

Robert Bailey Thomas(1766-1846), 1836
Hannah Beaman Thomas (1774-1855), 1836

Zedekiah Belknap (1781-1858)

oil on canvas

Each: 32 1/2 x 27 (82.5500 x 68.5800)

his portrait, signed on verso, under lining: "Portrait of Robert

B. Thomas, Esq. Z. Belknap Pinxt. Nov. A.D. 1836,"¹ and inscribed on recto, l.r.:
"Robert B. Thomas, Esq."

Gift of Helen M. Kaven, 1933

Weis 116, 128

Hewes Number: 133 & 134

Ex. Coll.: sitters, to Hannah Beaman Thomas's niece Fidelia Beaman Pierce (1808-1866), to her daughter Delia Pierce Hardy (b. 1835), to her husband Follansbe (Frank) C. Hardy (1829-1916), in 1916 to his daughter Bertha M. Hardy, sold around 1919 to Martha Esther Thomas Kidder (1836-1921), to her daughter the donor.

Exhibitions:

1893-1916, on loan to the Worcester Society of Antiquities.

c. 1919-1933, on loan to the Worcester Historical Society.

1977, "Portraits of Zedekiah Belknap," Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center.

Publications:

Robert Bailey Thomas:

Old Farmer's Almanac 150(1942): 32.

Edward Park, "Whither the Weather, 'Almanac'-style," Smithsonian Magazine 23 (November 1992): 93.

Hannah Beaman Thomas:

Old Farmer's Almanac 150 (1942): 32.

The founder of the Old Farmer's Almanac, Robert Bailey Thomas was born in Grafton, Massachusetts, and spent most of his life in the area around his boyhood home. He worked on his father's farm and taught school in several nearby towns. A great lover of books, as a young man he set up a bookbinding business and bound account books, ledgers and journals for his neighbors. He noted in a reminiscence, "My father was a great reader, and possessed a larger

¹ Frederick Weis, "Portraits in the American Antiquarian Society," Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 56 (April 1946): 111.

miscellaneous library than was generally to be met within a country town. Of consequence, I spent most of my leisure hours in reading. Among many scientific works, no one engrossed more of my attention than [John] Ferguson's Astronomy [Explained], from which I derived much pleasure and satisfaction.... [F]rom the pleasing study of this work I first imbibed the idea of calculating an almanack."² In order to learn the mathematical formulas for creating an almanac, Thomas attended Osgood Carleton's School of Mathematics in Boston in 1792.

Thomas was aware of a number of popular almanacs being produced in Massachusetts, including one printed by Isaiah Thomas, Sr. (cat. #123). In 1789 Robert Bailey Thomas called on Isaiah Thomas, hoping to purchase several off-printed sheets of his almanac to bind for sale. "I called on Mr. Isaiah Thomas of Worcester (no relation of mine, as I know of), to purchase 100 of his Almanacks in sheets, but he refused to let me have them, saying he did not sell in sheets only to those in the trade. I confess I was mortified and came home with a determination to have an Almanack of my own. I very well knew that there were many things in his that were not generally approved of, and which I could remedy."³ Robert Bayley Thomas issued his first edition of the Farmer's Almanac in 1793, omitting the signs of the zodiac and adding literary and agricultural information as well as patriotic stories, which appealed to educated farmers in New England. Thomas's almanac soon became one of the best selling annual publications in the United States. Between 1820 and 1830, over 200,000 copies were sold.

² Proceedings in Connection with the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Incorporation of the Town of West Boylston, Massachusetts (West Boylston: Centennial Committee, 1910): 59-60. This publication includes reprints of a series of autobiographical essays that Thomas included in his Farmer's Almanac between 1833 and 1839.

³ *Ibid.*, 61.

Through his almanac, Thomas became one of the best known figures in central Massachusetts. He married Hannah Beaman of Princeton, Massachusetts in 1803 after a courtship that lasted thirteen years. The couple lived on a farm in West Boylston, Massachusetts, where Thomas calculated the cycles of the moon and compiled essays and historical facts for inclusion in the yearly almanacs, which he edited until his death in 1846. He served as the town clerk of West Boylston in 1808 and as a state legislator in 1820. Thomas's personal papers, including correspondence relating to the publication of the almanacs, handwritten drafts of several editions, and business contracts are located in the American Antiquarian Society's manuscript collection.⁴

In 1836, when Thomas was aged seventy and his wife was sixty-six, they commissioned the itinerant painter Zedekiah Belknap to paint these portraits.⁵ Belknap, who was born in Ward (now Auburn), Massachusetts, was near the end of his forty-year career as a portrait painter. He attended Dartmouth College, graduating in 1807, and may have served as a chaplain during the War of 1812. He started painting portraits in 1810 and travelled through Vermont, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts taking likenesses of members of New England's growing middle class. Over one hundred and fifty portraits by his hand have been documented.⁶

⁴ Robert Bailey Thomas Papers, 1792-1846, American Antiquarian Society Manuscript Collection. For more on Thomas, see George Lyman Kittredge, The Old Farmer and His Almanac (Boston: William Ware & Co., 1904); for American almanacs in general, see Robb Sagendorph, America and Her Almanacs: Wit, Wisdom, and Weather, 1639-1970 (Dublin, N.H.: Yankee, Inc.. 1970).

⁵ For a later portrait of Robert Bailey Thomas see cat. #135. A second pair of portraits of Robert Bailey and Hannah Beaman Thomas by an unknown artist were illustrated in Judson D. Hale, Sr., "To Patrons," The Old Farmer's Almanac 200 (1992): v., vi..

⁶ For more on Belknap see Elizabeth R. Mankin, "Zedekiah Belknap," The Magazine Antiques 110 (November 1976): 1056-70.

After the death of Robert Bailey Thomas, his wife went to live with her niece Fidelia Beaman Pierce, bringing the portraits to the Pierce household. The paintings descended through one branch of the family and around 1919 were purchased by another line. They were given to the American Antiquarian Society in 1933. Upon receipt of the gift, the Society's director noted, "There is no library in the country where Robert B. Thomas is more valued and appreciated than here. We have a complete file of his Almanacs, the original manuscript of his first Farmer's Almanac and many letters written by him. Therefore the two pictures certainly fit in our collection."⁷

⁷ Clarence S. Brigham to Helen M. Kaven, June 29, 1933, American Antiquarian Society Archives.