

BENJAMIN CHAPIN (1814-38), 1838
William Hillyer, Jr. (fl. 1832-64)
oil on canvas
36 7/8 x 27 7/8 (93.6625 x 70.8025)
signed on verso: 'Wm. Hillyer/1838'
Gift of Ernest and Grace K. Morse, 1962
Hewes Number: 29

Ex. Coll.: sitter, to his wife Alice Chapin in 1838, to their son Benjamin Chapin, through the family to Alice and Martha Chapin, to their cousins the donors, c. 1945.

Little is known about Benjamin Chapin. He was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, the only son of Comfort and Dr. Benjamin Chapin. The Chapin household participated actively in the social and political scene in Worcester where Dr. Chapin worked as a local physician. Dr. Chapin was also the town clerk and promoted the advancement of primary education by serving on the town school board. Around 1834, young Benjamin left his parents' home and moved to New York City, where he worked as a hat presser. From 1835 to 1838, he listed himself as a hat manufacturer in New York City directories.¹

The next notice of Chapin is his obituary, which appeared on May 25, 1838, in the New York Evening Post and read, 'DIED on the 24th instant. Mr. BENJAMIN CHAPIN, aged 24 years. Funeral tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock, from 195 Bowery.'² No further explanation for his untimely death has been found. His widow, Alice, continued to list herself in the New York directories until 1840.

¹ Edwin Williams, ed., New York as It is in 1834 (New York, 1834) and Thomas Longworth, American Almanac, New York Register and City Directory (New York: 1835 through 1838).

² New York Evening Post, (May 25, 1838), 3.

The 1838 date inscribed on the reverse of this portrait by the artist reveals that the image was commissioned towards the end of Chapin's life or, possibly, was executed posthumously. The sitter is dressed in the standard attire of a gentleman of business, a black long coat, vest, and cravat with a white shirt. On the table at his side rests the emblem of his profession, a black top hat, carefully inverted to protect the curving brim.

The painter of Chapin's portrait, William Hillyer, was well established in New York by 1838. He exhibited three portraits at the 1833 exhibition of the American Academy and listed himself in the New York directories for 1837, 1838, and 1839 as a 'portrait painter.' During that decade several of Hillyer's portraits were reproduced as lithographs by New York printmakers. Around 1845, Hillyer became a partner in a portrait firm, where he continued to produce full-scale and miniature portraits.

Hillyer's portrait of Chapin passed through several generations of the family. Grace K. Morse, who with her husband presented the portrait to AAS, recalled, 'For many years the portrait hung in the Chapin home in Auburn (my relations') and was given to me about 1945 by the two remaining Chapin sisters.' The Morses, who were friends of American Antiquarian Society Director Clifford K. Shipton, stated, 'We would like to give this portrait to the American Antiquarian Society and we feel it would be a worthwhile portrait for you to have there.'⁵

³ Lithographs after Hillyer's portraits of Dr. Samuel Thomson and the Reverend David Millard are preserved in the American Antiquarian Society's Graphic Arts Collection.

⁴ George C. Groce and David H. Wallace, The New York Historical Society's Dictionary of Artists in America 1564-1860 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 317. Portraits by William Hillyer Jr., can be found in the collections of the New York Historical Association, Cooperstown, New York, and the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, Williamsburg, Virginia.

⁵ Grace K. Morse to American Antiquarian Society, August 3, 1962, American Antiquarian Society Archives.