

Isaiah Thomas, Sr. (1749-1831), June 1818

Ethan Allen Greenwood (1779-1856)

oil on panel

framed: 38 1/2 x 32 3/4 (97.790 x 83.1850)

signed at left: "Greenwood/pinx. 1818"

Bequest of Isaiah Thomas, 1831

Weis 117

Hewes Number: 123

Ex. Coll.: commissioned by the sitter, 1818.

Exhibitions:

1921-22, "Loan Exhibition of English and American Paintings of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," Worcester Art Museum.

1971, Chestnut Street Congregational Church, Worcester.

Publications:

John Fiske, Critical Period in American History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1898): 171.

Alice M. Earle, Two Centuries of Costume 2 (New York: Macmillan Co., 1903): 410.

William Dunlap, History of the Rise of the Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States 3 (New York: George P. Scott, Co., 1918): 310.

Charles L. Nichols, "The Portraits of Isaiah Thomas," Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 10 (October 1920): 251-62.¹

Annie R. Marble, From 'Prentice to Patron (New York: D. Appleton Press, 1935): frontis.

Louisa Dresser, "Portraits Owned by the American Antiquarian Society," The Magazine Antiques 95 (November 1969): 725.

The founder of the American Antiquarian Society, Isaiah Thomas, began his career as a seven-year-old apprentice to the printer Zechariah Fowle (1724-1776) who maintained a shop in Boston. As a young man he traveled in the West Indies and Nova Scotia, working in the printing business before returning to Boston in 1770. That year he went into partnership with Fowle and began publication of the Whig newspaper The Massachusetts Spy which strongly supported the cause of American independence. In April of 1775, two days before the Battle of Lexington, after hearing rumors that his press was to be seized by the royal government, Thomas packed up his type, press, and paper supply and fled to Worcester, Massachusetts, away from the British troops stationed in Boston. In Worcester, Thomas continued to print patriotic rhetoric and

¹ Nichols's annotated offprint version of this publication is housed at the American Antiquarian Society. In it, he records changes of ownership and provenance of various Thomas portraits that updates the Proceedings article.

detailed descriptions of Revolutionary War battles in the Spy. The press, type cases, and imposing stone that he used in Boston and moved in such a rush are preserved today at the American Antiquarian Society.²

After the war, Thomas remained in Worcester where he built an extensive printing business. He owned several printing offices, paper mills, a bindery, and bookstores, which together employed over one hundred and fifty people. Thomas published newspapers, broadsides, sheet music, periodicals, pamphlets, and a yearly almanac. He produced over four hundred book titles for both adult and juvenile readers, including the first dictionary printed in America and the first American edition of Mother Goose's Melody (1786). Thomas also served as Worcester's postmaster from 1775 to 1801 and was an active freemason, joining the lodge in Worcester in 1793 and becoming Grand Master of Massachusetts in 1802.³

In 1802, at the age of fifty-three, Thomas retired from business. He actively began to pursue his interests in the history of the young nation and in the origins of the printing occupation. In 1810, he published his History of Printing which remains one of the seminal reference books for the history of typography and printing. Several copies of the various editions of this important publication are preserved in the imprint collection of the American Antiquarian Society along with hundreds of examples of Thomas's work as a printer, including complete runs of the Massachusetts Spy and Thomas's almanacs, as well as dozens of his pamphlets, broadsides, and books for children, all produced in his shops. In addition, Isaiah Thomas's personal papers, which contain his private and business correspondence, diaries, and legal documents are part of the Society's manuscript collection.⁴

Ten years after his retirement, In 1812, Thomas founded the American Antiquarian Society, incorporating it that same year with a group of like-minded Massachusetts residents.⁵

² For more on early printing presses including the Thomas press at AAS, see Lawrence C. Wroth, The Colonial Printer (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1964), 64-66, 77.

³ For more on Thomas, see Charles L. Nichols, Isaiah Thomas Printer, Writer, & Collector (Boston: Club of Odd Volumes, 1912).

⁴ Isaiah Thomas Papers, 1748-1874, American Antiquarian Society Manuscripts Collection.

⁵ There are portraits of four of the twenty-seven incorporators in the collection: Isaiah Thomas, Sr., Isaiah Thomas, Jr. cat. #122, Aaron Bancroft D.D. cat. #4, and William Paine, D.D. cat. #93. The other founders were: Levi Lincoln, Sr., Levi Lincoln, Jr., Harrison Gray Otis, Timothy Bigelow, Nathaniel Paine, Edward Bangs, J.T. Kirkland, Jonathan H. Lyman, M.D., Elijah H. Mills, Elisha Hammond, Timothy Williams, William D. Peck, John Lowell (requested his name be removed), Edmund Dwight, Eleazar James, William S. Shaw, Francis Blake, Samuel

The goal of the Society was to preserve the history of the United States as it was recorded in the print medium. Explaining the need for such an institution, Thomas wrote: "We cannot obtain a knowledge of those who are to come after us, nor are we certain what will be the events of future times; as it is in our power, so it should be our duty, to bestow on posterity that which they cannot give to us, but which they may enlarge and improve and transmit to those who shall succeed them."⁶ Thomas was the Society's leader, serving as the first librarian, director and president. As a private collector, he purchased a large cache of Mather Family material, including portions of the famous Mather library and donated the material to the Society. Thomas eventually gave his entire private library of books, manuscripts, and newspapers to the American Antiquarian Society, along with a cash bequest and the Society's first building. He was also responsible for the election of collectors such as William Bentley (cat. #8) to membership in the fledgling Society, with the hope that his and other important groups of privately held printed material would be given to the institution.⁷ Thomas gathered runs of newspapers from not only urban centers like Boston and Philadelphia, but from rural towns like Suffield, Connecticut, and Weathersfield, Vermont. His knowledge of the role that printed ephemera such as political broadsides and pamphlets had played in American history informed his desire to collect these materials before they disappeared. This foresighted preservation of early American printed material set the stage for the American Antiquarian Society's collection to become an unparalleled resource for historical research.

This portrait of Isaiah Thomas was painted by Ethan Allen Greenwood six years after the establishment of the American Antiquarian Society. Greenwood probably first came to Thomas's attention after the artist produced a likeness of his son Isaiah Thomas Jr., in March of 1818 (cat. #122). In 1818, Greenwood was busy developing plans to establish his Gallery of Fine

Burnside Benjamin Russell, Redford Webster, Ebenezer T. Andrews, and William Wells. There is an image of Sophia Burnside (cat. #16), but none of her spouse.

⁶ Isaiah Thomas, Sr., Account of the American Antiquarian Society (Boston: Isaiah Thomas, Jr., 1813): 4.

⁷ For more on the early history of the American Antiquarian Society, see Nancy Burkett and John B. Hensch, eds., Under its Generous Dome, The Collections and Programs of the American Antiquarian Society (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1992).

Arts in Boston which featured copies of famous European paintings and portraits of well-known Americans.⁸

Greenwood first painted Isaiah Thomas in May of 1818, taking a portrait of the printer and patriot to hang with other likenesses of prominent New Englanders in the Gallery of Fine Arts. Isaiah Thomas recorded in his diary, "At the request of Mr. Greenwood, Portrait Painter in Boston, sat for him to take my likeness. Mr. G. is a member of a new Society in Boston called the Fine Arts."⁹ Thomas had four additional sittings with the painter before the work was completed.¹⁰ The finished portrait, which remained the property of Greenwood, evidently pleased Thomas and he commissioned the artist to again paint his portrait the following month. He noted in his diary at the end of June of 1818, "Engaged Mr. Greenwood to take my Likeness, I sat at his request five weeks since, when he finished one for himself. I sat again today for him to take one for myself. Sat six times for this last picture."¹¹ Greenwood's receipt for \$60.00 for the second portrait is preserved in the American Antiquarian Society.¹² The portrait, showing a well-dressed, bewigged Thomas holding a book, hung in the Thomas home in Worcester. At Isaiah Thomas's death, it was bequeathed to the American Antiquarian Society.¹³

⁸ Georgia Brady Barnhill, "Extracts from the Journals of Ethan Allen Greenwood: Portrait Painter and Museum Proprietor," Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 103 (April 1993): 91-178.

⁹ Isaiah Thomas Diary, May 20, 1818, Isaiah Thomas Papers 1748-1874.

¹⁰ Isaiah Thomas Diary, May 21-23 and 25, 1818.

¹¹ Isaiah Thomas Diary, June 29, 1818.

¹² Ethan Allen Greenwood's receipt, February 27, 1819, Isaiah Thomas Papers 1748-1874. Greenwood was evidently given a five dollar deposit in June as the receipt reads, "[R]eceived of Isaiah Thomas by the hand of Isaiah Thomas, Jr., Fifty-five dollars, in full for painting a Portrait, and for frame to the same. Price of Picture and frame \$60.00."

¹³ During his lifetime, Thomas had two copies of Greenwood's portrait made and three more copies were taken after his death. See Frederick Weis, "Portraits in the American Antiquarian Society," Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 56 (April 1946): 107-8; and Charles L. Nichols, The Portraits of Isaiah Thomas (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1921), 4-7.