

JOHN DAVIS (1787-1854), 1854
Edwin T. Billings (1824-1893)
after 'daguerreotypes and other likenesses'
38 x 31 (96.5200 x 78.7400)
oil on canvas
Commissioned by the American Antiquarian Society, 1854
Weis 46
Hewes Number: 40

Exhibitions:
1864, 'National Sailor's Fair,' Boston Athenaeum.

John Davis, a lawyer and politician, was elected to membership in the American Antiquarian Society in 1821. Elected the Society's vice-president in 1831, he remained in that office until he became president in 1853. Born in Northborough, Massachusetts, Davis graduated from Yale College in 1812, and was admitted to the bar three years later. In 1822 he married Eliza Bancroft (1787-1854), the daughter of Worcester's Unitarian minister Aaron Bancroft (cat. #4). Davis established his law practice in Worcester and began his political career as a Federalist. He was elected governor of Massachusetts in 1824. Over the next twenty-five years Davis, who was conservative in his political views, ran successfully for seats in Congress and the United States Senate.¹

Davis was connected politically and socially to such prominent American Whigs as Daniel Webster (cat. #140) and Edward Everett (cat. #45). He corresponded regularly with these men and other politicians of the era and his letters, speeches, and personal papers are part of the manuscript collection of the American Antiquarian Society.² Although he was mainly involved in national politics, Davis remained closely connected to Worcester. He was president of the State Mutual Life Insurance Company of Worcester and also of the Worcester County Auxiliary Bible Society.

Davis retired from public service around 1850. His obituary in the Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society stated, 'He surveyed the whole map of statesmanship, and was satisfied to leave no part of it unexplored. The principles of international law, of diplomatic

¹ For a summary of Davis's career see Thomas Kinnicutt, 'John Davis,' Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society (April 1854): 11-27.

² John Davis Papers, 1812-1902, American Antiquarian Society Manuscript Collection.

intercourse, of constitutional law, ...our systems of finance and public domain, our foreign and domestic relations, the great questions of peace and war, of international duties and international rights; - all these and many more, he made his study.' The obituary closed with a summary of Davis' contributions to the Society, noting, 'As [the Society's] friend and constant benefactor, he bestowed upon it many and valuable favors; and as its President, he conferred upon it honor and devoted to it the last services of his life.'³

The artist Edwin Billings lived and worked in Boston and Dorchester. Around 1853 he was hired by Leicester (Massachusetts) Academy to copy the American Antiquarian Society's portrait of Isaiah Thomas, Sr., by Ethan Allen Greenwood (cat. #123). This work must have attracted the attention of the Society's members because in November 1854, Billings was commissioned by the American Antiquarian Society to paint this portrait of John Davis, who had recently died. He was paid \$50.00, and his work was well received. 'This portrait is satisfactory to the Council; and has been commended for its execution and faithful resemblance by those who have seen it. In justice to the artist and as a proof of his skill, it should be mentioned that he never saw Governor Davis on more than one occasion, and he was obliged to rely on Daguerreotypes and other likenesses...'⁴

³ Kinnicutt, 'John Davis,' 19, 26.

⁴ Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society (October 1854): 11. According to an 1890 list entitled 'Public Buildings where Mr. Billings' Paintings are Hanging,' (American Antiquarian Society Newsclipping file), Billings went on to paint several living members of the Society including Stephen Salisbury and Isaac Davis.