

Gabriel Stelle (1683-1738), c. 1728

John Watson (1685-1768)
plumbago and wash on vellum
3 9/16 x 2 1/2 (9.05 x 5.08)
inscribed, on verso: 'Gabl. Stele [sic]/1728'
Gift of John Hill Morgan, 1942
Weis 106
Hewes Number: 106

Ex. Coll.: Early ownership unknown; in the nineteenth century owned by William Whitehead (1810-84); to his granddaughters Margaret Van Cortland Whitehead and Penelope Parker Whitehead; sold in 1942 to the donor.¹

Exhibitions:

1987, 'American Colonial Portraits, 1700-1776,' National Portrait Gallery, no. 23.

Publications:

John Hill Morgan, 'Further Notes on John Watson,' Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 52 (October 1942): opp. 134.
Richard H. Saunders and Ellen G. Miles, American Colonial Portraits, 1700-1776 (Washington, D.C.: National Portrait Gallery, 1987), 130-31.

Gabriel Stelle was the second son of Huguenot immigrants Poncet Stelle and Eugenie Legereau. The Stelles arrived in America from France in 1682. After living briefly in Boston and New York City, Poncet Stelle became a prosperous innkeeper in Monmouth County, New Jersey.² Gabriel Stelle spent most of his life in New Jersey and as an adult became a wealthy landowner in the region, with property in Shrewsbury, Manosquan, and Perth Amboy, where he established permanent residence in 1729. Married three times, he was active in civic affairs, serving as a judge of the quorum and as a vestryman for St. Peter's church.³ In 1728 he took out a permit for a ferry, which ran from South Amboy to Staten Island, New York, via Perth Amboy, until 1738. Stelle was described by a contemporary as a 'church man, a merchant of A good landed Estate, and well-affected to the Government.'⁴

The artist John Watson settled in Perth Amboy around 1714. His life as an artist, merchant, and land speculator was researched and documented in 1940 by John Hill Morgan, who donated this miniature of Stelle to the American Antiquarian Society.⁵ Watson produced dozens of small,

monochromatic miniatures of prominent New Jersey citizens, including a governor. These images followed a fashion set in Europe and were more affordable than painted miniatures.⁶

¹ The donor surmised the early provenance of this miniature to be as follows: artist to his niece Sophia Watson Terrill; to her daughter Sophia Waterhouse Brown (d. 1837); to her friend Maria Forbes; to her sister Elizabeth Forbes Benton; to William Whitehead. (See John Hill Morgan, 'Further Notes on John Watson,' Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 52 [October 1942]: 134-35.)

² For more on the Stelle family, see Orra Eugene Monnette, 'Poncet Stelle Sieur Des Lories, a Huguenot and Some of His Descendants,' The Grafton Magazine of History and Genealogy 2 (1910): 144-55; and Maud Burr Morris, 'Four Generations in America of the Huguenot Family of Stelle,' New York Genealogical and Biographical Record 44 (January 1913): 61-69, 107-15.

³ Edwin Salter, 'Huguenot Settlers and Land Owners in Monmouth County, New Jersey,' New York Genealogical and Biographical Record 20 (January 1889): 32; and Whitehead, Contributions to the Early History of Perth Amboy (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1856), 225.

⁴ Lewis Morris to the Duke of New Castle, June 2, 1732, New Jersey Archives, cited in Morris, 'Four Generations in America,' 109. In previous publications Stelle has incorrectly been given the title 'colonel,' based on a misinterpretation of an inscription on the verso of the miniature.

⁵ Morgan, 'John Watson: Painter, Merchant, and Capitalist of New Jersey, 1685-1768,' Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 50 (October 1940): 225-317. The New Jersey historian Whitehead, who once owned this miniature, tipped the portrait along with seven others by Watson, into an annotated copy of his book Contributions to the Early History of Perth Amboy (1856). The drawing was preserved between the pages of Whitehead's chapter on New Jersey transportation. For a list of the other images by Watson that were removed from Whitehead's book, see Morgan, 'Further Notes on John Watson,' 126-35.

⁶ Richard H. Saunders and Ellen G. Miles, American Colonial Portraits, 1700-1776 (Washington, D.C.: National Portrait Gallery, 1987), 131.