

JAMES PORTER (1808-88), c. 1835

Anonymous

watercolor on ivory

2 1/2 x 2 1/16 (6.3500 x 5.2388)

Gift of Jennie M. P. Tower, 1936

Weis 96

Hewes Number: 96

Ex. Coll.: sitter, through the family to his granddaughter Mrs. Henry D. Anderson, to her friend the donor.

James Porter, itinerant preacher and publisher of religious literature, was an important member of the Methodist Episcopal ministry in nineteenth-century New England. After he heard his first thunderous sermon by a travelling Methodist clergyman in 1827, Porter immediately joined the church. In 1830, after preaching informally around central Massachusetts, he became a member of the New England Conference, a formal organization of clergymen who spread the Methodist doctrine around the region. Porter spent his early years in southern New England, preaching in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. He travelled constantly, preaching at revival meetings, in town halls, and in newly constructed Methodist churches. A colleague recalled, 'In the pulpit his commanding personal appearance--tall, well-proportioned, erect--with a good voice, gentlemanly bearing, and easy manner gave him at once the eye and ear of the audience. . . . On the platform and on special occasions he had few equals. Calm, self-poised, and quick to see and feel, he was ever ready to take up a parable.'<sup>1</sup>

Porter continued to live the life of the itinerant minister, briefly holding posts in Worcester, Boston, and Lynn, Massachusetts. He helped organize annual conferences and rallies, spoke often at special events, and promoted the temperance platform. He was also an author and began publishing his tracts and sermons in the 1840s. In 1849 he wrote The True Evangelist, or an Itinerant Ministry in which he defended the Methodist practice of travelling from town to town to spread the gospel. He eventually authored over sixteen books including Revivals of Religion: Their Theory, Means, Obstructions, Uses and Importance (1849); his major historical work, A Compendium of Methodism (1851); and the popular tract, Spirit Rapping, Mesmerism, Clairvoyance, etc. Calmly Considered and Exposed (1853). Many of Porter's publications are preserved in the American Antiquarian Society's book collection.

In 1856 Porter became an assistant book agent in the New York publishing office of the Methodist Book Concern. He soon rose through the ranks and became an editor and publisher of the numerous tracts, temperance novels, and sermons that were printed and offered for sale by the Methodist clergy. Porter, with his love of straightforward language and strong narrative, soon turned the Book Concern into a viable business. 'In the selection of works for publication, he was usually fortunate. Though appreciative of high literary merit, which commends itself to the few, he believed as a publisher, in practical, pious, salable books, which would appeal to the tastes of the majority and chronicle their virtues on the ledger.'<sup>2</sup>

This miniature depicts the blue-eyed Porter in his youth and may have been painted around the time of his 1833 marriage to Jane

Tinkham Howard (d. 1886), whom he met during a revival meeting.<sup>3</sup> The artist is unidentified and the miniature could have been painted almost anywhere in coastal New England, where Porter spent most of his early career travelling and preaching. Possibly intended as a remembrance for the sitter's wife to admire while he was away spreading the gospel, the miniature descended through the family until it was donated to the Society in 1936.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Sherman, 'James Porter,' Minutes of the New England Methodist Episcopal Conference (1889), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Sherman, 'James Porter,' 10. Some time after 1860, Porter joined forces with the bookseller and publisher George Washington Carleton and formed the firm Carleton & Porter, which continued to publish religious material.

<sup>3</sup> Sherman, 'James Porter,' 5-6.