

AARON BANCROFT (1755-1839), 1832  
Alvan Fisher (1792-1863)  
oil on canvas  
36 x 28 1/8 (91.4 x 71.4375)  
signed, l.r.: 'A. Fisher Pixt. 1832'  
Gift of Eliza Bancroft Davis, 1863  
Weis #5  
Hewes Number: 4

Ex. Coll.: Sitter, to his daughter the donor.

Publication:

Louisa Dresser, 'Portraits Owned by the American Antiquarian Society,' The Magazine Antiques 95 (November 1969):725.

The Reverend Aaron Bancroft was minister of the Second Parish Church in Worcester for over fifty years. After graduating from Harvard in 1778, he went to Nova Scotia to preach, but returned to the United States in 1783 to serve as the pastor of the First Parish in Worcester. Although many considered his opposition to Calvinism controversial, he gradually built support among his parishioners for his Arminian doctrine. He eventually became president of the American Unitarian Association.

Bancroft, keenly interested in American history, published An Essay on the Life of George Washington, Commander in Chief of the American Army, through the Revolutionary War; and the First President of the United States, in 1807. Five years later, he was one of the incorporators of the American Antiquarian Society of which he remained a member for the rest of his life. Many of his sermons published during his lifetime are preserved in manuscript form at that American Antiquarian Society.<sup>1</sup> In later years, Bancroft was described by Massachusetts Governor Levi Lincoln (1782-1868) as a man 'of spare and slight habit but of elastic and firm step, his manners and personal address courteous and affable and his general appearance and bearing that of the accomplished gentleman of the old school. The slightness of his figure was made more apparent

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Bancroft Papers, 1789-1839, American Antiquarian Society Manuscript Collection. This collection contains autobiographical material, sermons, and correspondence. Bancroft's published writings are part of the American Antiquarian Society's book collection.

by the style of his dress, he having continued throughout his life to wear the knee-breeches and hose.<sup>2</sup>

In 1831 Bancroft resigned as vice-president of the American Antiquarian Society citing his advanced years, but remained active in the organization.<sup>3</sup> Bancroft was seventy-seven years old when the Society's librarian, Christopher Columbus Baldwin (cat#2) arranged for this portrait to be painted. The artist Alvan Fisher spent the summer of 1832 in Worcester and struck up a friendship with Baldwin. Although primarily regarded as a landscape painter, Fisher did occasionally take portrait commissions and Baldwin persuaded him to paint the aging Bancroft.<sup>4</sup> In September Baldwin noted in his diary: 'I made application to Deacon Butman and Rejoice Newton Esq. to get Mr. Fisher to take the portrait of the Rev. Dr. Bancroft & raise by subscription money enough to defray the expense of it. They very obligingly call [*sic*] on the venerable Doctor and he readily consents and the picture was finished in just one week. And a most accurate likeness it is.'<sup>5</sup> The family retained the painting until 1863 when it was given to the American Antiquarian Society.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Levi Lincoln, quoted in 'Aaron Bancroft: His Portrait Painted for the Unitarian Association,' unidentified clipping, May 28, 1886, American Antiquarian Society Newsclipping File.

<sup>3</sup> His son, the great American historian George Bancroft (1800-91), followed in his father's footsteps as a vice-president of the Society.

<sup>4</sup> For more on Fisher, see Robert C. Vose, Jr., 'Alvan Fisher 1792-1863,' Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin (October 1962): 97-111.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Columbus Baldwin Diary, September 5, 1832, Christopher Columbus Baldwin Papers 1817-1835, American Antiquarian Society Manuscript Collection.

<sup>6</sup> This portrait was copied twice by the painter Edwin T. Billings (1824-93). One copy was given to the Unitarian Association in Worcester by Bancroft's son George in 1886 (see 'Aaron Bancroft: His Portrait Painted for the Unitarian Association'). Billings copied the portrait again in 1891 for Channing Memorial Hall, Boston, see Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 7 (October 1891): 354.