

JAMES CLAYPOOLE—A FOUNDER OF THE ART OF PAINTING IN PENNSYLVANIA

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MATTHEW PRATT'S brief annals of his life record that in 1749, his fifteenth year, his father died and he, in his own words, "went apprentice to my uncle James Claypoole, Limner and Painter in general—served my time out 6 years and 8 months."¹

William Dunlap's vast and delightful compendium of studio gossip and autobiographical statements, *The History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States*, throws a little further light on the matter from intimate knowledge. Pratt, he says, "at the age of fifteen was placed apprentice to his uncle James Claypoole from whom (to use his own words) he learned all the different branches of portrait painting, which was his favorite study from ten years of age. This allusion to the different branches of the painting business shows plainly the degraded state in which the arts were at that time in this country."²

Claypoole, on this not always reliable authority, was at one time noted as the earliest American portrait painter, a distinction later; perforce, qualified to that of the earliest in Pennsylvania. Historians the while have vainly searched for a canvas from his hand.

We know that James Claypoole was born at Philadelphia, January 22, 1720, son and grandson of solid citizens of the province. He married, first, May 24, 1742, Rebecca White, and, second, Mary Chambers. He was Sheriff of Philadelphia from 1777 to 1780. The Christ Church records list the baptisms of five children, all by the second wife, from 1751 to 1759—Elizabeth, Mary, Abraham George, David Chambers and Temperance.³ The editors of Dunlap give the date of his death as "about 1796," and the place as Jamaica,

¹ *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 19, p. 460.

² Ed. by Frank W. Bayley and Charles E. Goodspeed (3 vols., Boston, 1918). Vol. 1, p. 110.

³ Graff, Rebecca Irwin, *Genealogy of the Claypoole Family of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1893), pp. 66-67.

in the West Indies, whither he had gone on his way to study with West, quoting Charles Willson Peale as their source.⁴ As a matter of fact, letters of administration for James Claypoole's estate had been granted on September 24, 1784.⁵ Peale's oft-quoted account gives no date of death. He says, "In 1762 on a visit to Philada. I went to see the paintings of Mr. James Claypoole. He was not at home. I see his pictures & among them one done by Miss Rench, whom if I mistake not he married. After her death he intended to go to London to visit Mr. West with whom he had been intimate—but meeting with a storm was drove into the West Indies. In the Island of Jamaica he married & settled there."⁶

"Miss Rench" (or Wrench) was a sister of Miss Polly, who married Judge Jacob Rush,⁷ and of whom Peale has left both an intimate description and a romantic portrait.

Very late in life, laboriously but happily, Peale compiled an autobiography from the letters and diaries of former years. He rarely added new matter, but in mentioning Claypoole, does make it clear that there were two James Claypooles, father and son. It was the younger whose paintings he saw, who sailed to study with West, but who lingered instead in Jamaica and died there. This must have been a son by the first marriage, not recorded in the Philadelphia baptismal records. The elder, as far as Peale's recollection reached, was a house painter only.

A son of Mr. James Claypoole of the City of Philadelphia discovered talents for the art, and painted portraits in said city. His father carried on the business of house painting and glazing, and thus afforded his son the conveniences for painting. Young Mr. Claypoole, desirous of gaining improvements in his art, planned a visit to Mr. West, with whom very probably he had before some intimacy. But on his passage to London a storm obliged him to bear away for the West Indies, and Mr. Claypoole arriving at Jamaica, found employment for his pencil and there married a lady of that island, by whom he

⁴ *Op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 110 n.

⁵ Graff, p. 66.

⁶ Letter to Rembrandt Peale, October 28, 1812. Library of the American Philosophical Society. See also Sartain, John, *Reminiscences of a Very Old Man* (New York, 1900), pp. 146-154.

⁷ Brother of Dr. Benjamin Rush. Dunlap erroneously states that she married William Rush, the sculptor.

had several children and there lived for the remainder of his life.⁸

Peale was in a position to know the Claypooles well. The elder James Claypoole served with him on the committee of 1777 appointed to deal with disloyal citizens of the town, and in 1782, Claypoole's daughter, Mary, married James Peale. Another relative, Septimus Claypoole, married Charles Willson Peale's adopted daughter, Elizabeth Polk. Since the early 1770's, it is clear that Claypoole had not been a professional limner, nor had any established reputation as such. In the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts there is a portrait of him which can be dated between the Peale-Claypoole alliance in 1782 and his death in 1784. It is probably by Charles Willson Peale—possibly by James assisted by his brother. It shows us a slim, erect, white-wigged old gentleman, arms folded, a quizzical smile playing about his mouth and eyes. Significantly, there are no accessories of trade or avocation shown. These brothers would never paint a fellow artist's portrait in half length without palette, brushes or maul stick—something to bear witness to his place in the honored profession.

The James Claypoole we see here is the house painter and glazier, the good and kindly man who knew enough beyond that trade to encourage and lead his apprentices, son and nephew, into the wider field. He had doubtless a fatherly eye on all the city's coterie of native artists, West and Benbridge, Pratt and the Wrench sisters and his son. One by one, the young men sailed for Italy and London, leaving this most prosperous of the colonies for an adventurous and hazardous future.

That exodus from Pennsylvania, as from other parts of the continent, shows us how strong was the attraction of the cultural centers, even so early in our history. Charles Willson Peale returned to an almost empty field and, stimulated by the rich patronage he received, painted with a sympathy and brilliance he had not shown in London. But he would have stayed in London had he been good enough, and in his colonial period occasionally sent choice works as gifts to his friends there, clearly hoping that they might be thought worthy of a showing.

If there be a native quality to early Pennsylvania painting it is a certain poetic sentimentality, which appears amusingly enough

⁸ Ms. Autobiography. Library of the American Philosophical Society.

in the work of William Williams, and to which Pratt and Peale and the other London-trained men added a sophisticated grace. It shone pleasantly in all the central and southern region, but was frozen out to the northward. In Pennsylvania, it was tempered by a strong feeling for the utilitarian, a respect for the useful rather than a Puritan insistence upon it. Early Philadelphia's predominant characteristic was her spirit of scientific inquiry, yet this never interfered with the enjoyment of beauty or romantic fancy. James Claypoole the elder, artisan and artist, would be equally looked up to on both counts by his fellow citizens.

That head start in unhindered scientific development is seen in the course of Pennsylvania history for at least a century and a half. It touched the arts throughout, the art of engraving, of course, in particular, for Philadelphia publishers thrived on the pre-eminence of their artists. One might possibly trace in such Pennsylvania painters as Fulton, Lambdin, Abbey or Pyle, a technical exactitude, a respect for record and purpose, that belong to Pennsylvania history. But it is a tenuous speculation in the face of all the interflow of influences of which they are a part. One may well feel a perceptible hesitation in attempting to define a native Pennsylvania art. Folk arts are regional and fine arts universal—one rooted in the soil, the other only mature when free of it. James Claypoole, house painter and glazier, dabbler on canvas, may be seen as a line in the measure. He was a Pennsylvania painter. But the young men whom he encouraged to imitate nature, to recreate the divine image, who crossed the broad ocean in search of it, were no longer bound by province or nation.