

ROBERT WALLACE McNAIR (1800-33), c. 1830

Attr. William Lewis (1788-after 1838)

watercolor on ivory

2 11/16 x 2 3/16 (6.87 x 5.56)

Gift of Charles H. Phinney, 1932

Weis 75

Hewes Number: 77

Ex. Coll.: Early ownership unknown; c. 1900 owned by ‘an old lady living on Union Park Street’; c. 1915 given by her to the secretary of the Franklin Typographical Society; in 1932 acquired by the donor.

Robert Wallace McNair was born in Hanover, Pennsylvania, the youngest son of Thomas McNair (1737-1830), an Irish immigrant who was a prominent landowner and distiller in the region. In 1817 Robert Wallace McNair worked as an apprentice printer at the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, newspaper office, where the Chronicle was published. He moved briefly to Philadelphia, then to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where, by 1824, he was working in the printing office of Eliab Wight Metcalf (1781-1835), one of the city’s most prosperous printers.¹ That year, McNair also became a founding member of the Franklin Typographical Society, a mutual aid organization established in Boston to ‘cultivate a spirit of benevolence’ among printers and to help mitigate disputes between printers, publishers, and shop workers.² McNair became the vice president of the Society in 1826.³

This miniature is attributed to Salem artist William Lewis, who set up a studio in Boston and exhibited there in the 1820s and 1830s. McNair may have commissioned the portrait about the time of his marriage to Eliza Hathaway (b. 1810), on February 26, 1831. He died two years later, at the age of thirty-three, and ownership of the miniature is undocumented from then until 1915, when the painting was given to the Franklin Typographical Society by an unknown donor.

McNair’s miniature was one of a few items salvaged after a fire destroyed the Franklin Typographical Society’s hall in 1932.⁴

¹ James Birtley McNair, McNair, McNear and McNeir Genealogies, Supplement (Los Angeles: privately printed, 1955), 308-9. Samples of publications produced by Metcalf’s shop are preserved in the AAS Imprint Collection.

² Constitution and Catalog of the Library of the Franklin Typographical Society (Boston: Snow & Wilder, 1850), 2.

³ McNair may have known AAS founder Isaiah Thomas, Sr. (cat. 123 et seq.), as Thomas became a member of the Franklin Typographical Society in 1825. See Thomas to Hiram Tupper, April 13, 1825, Isaiah Thomas Papers, 1748-1874, AAS Manuscript Collection.

⁴ Frederick Weis, 'Portraits in the American Antiquarian Society,' Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 56 (April 1946): 87.