

Nathan Webb (1767-1853), c. 1847

Peter Stephenson (1823-c. 1860)

cameo

1 3/4 (h) (4.45)

Bequest of Henry Herbert Edes and Grace Williamson Edes Stedman, 1935

Weis 133

Hewes Number: 139

Ex. Coll.: Early provenance unknown; owned by Henry Herbert Edes (1849-1922); to his wife, the donor.

Nathan Webb, a teacher and later a merchant, was active in public life in Boston and Charlestown, Massachusetts. In the 1820s he served as a city assessor and selectman in Boston. In 1827 he moved across the river to Charlestown, where he was elected to six terms as a representative to the Massachusetts General Court. Webb lived at 10 Cordis Street in Charlestown until he was eighty-six years old. His obituary stated: 'He was universally respected for his genuine worth and thousands of the elderly citizens of this city--for no one was more widely known--will recall his manly form and cheerful countenance. His conversation was rich with reminiscences of the times of Hancock and Adams and their compeers; and it may be truly said that while his early days were spent in the honorable occupation of a teacher, and in the most faithful public service, his latter years were those of cheerful, grateful, delightful, religious old age.'<sup>1</sup>

This cameo was cut when Webb was an old man. The artist, Peter Stephenson, was born in Yorkshire, England, and came to the United States with his parents in 1827. After the death of his father in 1835, he lived in Buffalo, New York, with an older brother, who taught him the trades of watchmaker and jeweler. In 1839 Stephenson began cutting cameos. Four years later, the twenty-year-old artist moved to Boston hoping to become a sculptor. He earned enough money cutting cameos of Boston residents to spend 1845 and 1846 in Rome studying antique sculpture.

Stephenson returned to Boston in 1847. Because of a shortage of materials and lack of appreciation among Americans for idealized sculpture, Stephenson and other American sculptors in the pre-Civil War period struggled to earn a living. He wrote in 1853: 'I do not complain; the way to make up for hard luck is to work the more industriously. I have never received a lesson from any one, nor a cent of money that the sweat of my brow did not earn. I have cut between six and seven hundred cameo likenesses, about two thousand fancy designs, and several busts and statues.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Daily Evening Transcript (Boston), March 1, 1853.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Stephenson possibly to Hannah Farnham Sawyer Lee, January 1853, quoted in Lee, Familiar Sketches of Sculpture and Sculptors, 2 vols. (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, and Co., 1854), 2: 193. For additional information on Stephenson, see The New-York Historical Society's Dictionary of Artists in America, 1564-1860, s.v. 'Stephenson, Peter.'