

Frederick William Thomas (1806-1866), c. 1840

Anonymous

oil on canvas over board

framed: 17 1/2 x 14 3/4 (44.45 x 37.47)

Gift of Martha Thomas Corwine Pelton, 1933

Weis 115

Hewes Number: 120

Ex. Coll.: Thomas family.

The author and poet Frederick William Thomas was born in Providence, Rhode Island, the son of Ebenezer Smith Thomas (1775-1845), who was a nephew of American Antiquarian Society founder Isaiah Thomas, Sr. (cat. #123). Frederick William Thomas attended law school in Baltimore, Maryland, where he was admitted to the bar in 1828. He enjoyed books and recalled, "I often stole out to the Baltimore Library and devoured the works upon Poetry, Oratory, and Biography."¹ In 1831 he followed his father to Cincinnati, Ohio, and worked at the Commercial Daily Advertiser, a local newspaper where he served briefly as editor.

Thomas pursued a variety of occupations during his lifetime, most involving writing or the law. He travelled a great deal, using Cincinnati as his home base. After serving six months as editor of that city's Democratic Intelligencer newspaper, Thomas traveled in the Midwest and South. From 1841 to 1846, he was a clerk in the Treasury Department in Washington, D.C.. He taught rhetoric and the English language at the University of Alabama in 1847, and later became a reporter in Kentucky and South Carolina, contributing to the Richmond Enquirer and the South Carolinian newspapers. Thomas was also an author, producing a number of novels and poems between 1835 and his death. Editions of his work, including his earliest descriptive poem The Emigrant (1833) and his first novel Clinton Bradshaw, or the Adventures of a Lawyer (1835), are part of the American Antiquarian Society's book collection. Thomas was also a friend of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49), whom he met in Philadelphia in 1840.²

¹ Frederick Lewis Thomas to Edgar Allan Poe, August 3, 1841, Griswold Correspondence, reprinted in James A. Harrison, ed., The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe 17 (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1902): 96. Thomas included a summary of his life and career in this letter at the request of Poe who wished to reproduce it in a compilation he was editing entitled The Poets and Poetry of America.

² Dumas Malone, Dictionary of American Biography 18 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936): 430. See also

This portrait of Thomas as a young man, thought by the family to have been painted by the sculptor Thomas D. Jones (1811-81), is now considered the work of an unknown Ohio artist. The awkward handling of the figure and disproportion of the head to the torso reflects the fact that the painter had little academic training. The artist included the handle of a cane at the lower left of the composition, revealing a detail the Society's later portrait of Thomas omits (cat. #121). A biographer noted that Frederick William Thomas was "injured by a fall as a child and later permanently lamed by another injury Because of his childhood injury, he could not walk without a cane."³

Harrison for the correspondence between Thomas and Poe.

³ Malone, 18: 430. Thomas details the events which led to his injury in a letter to Edgar Allan Poe, August 3, 1841, reprinted in Harrison, 18: 96.