

SAMUEL ROOSEVELT JOHNSON (1802-73), c. 1825

Anonymous

watercolor on ivory

2 3/16 x 1 3/4 (5.56 x 4.45)

Gift of Winifred Channing Johnson Chrisman, 1988

Hewes Number: 71

Ex. Coll.: Early ownership unknown; through the family to the sitter's great-granddaughter, the donor.

Samuel Roosevelt Johnson was born November 18, 1802, a son of the Reverend John Barent Johnson (1769-1803) and his wife Elizabeth Lupton Johnson (1777-1803), of Albany, New York. Orphaned within a year of his birth, Samuel was raised by his half-uncle Peter Roosevelt (1763-1833), a resident of New York City. Johnson graduated from Columbia University in 1820, at the age of eighteen. Called to ministry in the Episcopal Church, he studied at General Theological Seminary in New York and completed his courses there in 1823.

During his first parish appointment, at St. James Church in wealthy Hyde Park, New York, he boarded with the family of Judge John Johnston (1762-1850). He soon began courting the judge's daughter Elisabeth, whom he married in 1826.¹ The miniature was probably painted about the time of the marriage, when the young minister was in his late twenties. When a son was born to the couple the year after their marriage, Johnson wrote to a relative: 'Elisabeth succeeded well, behaved well, and is doing well, the little one is large, fine looking, with a shrewd looking eye, a sensible forehead and a right Johnson nose. He has a noble fist of his own and from the little specimen he has given, his lungs are in first rate order. They all call him a little beauty. I expect he will make his way to your hearts as soon as you see him, for you can't conceive how insinuating his manners are--in the little while he has been acquainted with my lady, he has cut me out completely.'²

About 1835, Samuel Roosevelt Johnson left his family safe in New York and travelled to the Northwest Territory as an Episcopal missionary. On Christmas Eve of 1835, before he was joined by his family, he wrote to his son, now eight years old, from Missouri: '[T]hough we have Christmas Eve services, there are no Christmas Greens--the great West with all its fertile soil and many resources cannot boast of them. Some few are to be found fifteen miles off from St. Louis, but the effort to obtain them failed.'³ Johnson eventually sent for his family, and they settled in

Lafayette, Indiana, where he served as a minister for twelve years, establishing and overseeing the construction of the town's first Episcopal church.⁴

Johnson later returned from Indiana to the East. He served as the minister of St. John's Church, Brooklyn, New York, and in 1850 was appointed professor of systematic divinity at General Theological Seminary. He retired in 1870 and took charge of a small parish in Amenia, New York, where he remained until his death. A colleague remembered: 'Second only to his love and devotion to the cause of his Direct Master as characteristic of his life was his varied and great learning. His natural gifts were excellent, his reading extensive, his experience varied and his memory retentive.'⁵ Published sermons by Johnson, manuscripts of his poetry, and part of his correspondence, a gift from descendants who wished to memorialize the family's history, are preserved in the manuscript collection of the American Antiquarian Society.

The artist of this portrait is unknown. A great-granddaughter of the sitter gave the portrait to the Society in 1988.

¹ Genealogical records, Johnson Family Papers, 1697-1985, AAS Manuscript Collection.

² Samuel Roosevelt Johnson to Peter Roosevelt Johnson, December 19, 1827, Johnson Family Papers.

³ Samuel Johnson to Peter Johnson, December 24, 1835, Johnson Family Papers.

⁴ R. P. DeHart, Past and Present of Tippecanoe County, Indiana, 2 vols. (Indianapolis: B. F. Bowen & Co., 1909), 1: 253-54. Johnson formed St. John's church in 1838. He was called Parson Johnson and was 'liberal and much beloved by his people.'

⁵ George F. Seymour, A Memorial of the Rev. Samuel Roosevelt Johnson, D. D. (New York: Trinity Parish, 1873), 47.