Charleston (ca. 1795), and Doctor Amos Throop of Providence (ca. 1794). Drowne's alert expression and his direct gaze would also become signatures of Earl's later work. If we are to believe the accuracy of Ingham's copy, however, Earl had not yet adopted the slight smile seen in his later work which would lend his male sitters a sense of gentlemanly ease. When compared to the ca. 1794 portrait of Doctor Amos Throop (Fig. 2), President of the Rhode Island Medical Society, who sits comfortably in a painted Windsor chair with a slightly amused expression, Drowne appears somewhat rigid in his upright posture.

The plainness of Drowne's costume might also suggest that Earl had yet to perfect his aptitude for precise and intricately-rendered fabrics, particularly in showing profusions of ruffles at the collar. The strong linearity and bold shadows in the textiles are, indeed, more reminiscent of Ralph Earl's work. In addition, Drowne's portrait is rendered with strong and specific facial characteristics. The specificity of likeness was a distinctive aspect both Ralph and James conveyed in their paintings, and would continue to do for the rest of their careers. This ran contrary to the English convention of creating overall genteel effect in the portrait, rather than capturing a sitter's exact facial features. It is possible that Ralph and James shared this value, even though the two approached likeness with markedly different styles.

The book titles behind Drowne in the Ingham portrait are obscured, however the original work may have borne the names of contemporary medical tomes, as they do in

Earl's later works of men in the medical field. In Earl's portrait of Amos Throop, each spine is clearly labelled with titles such as *Cullen*, *Moseley*, and *Moore's Sketches*. Earl's familiarity with these books may be a result of his serving as Drowne's occasional, if reluctant, book buyer in London. Drowne often asked Earle to collect this or that title, "if he could spare the money".<sup>47</sup> In a 1787 letter to Drowne, his book merchant wrote, "I have not seen, nor heard, anything from Mr. Earl, the painter; when he calls upon me, I shall endeavor to fulfill your request." and later, "P.S. Since the above was written, Mr. Earl called upon me; but seemed unwilling to advance any money to buy the books you mention."<sup>48</sup>

### **James' London Career**

In years following the departure of Solomon Drowne and Ralph Earl, James Earl continued to take the necessary prescribed steps towards a successful career as a painter in the Academy. By the time he left for America in 1794, Earl was thriving in the upper levels of London's art world. His submissions for exhibition suggest that he consciously situated himself within the Academy world as a portraitist, courting the patronage of Britain's most distinguished citizens. He would take five years to achieve entry into the Royal Academy, but in the meantime, he aggressively pursued his position amongst the

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<sup>47</sup> Solomon Drowne to Dear Friend, May 15, 1787, Box 5, Acc. no. A49142, DF Papers, BULSC. Note I have identified "Dear Friend" as James Earl based upon several references to Earl's family and life in London in this letter.

<sup>48</sup> This interaction constitutes only one of several instances in which Drowne asked Earl to obtain medical books for him. Abraham Booth to Solomon Drowne, August 17, 1787, Box 1, Acc. no: D1923, DF Papers, BULSC.

ranks of elite portraitists by exhibiting annually, practicing the formal elements of a proper artistic training, and gaining commissions from eminent patrons who would help garner him attention.

In 1786, Drowne referenced a letter Earl had written to a mutual friend in Providence. “By your letter to Polly Thompson I learn with real pleasure that you meet success in your business. May you go on improving, till you equal not only Sir. J. Reynolds, West + Copely [sic], but also Rubens, Van Dyke, Titian, Correggio and the yet more celebrated Raphael.”<sup>49</sup> This quote tells us that Earl, who we knew to be visiting the studios of West and Copley, had a targeted admiration for these artists. His esteem for Sir Joshua Reynolds, President of the Royal Academy, makes sense in light of his ambitions to join the Academy. Finally, the last five artists Drowne mentions suggests Earl’s familiarity with, and appreciation, for the great European masters of Renaissance and Baroque art. Drowne’s hope that Earl would “equal” these artists implies that Earl’s ambitions went beyond simply making a living as a portraitist, but that he hoped to consider himself amongst the ranks of the most well-known artists of the historical and contemporary canon of painters.

Becoming a student of the Royal Academy was first step in this process. Entry to the Academy was fiercely competitive, and Earl appears to have been attempting admission soon after he arrived in England. Drowne’s journals imply that Earl was preparing his submissions as early as 1785. On April 25<sup>th</sup> of that year, Drowne writes,

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<sup>49</sup> Solomon Drowne to James Earl, April 8, 1786, Box 5, DF Papers, BULSC.

“about 4 o'clock go to Somerset Place, a noble building in the Strand, to the Exhibition of Paintings etc. Find friend James there agreeable to appointment.”<sup>50</sup> The Academy's entrance rules required candidates to perform strict series of artistic projects, which then needed to be approved by the Keeper (teacher) and Visitor (visiting artist). The official guidelines stated:

Students who offers himself for admission must first present a Drawing from a plaster cast to Keeper; if qualified, will be permitted to make a drawing from a Cast in the Royal Academy. If approved by Keeper and Visitor, then laid before the Council for confirmation, at which point you receive a Letter of Admission as a Student. From there, can continue to draw from plaster until deemed ready to draw from live models.<sup>51</sup>

With this in mind, Drowne's comment might be interpreted to mean that Earl at the second phase of admission, in which he was permitted to make drawings from the Academy's plaster cast collection, which had recently moved location from Pall Mall to Somerset House (Fig. 3). Despite this early initiative, the Royal Academy's register only records Earl's official entry as student four years later, in 1789.<sup>52</sup> As Marcia Pointon writes, “Between the artist and the Academy lay a gulf that had to be bridged by personal

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<sup>50</sup> “Walk to several places...[London and Holland]”; Box A, SF Papers, BULSC, Brown Digital Repository, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:420477/>, accessed November 16, 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Reproduced in Sidney C. Hutchinson, “The Royal Academy Schools, 1768-1830.” *The Volume of the Walpole Society* 38 (1960): 128. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41829338>.

<sup>52</sup> *Register of Students at the Royal Academy of Arts, 1769-1922*, Column “E”, Mic. 2449, The Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera.

contact, nepotism, patronage and determination.” Though perhaps aided in his first years by his association with Ralph Earl, James would need to exert considerable efforts to establish himself amongst the circles of English artists and patronage.

As he continued to train for a place amongst these great artists and the Academy, Earl might have taken his own *Grand Tour* in order to fit the new model of painters who were classically educated and understood the cultures of antiquity. Drowne had toured the Netherlands and France after leaving London. In a letter, Earl asked him for the details and costs of his trip, which Drowne readily provided.<sup>53</sup> Exposure to the techniques of the European masters was a vital component of a professionally trained artist’s repertoire, and Earl likely sought to bolster his own education in this way through travel.

Perhaps the most important device Earl used in his efforts to launch his career was exhibition, the primary stage for gaining public exposure and building a network of patronage. He began exhibiting as soon as he could, first submitted works to an unknown venue in 1785 and 1786. This knowledge comes to us from Drowne’s 1786 letter to Earl, which remarks, “You will soon have an Exhibition. Let us know if it is equal to last year’s.”<sup>54</sup> The following year, he entered two pieces into his first Royal Academy

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<sup>53</sup> Drowne responds to this request in his letter to Earl, May 15, 1787, Box 5, DF Papers, BULSC.

<sup>54</sup> Solomon Drowne to James Earl, April 8, 1786, Box 5, DF Papers, BULSC.

exhibition: *A Small Head* (No. 12, unlocated) and *Two Boys* (No. 345, unlocated).<sup>55</sup> The latter, illustrated in a print after Johann Heinrich Ramberg (Fig. 4), was hung at the top corner of the crowded exhibition room, but was nonetheless amongst the varied submissions from the best artists of the day. Ramberg's depiction demonstrates how Royal Academy exhibitions served as major social events. Their full attendance afforded Earl an enormous amount of public exposure, which in turn, could lead to further commissions. Earl would continue to submit paintings to the Academy every year, including the years he was in America, possibly with the help of his wife or friends who remained in London.<sup>56</sup> These last entries in 1794 and 1796 suggest that he intended to return to London after his American painting trip, and sought to maintain his reputation there.

Earl's enterprising activity did, indeed, help him to eventually garner his position in the Academy in 1789. It appears that he steadily continued to build his profile so that by the time he entered, he had already begun to access elite levels of patronage. Aside from his efforts in exhibition, potential travel, and practice at the Academy, little

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<sup>55</sup> It should be noted that *A Small Head* has been incorrectly presumed to be a portrait of London surgeon Edmund Pitts, known today by a 1793 engraving by William Blake. The signature on the engraving "J. Earle armiger", as lead scholars to believe the original painting was by James Earl, when in fact, Blake engraved the portrait for a 1793 publication entitled *Practical Observations on the Operation for the Stone*, by a London surgeon named James Earle. National Library of Medicine, *William Blake at the National Library of Medicine* (Bethesda: National Library of Medicine, 1998), n4.

<sup>56</sup> For a detailed description of each of Earl's submissions, see Stewart, *James Earl*, 38-45.

information exists to explain how, exactly, he made these connections. This is further complicated by the fact that so few of Earl's English works have been identified, and many, we only know from their vague exhibition titles, making it difficult to assess his relationship to his sitters, and the links his sitters had to each other. What can be certain, is that in the later stages of Earl's English career, he had reached a reputation in which he was able to paint the upper echelons of British aristocratic society and public figures.

These high-profile clients represented more than simply a marker of success and a point of entry into close networks of patronage. According to Pointon, the recognized status of a patron assured a portraitist publicity for his work and presented the opportunity for further copies.<sup>57</sup> If an artist created a well-received portrait of a public or aristocratic figure, he could expect his reputation to rise, but also, that friends or admirers of the sitter might commission him or her to copy the same portrait. While Earl did paint several American expatriates, he seemed to primarily exhibit British patrons in the highest levels of society, signaling his target market.<sup>58</sup> This suggests that, even in his success, he was still strategic in how he presented himself as a portrait. Earl's access to these circles also tells us that Earl mastered the polite manners that were vital to a painter's success in high society. Not only would an artist need to adopt a gentlemanly comportment in keeping with the class of sitters, but would need to demonstrate that he

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<sup>57</sup> Pointon, *Hanging the Head*, 41 and 47.

<sup>58</sup> The one exception is a portrait of Dr. Samuel Stearns, exhibited in 1790 (No. 66). This is Earl's only known portrait executed in miniature form, which perhaps helped him to advertised the diversity of his services.



could imbue their portraits with the pictorial conventions which articulated their elevated status.<sup>59</sup>

In 1790, Earl submitted to the Academy No. 231, “Portrait of a Lady of Quality, Lady Caroline Beauclerk,” one of seven total portraits Earl completed of the Beauclerks, the fifth Duke of St. Alban’s family. The wealthy and prominent Beauclerks could choose any painter to render their portraits. A decade earlier, for example, they commissioned Joshua Reynolds, President of the Royal Academy and one of the most highly-sought after British portraitists. Only one year after his entry into the Royal Academy, this group signified a major success in the level of patronage Earl now received. In his portrait of Lady Caroline Beauclerk (reproduced in Robert G. Stewart, *James Earl: American Painter of Loyalists*, 41), Earl included a plethora of contrasting transparent fabric, textured fur, gleaming ribbons, and downy hair to frame the young woman’s finely blended facial features.<sup>60</sup> The slightly feathery and painterly quality of Earl’s paint conforms to the fashionable styles set forth by British artists such as Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough and William Beechey. By contrast, in his portrait of Lady Caroline’s brother, Lord Frederick Beauclerk (Fig. 5), he expresses his preference for strong contours, broad swathes of highly saturated color, made luminous by a forward-facing light, and strong bodily presence, elements he would carry over to his

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<sup>59</sup> Pointon, *Hanging the Head*, 47.

<sup>60</sup> See Stewart, *James Earl*, 44, for a reproduction of Lady Georgiana’s Beauclerk’s portrait.

American portraits. Though Earl imbued his subjects with the specificities of likeness, he also tended to generalize certain features, such as the almond shaped eyes and heavy lids we see on the young boy. Both of these paintings show that unlike his brother, Ralph, James Earl never took interest in the environmental details of his paintings. He placed his subjects in uncomplicated backgrounds, before a simple wall and drawn curtain, or at most, in a sketchily-rendered, but ambiguous landscape. He did, however, begin to exercise his great talent for color, texture, and dimensionality, while demonstrating his familiarity with British portrait conventions.

Given the high status of the Beauclerk commission, it is likely that Earl's submission the following year in 1791, *Portrait of a Lady* (no. 207), identified only as "Miss Jennings," was Elizabeth Jennings. A celebrated beauty and the granddaughter of famed picture collector, Sir Luke Schaub, a portrait of Elizabeth Jennings would indeed have drawn notice to Earl's work. The artist Joseph Farington later wrote of Jennings, that her beauty was such, "as to cause Her to be the object of general attention during two or three seasons successively in London witht. a rival to be put in competitions with Her."<sup>61</sup>

Earl followed Miss Jennings' portrait with a submission that was at once shocking and demonstrated the full mastery of his skill. In 1793, he exhibited *Portrait of a Lady of Quality (Lady Massareene)* (Fig. 6). He rendered Lady Massareene seemingly emerging

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<sup>61</sup> Quoted in "Lot Essay", Christie's, London, Sale 6210, Lot 6.  
<http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/sir-thomas-lawrence-pra-1769-1830-portrait-1607587-details.aspx>.

from the canvas, an ethereal figure amid a dramatic black background. Her creamy, finely-blended complexion appears as delicate and translucent as her suggestive muslin bodice. Born Mary-Anne Brocier in France, Lady Massareene was a scandalous figure, having helped the Earl of Massareene escape from debtor's prison before marrying him and moving to London in 1791. When she sat for her portrait, she was the talk of the town, having already left her husband. Stewart conjectures that Earl likely leveraged her notoriety for his own gain by offering to paint her portrait for free.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, it seemed to have worked. The following poem was published in teasing praise of Earl's portrait, by an anonymous writer in a London newspaper:

To Mr. Earle,  
*On his painting the Countess of M—'s Portrait.*

PRESUMPTUOUS EARLE! thy  
Art is vain –  
Thy glowing pencil ne'er can trace  
The more than mortal charms, that join  
To deck the lovely MARIANNE'S  
face!

Gaze on her polish'd brow, her cheek  
Soft dimpled, and her flowing hair;  
Her eyes! whose ev'ry liquid look can speak;  
And then to imitate – despair!

Her mouth, where wanton Cupids play,  
Her lips (more glowing than the rose  
Fresh budding in the dew of May)  
Half-op'd, the orient pearls disclose!

Then cease, ingenious Earle, thy vain essay,

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<sup>62</sup> Stewart, *James Earl*, 45.

And own the weakness of thy art!  
No mortal artist can her charms display;  
But love has fix'd them in my heart!

St. PREUX<sup>63</sup>

It was a testament to Earl's name recognition and achievement in London that the poem's author could employ only subtle references to the portrait. Writing to a literate and culturally-sophisticated audience, the author assumed the name *St. Preux*, referencing a character in the play *Eloisa*, which had recently run at Covent Garden.<sup>64</sup> The play was a take on the story of doomed lovers *Eloise and Abelard*, which was enjoying a revival of interest in the late eighteenth century. In the first line, he calls the artist "Presumptuous Earl," (also a literary reference to Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*), while finally conceding that he is in fact, "ingenious Earle" for capturing her likeness so well. This highly public, yet cryptic, statement makes abundantly clear that the Lady Massareene portrait was not only seen, admired, and discussed by a wide enough audience to understanding the poem's meaning, but that Earl was recognized and celebrated as its "ingenious" creator.

Earl never veered from the portrait genre. While the pioneers of the Royal Academy privileged history painting as the true test of a painter's technical, imaginative and literary prowess, Earl firmly opted to proclaim his reputation as a painter of

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<sup>63</sup> As later republished after Earl's death in *The United States Chronicle* (Providence, Rhode Island), January 19, 1797, 4.

<sup>64</sup> For a detailed review and synopsis of the play, see "Theatre, Covent Garden," *The Times* (London, England), December 21, 1786, 2.

likenesses. Portraiture was, after all, was the bread and butter of an artist's career, even if they chose to eschew it publicly for loftier categories. If his chosen genre attracted less attention in and of itself, Earl certainly gained notice for the aristocratic patrons and public figures he painted.

It is interesting to note that in the year Earl left England for America, 1794, he submitted a work entitled *Portrait of an Artist (Earle)* (No. 27). Likely a self-portrait, it was the second he would exhibit of the same name, the first being in 1790 (No. 61). Though both are unlocated, the fact that Earl publically exhibited his own portrait, tells us that he was announcing his business and artistic ideals to his potential patrons, connecting them to his face and his name. In doing so, he followed the lead of several American-born and English-trained artists before him. Matthew Pratt's 1765 *American School*, depicted a scene of instruction in Benjamin West's studio, in which Pratt included his own likeness working in from of an empty canvas, in effect, framing his own portrait. Susan Rather has read Pratt's work, in part, as demonstrating the recommended training required to fulfill the role of the of a proper artist, as defined by the popular treatises of the period.<sup>65</sup> Charles Wilson Peale, in his *Self-Portrait with Angelica and Portrait of Rachel Peale*, painted in the early 1780s, depicts himself painting his wife, with his daughter teasingly positioned behind him. His self-portrait plays with the ideas of portraiture as tied to family experience, while illuminating the ambiguities between the

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<sup>65</sup> Rather, *The American School*, 113.

living, ephemeral person and the inanimate object portraiture produces.<sup>66</sup> In both of these examples, the artists placed themselves within the works to comment on the role of the painter in bringing the genre to fruition. Margaretta Lovell sees these self-portraits as the antidote to the presumption that portraitists merely “settled” on portraiture instead of history painting. Perhaps, instead, “they saw it as so common, so embedded in social structures of individual, class, and family identity, that it had no need for the elaboration of theory constructed around the more obviously political and ideological...project of history painting.”<sup>67</sup> That Earl titled his submissions “portrait of an artist”, rather than “self-portrait” suggests a narrative or didactic composition which informed the viewer of what it means to be an artist, rather than a simple recording of a likeness. The location of Earl’s self-portraits would greatly benefit scholarship, as it might tell us how he chose to position himself and his “project” of portraiture to the public.

James Earl’s career in London was an impressive foray into the upper levels of the English art world. Arriving at only 23 years old, he leveraged his talent and what connections he had into the finest training available and a successful professional career. Through Solomon Drowne’s journals, we get a sense of Earl fully enmeshing himself in London’s cultural offerings, becoming literate in the art scene, and pursuing the prescribed course of study for an ambitious young artist. James’ brother, Ralph Earl had a greater impact on his career than scholarship could previously acknowledge. Not only

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<sup>66</sup> Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution*, 34.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

does their overlapping time in London suggest that James benefited from Ralph's experience in the metropolitan art world, but evidence that they physically painted together implies that James' artistic technique was developed in direct conversation with Ralph's methods and training in Benjamin West's studio.

In visiting the studios of London's great artists, training under his brother, and eventually, training in the Royal Academy, James Earl was surrounded by people who knew the business of portraiture. From this, he embraced his role as portraitist, strategically pursuing his craft to expand his markets. He eventually did this through the best possible conduit, the Royal Academy, which situated his work amongst the most celebrated artists of the era, and placed it directly before patrons in the highest levels of society. The aristocratic patronage Earl received, in turn, only bolstered his notoriety.

In 1789, Earl married Caroline Pilkington Smyth, a widow to an American Loyalist, with whom he had three children. Ten years after arriving, he made the decision to leave England for America, without his family, supporting the theory that he intended to return. Though not a stranger, he would be entering a market where his work was largely unfamiliar, except for his portrait of Solomon Drowne, which arrived in America nine years before. Earl would utilize the skill he had developed while painting in London with his established network of American connections, to begin a career painting of illustrious figures of the Early Republic. Beginning this two-year sojourn, he left for the home of his good friend, Solomon Drowne: Providence, Rhode Island.

### Chapter 3

#### JAMES EARL IN AMERICA

In 1794, Earl's friend, Solomon Drowne, had moved to Pennsylvania. His sister, Sarah Drowne, who kept close tabs on the comings, goings, deaths and births of their native Providence, provided him with a detailed series of letters in his prolonged absence. In August 1794, she wrote to Solomon, "James Earl has been in town and has gone to spend the winter at Charles Town/SC, he expects to be here again next spring [sic]."<sup>68</sup> In this one line, my discovery of Sarah Drowne's letter in the Drowne Family Papers completely alters the recognized trajectory of Earl's painting career. To this point, James Earl's presence has only been confirmed in Charleston, leaving question as to where and why he painted at least sixteen known portraits of native Rhode Islanders. Without fully understanding his motives for painting in Charleston, past scholarship has assumed that he arrived there after his ship from London was blown from a northern course. Sarah Drowne's letter, however, illuminates that Earl had in fact first painted in Rhode Island, and intended to return there after staying in Charleston for one season.

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<sup>68</sup> Sarah Drown to Solomon Drown, September 16, 1796, Box 4, DF Papers, BULSC; At least four letters from James Earl to Solomon Drown from the years 1785-1792 exist in the Drowne Family Papers at the Brown University Special Collections (see finding aid). Though currently unlocated, their rediscovery may aid researchers in revealing Earl's motives for returning to the United States.



Without any instructive evidence, we cannot know for certain why Earl returned to America in 1794. The patronage he enjoyed in England at the time he left, as outlined in the previous chapter, and his continued submissions to Royal Academy exhibitions through 1796, suggest that he intended to return. He also had a new family in England, who were described by Sarah Drowne in her letters. “He married an officer’s widow with two children and he has had three. She has half pay; her income is sixty pounds sterling a year, but whether it all arises from that I can’t say.”<sup>69</sup>

What can be certain, is that in his two years in America, Earl produced at least 42 portraits without ever advertising, suggesting that he managed to successfully parlay the skills he had learned in London to gain commissions in America. Though returning to his native country, Earl encountered a different artistic market than the one he had left. America had no Royal Academy to serve as the benchmark for artistic training, nor did they have a system of exhibition to publicize work to a mass audience. The courtly and aristocratic system of patronage that was waning in England by the end of the eighteenth century was nonexistent in America. To Earl’s advantage, however, Americans had limited exposure to England’s ongoing artistic theory, thus they generally placed more value in portraiture than history painting, unlike their English counterparts.<sup>70</sup> The demand for portraiture was growing, not only amongst the elite, but amongst the mercantile and tradesmen levels of society, whose increasing wealth afforded them such discretionary

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<sup>69</sup> Sarah Drown to Solomon Drown, September 16, 1796, Box 4, DF Papers, BULSC.

<sup>70</sup> Rather, *The American School*, 134; Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution*, 12.

purchases. In Rhode Island, Earl painted the city's merchant families, who not only constituted the elite majority, but circulated within Earl's same personal and family networks in the area. In Charleston, Earl painted this same class, though his merchant sitters were of mixed backgrounds; some were native to the area, while others constituted the city's large contingent of New England transplants. He also painted the elite natives of the city, who were rapidly growing their wealth through combined efforts in planting, trade, and politics. His services we called upon, too, across these classes, to paint the citizens whose recent Revolutionary service had gained them prestige within society.

While many aspects of his American body of work are ripe for analysis, this section attempts to understand how Earl conducted his business of portraiture in America, adapting the tactics he employed in London to a new market. Secondly, it serves to reframe how we think about Earl's role in American portraiture as a regional painter, instead suggesting he is better understood as a painter of the Atlantic world. I first consider Earl's time in Providence, the factors that gained him commissions there, and those that possibly motivated his move to Charleston. By simultaneously exploring the cultural and economic connections between Providence and Charleston in the 1790s, we see that Earl's movement was not arbitrary, but was part of the larger circumstances connecting New England to the American south during the Early Republic. Earl's kinship, social and commercial ties are vital pieces of this story, particularly when considering how both he and his patrons enacted their national and transnational circulation. Two double portraits of nearly identical composition, painted by James Earl in Charleston between the years 1795 and 1796, then serve as entry points for exploring

the nature of his clientele. The first, known as the *Portrait of Elizabeth Fales Paine and her Aunt* (Fig. 8) will be referred to as the Paine portrait and the second, a *Portrait of Rebecca Pritchard Mills (Mrs. William Mills) and Her Daughter, Eliza Shrewsbury* (Fig. 9), will be referred to as the Shrewsbury portrait, for issues of clarity. These two portraits show how Earl catered to a mixed market in the south, demonstrating that his patrons were part of a sophisticated, mobile, and commercially-driven cultural milieu at the end of the eighteenth century.

#### **Earl in Rhode Island: 1794**

Perhaps Earl's talents proceeded him with the portrait of Solomon Drowne, which Drowne sent from London to Providence in 1785 via Moses Brown, of the influential Brown merchant family. When Earl returned to Providence, he painted Brown's niece and nephew, Moses Brown Ives and Charlotte Rhode Ives. He also painted Drowne's colleague at the Rhode Island Medical Society, Doctor Amos Throop (Fig. 2). Earl's primarily clientele, however, were wealthy mercantile families, many of whom bore the more recognizable surnames in Providence's mercantile history, among them, John and Elizabeth Rogers, Thomas and Sarah Smart, Phebe Champlin, wife to the famed Newport trader, Christopher Champlin, and Ebenezer and Phoebe Burrill. His portrait of Mehitable Knight Dexter (Fig. 10), daughter of the merchant Knight Dexter, captures the young woman in her prime before she died soon after in 1795. In his portrait for Captain Samuel Packard (Fig. 11), Earl painted a shipping vessel in the distance and a spyglass in his right hand to signify Paine's activities as a merchant and ship owner, which helped him to amass considerable wealth.

Earl's first stop in Rhode Island is unsurprising, given his family's close associations with the area. The first Earls in America had settled in Rhode Island 1643 and had continued to inhabit the region with distinction. In the early eighteenth century, James Earl's great-grandfather moved his immediate family members to Leicester, Massachusetts (then not yet divided into the town of Paxton).<sup>71</sup> This inland area of central Massachusetts was well-appointed for the family's agrarian pursuits, while still being situated within the Blackstone River Valley, which was bracketed on one end by Worcester, and on the other, by Providence. The Leicester Earls could thus maintain their connection to the rest of the Earl family, and keep acquaintance with local Providence society. This is evident in James Earl's generation, as his own father was stationed in Providence during the Revolution, and married a native of the area after his first wife died. James, as we have seen, shared a warm friendship with Solomon Drowne, and demonstrated familiarity with Providence's local citizens in their letter exchanges.

Using Providence as his first significant painting destination was both strategic and practical for Earl. In the 1790s, Providence had a population of merchants who were worldly and wealthy enough to afford portraits. National and international trade had made Providence one of the most significant ports of late eighteenth-century southern New England. Rhode Islanders had little in the way of natural commodities, and thus

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<sup>71</sup> Pliny Earle, *The Earle Family: Ralph Earle and His Descendants* (Worcester, MA: Press of C. Hamilton, 1888), 443

looked outward to support their economy.<sup>72</sup> Their geographic advantage was the sea, and they capitalized by participating in a complex trading practice called *coasting*, in which they traded up and down the Eastern seaboard, sourcing American commodities for European export. In the 1770s, 69% of Rhode Island's total export trade has been estimated to have resulted from this coasting activity.<sup>73</sup>

The West Indies were also an essential stop in these trade routes, serving as a location where merchants could collect desirable materials such as molasses, sugar, cotton and coffee. Providence's merchants were particularly business savvy, having aggressively diversified into manufacturing interests early on, turning raw imports into finished commodities, such as molasses into rum and cacao into chocolate. This, coupled with a faster recovery after the Revolution, allowed Providence to surpass Newport as Rhode Island's major trading center by the end of the century.<sup>74</sup> This system also enabled Rhode Island merchants to partake in the "triangle trade", in which they traded finished

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<sup>72</sup> Rhode Island's had few local exports, primarily consisting of foodstuffs, horses, iron and timber. James F. Shepherd and Gary M. Walton, *Shipping, Maritime Trade, and the Economic Development of Colonial North America* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1972), 45.

<sup>73</sup> Anne C. McBride, "Consigned to the Account and Risk of John Innes Clark: " *Networks, Trade, & a Merchant in Providence, Rhode Island, 1768-1808*" Thesis (Newark, DE: University of Delaware, 2012), 25.

<sup>74</sup> Providence also had an advantage over Newport in their inland location, which escaped British occupation during the War. Both its diversification and its more rapid post-war recovery contributed to its eventual success over Newport. Lynne Withey, *Urban Growth in Colonial Rhode Island: Newport and Providence in the Eighteenth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 78.

rum for slaves in Africa, to then be exported to West Indies (who, in effect, produced more molasses for rum). Rhode Island was, however, an area with mixed religious views (in particular, Quakerism and Baptism), which caused much debate amongst the mercantile community. Even after the state abolished the slave trade in 1784, the moral ambiguity of trading in areas supported by slave labor was still an unresolved contradiction in Rhode Island at the end of the century.

Beyond a wealthy market, Earl's familiarity with local citizens might have aided him in gaining commissions within a society in which social and family connections were paramount. Margaretta Lovell writes about artist's working in America after the Revolution, noting that they often did not advertise, and instead relied on word of their skill to pass through recommendations between personal networks.<sup>75</sup> Lovell frames this strategy as part of a larger effort by artists to appear gentlemanly, as a means of accessing elite networks. In Earl's case, he was already peripherally connected to Providence's merchant elite. He used the systems of trust and personal connection that were integral to the workings of mercantile society. By aligning his commercial strategy with the business traditions, Earl was able to find patrons in a new market.

Instead of the aristocratic, courtly society Earl had left in England, the community in Providence was small, largely homogeneous, and tightly-knit. It was ruled socially and

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<sup>75</sup> Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution*, 12.

politically by only a few large and wealthy mercantile families.<sup>76</sup> Like the business of mercantilism in the late eighteenth century, the community relied heavily on a system of trust. Both mercantile and personal transactions often occurred across great distances and using credit, requiring interaction with reliable and recognized individuals. Solomon Drowne, for example, as illustrated in the previous chapter, often asked James Earl to buy medical books on his behalf in London, expecting that his trusted friend in the faraway city would advance him the money and competently collect the proper titles. Earl, in return, could be confident that Drowne would repay him upon his return to America.

The people of Providence made commercial alliances, especially, based upon these trusted members of their affiliated units, the people they were bonded to by family, religion, local ties, and fraternal organizations.<sup>77</sup> Kinship, above all, was the most relied upon unit for forging new business ties. Business was conducted, and passed down, between generations, assuring that carefully wrought commercial relationships and lines of communication could be controlled and maintained within a unit bound beyond financial factors. For those not connected by blood, marriage between families in similar and complementary trades was not only common, but expected, in forging enduring

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<sup>76</sup> The Brown family of merchants were the primary governing family of Providence at the time. Withey. *Urban Growth in Colonial Rhode Island*, 48.

<sup>77</sup> The subject of mercantile networks and family ties has been written about extensively in art historical, economic and historical scholarship. As these relationships functioned in eighteenth century New England, this description draws heavily from Margaretta Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution: Painters, Artisans, and Patrons in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 239-47.; Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 100-101.

partnerships and consolidating power.<sup>78</sup> This meant that Providence community status was often dictated by a family's longstanding residence, and James Earl's family were included in the mix of esteemed, multi-generational fixtures of the area.

Earl's continued contact with local figures, such as Solomon Drowne, no doubt also lent him credibility amongst a community in which it seems everyone was familiar with everyone else. Drowne's medical account book and letters, alone, show his acquaintance with the families of almost every patron who sat for Earl in Rhode Island, either as patients, or personal friends.<sup>79</sup> The letters exchanged between he and his sister, Sarah, during his time in Philadelphia, mention, for example, when Captain Samuel Packard bought a new house and for how much, attesting to how intertwined the lives of the local society were.<sup>80</sup> Earl, then, with his finely trained skills and affiliated membership in the community, was a natural choice to paint Providence's portraits.

### **A Season in Charleston**

Earl was clearly pleased enough with the network of patronage he had established in Providence that he intended to return. Even for successful artists in America, it was

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<sup>78</sup> In her discussion of marriage alliances in Newport, Rhode Island, Margaretta Lovell points to the agency and power females had over her family's business in choosing a partner. This is important to consider in relation to my later discussion of Earl's portraits of the Paines and Shrewsburys. Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution*, 239.

<sup>79</sup> For Drowne's account book, which mentions, for example, the Dexter (entry 73), Earle (entry 87), Paine (entry 188) and Kinnecut (entry 6) families, see Box 21, Folder: Drowne, Solomon, 1777-1826, DF Papers, BULSC.

<sup>80</sup> Sarah Drowne to Solomon Drowne, May 28, 1797, Box 4, DF Papers, BULSC.



common practice to undertake a painting tour. They proved a useful and lucrative tool for finding new clients and quickly producing work in a concentrated amount of time.<sup>81</sup> Perhaps, then, he was enticed by his friend, Alexander Jones, to spend his winter in Charleston in pursuit of warmer weather while expanding his network of patronage. Jones grew up near Earl in Worcester, lived in Providence while he attended Brown, and had moved to Charleston in 1787.<sup>82</sup> On November 22, 1794, the Charleston City Gazette recorded a twelve-day journey from Providence to Charleston of the sloop *The Hiram*, captained by Earl's relative and Providence resident, Captain Oliver Earle. On the passenger list was a *Mr. Earle*, as well *Mr. Jones* and *Mr. Dabney* (likely Jones' brothers-in-law, William Dabney). Both Jones and Dabney sat for Earl in Charleston and were later witnesses to his will.<sup>83</sup>

In leaving Providence for Charleston, James Earl encountered a similarly mercantile, though vastly more cosmopolitan population. Charleston was the wealthiest city in America. The ruling elite were comprised of merchants and planters, most of

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<sup>81</sup> Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution*, 14.

<sup>82</sup> George Farquhar Jones. *Family Record of the Jones Family of Milford, Massachusetts, and Providence, Rhode Island, with Its Connections and Descendants, Together with the Ancestry and Family of Loriania Carrington Jones, Wife of George F. Jones*. (Philadelphia, Pa.: Press of Globe Printing House, 1884), accessed via <http://archive.org/details/familyrecordofjo00jone>, 41; For a later image of Jones' portrait by Earl, see page 37.

<sup>83</sup> "Charleston, Saturday, November 22, 1794," *City Gazette* (Charleston, SC), November 22, 1794, 4.

whom were interconnected by marriage and bonded by a vibrant social scene. Like Providence, Charleston had many longstanding families and established traditions, but it was also a society open to newcomers thanks to its economic opportunities which attracted aspiring business and tradesmen.<sup>84</sup> Though a thoroughly southern city, Charleston's marine access and mercantile ports connected it to the greater Atlantic world. Its trade in indigo, rice, deerskins, and particularly, enslaved people, had given South Carolina a relatively high per capita export as a southern colony.<sup>85</sup> By the 1790s, many Charlestonians were in the midst of converting their plantations to cotton for European export, which grew the area's wealth exponentially. These endeavors not only further linked South Carolina to the West Indies, a source of slave labor, and England, the heart of world's cloth production, but also to Earl's native Blackstone River Valley, where the first American textile mills were beginning production. The portraits Earl completed during his time in Charleston reflect not only the southern natives of the area, but a population whose increasing wealth and mobility resulted in a mix of people from across the eastern seaboard, who were conscious of the fashions of the world around them. He painted primarily elite native Charlestonians, military figures, and merchants, as well as the northern transplants who now made the city their home. James Earl could

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<sup>84</sup> Wendell Garrett, "Introduction," in *In Pursuit of Refinement*, ed. Maurie D. McInnis et al. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>85</sup> Per capita exports are measured here in relation to South Carolina's white population. James F. Shepherd and Gary M. Walton, *Shipping, Maritime Trade, and the Economic Development of Colonial North America* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1972), 46.

rely on his reputation as a London-trained artist to gain commissions, as well as his familiar Rhode Island networks, through which he could forge connections with Charlestonians. His sitters, too, circulated in an interconnected web of social, kinship and business networks, which bolstered their constant mobility and success in the south.

Though once again in an unfamiliar city, Earl would not start from scratch; Charleston was home to a contingent of Rhode Island transplants who found the southern city's seaward connections beneficial to their mercantile business. Just as in London, Earl's familiar networks would help him to expand his patronage within the local community. One of these transplanted families were the Paines. If James Earl was not already acquainted with the Paine family in Providence, he could have met them through Alexander Jones, who boarded in their Providence home while still a student at Brown.<sup>86</sup> Earl painted Elizabeth Fales Paine (1776-1853) and her aunt, Sarah (Brigham) Paine (1763-1831) in Charleston, likely at the end of his life in 1796. The resulting double portrait, *Elizabeth Fales Paine and Her Aunt*, today is in the collection of the Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design (Fig. 7; for a chart of the family relationships depicted in this work, see Fig. 11). Earl rendered the two women seated upright and side-by-side in fashionable cotton Federal period costume, before a drawn Vandykian curtain and ambiguous landscape. Sarah Paine sits on a black Neoclassical horsehair cabriole sofa, while Elizabeth balances on the edge of a shield-back mahogany chair, her body angled

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<sup>86</sup> Jones also notes boarding with James' relative, Captain Ralph Earl of Providence, as well as Captain Samuel Packard, who sat for Earl in Providence. Jones, *Family Record of the Jones Family of Milford*, 45.

slightly toward her aunt in expectation. She holds an open book, a symbol of her proper education and refinement, while Sarah crosses her arms across her lap.

The Paine family participated in the system of coastal trade which tied had Charleston and Providence together for the last half century. Captain Thomas Paine (1759-1828; Sarah's husband and Elizabeth's paternal uncle) had been an active merchant in Providence, specializing in West Indian trade and selling imported goods from a storefront located adjacent to his home on the north end of town. Advertisements regularly placed by Captain Paine suggest he imported primarily from the French colonized island of St. Domingo (now Haiti), bringing in goods such as sugar, "French indigo," and coffee.<sup>87</sup> Paine's announcements also reveal that Charleston was a regular stop on his journey home. There, he offloaded West Indian travelers and commodities, and picked up South Carolina specialties, such as rice and pork.

Earl's sitters seem to have left Providence for Charleston around the same time that he did. In July 1794, Captain Paine advertised the sale of his house and store in Providence. Paine had gone into business with his brother-in-law, Joseph Brigham (Sarah Paine's brother), also a Rhode Island merchant now working in Charleston. The two advertised in Charleston as early as 1793 under the name *Paine & Bridgham*. He clearly saw this new partnership as advantageous. Situated between the West Indies and

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<sup>87</sup> See, for example, "Advertisement", *City Gazette and Advertiser* (Charleston, SC), January 14, 1795, 1; "Advertisement", *City Gazette and Advertiser* (Charleston, SC), February 14, 1795, 4.

Providence, Paine could use his connections to continue to trade with both ports, while selling out of Charleston's more centralized location.<sup>88</sup>

Earl's depiction of the Paines certainly invokes a close bond between aunt and niece, emphasizing close, physical attachment in their overlapping bodies, and an emotional regard in their interaction. Elizabeth looks to her aunt in quiet anticipation, while Sarah appears to gaze into the distance in thought, presenting the first example of Earl's known works in which the sitters do not directly engage with the viewer. At the moment of Earl's commission, Elizabeth Fales Paine might have lived with her aunt and uncle in Charleston. Elizabeth came from the wealthy mercantile Paine family of Bristol and Providence. She was the daughter of Stephen Paine, Captain Thomas Paine's brother. Family records note that her mother died shortly after childbirth in 1776, leaving Elizabeth to be raised by her aunts.<sup>89</sup> It is quite plausible that Sarah Paine could have been one of the aunts in question. As a girl from a wealthy family, with a father often at sea, the proper education and guidance from a female family member would have been paramount to Elizabeth's later success as a wife and member of society. In June 1794 Elizabeth's father was lost at sea. Captain Paine was executor of Stephen Paine's will and

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<sup>88</sup> One Paine family genealogy states that Captain Paine also joined the Charleston Navy at this time. It notes that he served for 46 years. Assuming he was a member until his death in 1832, he would have enlisted in 1794. No concrete evidence of his involvement, however, can substantiate this claim.

<sup>89</sup> The aunt in question is not specified. She also could have been one of her mother's two surviving sisters.

was responsible for his estate, strongly suggesting that he and his wife took on a guardianship role for his orphaned daughter.<sup>90</sup>

In 1856, the writer and step-grandson of Elizabeth Fales Paine, George William Curtis, wrote about the Paine portrait in his semi-autobiographical novel *Prue and I*. He recalled a, perhaps fictional, scene of his grandmother regarding her portrait in old age, back home in Rhode Island.

Often in my younger days, when my grandmother sat by the fire, after dinner, lost in thought—perhaps remembering the time when the picture was really a portrait—I have curiously compared her wasted face with the blooming beauty of the girl, and tried to detect the likeness. It was strange how the resemblance would sometimes start out: how, as I gazed and gazed upon her old face, age disappeared before my eager glance, as snow melts in the sunshine, revealing the flowers of a forgotten spring.<sup>91</sup>

Earl's Charleston obituary celebrated his abilities with precision, stating "To an uncommon facility in hitting of the likeness, may be added a peculiarity of his execution of drapery, and which ever has been esteemed in his art the NE PLUS ULTRA, or giving life to the eye, and expression of every feature."<sup>92</sup> While Curtis may have struggled to find a likeness between the elder Elizabeth and her younger self, a later etching of Elizabeth bears remarkable similarity to Earl's rendering, giving credence to the

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<sup>90</sup> For Captain Thomas Paine's notice of claims against the estate of Stephen Paine, see "Advertisement", *The United States Chronicle* (Providence, RI), July 24, 1794, 4.

<sup>91</sup> George William Curtis, *Prue and I*, 2005. (Harper & Brothers, 1856). Accessed February 7, 2017, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8645/pg8645-images.html>.

<sup>92</sup> As reproduced in Stewart, *James Earl*, 37.

truthfulness of his depiction (Fig. 12). Known only as it is reproduced in her family genealogy, the etching depicts what was possibly a companion portrait to her husband's mayoral portrait taken in 1841, now in the Brown University Portrait Collection.<sup>93</sup> The etching records her deep-set eyes, just as Earl did, and the minor furrow of her brow, lending her an expression of slight anxiety. In his portrait, Earl appeared to have faithfully documented Sarah Paine's features, too, painting the small bump in her long nose, a wide-set brow, and distinctive cheekbones. Earl's conventions of rendering faces with heavily-lidded, large, almond-shaped eyes, round faces, and contained smiles are less pronounced in the Paine portrait, perhaps indicating less reliance on these standards later in his career.

In painting the Paines, Earl's portrait records how the transplanted citizens of Charleston, in effect, celebrated the bonds which enabled them to thrive in Charleston, while articulating the personal and professional alliances which would keep them connected to their networks at home. The first clue of the portrait's purpose and date can be found in Earl's inventory. When James Earl died in August 1796, his inventory listed the "Paine & Bridgham" account as owing his estate the handsome sum of 23 pounds, 18 shillings, 6 pence.<sup>94</sup> Paid for by a business account, this reveals that the double portrait was not only a personal commission, but one that commemorated the new

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<sup>93</sup> See the portrait *Samuel Willard Bridgham*, Samuel Lovett Waldo and William Jewett, 1841, Brown University Portrait Collection, Brown Portrait No. 33.

<sup>94</sup> As reproduced in Robert G. Stewart, *James Earl*, 58

partnership between Captain Paine and Joseph Bridgham. Because Sarah Paine was Joseph Bridgham's sister and Captain Paine's wife, and Elizabeth was Captain Paine's niece, the women served as representatives of each family, symbolizing both the kinship and business ties linking them together.

The bond between the Paine and Bridgham families was about to deepen further, as Elizabeth was on the cusp of marrying Samuel Willard Bridgham (1774-1840), who was the younger brother of Sarah and Joseph Bridgham. At the time of the commission, Samuel was completing his law degree at Brown University, and would eventually become Providence's first mayor. After their marriage in 1798, he and Elizabeth would live in Providence for the rest of their lives, having children with illustrious careers of their own.<sup>95</sup> By choosing Sarah and Elizabeth as the sitters of their portrait, the Paine's materialized the relationships which connected the two families. The two women represent each side of the Paines and Bridghams, as the key members whose marital choices would facilitate the continued economic salience of the families.<sup>96</sup> Earl's depiction speaks not only to the implied contractual bonds and financial rewards that

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<sup>95</sup> Samuel and Elizabeth's children include Samuel Willard Bridgham Jr., who first spearheaded the United States Sanitary Commission. *Representative Men and Old Families of Rhode Island: Genealogical Records and Historical Sketches of Prominent and Representative Citizens and of Many of the Old Families* (Chicago: J.H. Beers & Company, 1908), 82-84.

<sup>96</sup> In her discussion of marriage alliances in Newport, Rhode Island, Margaretta Lovell points to the agency and power females had over her family's business in choosing a partner. This is important to consider in relation to my discussion of both of Earl's portraits of the Paines and Shrewsburys. Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution*, 239.



would result from these unions, but the affection and strengthened personal network gained in expanding one's family. At the same time, it may have served as a memento for Elizabeth to remember her kin in Charleston as she embarked on her new marital life in Providence. It should be noted that Earl's portrait of the Paines descended through Elizabeth's family in Providence, suggesting that may have always been intended as a token for Elizabeth, tying her and the Providence Bridgham's to their family in Charleston, even while they lived in the north.

### **New Englanders in Charleston in the 1790s**

The Paine portrait serves as an entry point for not only understanding the importance of familial, social, and business networks in a port city, but it is also an example of how Earl's body of work serves to illuminate the understudied connection between Charleston and Providence at the end of the eighteenth century. While Earl certainly benefited from Charleston's ready market for portraits, the unique mercantile relationship the city held with Rhode Island traders meant that he likely also had pre-established contacts in the area. By examining the circumstances of his Rhode Island sitters, we see that several spent time, lived in, or had connections in Charleston. The relationship between the two cities has been little explored. Indeed, Rhode Island has often been called the "Carolina Hospital" for Charlestonians who spent summers there seeking relief from heat and disease, but this primarily refers to Newport. The commercial ties are worth investigating, as they were often bound and reinforced by familial and social relationships, enabling the exchange of goods and facilitating the

movement of people between the northern and southern parts of the United States after the Revolution.

The mercantile relationship between Charleston and Providence began as soon as Providence established its coastal trading activity in the 1750s. Charleston continued to be an important stop along this route through the last half of the century. While in Rhode Island, Earl painted Ebenezer Burrill, for example, who, like Thomas Paine, used Charleston as a port on his way home from trading in the Caribbean, advertising there “the cargo of the sloop *Maryland* from the West-Indies, consisting of coffee, sugar and molasses”.<sup>97</sup> After the Revolution, the relationship between the two cities strengthened even further as the United States economy fell into a postwar slump. High taxes imposed on imports to Britain prompted Rhode Island merchants to expand their international trading region to new markets, and to increase their sourcing activity in the south. South Carolina was targeted for its rice production, which was highly profitable on the European market.<sup>98</sup>

As a result, many Rhode Island merchants established satellite offices in, or moved to, Charleston to strengthen Providence’s trade with the city. Their settlement in Charleston forced them forge new bonds with the local population, often relying on introduction from the contingent of fellow Rhode Island transplants who had established

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<sup>97</sup> “Advertisement”, E. Burrill, *City Gazette, published as The City Gazette & Daily Advertiser* (Charleston, SC), February 21, 1794.

<sup>98</sup> Withey, *Urban Growth in Colonial Rhode Island*, 94.

themselves there beforehand. At the same time, they maintained the business and family relationships at home who served as their primary trading contacts in the north. For Rhode Island, especially, these Charleston transplants were vital links for the expansion of their mercantile networks, serving as trusted agents for Rhode Island merchants conducting business with the south.

Earl's movement within the city parallels this activity, as he was able to gain entry into the circles of Charleston through his Rhode Island contacts, while also painting northern transplants. Between the years 1794 and 1796, Earl painted his friend Alexander Jones, as well as six of his Rhode Island family members visiting Charleston. He also painted several former Massachusetts residents who he may have met through his northern connections, or through his family in Paxton. His portraits of Dr. Cephas Price and his brother, lawyer, Peter Prentice, are two examples of Worcester-born individuals residing in Charleston. Another portrait of Mrs. James Courtney (born Elizabeth Coburn) illustrates a wealthy Boston-born woman who married an English tailor in Charleston. Though the details of Earl's connections to these sitters is unclear, they speak to the movement and connection bringing northern natives together in the south.

Earl painted one the Rhode Island merchant Joseph Sanford Barker, who left for a career in Charleston shortly after sitting for his portrait at around 21 years old (Fig. 14). Commissioned for his mother in Rhode Island, Earl painted a letter on the chair rail

behind Barker addressed to “Mrs. Abbey Barker, Westerley, Rho. Island”.<sup>99</sup> The letter creates a gesture of assurance of Barker’s continued contact, while possibly also referencing his allegiance to his Rhode Island family, at large. Perhaps at the same time, Earl painted Barker’s uncle, the merchant Captain John Rogers, and his wife, Elizabeth Rodman Rogers, of Providence.<sup>100</sup> For Rogers, Barker’s move to Charleston provided a direct contact in the busy trading port, while Rogers’ connections in Providence would have benefitted the young merchant in establishing his network. Correspondence between the two and a mutual trading partner, Samuel Nightingale Jr., in the Rhode Island Historical Society archive, suggests they maintained this professional connection for the remainder of Roger’s life.<sup>101</sup> Earl also benefited from the dual associations of his sitters. Painting Barker and the Rogers meant that word of his talent could spread in both their Rhode Island and South Carolinian networks. Furthermore, in making or strengthening his acquaintance with Barker, he knew one more familiar face upon moving to Charleston.

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<sup>99</sup> An inscription on the reverse of the canvas notes that the portrait was painted for Barker’s mother in Rhode Island, before he left for South Carolina at around 21 years old. Mary Hall to Robert G. Stewart, August 1, 1986, Charleston, Robert G. Stewart Collection, Folder: “Joseph Sanford Barker”, Gibbes Museum.

<sup>100</sup> John Rogers’ portrait is unlocated. Elizabeth Rodman Rogers’ portrait is in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Art.

<sup>101</sup> Evidence of Barker’s continued communication with Rhode Island merchants can be found in various personal papers held in the Rhode Island Historical Society. See in particular: J. Sanford Barker to Sam Nightingale, March 28, 1810, Nightingale Papers, MSS 588, 5G3, Series 2, Folder: Corr. 1-6/1810, Rhode Island Historical Society.

The Rhode Island transplants Earl painted not only speak to the expansion of Rhode Island's networks, but, in their ambition, these merchants were also contributors to the richly varied material life of Charleston. They were active agents in the trading networks that connected Charleston with Europe, Asia and the Caribbean. Captain Paine, for example, had for years imported exotic luxury commodities of sugar, coffee and molasses from St. Domingo, a French colony, to Charleston. When the Jay Treaty opened British West Indian ports to American trade in November, 1794, the Paine & Bridgham company took immediate action. By January 1795 they were advertising a cargo from British territories, including salt from Turks and rum from Jamaica.<sup>102</sup> At the same time, Paine & Bridgham leveraged their Rhode commercial networks to import commodities specific to the New England trade which brought goods from England and Asia. Yards of ship cordage, "northward" rum and "Russia" bar iron of Rhode Island manufacture came in on ships captained by their Providence associates. These same cargoes often included farther reaching imports collected through English trade, including "Bloom hyson" and "Souchong" tea from India, or sets of white gilt china possibly from England or China.<sup>103</sup> As goods from different national and international regions poured into the city, Charlestonians refined their artistic tastes. These trade networks brought not only people and things, but information. The merchants travelling back and forth to St. Domingo, as

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<sup>102</sup> "Advertisement," Paine & Bridgham, *City Gazette* (Charleston, SC), January 16, 1795, 3.

<sup>103</sup> "Advertisement," Paine & Bridgham, *City Gazette* (Charleston, SC), December 4, 1793, 2.

well as the enslaved people brought to the south, transported the refined knowledge of cotton production which would allow the south to rapidly develop their own cotton plantations.<sup>104</sup>

### **Earl's Portraits of Native Charlestonians**

Earl's connections with northern traders, such as the Paine family, likely assisted him in making rapid inroads with elite Charleston society. He painted his elegant double portrait of two such native Charlestonians, *Rebecca Pritchard Shrewsbury (Mrs. William Mills) and Her Daughter, Eliza Shrewsbury* (Fig. 8), who neighbors of the Paines. The Shrewsbury portrait, now in the collection of the Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library, is nearly identical in composition to the Paine portrait. Though we do not know the decisions behind commissioning such similar portraits, we do know that they were involved together in business, and their proximity suggests they may have overlapped socially and seen Earl's work in the other's residence. The Shrewsburys and Paines lived only two blocks apart at 135 and 105 Church street, respectively, which they also both advertised as the sites of their businesses.<sup>108</sup> The first clue of their business connection comes from Charleston artist Charles Fraser, who wrote in his memoirs that Rebecca Shrewsbury's brother, Paul Pritchard, built the ship "South-Carolina" in 1798, which was

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<sup>104</sup> Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, 101.

<sup>108</sup> The Paines' address is listed in a notice printed by Paine & Bridgham for their runaway horse, noting it as the residence of both subscribers. "Advertisement" *City Gazette & Daily Advertiser* (Charleston, SC), March 27, 1795, pg. 4.

commanded by Captain Paine.<sup>109</sup> Though the date cannot be accurate (Paul Pritchard died in 1791), it provides a possible trace of an early connection between the families, perhaps even before the Paines moved to Charleston. Forty years later, Sarah Paine died in 1832, four years after her husband. Her inventory lists a bond of \$1000 owed to her estate by Eliza Shrewsbury's husband, Isham Williams.<sup>110</sup> It was an enormous sum, which might indicate a continued business relationship between the families.

The Shrewsbury portrait is one of Earl's most luminous and eye-catching works; a sumptuous display of rich fabric, genteel refinement, and graceful disposition. The portrait matches the Paine portrait almost identically in configuration, with only a few altered specificities. Both portraits feature the two women seated at similar scale before a drawn curtain opening to an ambiguous landscape. In the Shrewsbury portrait, the landscape's charged green vegetation more specifically recalls the salt marshes of the Carolina lowlands, while a distant body of water reminds the viewer of Charleston's proximity to the ocean and its maritime pursuits. In both works, Earl positioned the two women's bodies angled towards each other with knees overlapping, creating two diagonals which converge at the bottom center of the canvas. While the Paines sit separately on a chair and sofa, the Shrewsburys sit together on a similar black horsehair

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<sup>109</sup> Charles Fraser, *Reminiscences of Charleston: Lately Published in the Charleston Courier* (Charleston: J. Russell, 1854), 48.

<sup>110</sup> *Wills and Miscellaneous Probate Records, 1671-1868*; Author: Charleston County (South Carolina). Probate Judge; Probate Place: Charleston, South Carolina, Wills, Vol 36, 1818-1826; Wills, Vol 37, 1826-1834.

cabriole sofa featured in both paintings, only altered with the inclusion of a scrolled, rather than floral, carved ornament, and a more pronounced armrest. Instead of interacting, the Shrewsburys glance up at the viewer in open expression as they momentarily pause the activities in their laps. Elizabeth Paine, like Eliza Shrewsbury, holds open a book, her four fingers actively splayed across the spine as the pages fall open in four equal sections. Rebecca holds a needle and thread in suspension, perhaps in reference to her new or impending marriage to William Mills, a wealthy tailor.

That Earl's portrait of the Paines so closely resembles the Shrewsbury portrait in composition, begs the viewer to consider any preconceived notions of how we can geographically classify Earl's portraits by style and technique. In her analysis of Ralph Earl's American work, Elizabeth Kornhauser found the portraitist decisively altering the attributes of his paintings to suit the needs of his clientele in different locations. In New York, a wealthy and worldly class of patrons requested the traditions he learned in his English training; in Connecticut, the puritanical and hardworking population eschewed heraldic style portraiture for a more austere, yet clearly-delineated bodily presence and environmental specificity.<sup>111</sup> James Earl's American portraits, however, reveal no obvious technical change between his paintings in Providence and Charleston, despite being two culturally distinctive cities. His art demonstrates that late eighteenth-century citizens, particularly in these active port cities, could not be defined by only one location, but were the products of constant movement, influence, and interaction between other

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<sup>111</sup> Kornhauser, *Ralph Earl*, 40.



areas of the United States, and the greater Atlantic world. Because of this, I propose viewing James Earl as an Atlantic, rather than regional painter.

Eliza and Rebecca Shrewsbury's trajectory can only be gleaned through their male associations, as is so often the case with women of the period. In the rare instance their names appear in a newspaper, bills of sale, or court record, it is primarily in relation to their husbands, who were all connected by complimentary professions. While little is known of the Shrewsbury women's lives, the alliances they made through marriage prove how strongly female marital choice dictated the advantage gained by their respective families. Like Providence society, which relied on kinship ties to forge commercial alliances, it was common practice amongst upper-class and middling Charlestonians to marry across professions who could benefit their own trade.<sup>112</sup>

Rebecca (1753 - 1816) was born into the wealthy Pritchard family of Charleston shipwrights. She married English immigrant Edward Shrewsbury, who also made his fortune as a shipwright and wharf owner. They lived on a rice plantation in St. Thomas' Parish, bearing only one child, Eliza Shrewsbury (birth date unknown - 1844).<sup>113</sup> In

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<sup>112</sup> Historian Emma Hart defines the three wealthiest tiers of Charleston society, including the "middling" sort as town-dwelling, often wealthy, and involved with mercantile or craftsman's pursuits. Within her discussion of marriage across beneficial professions, she cites the marriage of Isham Williams and Eliza Shrewsbury. Emma Hart, *Building Charleston: Town and Society in the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2015), 126.

<sup>113</sup> While unclear if Williams grew rice on the plantation, he certainly mined it for yellow pine, which he advertised as a construction material at his docks. "Advertisement," *The Charleston Evening Gazette*, June 19, 1786, 4.

1786, Eliza married Isham Williams (birth date unknown – 1848), who was also a wharf owner, merchant, and vendue master, in a union that proved strategic and advantageous by his subsequent dealings with each of his fathers-in-law and their families.

By the time Earl painted the two Shrewsbury women, their lives had dramatically shifted. Though I refer to them by the name which bonded them together and is used in the painting's title, Shrewsbury, they were by now Mrs. Mills and Mrs. Williams. Edward Shrewsbury died in 1793, leaving Rebecca a widow at forty years old. The family immediately sold the St. Thomas Parish plantation. In 1794, Rebecca filed a renunciation of her dower from the Shrewsbury estate, as she was likely engaged and anticipating a new source of financial support.<sup>114</sup> In February 1795, she married the wealthy Scottish tailor, William Mills, who had been established in the area for several decades. As Margaretta Lovell notes, portrait commissions for women often marked the occasion of the most defining events of their lives: marriage. It is probable, then, that the Shrewsbury portrait was commissioned in celebration of Rebecca's marriage to William Mills.<sup>115</sup>

Though an active tailor, William Mills was involved in a variety of pursuits that indicate he was wealthier and more cultured than an average tradesman. He invested in

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<sup>114</sup> Henry Bailey, *Reports of Cases in Equity Argued and Determined in the Court of Appeals of South Carolina* (Charleston: W. Riley, 1841), 212.

<sup>115</sup> Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution*, 56.

rental properties, speculated in farmland, and owned multiple enslaved laborers.<sup>116</sup>

Education was important to him, and he had connections in the intellectual community to provide it for his children. He sent his two oldest sons, Henry and Thomas, to his native Scotland to study, and would later give letters to his son, Robert, to study architecture in Washington under Benjamin Latrobe.<sup>117</sup> Robert Mills (1781-1855) would become one of the nation's great architects, designing important structures such as the Washington Monument, and the U.S. Patent Office Building in Washington, DC.

For the sitters of the Shrewsbury portrait, who came from socially prominent, wealthy, and well-respected Charleston families, commissioning Earl was a logical choice. During his time in London, Earl achieved a level of technical aptitude and cultural cache which made him instantly attractive to patrons in the upper echelons of Charleston society, who welcomed painters with foreign training. Since he never advertised in Charleston, his Rhode Island contacts would have helped him gain introduction, while his training in the Royal Academy would have helped to validate his skill. In the years preceding the war, Charlestonians who could afford to sought out the best European-trained painters abroad, such as the Middletons who commissioned Benjamin West's portrait of *Arthur Middleton and His Family* in Italy. Itinerant painters recognized a market amongst these well-educated consumers who were eager for

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<sup>116</sup> Mills, William, d. 1802. William Mills will, 1802. (43/798) South Carolina Historical Society; Bryan, John M. *Robert Mills: America's First Architect*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001, 2.

<sup>117</sup> Bryan, *Robert Mills*, 4

paintings that would reflect their gentility and mark their climbing prosperity. In 1795, the Peale brothers advertised their traveling museum in Charleston, likely knowing they had an audience of artistically and scientifically interested patrons. Before Earl, Henry Benbridge painted Charleston's elite after training with West. West's endorsement attracted Benbridge's high-level Charleston patrons, who included Arthur Middleton's son-in-law, Charles Cotesworth Pickney, General of the Continental Army, delegate of the Constitutional Convention and wealthy plantation owner. Benbridge also painted a double portrait of *John Purves and His Wife, Eliza Anne Pritchard*, the latter of whom was sister to Rebecca Shrewsbury.

The reputation of these London-trained artists paved the way for Earl, who, two decades later, shared patrons within the same politically powerful and socially prominent network. Earl painted Charles Cotesworth Pickney twice during his stay, in addition to Pickney's brother-in-law and signer of the Declaration of Independence, Edward Rutledge, and his niece, Rebecca Izard Wright. From these commissions, he also gained patrons in the Society of Cincinnati, such as the silversmith Enos Reeves, the merchant Aedenus Burke, and fellow Continental Congress member and judge, Richard Hutson. Military service connected patrons across planter, merchant, and tradesmen classes, and gained them honorable repute in local society. In this way, Earl's business functioned similarly to his strategies for gaining patronage in London. Just as his famous English sitters, like the Lady Massareene and Miss Jennings, gained him public attention within the exhibition sphere, painting the military heroes and public figures of Charleston no

doubt helped Earl to advertise his work and to position himself as a painter of notable individuals in society.

Returning to Margaretta Lovell's assertion that American painters adopted gentlemanly manners as a strategy for garnering high society patrons, Earl's former entry into the upper echelons of British society might have helped him in the genteel and refined circles of Charleston. Though we have no information regarding Earl's personal comportment, his living situation, or his leisurely pursuits in Charleston, we do know that many of his Charleston patrons belonged to wealthy and refined circles who valued social propriety and material display. Considering how quickly Earl was able to access the aristocratic circles of England, which functioned in a similarly exclusive and hierarchical fashion, it is logical to conjecture that part of his success in Charleston relied on his ability to convey the social good graces of polite society. The manners of English society would have transferred well to this southern city, which, in its highest levels of society, had adopted the etiquette and fashions of British culture.

Earl's familiarity with English culture, as well as its artistic traditions, were crucial to his success in Charleston. His fluency in English painting conventions is, indeed, reflected in his execution of the Shrewsbury portrait. During his time at the Royal Academy, his English teachers had favored classical settings and traditional motifs, placing sitters in a falsified, non-specific environment and theatrical mode of dress. Earl's use of a sketchily painted landscape and tempestuous sky in the Shrewsbury portrait was likely adopted from Joshua Reynolds, who served as President of the Royal Academy during Earl's tenure. He framed both the landscape and his sitters between a wall and

fluted column, with a crimson curtain draped for theatrical effect, all stock elements referencing Renaissance European paintings, likely lifted from the collection of prints listed in his inventory.<sup>118</sup>

But Earl's approach diverges from there. Earl rendered the Shrewsbury with full, dimensional presence, whose solid, palpable bodies react to light and the contours of their environment. No detail is neglected in his rendering of gleaming pearls, softly draping curls, and variation in fabrics. Earl's level of specificity runs contrary to Sir Joshua Reynolds' teachings, as he wrote in his *Discourses*,

The detail of particulars which does not assist the expression of the main characteristic is worse than useless, it is mischievous, as it dissipates the attention and draws it from the principal point. It may be remarked that the impression which is left on our mind even of things which are familiar to us, is seldom more than their general effect, beyond which we do not look in recognizing such objects.<sup>119</sup>

Reynolds regarded attention to detail as a detrimental distraction, believing a painting's *overall* effect to be of primary importance. Earl's attention to the effects of texture, fold, opacity and light on surfaces is, instead, most reminiscent of the American painters whose studios we know James to have visited in London with Solomon Drowne. John Singleton Copley's influence is clear in Earl's work; he favored deeply saturated color and almost tactile renderings of the materials adorning the sitter's environment. Several

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<sup>118</sup> The relevant entry reads "a lot of prints 20". As reproduced in Stewart, *James Earl*, 58.

<sup>119</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Sir Joshua Reynolds's Discourses on Art, Edited with Notes and an Historical and Biographical Introduction*, (A.C. McGlurg and Company, Chicago, 1891), 261.

of the London-trained American painters Earl followed, such as Copley, Benjamin West and Charles Wilson Peale, eschewed English sketchiness for precision, in effect lending to the painting's credibility as a reliable record of the temporal moment.<sup>120</sup> Considering Drowne's comment made to Earl in 1786, "May you go on improving, till you equal not only Sir. J. Reynolds, West + Copely [sic]...", it is clear that he not only admired the work of these great artists, but absorbed their technique for the purposes of his own painting.<sup>121</sup>

While the latest English portraiture often sought to place sitters within a historical scene, Earl recorded his sitters in the present, adopting classicism as a marker of their thoroughly modern lives. The balanced proportions, geometric shapes and allegorical symbols of Neoclassical design are highly visible throughout the Shrewsbury portrait.<sup>122</sup> The design of the cabriole sofa the Shrewsbury women perch on, for example, is made explicitly recognizable by Earl in the Shrewsbury portrait, where its frontal position gives a clear view of the gentle slope of the back, while a slight sheen makes the luxury horsehair upholstery tangible. It was a new, thoroughly modern form, being made in furniture shops across the eastern seaboard for clientele aware of the sophisticated Neoclassical fashions lately produced in English design books. The slender proportions

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<sup>120</sup> Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution*, 148

<sup>121</sup> Solomon Drowne to James Earl, April 8, 1786, Box 5, DF Papers, BULSC.

<sup>122</sup> Started in England, Neoclassicism was rampant in America in the 1790s, adopted as a nod to Greek and Roman precedents that aligned the American New Republic to ancient ideals of democracy.

and curvilinear lines of sofa in the Shrewsbury portrait are clearly adapted from Plate 22 in the *Cabinetmaker's and Upholsterer's Guide*, one of six new sofa forms George Hepplewhite recently introduced in his 1788 book of designs (Fig. 13).

Earl's "peculiarity" of drapery, as noted in his obituary, is the most striking element of the Shrewsbury portrait, and perhaps the skill which was most attractive to Charlestonians, who valued textiles not only for their material display, but also as a driver of their economy. Henry Benbridge wrote of Charlestonians, "the only thing attended to is dress & dissipation, & if I come in for share of their superfluous Cash, I have no right to find fault with them, as it turns out to my advantage."<sup>123</sup>

The costumes worn in the Shrewsbury portrait, indeed, represent the latest fashions, which signaled a sitter's cultural literacy and knowledge of international styles. Eliza Shrewsbury's dress balances on the precipice of this distinct shift in women's fashion in the Federal period. Her empire waist and Grecian, streamlined silhouette are beginning to move away from the large skirts, open forms and highly ornamented and ruffled bodices of the 1780s. Though her costume is far less dramatic, it alludes to the *robes a la greque* made popular in French and English portraiture in the 1790s, which likened women to "living statues" by modelling the dress forms of the many Greco-

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<sup>123</sup> Henry Benbridge to Elizabeth Gordon, February 21, 1773, Charleston, S.C., Acc. no. PH-37, Henry Benbridge Letters, Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, The Winterthur Library.



Roman sculptures discovered in Pompeii and Herculaneum in 1738.<sup>124</sup> In referencing antiquity through dress, the sitters of the Shrewsbury portrait signal their thorough modernity.

In Earl's depiction of the Shrewsburys, we find sitters who were not only keenly aware of European fashions, but had an enormous amount of access to expensive foreign materials. They may, in fact, have acted as an advertisement for William Mills' new business arrangement. In February 1795, Mills announced that he had taken into partnership Mr. Archibald Brebner, "an experienced taylor and habit maker lately from London, who resided here several years, and is well acquainted with the latest fashions".<sup>125</sup> Advertising one's connections to England was a common way of expressing that one was in tune with the fashions of the metropolis. As a tailor, he would not have made the dresses worn by Eliza and Rebecca (that would be the work of a mantua maker), but his reputation would still rely upon his access to the finest textiles Earl could express.

In the Shrewsbury portrait, Earl worked thick swatches of white paint at varying opacities onto the surface of Rebecca's grey dress to impart the appearance of gleaming silk, an expensive and coveted commodity imported from India. In Eliza's dress, in contrast to the jewel-like tones popular in fabrics of the 1780's, Earl records the

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<sup>124</sup> Amelia Rauser, "Living Statues and Neoclassical Dress in Late Eighteenth-Century Naples" in *Art History*, (Vol 38, no. 3, June 2015), 465.

<sup>125</sup> William Mills, Advertisement, *City Gazette & Daily Advertiser* (Charleston, South Carolina), February 10, 1795, p. 4.

beginning of the interest in a lighter palette, and in particular, in sheer cottons. Small floral bunches punctuating the white overlay of Eliza's dress identify it as a sprigged cotton, hand embroidered with a popular white-on-white motif. The sheer, ruffled bodices could be constructed of a finely wrought lace, but the thin, impasto line Earl used to delineate each border suggests they are also made of a fine cotton, which would require the edges to be folded and hemmed.<sup>126</sup>

Cotton was one of the most important textiles in the 1790s, particularly to South Carolina, as it forged an even deeper connection with the Atlantic world while increasing the wealth of its citizens. When Samuel Greg invented the first water-powered cotton weaving mill in Manchester, England, the demand for cotton fibers in England exploded. Primarily importing from St. Domingo and Brazil at the time, cotton exports were essentially halted by the slave rebellions of the early 1790s. At this point, American southern cotton plantations began to supply Britain with their newly-developed upland cotton, which could be processed at greater speeds in thanks to Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin in 1793. Between the years 1790 and 1800, South Carolina's yearly cotton exports went from 10,000 pounds to 6.4 million pounds.<sup>127</sup> As Charlestonians observed their agricultural and economic landscape shifting to accommodate the cotton trade, they were profoundly aware, and proud, of their privileged access to the lucrative

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<sup>126</sup> Linda Eaton. Personal consultation with author. Winterthur Museum. January 24, 2017.

<sup>127</sup> Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, 101.

industry. Indeed, Charleston merchant Humphrey Courtney made obvious his connections to this market when he sat for his portrait by James Earl (Fig. 15). He holds a bill in one hand, which, according to family tradition, signified Courtney's involvement with the first bale of cotton shipped out of Charleston.<sup>128</sup>

By the time Earl arrived in Charleston in the 1790s, Providence and Charleston were on the precipice of forging a new commercial relationship which would shape the course of America's economic and industrial history and tie the two cities even closer. In 1789, the Providence merchant Moses Brown backed English émigré Samuel Slater in building the first American water-powered textile weaving mill in nearby Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Even in its earliest years of experimental production in the 1790s, Charleston merchants directly sent cotton bales produced on Charleston plantations to their Providence counterparts for processing in the new mills, reinforcing the integral relationship southern and northern merchants and manufacturers already shared.<sup>129</sup> Moses Brown was supplied by Charleston merchant Samuel Maverick, who had spent his

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<sup>128</sup> According to Sven Beckert, the first substantial shipment of American cotton reached Liverpool in 1795. Several merchants in Charleston laid claim to shipping the first bale and I have been unable to substantiate the Courtney family's claim. That subsequent generations remembered Humphrey in this way, however, still indicates that he was likely involved in the cotton trade in some respect; George S. White, *Memoir of Samuel Slater, the Father of American Manufactures; Connected with a History of the Rise and Progress of the Cotton Manufacture in England and America* (New York: A.M. Kelley, 1967), 367.

<sup>129</sup> Caroline F. Ware, *The Early New England Cotton Manufacture, a Study in Industrial Beginnings* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), 22.

early childhood with relatives in Providence.<sup>130</sup> The industry would rapidly expand in the early nineteenth century, when American's would no longer rely on British imports to fulfill all of their textiles demands. Evidence of American cotton's rapid impact on Earl's own life is apparent in the development of more mills along the Blackstone River Corridor and his own family's participation in the textile industry. It was James Earl's relative in Leicester, Massachusetts, Pliny Earle, who in the 1780s, sold the first carding machine used in Samuel Slater's mill. The business was still lucrative when Earl arrived in America, advertising in 1794, "All kinds of Cotton and Wool cards...sheet and twilled work for machinery".<sup>131</sup> By then, the American textile industry was spreading across the Corridor, as Slater's mill influenced businessmen to harness the Blackstone River's water power and set up more production sites.<sup>132</sup>

Of the influences and fashions that charged Charlestonian lives, the most universally acknowledged and written about is their predilection for European taste,

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<sup>130</sup> Maverick's mother was a native of Providence (her parents were the Turpins), she took her children there during Revolution to seek refuge. At 21, he was apprenticed to his uncle, a Turpin, in Charleston, who was a leading merchant. Frederick C. Chabot, *With the makers of San Antonio; genealogies of the early Latin, Anglo-American, and German families with occasional biographies ; each group being prefaced with a brief historical sketch and illustrations* (San Antonio: Artes Graficas, 1937), 278-282.

<sup>131</sup> "Advertisement", *Massachusetts Spy*, published as *THOMAS's Massachusetts SPY: Or, The Worcester Gazette* (Worcester, Massachusetts), June 19, 1794, 4.

<sup>132</sup> For a discussion of the spread of the textiles mills along the Blackstone River, as well as the rise of the card machine industry in the area, see Paul Rivard, *A New Order of Things: How the Textile Industry Transformed New England* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002), 11-16.

particularly coming from England. The portrait of *Rebecca Shrewsbury (Mills) and Her Daughter, Eliza Shrewsbury*, speaks to this connection, serving as an example of the aesthetic influences and commercial ties which bound Charleston to a transnational realm. Examining the circumstances behind the portrait of *Elizabeth Fales Paine and Her Aunt*, then, speaks to a different, though similarly interconnected aspect of Charlestons' circulation within the Atlantic world. It illustrates how northern and Caribbean trade influenced and bolstered the southern city's economy and population. At the same time, it shows how northern Americans integrated into their new southern home by building and reinforcing their existing and new networks. When considered in conjunction with the material and intellectual richness of the late eighteenth-century, we can begin to understand Earl's artistic production as a product of, and contribution to, an incredibly varied cultural milieu in both Charleston and Rhode Island.

Earl seems to have compounded the material impression he left on the American artistic scene through his paintings by also opening his studio to young artists, just as he had observed West and Copley do in London. The artist and memoirist William Dunlap wrote that James Earl, "painted a good many portraits in Charleston when Sully as a boy was there & Sully saw his Widow in London & gave an account of his [illegible] & his death by yellow fever when his property was shipped for his return hence."<sup>133</sup> The Sully he refers to is, of course, the nineteenth-century portraitist Thomas Sully, who spent his

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<sup>133</sup> William Dunlap, *Diary of William Dunlap (1766-1839). Vol. 2.* (New York: New York Historical Society, 1930), 691.

childhood in Charleston. He clearly knew Earl well enough, and held enough admiration for him, that he visited his widow in London, suggesting they shared a possible mentoring relationship. Earl also seems to have influenced the artist of a portrait of Charles Cotesworth Pinckney in the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery (Fig. 16), which is a clear copy of Earl's portrait of Pinckney now in the Gibbes Museum collection. Pinckney at one point possessed the copy and gave it to a friend before he left for France in 1796. He wrote at that point, that it was not a good likeness, but painted by a young native of Charleston.<sup>134</sup> The artist completed his copy within Earl's lifetime, suggesting that he had access to Earl's original, perhaps while it was still in the studio. Earl had visited the studios of London, observing West's school for American painters and Copley's open workshop. He studied amongst the leaders of the art world in the Royal Academy and reaped valuable instruction under his brother's guidance. The confluence of artistic training and mentorship Earl had received in London, he could now impress on the burgeoning artists of America, contributing more than just his material products, but also his artistic sensibility, to the American art world.

In his two years in America, James Earl built a painting career that equaled his success in London. His English training secured his skill, but his ability to gain commissions amongst the overlapping family, social, and business circles of the Early Republic resulted in the body of masterful works we know today. By beginning his

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<sup>134</sup> This information originated from the curatorial files at the Smithsonian Museum, which was relayed to the Worcester Art Museum, where I located it in their curatorial files. The original source of the letter is unknown to the author.

sojourn amongst his familiar kin in Providence, Earl could tap into the society of wealthy merchants whose far-reaching trade connected them with Europe, the West Indies, and the eastern seaboard. Like the New England merchants who saw economic opportunity in the south, Earl moved to Charleston, where he found enough business amongst the native elite, Charleston transplants, and military figures to stay beyond his expected season. Earl met the American appetite for portraiture with his highly-refined ability to render likeness and costume in precise detail, drawing from the both the English conventions of his Academy teachers, and the American artists he admired while in London. In doing so, he earned renown amongst a varied population, who, like Earl, followed the currents of commerce, circulating within their extended units, connecting them to the Atlantic world at large.

### Chapter 3

#### CONCLUSION

James Earl died of yellow fever in Charleston on August 16, 1796 at the age of thirty-five. Amongst his meager personal effects, he left a camera obscura, a lot of prints, a box of brushes, a fiddle and books.<sup>135</sup> Soon afterwards, the Charleston papers reprinted the poem written for Earl in reference to his London portrait of Lady Massareene (see Chapter 2). The excerpt began: “The following elegant lines, taken from an English paper, were presented to the late Mr. Earle, while he resided in London; your inserting them will oblige *A Friend of Departed Merit.*”<sup>136</sup>

Months later, after the news of Earl’s death had reached Rhode Island, the poem was republished again by a Providence paper at the request of a friend who signed it simply *Amicus*:

“POETRY, Providence, January 16, 1797.

Mr. Wheeler,

It may not be unwelcome to the Friends and Connexions of that celebrated Portrait Painter the late Mr. EARLE, to be favoured with a Publication of the following elegant Lines, which were addressed to him during his Residence in England, and published in one of the London Papers.

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<sup>135</sup> James Earl’s Inventory, October 29, 1796, Charleston County, S.C. Inventories, Vol. C, 1793-1800, 218, as published in Stewart, *James Earl*, 58.

<sup>136</sup> “The following elegant lines,” *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser* (Charleston, SC), August 22, 1796, 3.



It may likewise gratify the Public to be informed, that another Artist from this Country has been added to the Catalogue of those American, who have acquired a Celebrity of Character in Europe; even in the City of London, which may be considered as the *Athens of the polite Arts*.”<sup>137</sup>

These entries show, that James Earl was a celebrated artist in London, as well as both of his painting locations in the United States. These cities also recognized, and lauded, him, for his success abroad. Though Earl has fallen into some obscurity since, his death was collectively mourned by his contemporaries. He was remembered not only as an artist, but as a friend, whose personal relationships endeared him to his patrons.

Solomon Drowne’s accounts of Earl in London reveal a portrait of the young artist ambitiously following the necessary steps to achieve success within the competitive art scene. His later commissions and acceptance to the Royal Academy prove his eventual success, but Drowne’s early insights divulge Earl’s single-minded artistic pursuit as soon as he arrived in the new city. By residing in Westminster, a center for aspiring artists, visiting the studios of American artists abroad, immediately working on his submissions for entrance to the Academy, and exhibiting his work, we see Earl’s resourcefulness and dogged attempts to position himself equally with Academicians. The revelation of Earl’s overlap with his brother, Ralph Earl, brings some clarity to the question of how an otherwise unconnected American artist could rise so quickly. Ralph’s mentorship in the studio no doubt extended to his brotherly advice in navigating a

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<sup>137</sup> “Poetry,” *The United States Chronicle* (Providence, RI), January 19, 1797, 4.

portraitist's career in London, and through him, James Earl had insight to the inner workings of the art world.

Upon his return to the United States, Earl's sojourn in Providence served as his first base of patrons in America, as well as the crucial link to his later period of painting in Charleston. Earl arrived in Providence having already announced himself through the portrait of Solomon Drowne, sent from London in 1785. His social and kinship ties with the local society helped him establish a new circle of patronage within a community which valued working amongst individuals of familiar and locally-endorsed credentials.

Providence's expanding mercantile and manufacturing activity, particularly with West Indian and eastern coastal trade, created a robust economic relationship with Charleston which brought new people and goods to the two cities. The Rhode Island natives who took advantage of these economic relationships and made Charleston their home helped pave the way for Earl, who was once again settling in an unfamiliar city. Coupled with his fine English training, that the cosmopolitan city so desired, Earl found success yet again with both local southern audiences and New England transplants.

Kinship and business relationships underpinned James Earl's transnational and national movement, as well as the movement of his patrons. These overlapping networks were the essential lines along which people in the Early Republic used to circulate within, and to expand their lives outwards. James' relied on his brother, Ralph Earl, who served as his early teacher and likely his guide and introduction to London's artistic circles and the Royal Academy. Earl's family in central Massachusetts were deeply tied to kin in Providence, who thereby endorsed him with their local networks in Rhode Island, their

business contacts in Charleston, and perhaps even in London. His sitters, too, relied on, and celebrated their linkages, in many cases commissioning Earl to materialize these relationships in painted form. By taking advantage of, and moving within, these circles, Earl's resulting portraits capture the networks of eastern seaboard Americans at the end of the eighteenth century as they negotiated their position within the larger Atlantic world.

This thesis has aimed to provide a framework for resituating Earl within the broader world in which he circulated, attempted to dismantle his categorization as a regional or Loyalist painter, and brought him out from under the shadow of his brother. In clarifying the details of his biography, I hope to bring renewed interest to his body of work, and stimulate the reattribution of the many works I suspect still exist. That so many of his portraits have been misattributed to the likes of Gilbert Stuart, William Beechey, and Ralph Earl, is a testament to Earl's skill as a painter amongst the greatest artists of his generation. James Earl deserves to be considered in the canon of art history amongst these artists who captured the people who formed the active and mobile Early American Republic.

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DF Papers, BULSC = Drowne Family Papers, Ms. Drowne, Brown University Library Special Collections.

RGS Papers = Robert G. Stewart Papers, Gibbes Museum of Art

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Solomon Drowne Family Papers

***Daughters of the American Revolution Museum, Washington, DC***  
Painting Files

***Gibbes Museum of Art, Charleston, SC***  
Curatorial Files  
Robert G. Stewart Papers

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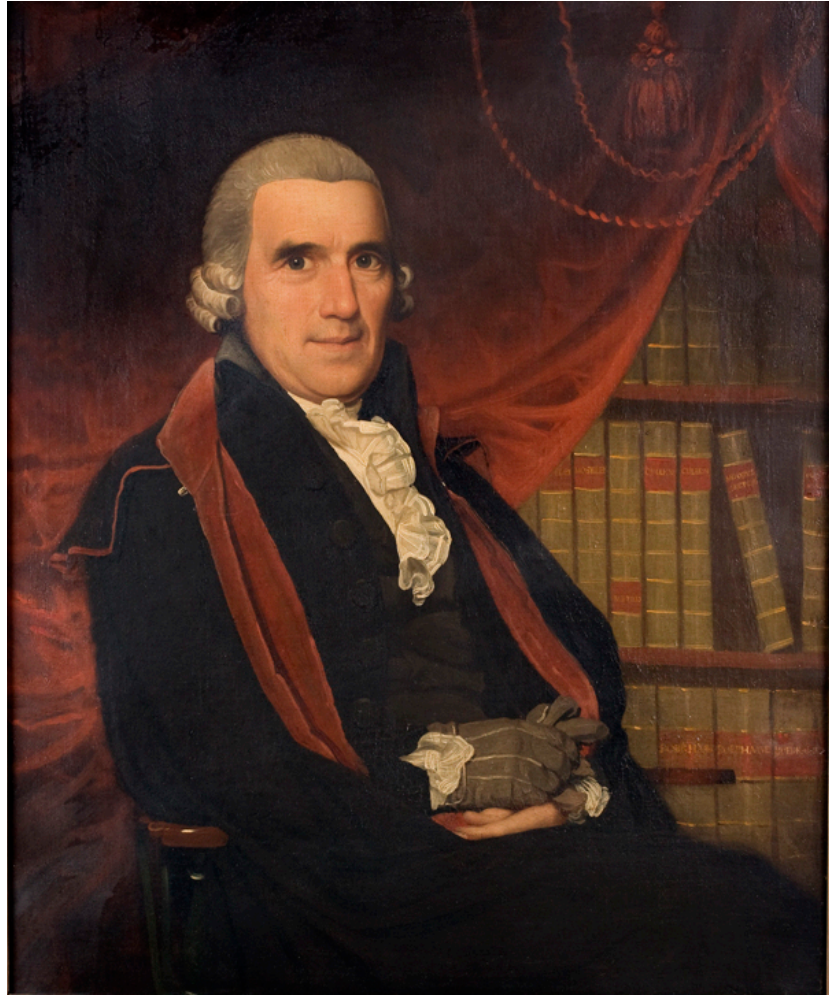
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## Appendix A

### IMAGES



**Figure 1.** *Solomon Drowne*, Charles Cromwell Ingham (1796-1863) after James Earl, 1863 (original 1795), Oil on canvas. Courtesy: Brown University Portrait Collection, Providence, Rhode Island. Portrait no. 21, Historic Property no. 1955.



**Figure 2.** *Doctor Amos Throop*, James Earl, Providence, ca. 1794, Oil on canvas, Courtesy, Rhode Island Medical Society.



**Figure 3.** *The Portraits of the Academicians of the Royal Academy, 1771-72*, Johan Zoffany, Oil on Canvas, The Royal Collection. Wikipedia Commons, Public Domain.





**Figure 4.** *The Exhibition of the Royal Academy, 1787*, Print by Pierre Antoine Martini after Johann Heinrich Ramberg, 1787, hand-coloured etching. Courtesy, The British Museum, 1871,1209.591; Detail of *Two Boys* by James Earl.



**Figure 5.** *Lord Frederick Beauclerk*, James Earl, London, ca. 1793, Oil on canvas, Wikipedia Commons, Public Domain.



**Figure 6.** *Lady Massareene*, James Earl, ca. 1793, Oil on canvas, 24 ¼" x 20",  
Courtesy: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, 38.9.1, Gift of Miss Ellen  
D. C. Blair.





**Figure 7.** *Portrait of Elizabeth Fales Paine and Her Aunt*, James Earl, ca. 1796, Oil on canvas, 40" x 50", Photography by Erik Gould, Courtesy of the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, 1924.052, Museum Appropriation Fund.





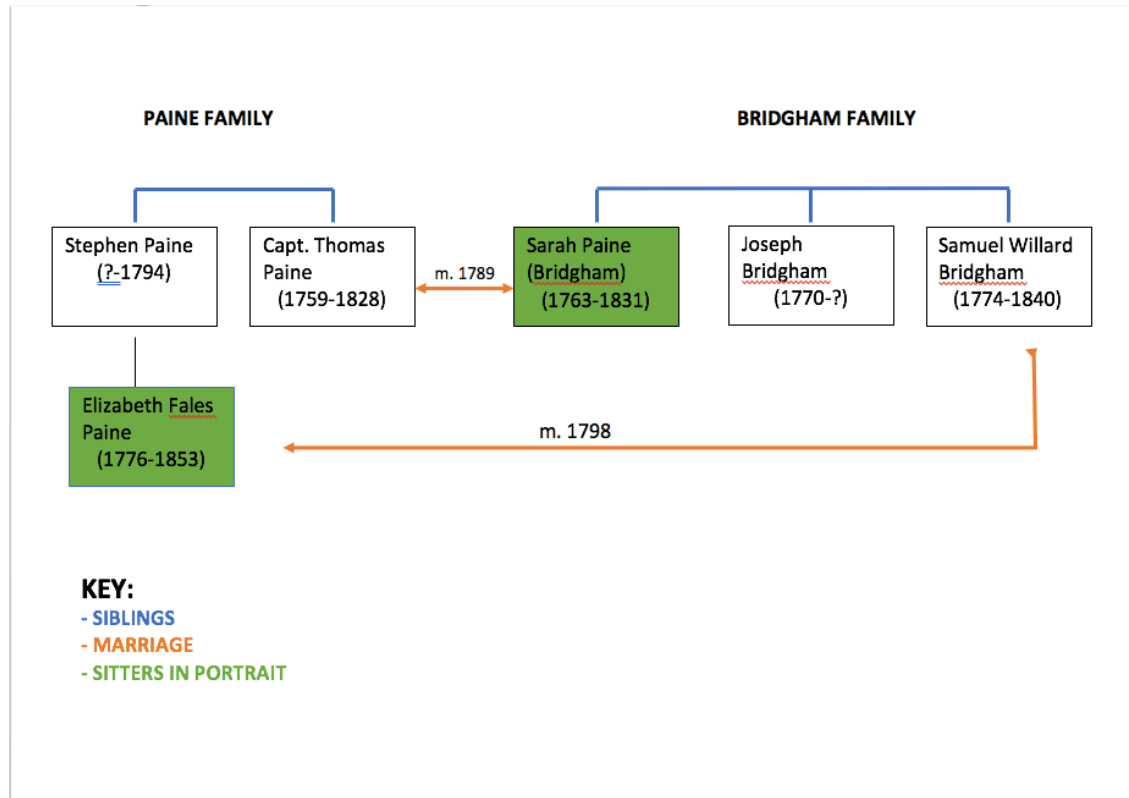
**Figure 8.** *Portrait of Rebecca Pritchard Mills (Mrs. William Mills) and her Daughter, Eliza Shrewsbury*, James Earl, ca. 1795, Oil on Canvas, Courtesy, Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library, 1960.554, Gift of Henry Francis du Pont.



**Figure 9.** *Portrait of Mehitable Knight Dexter*, James Earl, ca. 1794, Oil on Canvas, 26  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 21  $\frac{1}{4}$ ", Jesse Metcalf Fund, 23.346, Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design.



**Figure 10.** *Portrait of Captain Samuel Packard, James Earl*, ca. 1794, Oil on canvas, 35 x 29 ¼", Bequest of Miss Louise B. Bowen, 21.485, Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design.



**Figure 11.** A chart of the relationships between the Paine and Bridgham families depicted in *Elizabeth Fales Paine and Her Aunt*, James Earl, ca. 1796.





*Elizabeth Bridgham*

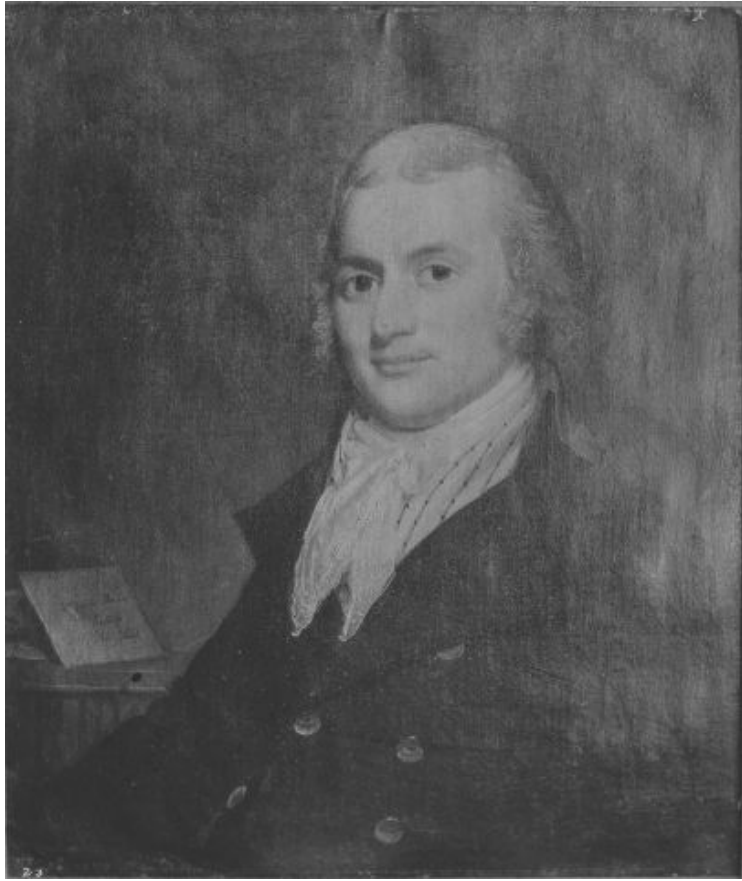
**Figure 12.** Portrait of Elizabeth Bridgham (Elizabeth Fales Paine), Unknown artist, ca. 1840. Reproduced in United States Sanitary Commission. *Representative Men and Old Families of Rhode Island: Genealogical Records and Historical Sketches of Prominent and Representative Citizens and of Many of the Old Families* (Chicago: J.H. Beers & Company, 1908), 81.

## Sofa

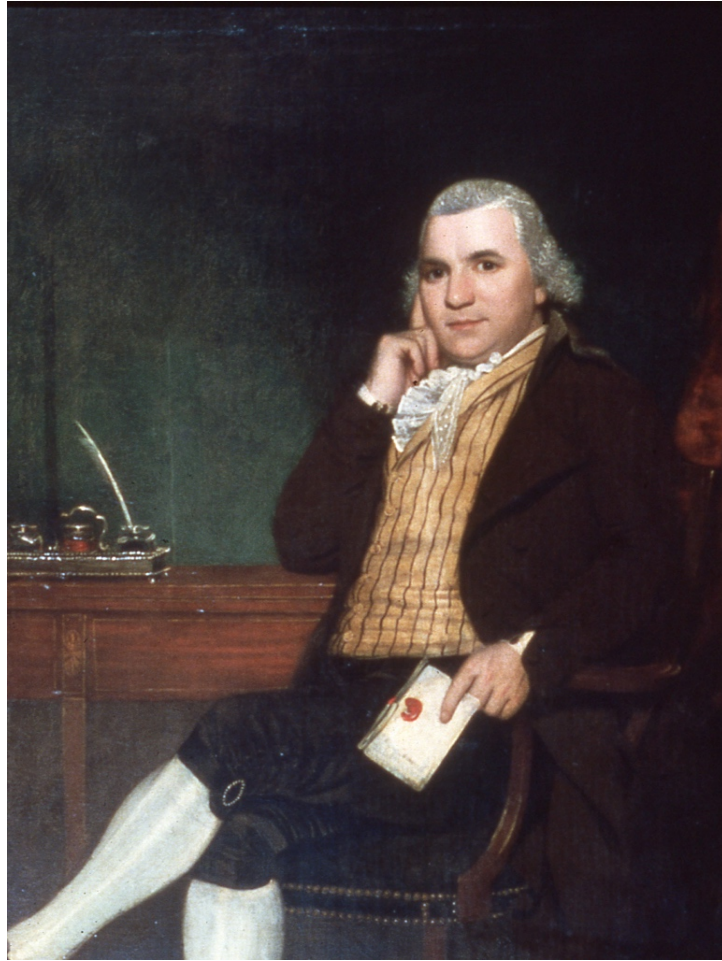


London: Published Sept. 6<sup>th</sup> 1789, by I. & J. Taylor, No 56, High Holborn.

**Figure 13.** Cabriole Sofa, Plate 22, A. Hepplewhite and Co, *The cabinet-maker and upholsterer's guide, or Repository of designs for every article of household furniture...*, (London : Published by I. and J. Taylor, 1789). Courtesy, Archive.org.

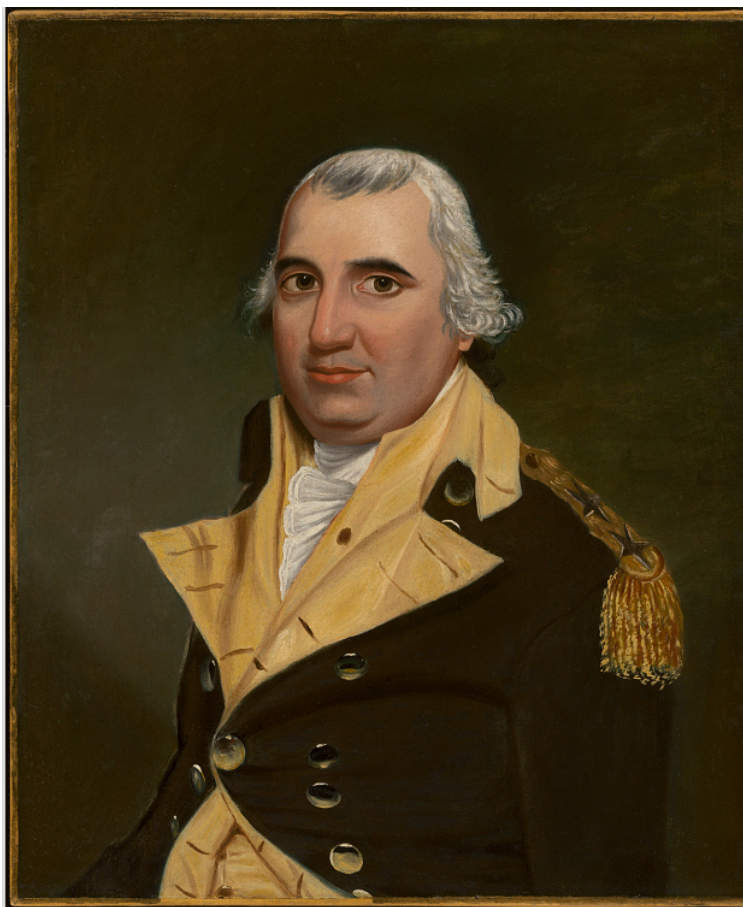


**Figure 14.** *Portrait of Joseph Sanford Barker*, James Earl, ca. 1794, Oil on Canvas, 26 ½" 22 ½", Courtesy of the Frick Art Reference Library.



**Figure 15.** *Portrait of Humphrey Courtney*, James Earl, ca. 1796, Oil on Canvas, 47 ½" x 37 ½", Courtesy, The Daughters of the American Revolution Museum, Washington DC., 1971.226, Gift of Mrs. Louise Thompkins Parker.





**Figure 16.** *Charles Cotesworth Pinckney*, Unidentified Artist, 1796, Oil on canvas, Courtesy, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Harriet J. Phelps, NPG.92.122.

## Appendix B

### IMAGE PERMISSIONS

From: **Blough, Carrie** CBlough@dar.org  
Subject: RE: Earl Portraits at the DAR Museum  
Date: February 15, 2017 at 10:18 AM  
To: **Lan Morgan** lanmai.morgan@gmail.com

CB

Hi Lan:

The form looks good. I managed to find a slide of the one portrait I said we do not have a professional copy of so I included that- 71.226 Humphrey Courtney. However, the slide was cropped at the bottom for some unknown reason, which is very frustrating. So I also included the photo I took with my phone so that you can see the top of his shoe that is cropped out. I took a close up of the letter with my phone, also included. I looked through the file to see if there might be anything of interest to you and found a letter from 1972, which I scanned and attached to this email. Most of the file included information about its conservation, and an exhibit on Earl that was at the National Portrait Gallery. I also scanned the piece of paper that was attached to the back of the painting.

I included PDFs of the catalog records for each of the three paintings.

Hopefully by the names of the files you can figure out what everything is!

You should have received an email from WeTransfer that includes all the images. You only have a week to download them.

Incidentally, if you happen to be in Washington, DC, the Humphrey Courtney painting is on display in our Yochim Gallery.

Please let me know if there is anything else I can help you with.

Sincerely,  
Carrie

*Carrie Blough*  
Associate Registrar/Assistant Curator  
National Society Daughters of the American Revolution Museum  
1776 D Street  
Washington, DC 20006-5303  
202/628-1776 x331  
[Facebook: DARMuseum](#)  
[Twitter: @DARMuseum](#)  
[Pinterest: DARMuseum](#)

**From:** Lan Morgan [mailto:lanmai.morgan@gmail.com]  
**Sent:** Friday, February 10, 2017 1:17 PM  
**To:** Blough, Carrie  
**Subject:** Re: Earl Portraits at the DAR Museum

Dear Carrie,

Thank you so much for your help with my request. I've attached a scanned copy of the form with my signature. Please let me know if you need any clarification.

I would love to see the catalogue entries for each painting that you mention, if it's not



### Image Use Agreement

Please complete and return this form with payment

Name Lan Morgan  
Publisher/Affiliation Winterthur Museum / University of Delaware  
Address 1603 Veale Rd, Wilmington, DE 19810  
Phone (412) 345-1972 Fax \_\_\_\_\_  
Email Lanmai.morgan@gmail.com

#### Object Name(s) & Number(s)

Paintings: 71.99, 71.100, 71.226

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Winterthur Masters thesis, "Unmatched in the United States: the portraiture of James Earl at home and abroad, 1785-1796," Author: Lan Morgan

Image Format: ☐ 4x5 Transparency  
☒ Digital image

Fee for image purchase: \$  
Fee for image reproduction: \$

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

From: **Newell Warde** [nwarde@rimed.org](mailto:nwarde@rimed.org)  
Subject: RE: James Earl Image Request  
Date: December 30, 2016 at 4:00 PM  
To: **Lan Morgan** [lanmai.morgan@gmail.com](mailto:lanmai.morgan@gmail.com)



Dear Lan,

Very happy to help and very interested to learn of your work.

We don't get requests for reproduction rights often enough to have a formal process established. I don't think I need to impose a lot of formality on it, but as Executive Director of the Medical Society, which received the Earl portrait from a member of Throop's wife's family as a gift in 1890, I do want to do the responsible thing. I am open to your suggestion. Perhaps Maureen can advise us about proper form. If I did not already give you permission in the final sentence of my first email, I am happy to cooperate in whatever way may suit your needs.

The conservator in Williamstown, MA, gave us a high resolution photograph, which I must have shared with Maureen O'Brien; so that part will be easy too.

(By the way, it is that gifting family member, an attorney, who told the Society in 1890 that Ralph Earl was the painter. It was not until my focus on the painting in 2011, in the midst of my preparations to have it conserved and then transferred to the RISD Museum, that we determined that the younger Earl was actually the artist.)

Solomon Drown was a very lively and interesting individual. He would have been fun to know. As a younger contemporary and colleague of Amos Throop, he was among the founding members of the RI Medical Society in 1812, as you no doubt know. I had no idea that the familiar portrait of Drown that I have often seen in the John Hay Library at Brown was a copy, or that James Earl is the painter of the original! Thank you for this intelligence!

I will be interested to hear your assessment once you have seen the Historical Society's portrait. Maureen and a member of RISD's adjunct faculty accompanied me when I went to the John Brown House to view it. To my unschooled eye, it seems obvious that it is a pre-study (on wood). The pose is the same, and the face is carefully worked up, while the folds of the sitter's clothing seem slightly less painstakingly rendered than in the final version. As I recall, there is no background (no glimpse of Throop's medical library over his shoulder, as there is in the final portrait), and in contrast to the finished formal portrait we have, Throop is without his wig, so his wispy white hair is on display.

You will know better than I how Earl and his contemporaries would have worked, but I imagine he might of done the Historical Society's portrait from life, then retired to some rooming house, or maybe remained a guest at Throop's house, while he produced the final work, complete with background and wig, and Dr. Troop was meanwhile able to go about his business.

When you are in town to visit the Historical Society, I hope you will have time to meet and talk.

Newell

---

**From:** Lan Morgan [<mailto:lanmai.morgan@gmail.com>]  
**Sent:** Friday, December 30, 2016 2:59 PM  
**To:** Newell Warde  
- - - - -

Thanks for filling out [Notice of Intent to Publish Special Collections Material from the John Hay Library](#)

Here's what we got from you:

EDIT RESPONSE

## Notice of Intent to Publish Special Collections Material from the John Hay Library

(Registration of Author's Intent to Publish)

Email address \*

lanmai.morgan@gmail.com

Name \*

Lan Morgan

Permanent Address \*

1603 Veale Road, Wilmington, DE 19810

Telephone No. \*

4133451972

Institutional Affiliation \*

Winterthur Museum/University of DE

### INFORMATION ABOUT PROPOSED PUBLICATION

Type of Publication \*

- ☐ Book
- ☐ Article
- ☐ Blog entry
- ☐ Website
- ☐ Exhibit publication

☒ Other: Thesis

Title of Work \*

"Unmatched in the United States": Tracing the Portraits of James Earl at Home and Abroad, 1785-1796"

Date of publication (anticipated) \*

May 2017

Publisher or Journal Name \*

March 2, 2017

#17-065

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Permission to publish the following work of art from the collection of the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design:

James Earl  
American, 1761-1796  
*Portrait of Elisabeth Fales Paine and Her Aunt*, ca. 1796  
Oil on canvas  
101.6 x 127 cm (40 x 50 inches)  
Museum Appropriation Fund 24.052  
Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence

James Earl  
American, 1761-1796  
*Portrait of Captain Samuel Packard*, ca. 1794  
Oil on canvas  
88.9 x 74.3 cm (35 x 29 1/4 inches)  
Bequest of Miss Louise B. Bowen 21.485  
Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence

James Earl  
American, 1761-1796  
*Portrait of Abigail Congdon Packard*, ca. 1794  
Oil on canvas  
88.9 x 73.7 cm (35 x 29 inches)  
Gift of Elizabeth Packard White Salisbury, William Gerald White, and  
Charlotte Bowen White Spellman 1993.049  
Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence

James Earl  
American, 1761-1796  
*Portrait of Mehitabel Knight Dexter*, ca. 1794  
Oil on canvas  
66.7 x 54 cm (26 1/4 x 21 1/4 inches)  
Jesse Metcalf Fund 23.346  
Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence

is granted to: Lan Morgan c/o University of Delaware  
Newark, DE 19716

Museum of Art  
Rhode Island School of Design  
224 Benefit Street  
Providence, RI 02903  
RISDMUSEUM.ORG



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From: **Lan Morgan** [lmorga@winterthur.org](mailto:lmorga@winterthur.org)   
Subject: FW: Winterthur Thesis - James Earl Portrait  
Date: January 24, 2017 at 2:11 PM  
To: [lanm@udel.edu](mailto:lanm@udel.edu)

---

LM

---

From: Perkins, Howell (VMFA)  
Sent: Tuesday, January 24, 2017 1:39:14 PM (UTC-05:00) Eastern Time (US & Canada)  
To: Lan Morgan  
Subject: RE: Winterthur Thesis - James Earl Portrait

Lan:  
Here you go.....

Best of luck!  
Howell

-----Original Message-----  
From: Lan Morgan [<mailto:lmorga@winterthur.org>]  
Sent: Tuesday, January 24, 2017 1:29 PM  
To: Perkins, Howell (VMFA) <[Howell.Perkins@vmfa.museum](mailto:Howell.Perkins@vmfa.museum)>  
Subject: Re: Winterthur Thesis - James Earl Portrait

Dear Howell,

Thank you very much for your quick response.

The image will only be produced in my thesis, which will be distributed internally in small numbers, with edited sections potentially reaching our blog. If I decide to publish later, I will certainly get back in touch.

Since the portrait is not yet on the website, would you be so kind as to send me a good quality file (300 dpi)? I only have the low-resolution black and white version from Stewart's article and would love to have a color copy for my thesis.

Many thanks,  
Lan

---

From: Perkins, Howell (VMFA) <[Howell.Perkins@vmfa.museum](mailto:Howell.Perkins@vmfa.museum)>  
Sent: Tuesday, January 24, 2017 1:11 PM  
To: Lan Morgan  
Subject: RE: Winterthur Thesis - James Earl Portrait

Dear Lan:

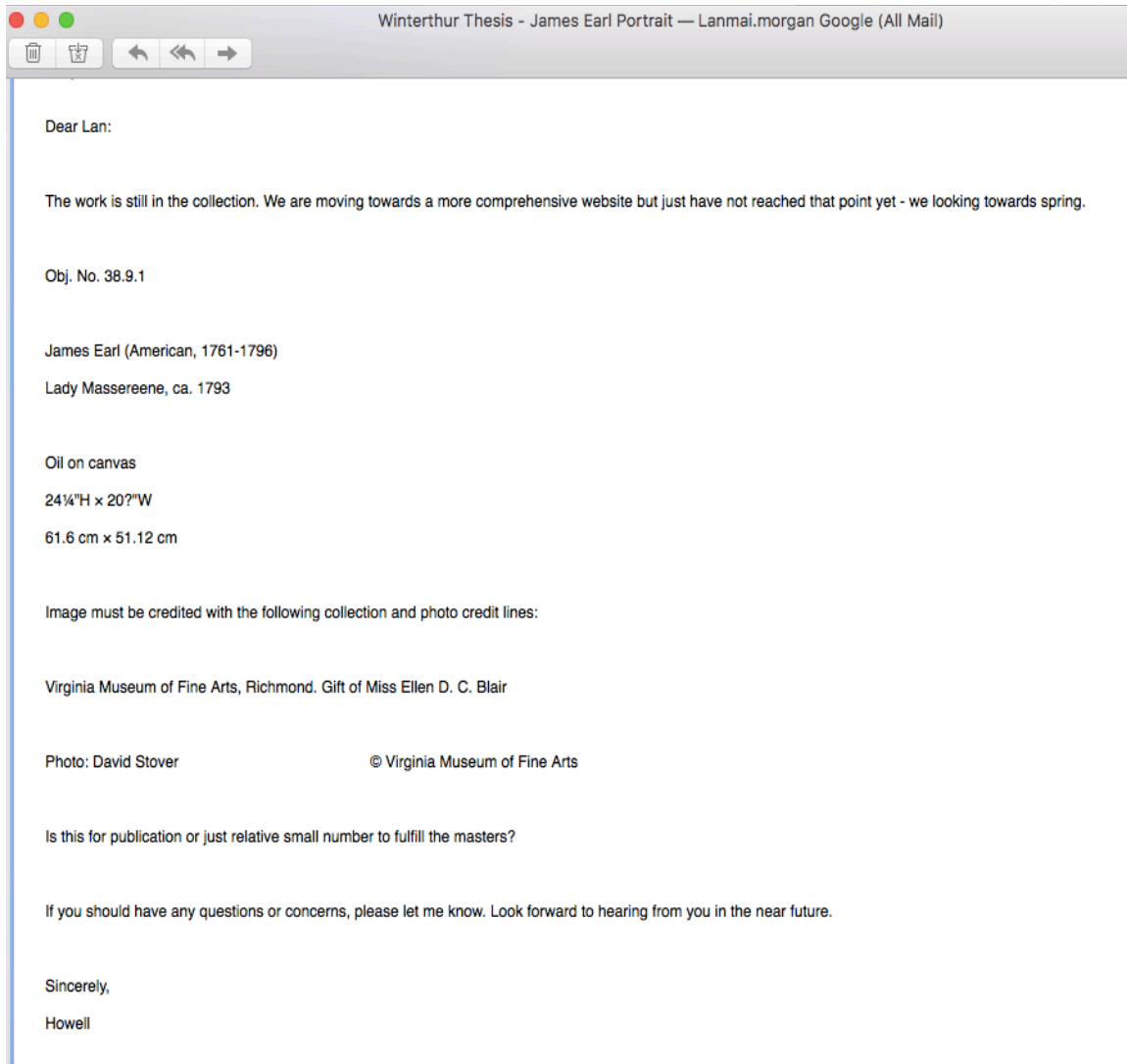
The work is still in the collection. We are moving towards a more comprehensive website but just have not reached that point yet - we looking towards spring.

Obj. No. 38.9.1

James Earl (American, 1761-1796)  
Lady Massereene, ca. 1793

---





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## Contents

- 1 How to comply with a file's license requirements
  - 1.1 Requirements of frequently-used licenses
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- 3 Contacting the uploader or content creator
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The tool creates buttons above an image (if you're logged in), or to the top right (if not). For details see Help:Gadget-Stockphoto.

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3. You can leave a message on their talk page by clicking on the "discussion" tab at the top of the user page, and then clicking the "Add topic" tab that appears next to the "edit" tab once the discussion page is visible. Enter your message and click "save." (Your message will be visible to the public.)
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### Ways to get help

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## WINTERTHUR



March 1, 2017

Lan Morgan  
Academic Programs  
Winterthur Museum  
Winterthur, DE 19735

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