

WILLIAM COMSTOCK (1787-1873), c. 1840  
James Sullivan Lincoln (1811-88)  
oil on canvas  
30 1/4 x 25 1/4 (76.84 x 64.14)  
Gift of William J. McKee, Jr., 1982  
Hewes Number: 32

Ex. Coll.: Sitter; in 1873 to his wife Harriet Comstock (1803-82); possibly to their son Richard William Comstock (1834-1918); owned by his daughter Alice Comstock Brigham (1879-1958); to her daughter Elizabeth Comstock Brigham McKee; to her second husband, the donor.

William Comstock, who boasted that he had run the British blockade of New York in 1812,<sup>1</sup> began a maritime career as a sixteen-year-old cabin boy on a schooner travelling between his hometown of Providence, Rhode Island, and New York City. In 1810, after several years of co-owning and building vessels with his brothers and uncles, Comstock became captain of the sloop Venus, a single-masted vessel that shipped freight along the Eastern seaboard.<sup>2</sup> He soon gained recognition as an excellent navigator, and keeping up with technological advances in shipping, in 1823 he became one of the first to captain a steam-powered ship, the Fulton, which travelled between Providence and New York. Eventually he served as an agent for the New York & New Jersey Steam Navigation Company and was a partner in several different schooner and steamboat lines. In 1835 he built the Massachusetts, a 200-foot side-wheeler with sixty berths. He was so proud of this vessel that 'every stick of timber in her' had his initials carved on it.<sup>3</sup> Comstock's business papers, containing details of his various partnerships and investments, are housed in the American Antiquarian Society's manuscript collection.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to his maritime concerns, Comstock, who married twice and had eleven children, was also president of the Bank of Commerce in Providence and of the Merchant's Insurance Company. He belonged to a Congregational church and was a member of the Providence Athenaeum. His obituary in the Providence Journal described him as a 'venerable and universally respected citizen'; remembered 'as a skilful and careful navigator, a rigid disciplinarian, an accomplished gentleman, and an honest man, nobody had more friends than Captain Comstock.'<sup>5</sup>

Comstock's portrait was painted by James Sullivan Lincoln, the most fashionable Providence artist of the era (see cat. 9). Lincoln highlighted Comstock's profession by including a lighthouse

and steamship in the background of the portrait. Other Lincoln commissions included portraits of several members of the extended Comstock family, as well as portraits of two of Comstock's children.<sup>6</sup>

In his will Comstock wrote: 'I give, devise and bequeath to my wife Harriet Comstock all my household furniture, silverware, plate and pictures,' presumably including this portrait. The painting eventually descended to the family of a granddaughter, Alice Comstock Brigham, who was the wife of American Antiquarian Society Director Clarence Brigham (cat. 11). Through this connection the portrait and family papers were given to the Society.

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<sup>1</sup> Representative Men and Old Families of Rhode Island, 3 vols. (Chicago: J. H. Beers & Co., 1908), 2: 1390.

<sup>2</sup> Ship Documents of Rhode Island, 2 vols. (Providence, R. I.: Works Progress Administration, 1941), 1: 1075, no. 3466.

<sup>3</sup> Representative Men and Old Families of Rhode Island, 2: 1390.

<sup>4</sup> Comstock Family Papers, 1782-1904, 1931-1939, AAS Manuscript Collection. This collection includes materials relating to three generations of the Comstock family, material relating to Providence and the Ohio Company belonging to William's father and uncle, and the correspondence and business papers of Captain William Comstock and his sons William and Richard. William, Jr., lived for many years in China, where he was an agent and later partner for the importers Augustine Heard and Company of Foochow and Canton.

<sup>5</sup> Providence Journal, October 23, 1873.

<sup>6</sup> 'List of Portraits Painted by J. S. Lincoln Since 1837 AD,' James Sullivan Lincoln Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society Manuscript Collection. The first portion of Lincoln's list is undated. The portraits of the Comstock children appear several pages before the entry for Captain William Comstock.