

Robert Bailey Thomas (1766-1846), c. 1846

Anonymous

after Zedekiah Belknap (1781-1858)

oil on canvas

85 3/4 x 37 1/2 (217.8050 x 95.2500)

inscribed on book in sitter's hand: "Farmer's Almanac from 1783

[sic]to 1846 by R. B. Thomas, Esq."

Gift of David D. Prescott, 1863

Weis 127

Hewes Number: 135

Ex. Coll.: unknown before the donor.

Publications:

The Old Farmer's Almanac 100(1892): opp. 40.

George Lyman Kittredge, The Old Farmer and His Almanac (Boston: William Ware & Co., 1904): frontispiece.

This full-length portrait of Robert Bailey Thomas, shown standing next to his telescope and holding a copy of his famous almanac, was probably painted after his death. The upper portion of the figure is based on the 1836 portrait of Thomas by Zedekiah Belknap (cat. #133). The artist has heavily reworked the lower half of the figure, shifting Thomas's right foot, elbow, and arm several times in the process of completing the composition.

The identity of the artist who created this painting is somewhat confused. Originally, the portrait arrived at the American Antiquarian Society without an attribution. In 1891 it was referred to in the Society's Proceedings as the work of "a Mr. Talcott."<sup>1</sup> After a 1908 restoration, a note in the Proceedings states, "The repairs upon our portraits and furniture have gone steadily forward although not yet completed.... [T]he portrait of Robert B. Thomas, painted shortly before his death is ascribed to William Talcott."<sup>2</sup> Presumably the portrait had an inscription on the verso which has since been lost under subsequent relinings and repairs. However, no further evidence of a William Talcott has been found. His name does not appear in the state censuses, vital

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<sup>1</sup> Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 7(October 1891): 357. The librarian of the Society put out a call for assistance in identifying Talcott writing, "a desire for information leads me to ask for light as to Mr. Talcott, a peripatetic artist who sometime after 1836, painted our curious, full-length portrait of Mr. Robert B. Thomas." There are no recorded responses to this appeal.

<sup>2</sup> Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 19(October 1908): 208.

records, city or town directories for the region, or in the history of West Boylston, Massachusetts, where the portrait hung for many years. In addition, no other paintings by him are known.

The early history of the painting is also unknown. The donor, David D. Prescott (b. 1805), lived in the house in West Boylston that was Robert Bailey Thomas's boyhood home.<sup>3</sup> Prescott was connected to the Thomas family through his wife Lucy, whose brother was married to Fidelia Beaman Pierce. Fidelia Pierce was the niece who cared for the aging Hannah Beaman Thomas (cat. #134) after she was widowed in 1846, and who once owned the portrait of Robert Bayley Thomas by Belknap. The Prescotts must have had access to Thomas family material, because in 1863 Lucy Prescott gave the American Antiquarian Society Robert Bayley Thomas's handwritten draft of the 1830 Farmer's Almanac and in 1871 David Prescott donated "one hundred and sixteen Farmer's Almanacs and a Trunk, Formerly the property of Robert Bailey Thomas."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Keyes, Historical Memorandum and Genealogical Register of the Town of West Boylston (Worcester: Spy Printing, 1861): 36.

<sup>4</sup> Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society (October 1871): 62.