

JAMES PHINNEY BAXTER (1831-1921), c. 1915

Joseph B. Kahill (1882-1957)

after Frederic P. Vinton (1846-1911)

oil on canvas

30 x 24 (76.20 x 60.96)

Bequest of James Phinney Baxter, 1922

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After James Phinney Baxter had made his fortune in the dry goods and canning businesses in Portland, Maine, he retired to a life of scholarship and philanthropy. Although he held only one public office, mayor of Portland, to which he was elected to six terms between 1893 and 1905, he provided generous support to numerous charities, including libraries and historical organizations primarily in Maine. He founded an occupational school, the Portland Society of Art, and the Portland Public Library. He was actively involved in many historical associations in New England and served for many years as president of both the New England Historic Genealogical Society in Boston and the Maine Historical Society in Portland. He also enjoyed outdoor life, hiking and fishing in Maine's rugged and scenic wilderness. He became a member of the American Antiquarian Society in 1887, and served as a councillor from 1897 to 1912, when he was elected secretary for foreign correspondence.

In retirement he trained himself as a historian of the founding of Maine by spending two years in London studying colonial records. This research resulted in the publication of twenty of the twenty-four volumes of the Documentary History of Maine that were compiled by Baxter and published by the Maine Historical Society.<sup>1</sup> As a historian interested in the exploration and early history of his native state, Baxter published more than twenty articles, several in the Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society.<sup>2</sup>

Literature and reading were among his other interests, and Baxter wrote poetry and a learned study of the authorship of Shakespeare's works. In a letter to a friend, he gave this opinion on the importance of reading: 'One should choose his reading matter as carefully as he would choose his food to develop his body, having one end in mind: the perfecting of his moral nature and strengthening of every faculty which may enable him to perform his duties to mankind. I began my course of reading when I was about twelve by reading Addison's Spectator and some of Shakespeare's plays. A little later I took up the leading authors of fiction, Fenimore Cooper, Walter Scott, G. P. R. James, Hans Christian Andersen.... In one winter when about

thirteen years old, I read over 100 volumes. This paved the way to literary study and I devoted myself to the best English and American authors.’<sup>3</sup>

Baxter had his portrait painted several times, with the intention of bequeathing them to the organizations that he had founded or served. He patronized artists who belonged to the Portland Society of Art, including Frederic Vinton and Joseph B. Kahill. Around 1915, Kahill was commissioned to paint Baxter’s portrait and to produce several copies of an earlier portrait painted by Vinton in 1883.<sup>4</sup> The American Antiquarian Society’s painting is one of those copies. Kahill, who was born in Alexandria, Egypt, had first studied art in Paris and continued his education in Portland with the painter Charles Lewis Fox (1854-1927). According to Baxter’s son, his father ‘rather favored this portrait and always dreaded appearing as an elderly man.’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ‘James Phinney Baxter,’ Sprague’s Journal of Maine History 9 (1921): 78-80.

<sup>2</sup> See Baxter, ‘What Caused the Deportation of the Acadians?’ and ‘The Writing of History,’ Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 13 (1899-1900): 74-100; 138-47.

<sup>3</sup> James P. Baxter to Merle Griffith, n.d., quoted in obituary ‘James Phinney Baxter,’ May 9, 1921, unidentified newspaper, AAS Newsclipping File.

<sup>4</sup> The c. 1915 portrait by Kahill, commissioned by the sitter’s sons, was left by Baxter to the Portland Society of Art. A detail is illustrated in ‘Baxter Portrait is Meritorious Canvas,’ unidentified newspaper, n.d., AAS Newsclipping File. In Baxter’s will, the original, 1883 Vinton portrait was left to the New England Historic Genealogical Society. A second copy of this canvas by Kahill was left to the Maine Historical Society.

<sup>5</sup> Percival P. Baxter to Waldo Lincoln, August 19, 1921, AAS Archives.