

Henry M. Wheeler (1830-1917), 1906

Charles Avery Aiken (1872-1965)

oil on canvas

signed at l.l.: "C. A. Aiken, '06"

20 x 16 (50.800 x 40.6400)

Bequest of Helen Eaton, 1978

Hewes Number: 149

Ex. Coll.: sitter, possibly to his daughter Fannie Thaxter Wheeler (1857-1941), owned by her daughter F. Louisa Eaton (1884-1966), to her sister, the donor.

The genealogist Henry M. Wheeler was born in Worcester and lived most of his life in central Massachusetts. He studied at both Amherst College and Brown University, but did not graduate from either institution. As a young man he worked as a clerk of the courts in Worcester County and later became an assistant secretary of the State Mutual Life Insurance Association, a position he held for over twenty years. Wheeler was a member of many Worcester organizations. He was president of both the Y.M.C.A and the Y.W.C.A, was active in the Central Congregational Church, and was a member of the Worcester Society of Antiquities.¹

After his retirement from the insurance business, Wheeler pursued his interests in local history and genealogy, often at the American Antiquarian Society. In 1898 he published his Genealogy of Some of the Descendants of Obadiah Wheeler of Concord and Thomas Thaxter of Hingham. Wheeler's annotated version of the book, as well as a copy he filled with original photographs, are preserved at the Society.² The Worcester Society of Antiquities published several of his papers on the history of Worcester, including "Recollections of Two New England Houses Built by the Reverend Joseph Wheeler" (1904), and "Lincoln Square, Worcester, Massachusetts" (1905). Although Wheeler was never elected to membership in the American Antiquarian Society, he was a frequent donor. He gave early town histories, religious material

documenting missions in Massachusetts, dozens of early pamphlets relating to Worcester, and copies of his own essays.³

This profile portrait of Wheeler was painted by his nephew, Charles Avery Aiken,⁴ whose studies at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston preceded a successful career as a painter and printmaker. In the 1920s and 1930s, he exhibited his work at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. and at New York's National Academy of Design. During his lifetime, he maintained studios in New York City and in Wellesley, Massachusetts.⁵ This portrait of his uncle was painted when Aiken was a young man, and may have been based on an 1896 photograph of Wheeler depicting the antiquarian in profile surrounded by books and papers.⁶

¹ "Henry M. Wheeler Dies in Wellesley," Worcester Evening Gazette, September 9, 1917, American Antiquarian Society Newsclipping File; and Henry M. Wheeler, Genealogy of Some of the Descendants of Obadiah Wheeler of Concord and Thomas Thaxter of Hingham (Worcester: Franklin P. Rice, 1898): 20-21, 35.

² Henry Martyn Wheeler Genealogical Papers 1898-1899, American Antiquarian Society Manuscript Collection.

³ See Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society from October 1867 to October 1916. Often the gift listings are vague. For example in April 1869, Wheeler is noted as giving, "Twenty-two college pamphlets," and in October of 1900 he donated, "Ten Worcester pamphlets of early date."

⁴ Born in Georgia, Vermont, the artist was the only son of Wheeler's sister Henrietta and her husband the Reverend John Francis Aiken Wheeler, Genealogy of Some of the Descendants of Obadiah Wheeler, 35.

⁵ Who's Who in American Art 1938-1939 (Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Arts, 1937), 13-14; and Dorothy B. Gilbert, ed., Who's Who in American Art 1953 (New York, R. R. Bowker Co., 1953), 5.

⁶ The 1896 photograph, which shows Wheeler seated in his study at 82 Park Avenue, Worcester, is housed in the American Antiquarian Society's collection of photographs of Worcester residents.