EDWARD SAVAGE'S PORTRAITS OF WASHINGTON.

BY MANTLE FIELDING.

To an American no other painted portrait can possess the interest and significance of that of our first President, nor does he ever tire of seeing the likeness of the man who stood first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen. His portraits transmit to posterity his eminent virtues, and in contemplating these paintings we feel impressed with the nobility of his character, the dignity of his manhood, and his truth, sincerity and patriotism.

To the student of Washington portraiture, the number of times he submitted to the sittings of painters seems appalling, but although the ordeal was a great burden he early realized that he was performing a duty to posterity. On May 16, 1785, we find him writing to Francis Hopkinson, from Mount Vernon: "I am so hackneyed to the touches of the Painter's pencil, that I am now altogether at their beck, and sit like Patience on a monument, whilst they are delineating the lines of my face. It is a proof of what habit and custom can effect. At first I was as impatient at the request and as restive under the operation as a colt is of the saddle."
The next time I submitted very reluctantly, but with less flouncing. Now no dray moves more readily to the Thrill, than I do to the Painter's chair."

Among the American portrait painters to whom Washington gave sittings was Edward Savage; unfortunately no complete life, diary or register of his work has descended to us. We therefore have had to take the rather incomplete records concerning him from notes and correspondence of his times.

Edward Savage was born in Princeton, Worcester County, Mass., November 26, 1761, and died there July 6, 1817. The father of Edward, Abraham Savage, had been driven from France, by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Edward Savage originally was a goldsmith, a trade that produced many of our early American engravers. As early as 1789, we find him turning his attention to portrait painting, he was only twenty-eight when he left Massachusetts carrying with him a letter from President Willard of Harvard College to Washington, requesting him to sit for his portrait for the University, and there it will be found today. This is the first that we know of Savage as an artist; he must have had some instruction and experience in portrait painting, however, for though his portrait of Washington was not remarkable as a work of art, still it was not painted by an absolutely inexperienced hand.

President Willard wrote, November 7, 1789: "'Mr. Savage, the bearer of this, who is a painter and is going to New York, has called on me and of his own accord has politely and generously offered to take your portrait for the University, if you will be so kind as to sit. As it would be exceedingly gratifying to all the governors of this literary society, that the portrait of the man we so highly love, esteem and revere should be the property of and placed within Harvard College, permit me, Sir, to request the favor of your sitting for
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the purpose which will greatly oblige the whole corpo-
ration."’

In “Sparks’ Writings of Washington” we find his reply:

New York, 23 December 1789.

Sir:—Your letter of the 7th ultimo was handed to
me a few days since by Mr. Savage, who is now en-
gaged in taking the portrait, which you and the gov-
ernors of the seminary over which you preside have
expressed a desire for, that it may be placed in the
philosophical chamber of your University. I am in-
duced, Sir, to comply with this request from a wish
that I may have to gratify, as far as with propriety
may be done, every reasonable desire of the patrons
and promoters of science. And at the same time I feel
myself flattered by the polite manner in which I am
requested to give this proof of my sincere regard, and
good wishes for the prosperity of the University of
Cambridge.

I am Sir with great esteem

Your obd. Servt.

Go. Washington.

To Joseph Warren,
President of Harvard.

In the Diary of George Washington from 1789 to
1791, he records with his accustomed precision on De-
cember 21st, “Sat from ten to one o’clock for a Mr.
Savage, to draw my Portrait for the University of
Cambridge, in the State of Massachusetts, at the re-
quest of the President and Governors of the said Uni-
versity.’’

On December 28th he notes:

“Sat all the forenoon for Mr. Savage who was taking
my portrait.” And on January 6th, 1790 he enters:

“Sat from half after eight o’clock till ten for the
portrait painter, Mr. Savage, to finish the picture of
me which he had begun for the University of Cambridge." This portrait is painted on a Canvas, twenty-five by thirty inches. Later on Savage on the order of Vice President, John Adams, painted a second portrait of Washington, as shown by an entry in the Diary on April 6, 1790.

"Sat for Mr. Savage at the request of the Vice President to have my Portrait drawn for him."

Savage moved to Philadelphia, and in 1791 sailed for London,—here he studied under Benjamin West, and probably learned something of the art of engraving in stipple and in mezzotint. His portraits of General Knox and of Washington were issued in London 1791–92–93.

In 1794 Savage returned to the United States, and was married in Boston to Sarah Sever, and soon after this date he settled in Philadelphia, where his brother John Savage had established himself as a merchant. In July of 1795 he exhibited the first panorama ever shown in that city. It represented London and Westminster, and a Philadelphia newspaper of the time states that it was painted "in a circle and looks like reality."

Savage apparently remained in Philadelphia until 1801 when his name disappears from the city directory. He went to New York, and from there to Boston, and to Princeton. In New York Savage joined forces with Daniel Bowen, in the New York Museum. Dunlap in his "History of the Arts of Design" calls it "a mingled establishment, half painting-gallery, half museum."

In 1795 these collections were transferred to Boston, and opened at "The Head of the Mall" as the Columbia Museum. The museum with a portion of its contents was burned in 1803. In 1806 Bowen and the artist W. M. S. Doyle erected the Museum in Tremont St., which the next year was again destroyed by fire;
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it was rebuilt and maintained as a museum until 1825 when the Columbian Museum passed to the New England Museum. In 1840 it was purchased by Moses Kimball, who maintained it as the Boston Museum for more than fifty years. To the picture-gallery of this museum the heirs of Edward Savage contributed several important American paintings and portraits, including the Washington Family (see plate). In 1891 this painting was purchased by Mr. Avery of New York from Moses Kimball, and sold to the late William F. Havemeyer of New York City, it then came into the possession of the Democratic Club, Madison Ave., who recently sold it.

The great value of this picture is like that of a human document, preserving as it does the group of full length portraits of George Washington, Martha Washington, George Washington Parke Custis, Eleanor Parke Custis, and their negro servant "Billy" Lee. The picture of the Washington Family (Canvas size 84 inches by 111 inches) represents Washington in the buff and blue uniform of the Continental Army. He is seated and rests his arm upon a table on which is spread a plan of the then contemplated city of Washington, together with a cocked hat. The two adopted children are shown, also the negro servant back of Mrs. Washington's chair. A globe is seen in the foreground to the left. There is a marble column and a looped-up curtain in the background, beyond which is a view along the Potomac River.

Rembrandt Peale in his lecture on Washington Portraits, referring to the Washington Family picture, painted by Edward Savage, stated that Washington gave sittings for it in Philadelphia.

Among the Washington papers in the Department of State at the national capital is this letter:

On June 3, 1798, Savage writes to Washington from "No. 70 South 4th Street, Philadelphia":
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"Agreeable to Col. Biddle’s order, I delivered four of the best impressions of your Family Print. They are chosen out of the first that was printed. Perhaps you may think that they are too dark, but they will change lighter after hanging two or three months. . . . The likenesses of the young people are not much like what they are at present. The Copper-plate was begun and half finished from the likenesses which I painted in New York in the year 1789. I could not make the alterations in the copper to make it like the painting which I finished in Philadelphia in the year 1796. The portraits of yourself and Mrs. Washington are generally thought to be likenesses. . . . In consequence of its success and being generally approved of, I continued the subscription. . . . As soon as I have one printed in colours I shall take the liberty to send it to Mrs. Washington for her acceptance. I think she will like it better than a plain print. Mrs. Savage joins me in respectful compliments to Mrs. Washington."

To this letter from Savage, Washington replied:

Mt. Vernon, 17th June 98.

Mr. Ed. Savage,

Sir,—I have been favored with your letter of the 3rd instant and pray you to receive my thanks for your attention in chusing the prints which you sent to Col. Biddle for my use. As Mrs. Washington also does for your politeness in presenting her one in colours. We are pleased to hear that the undertaking has succeeded so well. Col. Biddle I presume has paid you for the first four, being so directed.

Mrs. Washintgon offers her compts to you and Mrs. Savage.

I am your Odbt Servt.

Go. Washington.

This engraving of the Washington Family was published by Savage in 1798. David Edwin the engraver
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was assisting Savage at this time with his work. During the yellow fever epidemic which afflicted Philadelphia, the artist and his assistants were frightened away from the city, taking refuge in Burlington, N. J. Edwin told John Sartain the Philadelphia engraver an amusing story of their voyage up the Delaware in a row-boat, carrying the big painting of the Washington Family along without taking the canvas off from its stretching frame. It was held upright, and the nicety of skill requisite to keep it exactly edgewise to the wind, and the pompous and solemn manner of Savage in directing manoeuvres made it irresistibly comic and laughable. To what extent Edwin and other engravers assisted Savage has always been more or less a question. Sartain always said “Savage drew the outlines on the copper, but Edwin did a large part of the engraving.” This is again corroborated in part by the portrait painter, James R. Lambdin, who writes: “The Group of the Washington family by Savage was engraved by Edwin at Burlington, N. J. during the prevalence of the yellow fever in Philadelphia in 1798. Edwin told me an amusing anecdote of his having to come to Phila. during the period of the epidemic for a box of glass to frame the prints. He came down in a sail-boat in which he slept all night, and after obtaining the glass he started back, tying the rope of the sail to his ankle and was unable to release himself until his arrival at Burlington.”

It is interesting to note in Martha Washington’s will dated March 4, 1802 she made a special bequest to her granddaughter, Eleanor Parke Lewis, née Custis, of a “print of the Washington Family.” Upon the back of another engraving of the Family portrait is this inscription, “Presented to Mrs. Elizabeth Washington Parke Custis July 4, 1802.”

The popularity and sale of the artist’s engraving of his “Washington Family” were so great that half a
dozen publishing establishments in the United States produced copies with variations in black and brown mezzotint, aquatint and stipple, while lithographs in bright tints were printed later and sold, which bore but slight resemblance to the original composition and never duplicated the colors employed in the oil painting by the artist.