

MATHER BYLES, JR. (1734/35-1814), 1784

Mather Brown (1761-1831)

oil on canvas

30 x 25 1/4 (76.20 x 64.14)

Gift of Josephine Spencer Gay, 1923

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Hewes Number: 23

Ex. Coll.: Sitter; to Catherine and Mary Byles, 1814; to Catherine, 1832; willed to the Reverend Mather Byles DesBrisay; sold at 'Hon. M. B. DesBrisay Collection Sale,' C. F. Libbie & Co., April 4, 1908 to Frederick L. Gay; to his wife, the donor.

Exhibitions:

1977, 'Wellsprings of a Nation,' Worcester Art Museum, no. 258.

Publications:

Franklin P. Cole, Mather Books and Portraits through Six Generations (Portland, Maine: Casco Printing, 1978), 200.

Dorinda Evans, Mather Brown: Early American Artist in England (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), 36-37, 201, checklist no. 36, fig. 12.

Edward A. Jones, Loyalists of Massachusetts (London: St. Catherine's Press, 1930), plate 7 [misidentified as Mather Byles, Sr.]

Sibley's Harvard Graduates, s.v. 'Byles, Mather.'

Like his father a graduate of Harvard College, Mather Byles, Jr., was a member of the Class of 1751. He served briefly as the librarian of Harvard from 1755 until 1757, when he was ordained minister of the First Congregational Church in New London, Connecticut. After falling out with church officials, he moved back to Boston in 1768 to assume leadership of Christ Church, an Episcopal parish.

Raised in a Tory household, Byles was a staunch Loyalist. During the Revolutionary War, he fled with his family to Halifax, Nova Scotia, writing to a relative in England: 'I must confess I had not the least suspicion that the army would ever have evacuated Boston. That astonishing event has now taken place.... I now see myself, without being guilty of any crime to occasion it, reduced, with in the compass of a few days, to the most distressing circumstances imaginable - an exile from my native country.'¹ Byles, who called Nova Scotia the 'American Siberia,' became a garrison chaplain for the British army and in 1788 was made minister of Trinity Church in Saint John's, New Brunswick.

Although he did not achieve the acclaim of his father, several of Byles's American and Canadian sermons were published in his lifetime, including The Christian Sabbath Explained and

Vindicated (1759), and The Victory Ascribed to God: A Sermon Delivered on December 2, 1798 on the Late Successes Granted to His Majesty's Arms (1799). These and other published writings by Byles are preserved in the imprint collection of the American Antiquarian Society. His personal papers and correspondence are part of the Byles Family Papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

This portrait was painted while Byles was a chaplain to the British army. He travelled to London in 1784 in order to present claims for his property losses in America, and while in London sought out his nephew, the artist Mather Brown (cat. 14), who had arrived in London four years earlier and was gaining notice as a portrait painter of some talent. Byles arranged to sit for the portrait during the summer of 1784. Evidently satisfied with the results, he wrote to his sisters in Boston: 'Mather Brown is a very worthy amiable Youth, industrious in his Profession & sustains an unblemished Character. His Performances do him credit.'² Brown entertained his uncle and took him to visit the Royal Academy. In return, Byles used his influence with other American Loyalists to secure commissions for his nephew. Byles brought his finished portrait back to Nova Scotia in 1785. It descended through the Byles family until it was sold at auction in 1908.

¹ Sibley's Harvard, s.v. 'Byles, Mather.'

² Mather Byles, Jr., to Catherine and Mary Byles, June 21, 1784, Byles Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

³ Dorinda Evans, Mather Brown: Early American Artist in England (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), 47.