

Calvin Willard (1784-1867), 1857

Edwin T. Billings (1824-93)  
oil on canvas  
30 x 25 (76.20 x 63.50)  
Bequest of Olive F. Willard, 1885  
Weis 145  
Hewes number: 151

Ex. Coll.: Sitter; to his second wife, the donor.

Calvin Willard was born in Harvard, Massachusetts, and studied law with the Boston attorney Richard Henry Dana (1815-82). Willard was admitted to the bar in 1809 and practiced law in Barnstable and Petersham, Massachusetts, before settling in Fitchburg, an urban center north of Worcester. There, Willard served as the town's postmaster and was elected as a state representative in 1824. His experience with state law led to his 1824 appointment as high sheriff for Worcester County and he moved to Worcester three years later. Willard retained the position of sheriff until his retirement in 1844, and a colleague remembered, 'He made an excellent sheriff, was very strict in the observance of all forms of etiquette of the Court, and added dignity to its deliberations by his gentlemanly bearing and the care and neatness of his dress.'<sup>1</sup> Willard, who officiated at the last public execution in the county in 1824, was known for many years as 'the model sheriff of Worcester County.'<sup>2</sup>

Willard was a prominent resident of Worcester. He was a member of the board of directors of the Citizens Bank and a trustee of the Worcester County Institute for Savings. Although he was not a member of the American Antiquarian Society, Willard donated several books to the Society, including The Second Spira: or the Blasphemers Justly Reproved (1772) and A Copy of a Letter Written by our Blessed Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ that was printed by the Society's founder Isaiah Thomas, Sr. (cat. #123) in 1772. In addition, Willard's own copy of Thomas's The History of Printing in America (1810) was given to the Society in 1995.

This portrait of Willard was painted about thirteen years after Willard retired as sheriff. It was executed by the Boston artist Edwin T. Billings, who first visited Worcester in 1854. Billings painted several important Worcester residents, including John Davis (cat. #40) and Stephen Salisbury.<sup>3</sup> His work hung in many public buildings including the Worcester County Courthouse

and Mechanics Hall, and it is possible that Willard saw the artist's work in one of these venues before commissioning this portrait in 1857.<sup>4</sup> The completed painting hung in Willard's home on Portland Street in Worcester until it was bequeathed to the American Antiquarian Society in 1885.

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<sup>1</sup> Nathaniel Paine, 'Calvin Willard,' Reminiscences and Biographical Notices of the Eighteen Members of the Worcester Fire Society (Worcester: Worcester Fire Society, 1887), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 3 (April 1885): 396. The last public execution in the county was that of Horace Carter (1799-1825), who was hanged after being found guilty of rape. See A Brief Sketch of the Life of Horace Carter (Worcester: Newell Press, 1825).

<sup>3</sup> 'Public Buildings Where Mr. Billings' Paintings are Hanging,' 1890, AAS Newsclipping File.

<sup>4</sup> Edwin T. Billings to Edmund Mills Barton, July 13, 1885, AAS Archives. The letter from Billings confirms the date of the portrait, as he writes, 'In referring back to old records of portraits painted in Worcester, I find a Mr. Willard under the date of 1857.'