

Samuel Sewall (1652-1730), c. 1728

Attr. Nathaniel Emmons (c. 1704-40)

monochrome oil on panel with inscribed paper label

13 7/8 x 9 5/8 (35.24 x 24.45)

Gift of Alexander MacKay Smith and Carleton Sprague Smith, 1985

Hewes Number: 103

Ex. Coll.: Early ownership unknown; owned in the nineteenth century by Mary Pepperell Sparhawk Jarvis Cutts (1809-79); to her daughter Anna Cutts Howard (1835-89); about 1885 given to her son Cecil Hampden Cutts Howard; in 1926 sold to his cousin Clarence Bishop Smith; to his sons, the donors.

Exhibitions:

c. 1960, according to the donors the portrait was exhibited at Yale University.

Publications:

Charles K. Bolton, The Founders: Portraits of Persons Born Abroad, 3 vols. (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1919-26), 2: 469, 647.

Bowen, History of Woodstock, 1: 32.

Essex Institute Historical Collections 37 (April 1901): opp. 161.

New England Historical and Genealogical Register 1 (1847): 104. Engraving by Oliver Pelton (1798-1882).

Samuel Sewall, 'Memoir of the Hon. Samuel Sewall, Esq.,' American Quarterly Register 13 (February 1841): frontispiece. Pelton engraving.

Samuel Sewall kept a diary for fifty-six years, from 1674, when he was engaged in postgraduate studies at Harvard, until three months before his death in 1729. It covers critical years in the evolution of the Puritan colony into an English provincial town. Details of his family life and responses to books he read are interwoven with such complex and tragic events as the revocation and restoration of the charter of Massachusetts Bay Colony and the Salem witchcraft trials.<sup>1</sup>

Sewall was still living in Cambridge, after taking his undergraduate degree at Harvard in 1671, when he began keeping his diary. His duties as a tutor and library keeper that occupied him while he prepared to take his M.A. in 1674 must have been light, with only five or six students enrolled in the college. Sewall wrote his M.A. thesis on a theological topic, but realized after accepting some invitations to preach that despite his continuing engagement with matters

spiritual, he was not called to the ministry. What Sewall worked at is not evident from the early volumes of the diary, and those extending from 1677 to 1684 are missing. The presence of Hannah Hull at his graduation led to courtship and a long and happy marriage to the only daughter of a prosperous Boston merchant. Years later, Sewall's description of taking the Oath of Freedom and being chosen a constable in 1679 as 'my first publick Entrance into the Civil Order' summarized what became his life work.<sup>2</sup>

He was appointed to succeed John Foster as the person in charge of the Massachusetts printing press in 1681. Not a printer, he hired Samuel Green to run the press, while he chose material to be printed and sold the pamphlets and books. Sewall petitioned for release from this responsibility after the death of his father-in-law John Hull in 1683, became a merchant, and was elected to Hull's seat in the General Court. The year he was released from the press, 1684, was the year in which the Massachusetts Bay Colony charter was declared forfeit in an attempt to rein in New England merchants' disregard for the customs laws. Sewall sailed to England in 1688 to meet with his agents and also with Increase Mather, who was negotiating the restoration of the old charter.

During Sewall's absence, accusations of witchcraft at Salem escalated, suspects were imprisoned, and legal action by the colony was seen as the immediate solution. After the new governor arrived with the new charter in May 1692, he appointed seven members of the Governor's Council to a Special Court of Oyer and Terminer. Sewall was among them, but his diary gives few details about the proceedings: 'Went to Salem, where, in the Meeting-house, the persons accused of Witchcraft were examined; was a very great Assembly; 'twas awfull to see how the afflicted persons were agitated. Mr. Noyes pray'd at the beginning and Mr. Higginson concluded.'<sup>3</sup> Sewall's performance on the special court that was disbanded at the end of October

led to his appointment as a justice of the Superior Court. His dissatisfaction with his role in the judgments at Salem led to a public act of contrition on the January fast day in 1697.<sup>4</sup>

The next phase of Sewall's life was marked by his service in the Superior Court, twenty-six years on the bench followed by ten years as chief justice beginning in 1718. He also became judge of probate for Suffolk County in 1715. His public writings included a pamphlet titled 'The Selling of Joseph' (1700) that highlights Sewall's sensitivity as a judge and his familiarity with Biblical teachings on slavery.

At Sewall's death, his diary remained in the hands of his descendents, but his exemplary public life had earned him respect for his fairness as a judge and his devotion to God and the law. 'He was universally and greatly reverenc'd, esteemed and beloved among us for his eminent Piety, Learning and Wisdom; his grave and venerable Aspect and Carriage...his Moderation, Peaceableness and Humility; which being all united in the same Person, and in an high Degree and Station, rendered Him one of the most shining Lights and Honours of the Age and Land wherein he lived, and worthy of very distinguishing regard in the New English Histories.'<sup>5</sup>

This portrait of Sewall is attributed to the Boston commercial artist Nathaniel Emmons, who, in 1728, painted several small, monochromatic likenesses on panel depicting Harvard graduates associated with Boston's Old South Church.<sup>6</sup> The engraved inscription with Sewall's name and achievements mounted below the image substitute for the customary, freehand inscription by Emmons.<sup>7</sup> A second monochrome and a full-size color portrait of Sewall, both painted in 1728, are also attributed to Emmons.<sup>8</sup> The inventory of his estate indicates that he evidently retained one of these portraits, listing eight mezzotint pictures, one hundred brushes, a number of empty frames, and 'the Hon. Judge Sewall's picture.'<sup>9</sup>

The portrait of Sewall now at AAS was discovered by Clarence W. Bowen (cat. 10) in the 1920s when he was preparing his History of Woodstock, Connecticut. In 1935 Bowen wrote the owner of the painting: ‘I remember saying to your father that if he ever thought of selling the Sewall portrait, I would be glad to use my best efforts in trying to get the portrait presented to the American Antiquarian Society.’<sup>10</sup> Fifty years after Bowen’s suggestion and after conducting research at the Society and learning more about the collection, the donors decided to give Sewall’s likeness to the American Antiquarian Society.

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Sewall Diaries, 1647-1729, Massachusetts Historical Society Manuscript Collection. The diaries were first published by Massachusetts Historical Society, 1878-82, and more recently as The Diary of Samuel Sewall, M. Halsey Thomas, ed., 2 vols. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> Letter Book, March 7, 1826/27, 2: 223, cited in Ola E. Winslow, Samuel Sewall of Boston (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 59.

<sup>3</sup> The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1: 289.

<sup>4</sup> The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1: 366-67.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Sewall, ‘Memoir of Hon. Samuel Sewall, Esq.’ American Quarterly Register 13 (February 1841): 249. The author, a Sewall descendant, quotes an obituary from Weekly Newsletter.

<sup>6</sup> These grisaille portraits were usually inscribed below the image with the name of the sitter in the style of popular European mezzotints. The AAS portrait is one of two monochrome likenesses of Sewall; the second is now lost (see below). Others by Emmons in 1728 are of Andrew Oliver (private collection) and the Reverend John Lowell (Fogg Art Museum; private collection [American Portraits, 1620-1825, Found in Massachusetts (Boston: Works Progress Administration, 1939), 251]). Richard Saunders and Ellen Miles, American Colonial Portraits, 1700-1776 (Washington, D.C.: National Portrait Gallery, 1987), 132-33. The arrival of the artist John Smibert (1688-1751) from London in 1729 reduced the number of Emmons’s commissions, but he continued to paint portraits until the end of his life. Smibert’s 1729 portrait of Sewall (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) is illustrated in New England Begins: The Seventeenth Century, 3 vols. (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1982), 3: 476-77.

<sup>7</sup> The inscription may have originally been part of a print that Emmons based on his painting of Sewall: ‘Emmons’ original painting from life is believed to have been destroyed but an impression of the mezzotint by the same artist has descended in the Sewall family and is owned by William Callan of Bronxville, New York.’ (Waldron K. Belknap, American Colonial Painting [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959], 289.) Callan died in 1963, and recent contact with his widow and heirs did not locate this print.

<sup>8</sup> The second grisaille image of Sewall appears as the frontispiece of N. H. Chamberlain, Samuel Sewall and the World He Lived In (Boston: De Wolfe, Fiske & Co., 1897). It was once thought to be a mezzotint, but close examination reveals that it is a second painted portrait. Signed and dated, it differs from the AAS portrait in the treatment of the sleeves and coat buttons, and it includes a painted inscription rather than an engraved paper label. The color portrait of Sewall is illustrated in Portraits in the Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1988), 92.

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<sup>9</sup> Frank W. Bayley, Little Known Early American Portrait Painters (Boston: Copley Gallery, 1919), no. 2, n.p.  
This could refer to any of the three known images of Sewall painted by Emmons.

<sup>10</sup> Clarence W. Bowen to Alexander MacKay Smith, May 14, 1935, AAS Archives.