

JOHN ROGERS (1505-55), 1805

Samuel Harris (1783-1810)

after John Singleton Copley (1738-1815)

oil on canvas

30 1/2 x 25 (76.52 x 63.50)

Bequest of William Bentley, 1819

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Ex. Coll.: Artist; gift to the donor, 1805.

John Rogers was an English Protestant martyr best known for his inclusion in the volume familiarly known as John Foxe's Book of Martyrs, which was first published in 1563 and was well known to early generations of New Englanders. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, New England children learning to read were likely to encounter in their primers the story of Rogers's struggle against the crown and his martyrdom.¹ His story became part of the American Protestant tradition and was kept alive in Boston by the Rogers and Ellis families, who claimed to have descended from the minister.²

Rogers began his clerical life as a Roman Catholic but in 1535 denounced Rome and followed the teachings of the Protestant minister William Tyndale (c. 1494-1536). Working with Tyndale and other clergy in Holland, Rogers translated the Bible into English for publication in 1537. He returned to England in 1548, and five years later, during the reign of Mary Tudor, preached a sermon in St. Paul's Cathedral warning against the dogma and rituals of Catholicism. Shortly afterwards, Rogers was arrested and imprisoned. After serving several years of his sentence, he received a second trial, was found guilty of heresy, and was burned at the stake in 1555.³

Governor Thomas Hutchinson (1711-80) of Massachusetts owned a now-lost portrait of Rogers that was brought to America from England by descendants of Rogers. In 1759 John Singleton Copley, eager to examine European painting techniques, copied this image.⁴ Copley's painting, now in the Massachusetts Historical Society, was in turn copied forty-six years later by the Boston engraver Samuel Harris. Harris (fig. 27) started working as an engraver after completing an apprenticeship with a copperplate engraver, Samuel Hill (active 1798-1803).

In 1804 Harris was producing illustrations for Boston book and periodical publishers and was showing great promise as an artist. In September 1805, before meeting Harris, William Bentley (cat. 8) noted in his diary that the engraver ‘displayed taste in his profession & an inclination for Oriental Literature.’⁵ The following month, after Bentley was shown examples of Harris’s engraving by the Reverend John Eliot (1753-1813), he wrote: ‘Mr. Eliot furnished me with several specimens of the talents of a self-taught young man in Northend, Boston named Harris. He employs the Engraving tool with good success.’⁶

Harris soon discovered that Bentley was forming a collection of portraits of prominent New England clergymen and politicians. In December, Harris sent this portrait of John Rogers, his only known work in oils, and a chalk drawing of the Reverend Jeremy Belknap (1744-98) to Bentley as a gift.⁷ This led to several exchanges between the two men. Harris sent Bentley dozens of engravings and mezzotints, as well as his own original chalk drawings, including the portraits of Sir Francis Drake, Governor John Winthrop, and the Reverend Mather Byles that Bentley bequeathed to the American Antiquarian Society, where they form part of the Graphic Arts Collection.⁸

In 1808 Harris matriculated at Harvard College to pursue his interest in foreign languages. However, before receiving his degree, he died in July 1810. Bentley marked the day in his diary, writing: ‘This day proved the melancholy day of the exit of my young friend Samuel Harris. He drowned while bathing in the Charles near the Colleges. He was to graduate this Commencement & has a Hebrew oration assigned him. He came from the Northend of Boston, was an ingenious mechanic, but from his extraordinary attainments was assisted in a public education. He has furnished me with my best painting & engravings, with some rare copies of some ingenious oriental curiosities and many curious letters. I expected in him the Greatest Orientalist our country has ever produced. He was a modest, inquisitive, indefatigable man.... In a moment our thoughts perish.’⁹

¹ Charles L. Nichols, ‘The Holy Bible in Verse,’ Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 36 (1926): 71-72. Verses by Rogers appeared as early as the 1683 edition of The New England Primer, or Milk for Babes. Nichols notes that a print showing Rogers was included in later editions of this work.

² ‘Portrait of John Rogers, the Martyr,’ Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society 2 (1854): 611-12; and Nichols, ‘The Holy Bible in Verse,’ 72-73.

³ The New American Cyclopedia, s.v. ‘Rogers, John.’

⁴ Jules David Prown, John Singleton Copley in America, 1738-1774 (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1966), 19, fig. 12.

⁵ William Bentley Diary, September 18, 1805, William Bentley Papers, 1666-1819, AAS Manuscript Collection.

⁶ Bentley Diary, October 5, 1805.

⁷ William Bentley Daybook, December 8, 1805, Bentley Papers. Bentley noted: 'From Mr. Samuel Harris, gift of a portrait of the Martyr John Rogers from a copy in the possession of the Rev. John Eliot, D.D. of Boston. Done by Mr. Harris in oil colours.'

⁸ A complete list of Harris's chalk drawings can be found in Frederick Weis, 'Portraits at the American Antiquarian Society,' Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 56 (April 1946): 121-22.

⁹ Bentley Diary, July 8, 1810. An obituary of Harris appears in the periodical Polyanthos, new series 1 (February 18, 1812): 3-15; (March 1812): 144.