

SAMUEL DEXTER (1726-1810), 1792
John Johnston (1752-1818)
oil on canvas
30 1/4 x 24 3/4 (76.84 x 62.87)
Bequest of Rebecca Langdon Price Lamson, 1935
Weis 47
Hewes Number: 41

Ex. Coll.: Sitter; to his grandson Samuel Dexter Ward (1789-1871); to his nephew Artemas Ward Lamson (1830-1910); to his widow, the donor.

Exhibitions:

1976, 'Paintings by New England Provincial Artists,' Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, no. 59.
1977, 'Wellsprings of a Nation,' Worcester Art Museum, no. 264.

Publications:

Bowen, History of Woodstock, 182.

Dedham Historical Register 3 (1892): 45.

Nina Fletcher Little, Paintings by New England Provincial Artists (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1976), 138.

Nina Fletcher Little, 'Paintings by New England Provincial Artists,' The Magazine Antiques 110 (November 1976): 994.

As a young man, Samuel Dexter, a son of the minister of the First Church in Dedham, Massachusetts, was apprenticed to a Boston shopkeeper. After completing his apprenticeship, he set up his own business and soon became a prosperous merchant. Dexter managed his affairs so well that at age thirty-six he retired to Dedham with a modest fortune and began a life in public service.¹ In the late 1760s he was Dedham's town clerk and a selectman. A supporter of the American cause for independence, Dexter also served three terms in the General Court between 1764 and 1775.² In 1775 he retired from public life in Massachusetts, left his home in Dedham, and moved to Woodstock, Connecticut, where he lived for the next ten years.³

Dexter's interests were in scholarship and religion. In 1791 Isaiah Thomas published a sixty-page pamphlet written by Dexter under the pseudonym 'Philotheorus,' entitled Thoughts Upon Several Passages of Scripture in the Old and New Testament, Relative to Jacob and Esau, with Incidental Excursions.⁴ In his will, Dexter left \$5,000 to Harvard College to establish a lectureship on biblical criticism.

This portrait of Dexter was painted in 1792, when he was sixty-six years of age and living in Weston, Massachusetts. The artist, John Johnston, was the son of engraver and portrait and heraldic painter Thomas Johnston (1708-67), who, shortly before his death, had apprenticed his son to a house and sign painter.⁵ In 1775 John Johnston joined the American army; he was seriously wounded and taken prisoner during the Battle of Long Island.⁶ He survived his injuries and, after the war, formed a partnership with his brother-in-law Daniel Rea, Jr. (b. 1743), in the ornamental painting firm of Rea & Johnston.⁷ They painted tavern signs, ship figureheads, and houses. In 1781 Johnston began painting portraits and by the end of the decade was dedicating most of his time to taking likenesses.

Two other versions of this portrait exist, a second by Johnston and a later copy by James Frothingham (1786-1864).⁸ The portrait at the American Antiquarian Society, which descended through the family, is mentioned in Dexter's will.⁹ Society member Clarence W. Bowen (cat. 10) met family members while researching his History of Woodstock, Connecticut, and it is likely that he encouraged them to donate the portrait to the American Antiquarian Society.

¹ Dictionary of American Biography, s.v. 'Dexter, Samuel.'

² Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 46 (October 1936): 157.

³ Bowen, History of Woodstock, 177-195. This is one of the more complete biographies of Dexter.

⁴ This attribution follows the Dictionary of American Biography and the Library of Congress, although Evans (23324) and Shipton & Mooney attributed the work to Dexter's son Samuel (1761-1816). The AAS copy has the bookplate of Isaiah Thomas. A tipped-in leaf, possibly from another copy, is inscribed: 'To Major Jonathan Hale, this is presented by his most obedient servant, the author; The above is the handwriting of my grandfather the Hon. Samuel Dexter Senr. This copy was presented to me by Major Hale abovenamed, Franklin Dexter. Boston Jany. 19: 1835.'

⁵ The New-York Historical Society's Dictionary of Artists in America, 1564-1860, s.v. 'Johnston, John.' Several members of the Johnston family were artists. See Frederick Coburn, 'Johnstons of Boston,' parts 1 and 2, Art in America 21 (December 1932): 27-36; 21 (October 1933): 132-38. There are several prints by Thomas Johnston in the AAS Graphic Arts Collection.

⁶ Nina Fletcher Little, Paintings by New England Provincial Artists (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1976), 138.

⁷ The account books of Rea & Johnston are preserved in the Baker Library, Harvard University Business School.

⁸ All three portraits are illustrated in Bowen, History of Woodstock, 182-83.

⁹ Sylvanus Chace Newman, The Dexter Genealogy (Providence: A. C. Greene, 1859), 56. Dexter left the portrait to his grandson Samuel Dexter Ward.