

John Winthrop (1587/8-1649), c. 1750-1790

Anonymous
after a full-sized portrait of Winthrop
watercolor on ivory
1 11/16 x 1 5/16 (4.2862 x 3.3338)
Bequest of William Bentley, 1819
Weis 148
Hewes number: 154

Ex. Coll.: early ownership unknown, owned by William Winthrop (1753-1825), in 1790 given by him to the donor.

This miniature portrait of John Winthrop was given to the Reverend William Bentley (cat. #8) in 1790 by the sitter's great-great-great grandson William Winthrop (1753-1825), a resident of Cambridge, Massachusetts, who, like Bentley, was keenly interested in the biographies of America's early settlers.¹ In 1790 Bentley visited Winthrop during the commencement of Harvard College and noted in his diary, "Mr. Winthrop favored me with a miniature of the first Governor Winthrop, which was with me a very high Compliment."² At the time he presented Bentley with the miniature, Winthrop also owned a full-sized canvas painting of John Winthrop (cat. #153).

In 1846 the American Antiquarian Society's librarian Samuel Foster Haven (cat. #65) published his belief that this miniature was a copy after the full-sized canvas portrait of John Winthrop which was presented to the Society by William Winthrop's estate in 1830.³ The similarity of details in both portraits, including the sitter's hairline, facial contours, and expression, support Haven's theory.

¹ For more information on William Winthrop see Lawrence Shaw Mayo, The Winthrop Family in America (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1948): 254-262.

² William Bentley Diary, July 22, 1790, William Bentley Papers 1666-1819, American Antiquarian Society Manuscript Collection. According to the diary, Bentley also dined with Winthrop the previous evening and correspondence between the two men, including discussions of Winthrop's proposed publication Catalog of Graduates of Harvard College, continued into 1798.

³ Samuel Foster Haven, "The Portraits of Winthrop," Boston Courier, September 17, 1846. Bentley, noting locations of portraits of historical figures in his diary on May 19, 1797, listed images in public and private hands including portraits of Judge Sewall and Rev. Higginson. About this miniature he wrote, "I have a miniature of Gov. Winthrop from the original," indicating that he was aware of the fact that his miniature was a copy.

Because William Winthrop owned the full-sized portrait, it is plausible that he may have at one time commissioned a copy of the likeness in miniature. It is equally possibly that an earlier family member may have commissioned the miniature as a keepsake and it then descended to William Winthrop. Winthrop, a confirmed bachelor with no heirs, had little need for two similar likenesses of his famous ancestor and presented one to Bentley. With this gift, Bentley began to form a collection of portraits of prominent Massachusetts historical figures.