

ISAAC DAVIS (1799-1883), 1855  
Benjamin Kinney (1821-88)  
marble  
26 (h) (66.04)  
inscribed, on verso: 'By B. H. Kinney, 1855'  
Gift of Edward Livingston Davis, 1883  
Weis 45  
Hewes Number: 39

Ex. Coll.: Sitter; to his son, the donor.<sup>1</sup>

Exhibitions:

1985, 'B. H. Kinney: Gravestone Carver and Sculptor,' Worcester Historical Museum.  
On loan to the Worcester Historical Museum.

Publications:

William D. Wallace, B. H. Kinney: Gravestone Carver and Sculptor (Worcester: Worcester Historical Museum, 1985), 27, 28.

Isaac Davis, born in Northborough, Massachusetts, graduated from Brown University in 1822. He was admitted to the Massachusetts bar in 1825 and set up a practice in Worcester. As a young man, he joined the Sixth Massachusetts Regiment, rising to the rank of colonel. He also served as a member of the Board of Visitors to the United States Military Academy at West Point. In 1843 Davis entered the political arena and served terms in the Massachusetts House of Representatives and Senate. A Democrat, he knew his constituents well. Davis held multiple town and city offices in Worcester: city assessor, selectman, alderman, overseer of the poor, and mayor in 1856, 1859, and 1861.

Elected to membership in the American Antiquarian Society in 1841, Davis became a councillor in 1850. He was an active member and regularly supported the Society's publications with financial donations. In 1859 Davis was responsible for arranging the details of a commission for a marble bust of the Society's founder, Isaiah Thomas, Sr. (cat. 123 et seq.).

An interest in the American West and Mexico led Davis in 1868 to establish a fund at the Society for the purchase of material relating to these regions.<sup>2</sup> Over the years, he donated hundreds of books and pamphlets, including Washington Irving's A Chronicle of the Conquest of Granada (1829) and George W. Kendall's Narrative of the Texan Santa Fe Expedition (1844). At Davis's death, a fellow member recalled: '[W]e may trace his forty-two years of membership with generous and judicious acts for the Society. For thirty-two years he has sat with us in this

council, aiding us by willing labor and wise counsels, stimulating us by his liberal example and making the hours more happy with his spirited and agreeable companionship.’<sup>3</sup>

Davis was also active in the promotion of Worcester business. He was a director of the Worcester & Nashua Railroad, president of the Quinsigamond and Mechanics savings banks, and head of the State Mutual Life Insurance Company. He was the founder and president of Worcester Academy. A member of the First Baptist Church, he was president of the American Home Baptist Missionary Society and of the Baptist Sabbath School Teachers Association in Worcester County. Correspondence relating to Davis’s business dealings and his involvement with religious groups is preserved in the American Antiquarian Society’s manuscript collection.<sup>4</sup>

Completed in 1855, this bust of Davis was made at the height of his political career, between his last term as a state senator and his election to his first term as Worcester’s mayor. He commissioned the local sculptor Benjamin Kinney, who had completed several busts of other Worcester notables, to make his likeness in marble.<sup>5</sup> Kinney, who grew up in Vermont, was apprenticed at age sixteen to an Arlington, Vermont, stonemason who taught him how to work with marble. In 1842, after initial success in Vermont, Kinney and his brother Charles opened a marble shop in Worcester where they sold raw marble, mantles, grave markers, and cameos. Benjamin Kinney carved his first portrait bust in 1849 and continued to produce busts on commission and speculation until the end of his career. He eventually opened a studio on Main Street in Worcester and exhibited his work at the Boston Athenaeum from 1854 to 1856.<sup>6</sup> Some of Kinney’s other Worcester sitters included Dr. John Green (1784-1865), who founded the city’s public library, and Ichabod Washburn (1798-1868), a wealthy industrialist.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 2 (April 1883): 274. The librarian noted: ‘The gift of Hon. Edward L. Davis...includes the marble bust of his father, the late Hon. Isaac Davis, made by Benjamin H. Kinney in 1856.’ The error in date is interesting, as a Kinney plaster cast of Davis, similar to this bust but with alterations, is dated 1856 (Worcester Historical Society). In 1879, four years before Edward L. Davis made his gift, the Society recorded the following donation: ‘Mr. Benjamin H. Kinney, Worcester – A Bust of Hon. Isaac Davis.’ (Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society [April 1879]: 52.) Possibly the 1879 record refers to a copy of the plaster cast that is no longer owned by the Society.

<sup>2</sup> Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society (April 1868): 15.

<sup>3</sup> Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 2 (April 1883): 299-300.

<sup>4</sup> Isaac Davis Correspondence, 1816-1869, AAS Manuscript Collection.

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<sup>5</sup> William D. Wallace, B. H. Kinney: Gravestone Carver and Sculptor (Worcester: Worcester Historical Museum, 1985), 26-27. This publication includes detailed biographical information on Kinney and outlines his working methods.

<sup>6</sup> Robert F. Perkins, Jr., and William J. Gavin, The Boston Athenaeum Art Exhibition Index, 1827-1874 (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1980), 88.

<sup>7</sup> Wallace, B. H. Kinney, 32, 52.