BASS OTIS, AMERICA'S FIRST LITHOGRAPHER.

By JOSEPH JACKSON.

Every sketch of the rise and progress of the art of lithography that mentions the introduction of the art in the United States cites the July number of The Analectic Magazine in the year 1819 as its beginning in this country. This statement has been quoted so many times usually without any investigation on the part of the writer, that it has become as fixed a piece of history as anything well could be. Yet, it appears that at least six months before this time, or in November, 1818, there was published in Philadelphia a book containing a frontispiece portrait by the same Bass Otis, who made the plate in The Analectic that undoubtedly is the product of lithography.

Having thus discovered a lithograph earlier than the one usually supposed to have been the first one, it would be hazardous to claim for it the virtue of having been the first product of the lithographic stone in this country. Certainly, it might be argued that the discovery does not matter after all, for it still leaves Bass Otis the first lithographer in the United States, and does not remove the claim for Philadelphia to be
the cradle of the art in this country. Yet it has interest in advancing the date of lithography’s introduction here.

The mystery of the beginnings of lithography in the United States is still almost as baffling as the mystery concerning the place of origin of the American Indian. Yet, a little patience to examine the facts in the case is likely to be rewarded by a fairly good understanding of it.

For some years a paragraph in the introduction of Senefelder’s Book on Lithography, which was published in Germany in the year 1818 and reprinted in translation the following year by Ackermann in London, which refers to the spread of the art to the four quarters of the globe, has mystified all investigators who have striven to reconcile the statement found there with the familiar statement. This paragraph, written by the enthusiastic inventor of lithography, is the last one in the introduction to his history of the invention, and relates the wonderful growth in these words:

“This invention will, no doubt, greatly facilitate everywhere, the introduction and application of lithography; and I am proud to see that, even in its present shape, it is known and exercised in a great part of the civilized world. In England and France it was first introduced by Mr. Andre, and it has lately been revived in London by Mr. Ackermann, of the Strand, and in Paris, by Count Lestayrie, both of whom have employed it in various publications. At Berlin, Mr. Von Reiche opened a lithographic establishment upon a large scale; at St. Petersburg it was practiced several years ago and, at present it is more particularly cultivated by Baron Schilling. Even in Philadelphia, and what is still more astonishing in Astrakan, lithography is already introduced, and, I understand, is in a flourishing state.”

This extract is made from the English translation of the work published in London by Ackermann, with a preface dated March, 1819. Senefelder’s book first appeared in Germany late in the year 1818, and there has been no other evidence than his assertion that at that time lithography was practiced even experimen-
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tally in the United States, and certainly, until the recent discovery of the portrait of the Rev. Abner Kneeland, which appears as the frontispiece to his lectures in the Universalist Church in Lombard Street, in 1818, there was no evidence of the art having been practiced in Philadelphia.

The portrait of Abner Kneeland, which is signed “Bass Otis, Sc.” is so remarkable in the diversity of the styles combined in its production that it at once attracts the attention of the beholder. It displays so many different styles that one is forced to admit that the engraver was not confident of his skill. The background is in pure lithotint, part of the face is in stipple, and the remainder of the portrait is in line and lithotint. No amateur of engravings can look at it without being struck by its many peculiarities, which until it is shown to have been a lithographic product, must have been baffling to every theory concerning the probable method employed. It is unlike any other engraving for the very simple reason that it is not an engraving on metal, but an engraving on stone, and follows styles of lithography which are uncommon in these days.

It is evidently the product of an artist who was struggling in the dark with a new method of reproduction, and lacking confidence in his ability to work in any single manner of the art, has combined several styles, not with the idea of perfecting the art but with the intention of being able to use the new process in lieu of metal engraving. Strictly speaking the work is not engraving, as that process is generally understood; it is not pure lithography, but an etching on stone, in a most primitive manner. Yet, when the plate which was issued in The Analectic by the same hand is placed beside the portrait of Kneeland, it at once becomes apparent that both are early attempts to naturalize the new art. As a matter of fact the portrait is much the
better piece of work, in spite of the artist’s eccentricities of manner.

This frontispiece portrait by Bass Otis seems to be the explanation of the mystifying paragraph in Senefelder’s introduction. The inventor of the art of lithography asserts that the art is practiced “even in Philadelphia,” and one may be sure that he would not have ventured this statement if he had no reason to believe it true.

In the July, 1819, number of *The Analectic Magazine*, the statement is not made that the plate that accompanies it is the first to have been produced in this country, although nearly all writers on the subject have assumed this position. It is true that the description of how the plate was obtained, which was written by Judge Cooper, at that time a professor of chemistry in the University of Pennsylvania, might lead to such an erroneous conclusion. There is evidence that there were lithographic stones in the city before this time. One of these had been in the possession of the American Philosophical Society, and others were in the hands of Charles Alexander Lesueur, who drew the first really good lithographic drawing published in this country, to illustrate the journal of the Academy of Natural Sciences. Lesueur did not publish his crayon-style lithographs of fishes until 1822, but these appear to have been the first book illustrations issued here.

On the books of the Secretary of the Philosophical Society stands the note that on May 7, 1819:

“*The lithographic stone belonging to the cabinet of the Society was loaned to Dr. Brown and Mr. Otis for the purpose of making experiments in the art of lithographic engravings.*”

Diligent inquiry has failed to trace this stone. There is no record in the Society’s possession that could be found by the writer that even notes the original receipt of the stone. Neither is there any record
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that it was returned after the experiments were made. That the stone was used for the print which appears in the July, 1819, number of The Analectic Magazine, we have the authority of the periodical.

"In this number," begins the article signed C and evidently from the pen of Doctor, or Judge, Cooper, "we present our readers with a specimen of American Lithography: the design and execution from beginning to end—from the drawing to the impression inclusive—is by Mr. B. Otis; who following the suggestions of Judge Cooper, and Dr. Brown, of Alabama, has by means of their hints, and his own more successful improvements, produced the specimen now submitted. The drawing was made on a stone from Munich, presented to the American Philosophical Society, by Mr. Thomas Dobson of this city. But the art has been successfully tried on specimens of stone from Frankfort in Kentucky, produced by Judge Cooper, Dr. Brown and Mr. Clifford—from Doe Run in Kentucky, furnished by Dr. Blight—from a quarry about two miles from Maytown, Lancaster County—and also on some pieces of white marble from White Marsh, commonly found at stone cutters in this city. • • • • • • • M. le Sieur also, whose exquisite designs are well known to men of science and artists here, has procured some stones, such as are used at Paris by M. de Lestayrie, and is proceeding with the experiment, we hope successfully; for in truth, it is an experiment in which the whole circle of science and literature is very much interested."

In the National Museum in one of the wing buildings of Independence Hall will be found a lithographic stone, irretrievably damaged, but still containing part of the design etched upon it by Bass Otis, that may be one of the early attempts at lithography by that artist. It is unlike the usual lithographic stone that comes from Bavaria, and probably is one from Kentucky or even one of the pieces of white marble from White Marsh, although it does not resemble this latter stone except in whiteness. The design on the stone is a copy of West’s painting of Christ Healing the Sick, which is in the Pennsylvania Hospital. The method or style of lithography followed by the artist in this experiment is the etched style which he followed in the print in The Analectic Magazine. Little is known of the history of this stone which was deposited in the City’s care some years ago. It is, how-
ever, of great historical importance so far as the history of American lithography is concerned.

We must go farther back in the pages of The Analectic Magazine to get the clue to the first attempt of Otis. In the February number for the year 1818, there appears a brief extract from the Edinburg Magazine. In the course of this article there is a brief description of the method of lithography. The whole process is not described, but the clever artist with the description in his possession might very well have a good idea of the method; it also is possible that some information was received from Munich by Dobson, when he acquired the stone, which he might have bought from Senefelder or someone known to him, since later in the same year he alludes to the introduction of the art in Philadelphia, which he might have inferred from the receipt of a stone from his establishment.

It will be noted that there is nothing in the article in The Analectic Magazine for July, 1819, beyond the statement that it was a trial plate, to give the impression that it was the first lithograph made in this country. Indeed, it might appear that had this been the case, the periodical might very well have been proud to make such an announcement.

To the writer it seems that there is nothing in evidence that disposes of the assertion that Otis’s lithographic portrait of Abner Kneeland must be entitled to rank in point of time before the lithographic plate in the magazine, for while the portrait is not dated, the book is, and the copyright notice gives the time as November, and the year, 1818.

Of the early years of Bass Otis little information has been gleaned. He was the fourth child and third son of Dr. Josiah and Susanna Orr Otis, and was born at Bridgewater, Connecticut, in 1784. His father was a physician at Bridgewater and his mother a native of East Bridgewater.
All the biographical sketches of Otis mention that he was apprenticed to a scythe maker in his native town, and Dunlap, in his history of the Arts of Design in the United States, states that he received his instruction in painting by working with a coach painter. While this seems reasonable, there is no other authority for the statement. There is every evidence in the work of Otis to show that he was talented rather than trained. He had remarkable facility with his brush, and was able to make very good copies of portraits by his more famous contemporaries. Dunlap does not inform us when Otis came to New York, but shows that he was there in the year 1808, and was established as a portrait painter. Dunlap did not approve of his style, for he says of his work: “Mr. Otis, as a portrait painter, has strong, natural talents and a good perception of character. Many of his heads are well colored. At one time he painted many portraits in Philadelphia, but they were all of a class; if not so originally, he made them so.”

There is an anecdote to the effect that Otis left his scythe maker’s shop as soon as he completed his apprenticeship, which should have been in 1805. What he did between that year and the year of his appearance in New York (1808), may be left to conjecture. Evidently he painted portraits, but whether in Connecticut, or in Boston, where later he was for a time, is not now known. Even the exact time of his coming to Philadelphia, where he lived so long and where he met his wife, a Miss Pierie, and where he died, is not known, excepting by inference.

Otis’s name first appears in the Philadelphia Directory for the year 1813. It is absent from that issued in 1811 and there was none in 1812, but he exhibited in the latter year in the Second Annual Exhibition of the Columbian Society of Artists in the Academy of the Fine Arts, and it is known that he was in Philadelphia
as a resident in that year. His contribution to the 1812 Exhibition consisted of six portraits of men and two of women.

The portraits which he showed at the Academy were his first exhibited works as a painter. There is no means of identifying the portraits thus shown, for they were set down in the catalogue simply as "Portrait of a Gentleman," or "Portrait of a Lady." In the annual exhibition in 1813, however, there is one canvas catalogued as "Portrait of Himself." There seems to be no means of tracing this canvas now. There is, of course, another portrait of himself painted a year before his death, when Otis was an aged man, but when he still retained some of his early skill in portraiture. This was painted for the late Ferdinand J. Dreer, and was sold in the sale of Mr. Dreer’s library in the spring of 1913.

In 1813 Otis was living in Walnut Street, according to the catalogue, and at 72 Chestnut, according to the directory for that year. In 1817 he was dwelling at No. 6 North Seventh Street. There he remained until 1818, when he removed to Cherry Street between Fifth and Sixth, identified by the writer as the present No. 515. It was while he was living in this house that Otis made his trials in lithography, which he did not prosecute very long. The Academy Exhibition in 1819 exhibited the only composition by the painter that is known. The picture was entitled "A Foundry." It gives a view of the scythe maker’s shop in which Otis worked during his apprenticeship, and is a most creditable piece of painting. It was decidedly approved by the critics of his time, and the painter presented it to the Academy for its permanent collection. It may still be seen in the galleries of that institution.

In every exhibition of the Academy for many years after 1812 Otis had a good representative showing on the walls. It is evident from the old catalogues that
some of the portraits were shown year after year, but there always were several new ones exhibited by him. During this period, say, from 1817 for the next year or two, Otis was engaged in painting portraits for Joseph Delaplaine’s Repository, which ambitious work came to an untimely conclusion after but two volumes of the work had been printed. Only one of Otis’s portraits was engraved for the parts in existence. That is the portrait of Thomas Jefferson, which Otis painted from life. Many of the others were copies.

In the exhibition for 1817 Otis showed portraits of James Madison, Joseph Hopkinson, Commodore Truxtun, Charles Thomson, and Doctor Wistar, for Delaplaine. The next year he showed a copy of Copley’s portrait of Samuel Adams, also painted for Delaplaine, and in this exhibition was shown for the first time his portrait of Jefferson. In the Exhibition for 1819, there was a group—the Washington Family—but upon what work it was founded is not known. His portrait of Bishop White was shown in the 1823 exhibition, in which he had thirteen paintings. In the same show was exhibited his portrait of General St. Clair and of General Wilkinson, both for Delaplaine, as was also the portrait of Bishop White. The next year’s exhibition found Otis with fifteen canvases on the walls, but many of them had been seen before. There was shown for the first time, however, a portrait of the Rev. Dr. Wilson.

That year Otis was elected an Academician of the Pennsylvania Academy, and was entitled to have the letters, P.A. after his name. In the 1825 exhibition he exhibited a group of children, and portraits of the Rev. Ezra Stiles Ely, and of the Rev. J. J. Janeway, as well as two portraits of officers in the United States service not named on the catalogues. In this exhibit Otis had a larger representation than any other
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painter, having a total of twenty canvases. Very few of this number, however, were new.

His portrait of the Rev. Joseph Eastburn, pastor of the Mariner's Bethel, was shown in the exhibition in 1826, and from this time his light appears to have waned. In the annual exhibition held in May, 1832, Albert Newsam's lithograph of Otis's portrait of Stephen Girard, was exhibited. Otis had portraits of D. W. Coxe and of a Mr. Kittenger in the 1834 exhibition. In 1845 he appears to have gone to New York and later to Boston, where he was in 1850, working as a portrait painter.

Among the portraits painted by Otis, and not noted above, it may be of interest to mention that there are in existence those of the Rev. William J. Clark, Peter Stephen Duponceau, John Farr, John U. Fraley, Alexander Lawson, Captain John Markland, Margaretta M. Meeker, and John Neagle.

Otis did not live long after his return to Philadelphia in 1859. He went to live at 805 Spring Garden Street, and there, on November 3, 1861, he passed away. The newspapers of the time contained no obituary sketch of his long life as a painter, and he was buried without any unusual honors in Christ Church burying ground at Fifth and Arch Streets, near the southwest corner of the grounds.

For more than half a century Otis had been actively engaged in Philadelphia, New York and Boston as a portrait painter; he is acknowledged to have introduced the art of lithography into the United States, but he has received but scant recognition.