

CHARLES PAXTON (1707/8-88), c. 1751
John Cornish (at work 1751-62)
oil on canvas
29 7/8 x 24 3/4 (75.88 x 62.87)
inscribed, l.r.: '[illeg.] Cornish pinxt/17--'
Gift of 'a Lady,' 1814
Weis 95
Hewes Number: 94

Ex. Coll.: Unknown before donor.

Exhibitions:

1891, 'Portraits by American Artists,' Worcester Public Library.
1977, 'Wellsprings of a Nation,' Worcester Art Museum.

Publications:

E. Alfred Jones, Loyalists of Massachusetts (London: Saint Catherine Press, 1930), plate 39.
Lillian B. Miller, In the Minds and Hearts of the People: Prologue to the American Revolution, 1760-1774 (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1974), 113-14.

Little is known about the early career of Charles Paxton, who was born and grew up in Boston. In 1760 he became the surveyor of customs for Boston Harbor, a thankless job that involved searching ships for contraband and pressuring his neighbors to pay the customs duties set by Parliament. As a result, Paxton, who was perceived as living in luxury and currying favor with the British, was immensely unpopular in Boston.¹ In 1766 he was chased out of the country by an angry mob after he allegedly searched a merchant's warehouse without a warrant.²

In London during the following year, Paxton helped form a Board of Commissioners, a group of five men who worked together to enforce British customs laws in Boston. He returned to Massachusetts emboldened with new powers. However, by February 1768, he sought help from his superior in England, writing: 'The Merchants of the first Character in this place openly run whole Cargoes of Wines and Molasses &c. in defiance of the Law and the Custom-house officers, and there is no power in the Government to prevent them. 'Tis the opinion of the wisest men here that unless we have immediately three or four men of rank and at least one Regiment every thing will be in the greatest confusion and disorder.'³ The following month an effigy of Paxton was hung from the 'Liberty Tree,' after he seized the cargo of one of John Hancock's ships. This incident led Paxton to repeat his request to have British troops sent to Boston to help restore order.

Paxton's call for military support is regarded as one of the earliest actions leading to the hostilities that erupted in 1775.⁴ Once the Revolutionary War was underway, Paxton was officially banished from Boston. He fled to England in 1776 and remained there for the rest of his life. In 1785 and 1786 he submitted claims to the crown for losses incurred during the war, including property in Connecticut and 'valuable pictures from Italy, old and valuable furniture and a large library of books, neatly bound and gilt.'⁵

This portrait was left behind by Paxton or a member of his family during their flight to England. In the nineteenth century it was thought to be by the Boston artist John Singleton Copley (1738-1815). However, a 1908 restoration revealed the partial signature of John Cornish, an English portrait artist, and the painting was re-attributed to him.⁶ Little is known about Cornish, who painted the Paxton portrait in England well before the American Revolution. Only two other known portraits signed by Cornish are known, both associated with the area around Oxford.⁷

¹ Paxton was unpopular outside of Boston as well. The Worcester County town of Paxton, in central Massachusetts, had adopted its name following a promise by the surveyor of customs to donate a church bell to the town. Paxton never fulfilled his promise, and during the Revolution the town tried unsuccessfully to change its name. (See One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Town of Paxton, Massachusetts [Worcester: The Davis Press, 1917], 31.)

² For biographical information on Paxton, see Lorenzo Sabine, Biographical Sketches of Loyalists of the American Revolution (Port Washington, N. Y.: Kennikat Press, 1864 and 1966), 153-55. Paxton's birth year is incorrectly marked as '1704' on the portrait frame.

³ Charles Paxton to Charles Townsend, February 24, 1768, Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society 56 (June 1923): 349. This volume of the Proceedings contains transcripts of several Paxton letters.

⁴ Published copies of Paxton's formal decrees and speeches are part of the AAS Imprint Collection.

⁵ E. Alfred Jones, Loyalists of Massachusetts (London: Saint Catherine Press, 1930), 230.

⁶ The restoration was done by Hermann Dudley Murphy in Boston. (See his receipt for April 21, 1908, AAS Archives.) A second portrait of Paxton is owned by the Massachusetts Historical Society. It was painted in 1734 by Edward Truman and is illustrated in Portraits in the Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1988), 73.

⁷ Ellis Waterhouse, Dictionary of British Eighteenth Century Painters (Suffolk, England.: Antique Collector's Club, 1981), 87, and Ulrich Thieme, Felix Becker, et al., Allgemeines Lexicon der Bildenden Kunstler von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart (Leipzig: Wilhelm Engelmann & E. A. Seemann, 1907-35), 7: 444.