John A. Woodside

JOHN A. WOODSIDE
PHILADELPHIA'S GLORIFIED SIGN-PAINTER
BY JOSEPH JACKSON

"Woodsides of Philadelphia, paints signs with talent beyond many who paint in higher branches."

That is the short but comprehensive comment upon John Archibald Woodside, in William Dunlap's History of the Arts of Design in the United States, published in 1834. While the sentence contains all Dunlap had to say about him, it indicates that the New York miniaturist, who was many other things as well, realized that Woodside was a glorified sign-painter, and hastened to be the first to approve of him in print.

Philadelphians had admitted his preeminence in a branch that, until Woodside's time, had not been regarded seriously as one of the fine arts. He did raise sign painting to a profession, instead of a trade, but had he applied his great talent to some other branch of painting, we might today, be able still to find some enjoyment in his work. As it is, he painted masterpieces for the sun and rain and time to obliterate; and beyond a few sketches in water color, and a small canvas in oils, we have nothing of his art in any of our collections.

Woodside has been a tradition in Philadelphia, usually coupled with that of the days of the volunteer firemen; and as a consequence very few facts about his life are to be found in print, and that little often vague. When everyone was familiar with his ornamental paintings on fire engines and banners, no one thought it necessary to make any record of their impressions of his work; and if any proof were needed to support the statement that tradition is stronger
than record, it could be found in the impress Woodside made upon his own time. Brief as are references to it, his name at least is known to all old Philadelphians.

John Archibald Woodside was born in Philadelphia in 1781. His father was John Woodside, an engrossing clerk, from whom, probably, he inherited some of his taste and talent for drawing and painting. His father is believed to have been a son or grandson of that Jonathan Woodside, who came to Philadelphia, from Ayrshire, Scotland, in the middle of the eighteenth century; although early Woodside families of Chester and Northampton Counties, usually are listed among Irish immigrants.

From 1785 to 1801, the name of the painter’s father appears in the Philadelphia Directories, but is not in White’s Directory for 1785. From these listings it appears he spent part of his career in public office. In 1791, he is described as “gentleman”; in 1793, as “clerk”; in 1794, he was a clerk in the Treasury Department; from 1795 to 1797, he was a scrivener; from 1798 to 1800, he was a clerk in the Register’s Office; and in 1801, in which year he died, he was a clerk in the Comptroller’s Office. From 1794, until his death, he lived on Arch Street, between Second and Third Streets. While the father followed various occupations as clerk, the painter’s mother, Mrs. Elizabeth Woodside, carried on a millinery business at the same address, then No. 70, Arch Street; and this fact might suggest that some of John A. Woodside’s taste and fancy might have been derived from her.

While nothing is known of his early life, it has been intimated that, if he were not actually apprentice to Mathew Pratt, or of his partners, William Clarke, Jeremiah Paul, Jr., and Henry Rutter, all of them portrait painters who were in business together as sign-painters, in 1800, he certainly was influenced by Pratt’s
work as a painter of sign boards. It has been said of John A. Woodside that he was the only competent successor to Pratt, whose sign boards were viewed by his contemporaries with the delight and seriousness one usually reserves for art exhibitions.

There is good reason to believe Woodside was a pupil, and probably journeyman sign-painter for Pratt. The latter died in 1805, and the same year Woodside opened his own studio, at 37 North Fifth Street. During the next forty-seven years, Woodside had his studio in many parts of the city. In 1809, he announced himself as "ornamental painter," and thenceforth he so advertised, usually accompanying that description with the addition, "sign painter."

It is evident that he was a good painter of still life, dead game, animals, and fruit pieces. He first exhibited in the annual exhibition of the Academy of the Fine Arts, in 1817, when he showed a picture of a tigress. In the annual show for 1821, he sent two still life subjects, both of them groups of fruit. In the exhibition of 1831 he sent two other fruit pieces, and in that for 1834, the last to which he contributed, he showed a portrait of a dog, and a still life of dead game. In the catalogues of the exhibitions he was described as, "Painter, Animals and Still Life."

Although usually alluded to as a sign-painter, his business principally was in the line of ornamental painting. In his day there were many organizations—the military companies alone were independent units, and fairly numerous—in Philadelphia and surrounding communities, which prided themselves upon the possession of banners painted by Woodside, proudly displayed when they paraded. The fire companies had their hand engines and hose carriages, pictorially ornamented, wherever there was space for this treatment, and it is said that these pictures by Woodside were worthy of a better refuge. The hats and capes
SKETCH FOR A BANNER, BY JOHN A. WOODSIDE
From the original in the Historical Society's Collection. It is believed this banner was painted for the Procession of the Native American Party, July 4, 1844
worn by the volunteer firemen of that time often contained ornamental painting. These pieces of uniform were of leather or oiled cloth, and Woodside found work to do upon them. When omnibuses were introduced, many of those in Philadelphia contained on their sides beautiful pictures painted by Woodside.

None of the painter’s signs have been preserved, so far as the writer has learned, and even the gay banners which Woodside painted, being usually of silk or satin, have defined preservation, except in a fragmentary state. But we may see some of the artist’s original sketches for some of these works in the Historical Society’s collections, and these are sufficient evidence that the high esteem in which the humble sign-painter was held in his generation, was amply justified.

It always is of interest to learn the cost of objects in times past, and on the backs of two of these sketches for banners, evidently made in the middle of the last century, not many years before Woodside’s death, we find something of his estimates. For the banner of the Native American Association, which was carried in their Fourth of July parade, in 1844, Woodside has noted on the back of the sketch that the price was $30. When it is considered that the artist had to submit a sketch in color, and then paint in careful detail, an ornamental group, the price seems to have been a very modest one.

On the reverse of the sketch for the banner of the Hibernia Greens, a local military organization, the price is given as $40, and the silk or satin required was to be either $15 or $13; evidently according to quality. The other sketches contain no information regarding the estimated cost. However, these two instances will give an adequate idea of the prices paid the best sign painter of his class in the mid-Nineteenth century, in Philadelphia.

From all accounts Woodside’s most notable sign
board was the one he painted for John Chase's New Theatre Tavern, at Sixth and Carpenter (Ranstead) Streets, about 1822. This sign portrayed William Warren in the character of Falstaff, and after Warren left the stage, about 1830, he leased the tavern, and it became known as The Falstaff for many years. While the sign board remained on the wall of the tavern until the place was burned, in 1880, the original had been repainted by one who wielded the brush more of a sign painter than of an artist; and those who may remember the sign of that period could have no idea of the merit of Woodside's original.

The sign board Woodside painted for the Indian Queen Hotel, of Fourth Street, below Market, has been praised; and it has been copied by Kennedy, which gives a better idea of its composition than it does of its actual technical merit, or color. Just after the War of 1812, a tavern known as the State Fencibles Second Company, stood on the east side of Third Street, below Coates, now Fairmount Avenue. It had an elaborate sign, the product of Woodside's brush. This tavern was kept by John Christine, a Lieutenant in the Second Company of the Fencibles. There were other numerous sign boards, which from the description of their attractiveness one is led to conclude that they were the work of Woodside. Among these, a portrait of Cooke, the tragedian, in the character of Rollo, hung at the southwest corner of Front and Catharine Streets; a Shakespeare's head, on the south side of Market Street, near Sixteenth; The Goose and Gridiron, Chestnut Street, below Sixth; General Washington, a copy of Stuart's portrait, Fourth Street, above Market. All of these signs were observed during the decade (1825-1835), when Woodside was at the height of his career as a painter of pictorial sign boards.

One of the finished paintings by Woodside which has survived, is owned by the Historical Society. It
is a view of Lemon Hill, the country seat of Henry Pratt, who was a son of Mathew Pratt, the painter. This work is in oils, and does not appear to belong to his best period; or, if it does, reveals the weakness of the painter in the field of landscape painting.

John A. Woodside died in Philadelphia, February 26, 1852, and in the Public Ledger, of February 28, was this brief notice:

This well known artist died at his residence in this city on Thursday last at the advanced age of 71 years. He was one of the best sign painters in the state, and perhaps in the country, and was the first to raise this branch of the art to the degree of excellence here which it has now attained. He was quiet and unobtrusive in his deportment and passed his long life in the pursuit of his favorite art with credit to himself and profit to all who had any intercourse with him.

Longer obituary references to the great sometimes have been printed in newspapers, but it is doubtful if any stronger or more appreciative estimate of Woodside could have been made than that which appeared in the Ledger. It was comprehensive in its terseness, and gave notice that tradition had not erred.

Similarly, the author of the chapter on "Art and Artists," in Scharf and Westcott's History of Philadelphia, was eulogistic but brief in his notice of Woodside. Incidentally it might be mentioned that the ten lines devoted to the painter in that work, is the longest biographical notice the artist received in any publication. Woodside seems to have been the embodiment of Pope's idea of the "Happy Life," for, to paraphrase the poet's lines, he "stole from the world, and not a stone tells where he lies."

"John A. Woodside, the great sign-painter of his day, and worthy successor of Pratt in that particular line," observes the writer in the History of Philadelphia,
was an artist of no ordinary merit... His frontispieces for hose-carriages, side, and front and rear gallery paintings for fire-engines, were beautiful. He copied engravings in the best manner, and was a careful worker, finishing everything with great perfection.

Although Woodside left a son, Abraham Woodside, Jr., who was a painter, he left no successor. Fortunately, he died toward the close of an era which he illumined by his art. The hand fire-engine was supplanted by the steam fire-engine a few years later, and even the volunteer firemen became a memory within less than twenty years.

Woodside had two sons, the elder, John A. Woodside, Jr., began his professional career as a wood engraver, in 1837, the year of his marriage, and worked at his profession for the following three years; but after 1840 his name is absent from the City Directory, and it is probable that he died that year, or early in the following one.

In 1844, we find the name of "A. Woodside, portrait painter" in the Directory, and this was the younger son, who was born in 1819, and died August 15, 1853, at the beginning of a promising career. He was a member of the Artists' Fund Society, as was his father before him, and also of the Artists' Graphic Association, delegations from both of which organizations followed his remains to his grave in Monument Cemetery.

Some of the younger Woodside's sketches are in the collections of the Historical Society, and they show the work of an artist who had more force, greater boldness of conception, and a freer technique than the elder Woodside, but they lack the refined beauty characteristic of the father's work. Young Woodside opened a studio in the Art Union Building, on Chestnut Street above Tenth, and became known as a portrait and historical painter. One of his favorite paintings at that time was "Hagar and Ishmael in the
Caricature in "The Comic Natural History," which erroneously has been identified as John A. Woodside.
Desert," exhibited in 1851. The same year he ex-
hibited, "Marguerite and Faust," and his painting,
"Abou Ben Adhem" was shown at the Academy, in
1854, after his death.

Abraham Woodside, at thirty-two, was regarded
as a personage prominent enough to be included in
Stephens’ *Comic Natural History*, which was pub-
lished in 1851. There he is playfully caricatured as
"Canvas Back Duck," and is shown before an easel
upon which is his picture, Hagar and Ishmael. His
work was neither better nor worse than that of other
figure or historical painters of his period. Had he
lived he might have developed talent beyond that of
his contemporaries, for his sketches indicate that he
was not deficient in fancy.