

Daniel Webster (1782-1852), c. 1870

Francis Carpenter (1830-1900)

[after a painting by Joseph Ames, ca. 1855]

Oil on canvas

36 ¼ x 29 1/2” (92.1 x 74.8 cm)

Gift of John Seelye, 1999

Hewes Number: 140

Ex. Coll.: Gordon Lesley Ford (1823-1891), to persons unknown, to donor c. 1989.

Exhibitions:

Brooklyn Art Association, 1872.

Daniel Webster, the great orator and statesman, began his first term in the United States Congress in 1813, the year before he was elected to membership in the recently founded American Antiquarian Society. At his death, Webster was remembered in the annals of the Society for his scholarship and intellect: ‘Mr. Webster was one of the earliest members of this Society. . . . The services, which, as a statesman, he rendered to his country and the world will be those which most frequently commemorate him. But, at the same time, students and men of letters will remember that, with all the vigor of his mind, he was a laborious student, and that his labors as a statesman have been permanent and invaluable gifts to English literature.’¹

Webster was born in Salisbury, New Hampshire, and graduated from Dartmouth College in 1801. He practiced law in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, married Grace Fletcher² in 1808, and, after delivering several rousing orations on democracy and patriotism, became interested in politics. Webster served two terms as a United States Congressman and, at age forty-five, was elected to the United States Senate where he earned fame for his battles against excessive tariffs, his support for states rights, and his well-honed political

instincts. In recognition of his ability to bring disparate groups together for a common cause, Webster was appointed Secretary of State by President William Henry Harrison (1773-1841) in 1841. Webster's writings as well as his orations, including speeches on slavery, the Compromise Bill (1850), and the Austro-Hungarian question (1851) are preserved in the book collection of the American Antiquarian Society.³

Francis Bicknell Carpenter painted this portrait of Webster before 1872, when it was exhibited at the Brooklyn Art Association's 'Chronological Exhibition of American Art,' an exhibition on view from March 12 through April 6, of that year. The title of the painting in the exhibition catalogue is Daniel Webster at his Birthplace, Franklin, N.H.⁴ Carpenter based his painting on a portrait by Joseph Ames that is, in turn based on a daguerreotype of Webster.⁵ Carpenter either knew the painting by Ames or an anonymous lithograph, Webster at Franklin, The Home of his Childhood that appears to have been printed about the time of Webster's death or shortly thereafter.⁶

This portrayal of a relaxed Webster contrasts with the more formal portraits of the great orator such as the painting by William Willard. It is reminiscent of the final life portrait of Webster by Joseph A. Ames that show Webster in sportsman's dress at his home in Marshfield, Massachusetts.⁷ In 1877 Peter Harvey wrote, 'He always seemed most happy and most contented at home in Marshfield, surrounded by a family to whom he was tenderly devoted, within reach of the scenes of favorite sports and pastimes, and absorbed by the many quiet interests of the homestead and the farm.' Likewise, he visited elms Farm in Franklin, New Hampshire, almost every year to 'make a personal

inspection of his fields and live-stock.’ To the very end of his life, Webster corresponded with his tenant farmer, John Taylor, giving him instructions and receiving reports.

Webster planned to go to Franklin in late September 1852, but he became ill at his home in Marshfield and died there on October 24.⁸

The portrait was owned by Gordon L. Ford (1823-91) at the time of its exhibition in 1872. Ford, trained as a lawyer, but successful as a businessman, became the president of the New London, Willimantic and Palmer Railroad in 1852. He later became the business manager of the New York Tribune. A resident of Brooklyn, he supported many cultural organizations and was a founder of the Brooklyn Art Association. Of particular interest was his passion for book and manuscript collecting, a love passed on to two of his sons, Paul Leicester Ford and Worthington Chauncey Ford, both of whom were bibliographers of Americana. His sons donated his library to the New York Public Library in 1899.⁹ The history of the painting between 1872 and its acquisition by the donor at an auction in 1989 is not known.

¹ Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society (April, 1853): 9.

² Grace Fletcher Webster died in 1828, and Webster married the New York socialite, Caroline Le Roy, the following year.

³ For additional biographical information on Webster see Kenneth Shewmaker, Daniel Webster: The Completest Man (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1990).

⁴ Catalogue of the Works of Art Exhibited at the Twenty-Fourth Reception on Monday Evening, march 11th, 1872. ... Brooklyn Art Association (Brooklyn, 1872), 7.

⁵ Charles Henry Hart, ‘Life Portraits of Daniel Webster,’ McClure’s Magazine 9 (May 1897): 620.

⁶ This lithograph measures 17 ¾ x 11 ½”. It was donated to AAS by John D. Seelye in 2001.

⁷ Reproduced in an article by Jourdan Moore Houston and Alan Fraser Houston, ‘“Mr. Webster’s Greatest Painter”’: New Hampshire-Born Artist Joseph Alexander Ames,’ Historical New Hampshire 56 (2001): 11. The painting is owned by the Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁸ Peter Harvey, Reminiscences and Anecdotes of Daniel Webster (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1877), 263, 294, 307-8.

⁹ Dictionary of American Biography, 6: 514-15.