Yarrow Mamout (formerly known as Billy Lee)
By Charles Willson Peale
Charles Willson Peale was justly proud of his reputation as a painter who could always transmit an accurate likeness to canvas. In grace and insight, where personal feeling for his subject was an element, his work is more uneven. When he was cool toward the sitter, or uninterested, the portrait is often unrevealing, stiff, and even awkward. But when his heart was warm toward his subject he recorded not only the features but his own friendly feeling, with both sympathy and charm. Such a picture is The Society’s “Billy Lee”—a slouching, chuckling old Negro, with a greatcoat wrapped about him and a striped woolen cap on his head.

That Peale almost certainly never painted Billy Lee, and that this picture was erroneously identified as “Washington’s Servant” by the artist’s grandson, Edmund Peale, in 1852, cannot detract from its delightful quality, while its history contains a pleasant passage between two old men that in a measure makes up for the loss of the Washington association.

One of Peale’s particular interests was longevity. With others before and after his time, he believed that mankind should have a mature span of life as great in proportion to the immature period as was the case with other animals. By temperance, calmness, and benevolence of mind, he believed that he could live out a century and
a half, or even two hundred years. He meant to be active and useful all that time, and, in 1818, visited Washington to paint the American celebrities for his Museum gallery and to show that, at the age of seventy-seven, he could finish a better portrait than ever before in his life.

He was accompanied by his wife and by his niece, Anna Claypoole Peale. The time passed in a combination of hard work and social pleasures, for the painter attended most of the presidential affairs, went to parties, and made calls among his acquaintances and relations in the city. The President, members of Congress and of the cabinet, naval heroes and the great General Jackson, were painted. And when Peale, visiting in Georgetown, was told of an old Negro living there who was “healthy, active and very full of fun” at one hundred and forty years, he was naturally eager to include that head also in the group. It was not until January 30, 1819, that Peale went out to Georgetown and began the picture, completing it on the following day.

I spent the whole day, and not only painted a good likeness of him, but also the drapery and background. However, to finish it more completely, I engaged him to set the next day—and early in the morning went to see some of the family who had knowledge of him for many years, and whose ancestors had purchased him from the ship that brought him from Africa. A Mr. Bell in a bank directed me to an ancient widow who had set him free. On making inquiry of this lady about his age, for he had told me he would be 134 years old in next March, I found that he counted 12 moons to the year, and that he was 35 years old when he was first brought to America by Captain Dow. But the widow Bell told me that it was a practice in former times when slaves was brought into the country, they were valued by a committee who estimated their age, and she thought that he had been sold as 14 years or thereabout, yet he might be a little older—That at the death of Mr. Bell he became the property of her husband—that Yarrow was always an industrious, hard-working man and had served them faithfully for many years, and her husband, intending to build a large house in Georgetown, told Yarrow, if he would be very industrious in making the bricks for that house and outhouses, that when he had made all the bricks that he would set him free. Yarrow completed the task, but his master died before he began the house, and the widow, knowing the design of her husband, told Yarrow that as he had performed his duty, that she had made the necessary papers to set him free. Yarrow made a great many bows, thanking his mistress, and said that [if] ever mistress wanted work done, Yarrow would work for her.

After Yarrow obtained his freedom, he worked hard and saved his money until he got $100 which [he] put into an old gentleman’s hands to keep for him. That person died and Yarrow lost his money. However, it did not dispirit him, for he still worked as before and raised another $100, which he put into the care of a young
merchant in Georgetown, and Yarrow said, "Young man no die." But this merchant became bankrupt, and thus Yarrow met a second heavy loss. Yet, not dispirited, he worked hard, and saved a third sum amounting to $200. Some friend to Yarrow advised him to buy bank stock in the Columbia Bank. This advice Yarrow thought good, for he said, "Bank no die." And he was amongst the first who contributed to that bank about 26 years past.

Yarrow owns a house and lots, and is known by most of the inhabitants of Georgetown, and particularly by the boys, who are often teasing him, which he takes in good humor. It appears to me that the good temper of the man has contributed considerably to longevity. Yarrow has been noted for sobriety and a cheerful conduct. He professes to be a Mahometan, and is often seen and heard in the streets singing praises to God—and, conversing with him, he said man is no good unless his religion comes from the heart. He said he never stole one penny in his life—yet he seems delighted to sport with those in company, pretending that he would steal something. The butchers in the market can always find a bit of meat to give to Yarrow. Sometimes he will pretend to steal a piece of meat and put it into the basket of some gentleman, and then say, "Me no tell if you give me half."

The acquaintance of him often banter him about eating bacon and drinking whiskey—but Yarrow says it is no good to eat hog—and drink whiskey is very bad.

I retouched his portrait after his first setting to mark what wrinkles and lines [were needed] to characterize better his portrait.1

The portrait was duly placed in the Museum, and is recorded in the principal source on the collection, the Museum Accession Book, "a negro said to be upwards of 134 years of age now in good health in Georgetown, D. C."2 Perhaps because of a lingering doubt as to Yarrow’s real age, Peale did not publicize this picture as much as his other new works. Its story seems to have been soon forgotten, and its associations only so far recalled as to produce the title "Washington’s Servant," in the catalogues of 1852 and 1854. This picture, No. 262 at the sale of the gallery, was bought by Charles S. Ogden, and by him presented to The Society in 1892.

The portrait itself answers the description of Yarrow, the aged humorist, "active and very full of fun." The strongly Semitic cast of the features ties in with Yarrow’s Mohammedan background. The size of the canvas, also, is identical with that of the other 1818 portraits, two of which, those of John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay, are in The Society’s collection. The Museum Accession Book, the newspaper announcements, and Peale’s own papers, record only one other Negro portrait in the Museum, that of a man whose color had changed from brown to white.

2 Page 97. Now in the possession of THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA.
It is not reasonable to suppose that Peale would have painted Billy Lee in his old age, for, despite faithful service to General Washington, Billy was a drunkard and a cripple in his last years at Mount Vernon. Peale met him once in this period, in 1804, at a time, however, when he had done no painting whatever for a period of six years. While his fellow visitors pored over the relics and memorabilia of Washington, Peale sat down with the old slave in an outbuilding, and talked to him on the subject of health and right living.

*Hebron, Connecticut*  
*Charles Coleman Sellers*