NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

A James Peale Puzzle: Captain Allen McLane's Encounter with British Dragoons

Between 1782 and 1811 Philadelphia artist James Peale is known to have painted a number of historical subjects. Among these is the British ambush of Captain Allen McLane which took place during the Revolutionary War near Philadelphia. That Peale painted two versions of this particular historical scene has been well established; however, primary documentation is scant, and the paintings are not dated or signed. Questions persist. When were the different versions painted, in what order, and for whom? Which one of McLane's daring escapades is actually depicted? How many versions did James Peale actually paint? With my recent discovery of a third version, it is now possible to reconstruct the circumstances and the probable order in which the three paintings were created. First it is necessary to review the extant evidence.

As a descendant of McLane engaged in research on McLane family portraits, I found myself uniquely positioned to revisit these scenes and seek new answers to the persistent questions. Early descendants of Allen McLane had originally owned both of the well-known paintings, but subsequent provenances are confusing and contain conflicting information. This renewed search for answers begins with a letter written by Charles Willson Peale, James Peale's brother, to Allen McLane in 1803:

Your interesting journal received and it shall be in safe keeping until your return to Philadelphia. My brother has made a beginning, and his design tells your adventure with the Horsemen admirably. I wish his finishing may be

1 Published accounts of McLane's numerous exploits during the Revolutionary War can be found in Fred J. Cook, What Manner of Men: Forgotten Heroes of the American Revolution (New York, 1959); Charles Green, Delaware Heritage (Wilmington, 1975); Steven Hill, The Delaware Cincinnati, 1783-1988 (Bryn Mawr, Pa., 1988); and in a carefully referenced chapter of John A. Munroe, Louis McLane, Federalist and Jacksonian (New Brunswick, N.J., 1973).

The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography
Vol. CXXV, No. 4 (October 2001)
EDITH McLANE EDSON

equally as good.
However, I suspect he has placed the scene rather nearer the city than it really
was—yet it is not very material, so that history will be better understood.
It will be well for you to set when you come again to Philada. Such is my
advice, and I shall acquaint my brother so.²

The journal mentioned in the letter contains Allen McLane’s account of
the depicted incident. Just before dawn on June 8, 1778, Captain McLane,
then commander of a partisan cavalry company, was conducting personal
reconnaissance in the vicinity of Philadelphia with two of his troopers. They
were ambushed by British infantry and a troop of dragoons. The infantry
fired on McLane’s accompanying escort who retreated, leaving McLane to
his own resources. Rather than surrender, he decided to make a run for it.
The British commander dispatched two dragoons to chase him down.
Realizing that his mount was faltering, McLane, with his usual dash and
cunning, decided to engage the enemy himself. Writing in the narrative style
of his time, McLane recounted this dramatic scene in the third person he
typically used when referring to himself:

[T]he Captain took to the woods in hopes of gaining the broken ground near
the Old York Road and near Shoemaker’s Mills, which he did. As he entered
the run of water near the slitting mill, the two dragoons was close in his rear,
swearing they would cut him down if he did not surrender. The Captain
retreated with his pistol concealed under his coat. The dragoons followed with
their drawn swords. As the Captain reached the hill after he had passed the
water, he discovered his horse to fail and determined to attack the enemy on the
brow of the hill. He stopped[,] his horse apparently broken down. One of the
dragoons came up on his left, dropped his sword to the strap, the other on the
right throwing his sword hand across the Captain’s right shoulder, dropping it at
the same time to his sword strap. The Captain seized the tassel of the dragoon’s
sword on his right, at the same moment fired into the breast of the dragoon on
his left, and before the dragoon on the right could get clear of his griepe of the
tassel of his sword, the Captain got two strokes with the cock and barrel of the
pistol that brought the dragoon on his right to the pummel of the saddle, and
could have taken off both horses but he grew weak from the loss of blood, his

² Charles Willson Peale to Allen McLane, May 22, 1803, C. W. Peale letter book, 1803, American
Philosophical Society, as quoted in Lilian Miller, ed., The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and
bridle hand being cut by the hilt of the dragoon's sword on his right. The troops came up after the Captain got off."

James Peale's challenge in painting this scene was to freeze the action at the critical moment when McLane had shot the dragoon on his left. With bleeding hand, McLane grappled with the sword of the dragoon on his right while pistol dubbing him. The artist dealt with this challenge differently in each version of the scene he painted, as we will demonstrate.

Although both of the recognized versions share many characteristics, i.e. size, material, subject matter, general setting, and coloring, there are significant differences between them. Revolutionary Subject (fig. 1) was shown in the "Exhibition of Early American Paintings, Miniatures and Silver" at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1925–26 and was also used as an illustration in two narratives: Fred Cook's "Allan McLane, Unknown Hero of the Revolution" which appeared in American Heritage (1956), and John Munroe's Louis McLane: Federalist and Jacksonian (1973).

The actual journal is unlocated. This extract is taken from an uncatalogued account "in the Capt's own hand" found in "Copies of Orders, Letters, Anecdotes, 1774–1829, A McL Papes," in the Society Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP). The same report by McLane can be found in an extract from his journal in the Allen McLane Papers at the New-York Historical Society, vol. 1, #56. The HSP version was chosen here because it matches the transcription headed "John Bull takes a Scotch prize" contained in the Pleasants files (file #3002, Maryland Historical Society) which are discussed later in this article. The story of the ambush is vividly retold in John F. Watson, Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1857), 2:322.

The exhibition catalog lists the painting (no. 45) as loaned by the U.S. National Museum; however, at the time of the exhibition the painting belonged to Mrs. John Cropper (Anne McLane) of Orleans, France, who had apparently left it in the custody of the museum, where it may also have been on exhibit. Anne Cropper inherited the painting from her father, Allan McLane (1823–1891), who was a son of Louis McLane I (see note 1) and a grandson of Captain McLane. Mrs. Cropper bequeathed it to her cousin, Katherine McLane Tiffany Abbott in 1932. Subsequently, it has remained in private hands.

A graphic of Revolutionary Subject can be obtained from the National Archives and Records Administration, on the World Wide Web at http://www.nara.gov/nara/menudstill.html, Revolutions War no. 39. It is listed as "Encounter between Capt. Allan McLane and a British dragoon at Frankfort near Philadelphia. Painting by James Peale. 111-SC-91311." The identification number indicates that the print came from the Army Signal Corps Collection. During the early 1900s the Army Signal Corps had the mission of collecting copies of paintings depicting American military scenes.

Fred Cook, "Allan McLane, Unknown Hero of the Revolution," American Heritage 7 (1956), 74–119; Munroe, Louis McLane: Federalist and Jacksonian, 13f. Although the illustration in the article corresponds to the ambush described in McLane's journal entry of June 8, 1778, Cook cites a McLane journal entry which recounts an ambush of June 16, 1778. Lillian B. Miller, ed., in annotating C. W.
Fig. 1. James Peale, *Revolutionary Subject*, ca. 1803–1811. Oil on canvas, 27 ¼ x 35 ½" (sight) (69.2 x 90.2 cm). Private Collection. Photo, courtesy, Frick Art Reference Library.

*Revolutionary Subject* depicts McLane, in Continental uniform, in the foreground, facing right, riding a dark horse. Two red-coated British dragoons

Peale’s May 22d, 1803, letter in *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and his Family*, vol. 2, pt. 1, 527, falls into the same error. Referring to the ambush painting in progress by James Peale, note 3 states: “On June 16 McLane arranged to meet with an informant near the Rising Sun Tavern on Germantown Road about two and a half miles from Philadelphia city limits. JP’s painting depicts McLane’s own account of the meeting shortly after a British patrol happened by. McLane, who had taken the precaution of placing his own troops a short distance away “galloped to meete the Enemy at the Gate and as he approached them he fired his pistol which wounded the man . . . opening the gate in the face at the same time Calling out to his command to close on the enemy . . .” Aside from obvious discrepancies between this description and the picture, additional documentary evidence that the incident on June 16 is separate from that of June 8th is found in a letter from Lafayette to McLane, dated June 12, 1778, congratulating him on his escape “of the other day” from “two english dragoons.” At the bottom of the letter in McLane’s hand is a note, “See Peale’s painting” (Allen McLane Papers, New-York Historical Society, 1:54).
on chestnut horses are nearby, both on McLane's left. McLane attacks the nearest dragoon with the pistol in his upraised right hand. His wounded left hand, holding the reins, spurts blood. The captain's horse ferociously paws and bites the horse of the enemy. The dragoon at the viewer's far right appears groggy and helpless. In the background, a number of red-coated mounted dragoons approach rapidly. Here we see a country scene with green trees, a sky of yellow shading to blue and a bright sand-colored road, bounded at the far side and at the rear by a post-and-rail fence. Although not clearly visible in reproductions, sketchy outlines of buildings appear in the hazy distance.

James Peale's other well-known painting of the McLane adventure is entitled *Ambush of Captain McLane* (fig. 2). It was acquired by the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, University of Utah, in 1987. The painting was ex-

---

7 *Ambush* was purchased with funds from the George S. and Dolores Doré Eccles Foundation, the Marriner S. Eccles Foundation, and the Friends of the Art Museum. The painting had been offered for
hibited in 1996–97 in Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.,
in the exhibition “The Peale Family: Creation of a Legacy 1770–1870.”
Almost exactly the same size as Revolutionary Subject, it is also an oil on
canvas. Except for a slight shift in perspective, the two paintings have almost
identical backgrounds. However, the two versions are easily distinguishable
by the differences in the positions of McLane’s two antagonists. In Ambush
the captain turns toward the viewer with his face highlighted. All three
central figures are drawn closely together. Now we see one of the British
dragoons on McLane’s right, the other on his left, as they had been
described in the journal. The captain has lowered his bloody left hand,
reining in his horse. He now holds the pistol in what appears to be a more
natural manner in his raised right hand. Smoke from the discharged pistol
rises dramatically against the background trees. The dragoon on the captain’s
left appears to have been mortally wounded, while the one on his right is
groggy.

Each of these two distinct versions has sometimes been dated 1803 and
at other times 1811, which leaves unanswered the question of which came
first. A study of documentary evidence reveals that remarkably little is
actually known about the history of these paintings.

What we can document comes from three primary sources. From C. W.
Peale’s letter of May 22, 1803, we know that James Peale painted, or at least
started, a version of the scene in 1803. From the catalog of the First Annual
Exhibition of The Society of Artists of the United States (1811), we find in
item 511, “Rencounter between Col. Allen McClane and two British
horsemen, which occurred during the revolution near this city, James Peale,
F.S.A.” And from the Peale Museum accession book we learn that a
painting entitled “Historical Picture, representing the attack of Col.
McClain of Wilmington” was accessioned on December 16, 1813. Thus we
have a record of a painting in 1803, one exhibited in 1811, and one
accessioned in 1813. But again questions remain. Was the 1803 painting the
same as that exhibited in 1811? Was the accessioned painting another version? How many paintings are actually documented here?

A review of secondary references only further complicates matters. In discussing the paintings of James Peale, two late nineteenth-century references mention a scene entitled "A Rencontre between Col. Allen McLane and Two British Horsemen." Scharf and Westcott's 1884 History of Philadelphia gives a date of 1811 for the work, adding that "the painting was for many years an ornament of Peale's Museum." Art historian Cuthbert Lee, citing Appleton's Cyclopedia of 1888, gives a date of 1814.

In the absence of conclusive information, modern art historians (including those compiling the FARL files on the two paintings) have relied heavily on the works of Dr. J. Hall Pleasants and Dr. Charles Coleman Sellers. Pleasants devoted his research mainly to Maryland paintings. He was related by marriage to the McLanes and had personal knowledge of their family collections. Sellers, a descendant of the Peales, was privy to much unpublished information about the artists. These two authorities corresponded about the McLane ambush scene, and Pleasants's files reflect information he had received from Sellers. They could not dispute the documented dates of 1803 for the start of one painting, 1811 for an exhibit of one, and 1813 for the Peale Museum accession of one ambush scene.

In his file (no. 3002) on Revolutionary Subject in 1946, Pleasants included copies of documentary evidence provided by Sellers—transcriptions

---

12 Jacob Hall Pleasants, M.D. (1873–1957), a native of Maryland, compiled the Pleasants Files in which are indexed by subject and artist approximately 4,000 paintings located in Maryland during the 1920s and 1930s, together with photographs and a wealth of information. The file is housed at the Maryland Historical Society and is open to bona fide scholars with advance permission.

Charles Coleman Sellers (1903–1980) was the major chronicler of the Peale family's artistic and cultural contributions and biographer of Charles Willson Peale. Sellers was a descendant of C. W. Peale through Peale's daughter, Sophonisba. His father, Horace Wells Sellers, had transcribed and indexed a vast collection of Peale and Sellers family papers in anticipation of publishing the material. This collection and a commitment to the work was inherited by Charles Coleman, who succeeded in fulfilling most of his father's aspirations. Unfortunately, in working with this vast trove of family information and lore, Sellers, who was a librarian and curator, did not always exhibit the historian's passion for verification or the art historian's devotion to solid attribution. While his work contains a wealth of otherwise inaccessible information concerning Peale paintings, and he remains one of the foremost interpreters of the subject, acceptance of this information at face value has led to much confusion.
of both the C. W. Peale 1803 letter to McLane and a contemporary account of the incident headed "John Bull takes a Scotch prize." In addition, Pleasants reported that Sellers had informed him that the Peale Museum had paid $40 for a painting entitled "Rencounter between Col. Allan M'Lane and two British horsemen, which occurred during the revolution, near this city" and which had subsequently been sold as item no. 114 for $32.50 in the auction of Peale's Museum Gallery in 1854. But the auction catalog itself does not indicate which painting of McLane was actually sold as item no. 114. It is listed simply as "Colonel McLane." The copy of the auction catalog in the Independence National Historical Park was annotated by Mary Jane Peale who noted "CWP" as the painter of item 114 along with "M. Thomas $32.50." The attribution to C. W. Peale indicates that rather than one of the James Peale action pictures of McLane, item 114 could in fact have been the individual portrait of Allen McLane by Charles Willson Peale which had been accessioned by the Museum in 1818. Apparently Sellers reached the same conclusion. In 1952 he had commented in his extensive compilation of C. W. Peale's works, "The Museum portrait is not recorded in the catalog sale of the gallery in 1854, but may have been sold...

13 The title "John Bull takes a Scotch Prize" may be a clever play on words, alluding not only to Allen McLane's ethnic origin, but to the fact that what the British got was not quite what they expected. The term "Scotch" may have been used in colonial times to denote something unpleasantly contrary to expectations—taken from Scotch cloth, a cheap, scratchy fabric sold in the colonies as a version of lawn, a fine, thin fabric of cotton or linen. The allusion would have been typical of McLane's style of rhetoric; however, Sellers is the first published source for this title. Pleasants cites Sellers Family Peale Papers, 6:36, as the source of the transcription Sellers had sent to Pleasants. In "Francis Bailey and the Peales," Antiques 66 (1954), 492-93, Sellers states again that a painting he calls "Allen McLane and the British Dragoons" was originally entitled "John Bull takes a Scotch Prize, 8 June, 1778." Miller in her editorial note in Selected Papers, vol. 2, pt. 1, 526, cites the same Sellers article as the source for the "John Bull" title.

14 Peale Museum Gallery of Oil Paintings, Thomas and Sons, Auctioneers (Philadelphia, 1854). There are at least seven copies of the catalog extant: one at Independence National Historic Park, four at the American Philosophical Society, and two at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

15 M. Thomas was the auctioneer.

16 On January 8, 1818, C. W. Peale wrote to his son Rembrandt, as quoted in Selected Papers, 3:557,
"The portraits I have painted and painting are... and Coll. Mcclain Naval Officer at Wilmington and the greatest Partizan we had during the American Revolution & other wars since." The Accession Book of the Peale Museum (p. 91) carries the entry for January 27, 1818: "Portraits painted by C. W. Peale. viz. ... Col. A. McLane." Sellers in Portraits and Miniatures by Charles Willson Peale, vol. 42, pt. 1, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society (Philadelphia, 1952), 138, lists C. W. Peale's portrait as unlocated. He later accepted as the missing portrait the Maryland Historical Society's unsigned portrait of Colonel McLane which it had acquired from the estate of a McLane descendant.
among the unidentified pieces." Yet in 1974 he amended this view in private correspondence: "... tracing back on the ALLEN McLANE, ... The Museum portrait by C. W. Peale is recorded in the catalogue of the 1854 sale, where it was bought by Thomas, a dealer."17

Sellers published further commentary on the James Peale encounter scene. Since many of his notes are not referenced and he never clarifies how many versions he is considering, we are left with a mélange of anecdotal and, at times, inconsistent information. For instance, in his notes on the C. W. Peale 1818 individual portrait of McLane,18 he blurs the motivation for James Peale's scene by alluding to the Peale family's gratitude to McLane for his testimony in the case of the mad wife of Franklin Peale.19 He also mentions a "replica" of James's scene presented to McLane. Later, Sellers adds further confusion by stating that the artist withdrew, apparently, his 1803 picture of McLane's adventure (no title specified) from the Peale Museum.20 And then, in a 1954 article he introduces the John Bull title for the ambush scene, now saying that an original and "replica" descended in the McLane family.21 Finally, in 1975 Sellers decided that James Peale painted McLane's "spirited single-handed brush with a party of British Dragoons" in 1803 for the Museum audience.22

Lillian Miller, the late editor of the Peale Family Papers, and Linda Crocker Simmons, an authority on the oeuvre of James Peale, have had to rely on the same scant references. Both confirm the existence of more than one version (possibly as many as three); however, they cannot say which was painted when, nor for whom. Implying a motive for an additional painting, Miller says that the artist placed one in the museum and presented a

---

17 Sellers to John Munroe, Aug. 25, 1973, in folder "McLane portraits," in Munroe Papers, Special Collections, University of Delaware.
18 Sellers, Portraits and Miniatures, 138.
19 On April 24, 1815, C. W. Peale's nineteen-year-old son, Benjamin Franklin Peale, without his father's consent, married Eliza Greatrake. Almost immediately he realized that she had mental problems. Within a year she had borne him a child and gone to live with her mother, who had her committed to the Pennsylvania Hospital as a "lunatic." Thus began a lengthy process of proving that she was mad at the time of the marriage. An annulment was finally granted on March 22, 1820. See "The Marriage and Divorce of Benjamin Franklin Peale," in Lillian B. Miller, Selected Papers, 4:72–73.
20 Sellers, Portraits and Miniatures, 179. If this is true it adds weight to the conclusion that item no. 114 of Col. McLane in the auction catalog sale was most likely not an encounter picture by James Peale.
"variant" to McLane.

We are given the first hint of an answer when Miller notes three different titles in connection with these two paintings and acknowledges that it is not clear to which painting C. W. Peale refers in his 1803 letter to McLane.23

Unfortunately, James Peale left no papers helpful in this regard and only one of his sketchbooks has come to light.24 However, this sketchbook does contain undated drawings which are clearly related to this historic scene. After a careful study of the drawings, Simmons suggests that "Man with a gun" (fig. 3a) and "Horserace" (fig. 3b) were preparatory drawings for Revolutionary Subject, which would "lend strength to the assumption that it was the first of the two paintings executed." Her analysis helps to determine the circumstances under which they were painted. She believes


24 The only extant James Peale sketchbook is held by the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. With the dating "Sept 1786—of James Peale" this sketchbook contains subjects that can be related to dated or dateable paintings over the course of four decades, from the late 1780s to mid-1820s, indicating that there must have been other sketchbooks which have not survived.
that the sketch of "Man with a gun" "strongly suggests observation of an actual model, possibly the aging captain himself." This would account for C. W. Peale’s suggestion to McLane to "set when you come again to Philada."

Without clarification of the number of paintings involved it has been impossible to construct a convincing scenario of circumstances and dates.

25 Linda C. Simmons, "James Peale: Out of the Shadows," in The Peale Family, Creation of a Legacy, 1770–1870, ed. Lillian B. Miller (New York, 1996), 212. The sketchbook drawings and a full-colored plate of Ambush (dated 1803 or 1811) are illustrated on page 213. Simmons captions the sketchbook drawings "Watercolor over graphite on paper." However, if there is watercolor, it is not discernible. According to the American Philosophical Society, ink wash might be suspected in the area of the hand in Man with a gun.

26 In an earlier chapter of The Peale Family: Creation of a Legacy, 1770–1870, 73, Lillian Miller speculates on the circumstances under which the scene was painted. She is not specific as to which version she refers, but she suggests that "James' work seems to have been an adjunct to his brother's portrait of McLane." However, Charles W. Peale's individual portrait of McLane (now owned by the Maryland Historical Society) was not painted until 1818, and Miller subsequently agreed that she had been led astray—she had based her assumption on C. W. Peale's advice about "setting" in his 1803 letter. Miller to Edson, Nov. 27, 1996.
Two scenes had been recognized, but new evidence brought to light from McLane family sources reveals the existence of a third painting. The inheritance of the paintings in the McLane family is clear. *Ambush*, the Utah version, descended in the family of Captain McLane’s younger son, Dr. Allen McLane. *Revolutionary Subject*, the private collection painting, descended through the older son, Louis I, to Anne McLane Cropper who bequeathed it to her cousin Kate Abbott (Mrs. Gordon Abbott) in 1932. In a letter telling Kate about this bequest, Anne Cropper said that the Louis McLane II family had a replica of the picture which they had bought from the descendants of Dr. Allen McLane.

Here we discover that there must have been another painting, a “replica” that might closely resemble one of the two others or perhaps represent a third distinct version, and that all three of the paintings can be accounted for in the McLane family.

J. Hall Pleasants had known of this third painting through his McLane connections. On December 20, 1946, he wrote to Sellers:

> Thank you so much for the very illuminating notes you sent me on the Allan McLane fight with the British Dragoons. I am delighted to have this information. Since I wrote you, another painting of this episode, apparently identical with that owned by Mrs. Gordon Abbott of Boston, has turned up in Baltimore in the possession of another descendant of McLane, an alert-minded lady of 90 years. She says that she has always heard her painting was a copy of that owned by her cousin, Mrs. Abbott. . . .

Additional corroboration is found in a 1952 memorandum by Frank Skutch, an appraiser for the Mercantile Trust Company, in reference to the estate of Elizabeth Curzon McLane (1856–1952), the “alert-minded lady of 90 years” mentioned by Pleasants:

> “Colonel Allen McLane Fighting Two British Officers”
> The colonel in full regimentals, mounted on a dark brown horse, is engaged with two red-coated British officers also mounted on two chestnut horses. He holds his pistol in one hand and his saber in the other. In the distance a group of mounted soldiers are galloping down a side road. Wood and field background.

---

27 In a file of Sellers’s correspondence regarding the ambush scene, referenced under “McLane,” American Philosophical Society Library.
In summer coloring. Oil on canvas. 28" x 36". In contemporary gold frame. Attributed to James Peale. American School. 1749–1831. According to legend, the colonel used to hang his saber and pistol on either side of this picture.²⁸

Here we have the same scene with another title and a third description. And, while it might seem that Skutch’s description of Colonel Allan McLane Fighting Two British Officers could apply as well to the other known versions, the specific noting of the saber makes it significantly different. In both Revolutionary Subject and Ambush, McLane holds his pistol in one hand and his horse’s reins in the other. Thus McLane Fighting emerges as a third distinct version attributed to James Peale.

But what of this third version? Where did it come from and what became of it? Sadly it was destroyed in the 1980s in a house fire which also took the life of Sophie McLane Brocklebank, its owner. Sophie had inherited the painting from her aunt, the same Elizabeth Curzon McLane mentioned in the Pleasants notes above.²⁹

The destruction of this painting might have ended all hope of deciding whether it was the original version or a copy—except for one of those serendipitous coincidences of history. A black-and-white photograph of a painting of the ambush scene was found in the Maryland home of a McLane family member. Could it possibly be an image of the destroyed painting? Close examination revealed the prominent saber: it could not be either Revolutionary Subject or Ambush. Inspection of the photograph (fig. 4) under electronic microscopes at the conservation laboratory of the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C., established that it was a platinum print, probably made around 1900. Further examination by Andrew Robb of Arlington, Virginia, a conservator of photographs, dated it between 1900 and 1915.

Katharine Milligan McLane Hoffman, the owner of the photograph, found it in the effects of her aunt, Fanny King McLane (1869–1915), daughter of James Latimer McLane (1834–1923). Although it is not possible to establish with certainty for whom the print was made, it was

²⁹ McLane-Fisher Family Papers, Maryland Historical Society, MS #2403, Manson Smith, vice president, Mercantile Trust Co., to Pleasants, May 11, 1956, giving details of the distribution of McLane portraits upon the death of Elizabeth Curzon McLane. (Details of McLane times and places can be found in McLane-Fisher Family Papers.)
probably done for James Latimer who was the youngest son of Louis McLane I (1784–1857). 30

Was the painting in the photograph in fact a copy of a James Peale original? Dr. Ellen Miles, Curator, National Portrait Gallery, the late Dr. Lillian B. Miller, historian of American Culture and editor of the Peale Family Papers, and Linda Crocker Simmons, then Curator of American Art and Research, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., all with expert knowledge of James Peale paintings, examined the print and concurred that the work was consistent with that of James Peale, and there was sufficient reason to attribute the original to him.

Now the three scenes can be compared and a plausible scenario constructed from the evidence available. Several alternative interpretations could be made from the same evidence. For example, Ambush is the only version in which the positioning of the protagonists corresponds to the journal account. This could make it a candidate for being the first version; however, there is no supporting rationale for this view when the three scenes are compared. Details of the photographic reproductions are difficult to see, but close examination strongly indicates the following.

The central composition of McLane Fighting (fig. 4) and Revolutionary Subject (fig. 1) is clearly the same and appears to derive from the sketchbook drawing entitled “Horserace” (fig. 3b). In the absence of other sketchbooks, we presume that “Horserace” was the sketch used by Peale in the creation of the earliest of his versions of the McLane encounter, the one started by 1803. It is then logical to decide that either McLane Fighting or Revolutionary Subject was the earliest rendition and that both preceded Ambush.

We know that McLane’s journal provided the basis for all three versions of the scene, even though the positioning of the protagonists in both McLane Fighting and Revolutionary Subject differs from the journal narrative. In both it appears that the artist is intentionally re-arranging the scene to emphasize the details most important to his client. To show these details he moves one dragoon out of the way (to the viewer’s right) and portrays the clubbed dragoon on McLane’s left rather than his right as

30 Although he had inherited some important McLane paintings from his father, James Latimer McLane did not have the ambush scene. Had he wanted a photographic copy, it could most easily have been made from McLane Fighting which was readily accessible to him in Baltimore, either in the possession of his older brother, Louis II (1819–1905), or Louis II’s daughter, Elizabeth Curzon McLane.
recounted in the journal. The stage is thus cleared for a vivid illustration of the spurting blood and of the way McLane held his pistol. But which of these two versions was actually the first?

Certain elements mark *McLane Fighting* (fig. 4) as the first of Peale’s efforts. In addition to its faithfulness to the “Horserace” sketch, the lack of sophistication and comparatively primitive execution would indicate a first attempt. The setting is not exactly as described by McLane; however, unlike the other versions, this scene depicts a realistic country road with fields and woods. The countryside, rather than the studio, appears to be the source of the large forked tree on the left behind the post-and-rail fence. In this version, the artist gives scant attention to the approaching British which has the effect of simplifying the composition to focus on the main event. With his body silhouetted against the sky, McLane is front and center. The rendering of the bloody hand is more accentuated in *McLane Fighting* and, though more awkward, probably more to McLane’s order. In the far right distance a suggestion of buildings, perhaps a steeple, could account for the “rather nearer the city” comment in the C. W. Peale 1803 letter. Here we see a representation which features the actions McLane must have considered important when he loaned his journal. It is not a picture an artist would paint for an exhibition, but rather one he would paint to specifications prescribed by a patron. The logical conclusion is that this is the 1803 picture commissioned by McLane at a particularly opportune time. Politically adroit and ever pugnacious, he had recently outmaneuvered his opponents to retain his position as Collector of the Port of Wilmington. Now financially secure, he would have acted completely in character in ordering such a detailed commemoration of his heroism, and he truly may have hung it in his home with “his saber and pistol on either side.”

Keeping the same central composition as *McLane Fighting*, the painter executes *Revolutionary Subject* (fig. 1) with more artistry. Pursuing figures add suspense to the action. Keeping the focus on McLane, Peale silhouettes the two central actors. He now recreates exactly the faces of the dragoons and faithfully copies minute details such as the hooves of the horse on the far right. The saber is not shown, but the blood spurting from McLane’s hand is still clearly visible. Given the level of detail in the protagonist group, the

---

31 Appointed to the Collectorship by President Washington in 1797, McLane held the post until his death in 1829. For an analysis of McLane’s political survival in Delaware during the Jefferson years, see Munroe, *Louis McLane: Federalist and Jacksonian*, 27–31.
Fig. 4. Platinum print (ca. 1905–1915) of a destroyed oil on canvas attributed to James Peale, *Colonel Allan McLane Fighting Two British Officers*, ca. 1803, 28 x 36'. Katharine McLane Hoffman.

The artist must have used *McLane Fighting* as a model. Clear evidence that James Peale and the McLanes were closely associated during these years before 1811 makes this a strong possibility. James Peale had painted portraits of McLane's sons, Louis and Allen, in 1809 and had painted a little-known individual portrait of McLane himself in 1811.32 In *Revolutionary Subject* Peale creatively revised the setting to produce an idealized landscape with added decorative elements such as the framing tree and plants in the left foreground. The tree has become more stylized with the fork higher up. It

32 Signed with James Peale's initials and dated 1811, this painting was destroyed in a fire in 1991. How I was able to authenticate its existence and resurrect an image of it from old family snapshots and home movie film is described in "Allen McLane, James Peale, and Henry Bryan Hall: An Artistic Mystery Solved," *Delaware History* 28 (1999–2000), 311–21.
has been moved to the left side of the road and accented with a mullen plant. This additional creativity makes it entirely credible that Revolutionary Subject was the version designed to be worthy of showing in the First Annual Exhibition of the Society of Artists of the United States in 1811 in Philadelphia. There it would have been exhibited with the works of such accomplished contemporaries as Jacob Eicholtz, John Wesley Jarvis, and Thomas Sully, as well as those of James Peale’s nephews, Raphaelle and Rembrandt Peale. Subsequently Captain McLane may have acquired it for his oldest son, Louis I, to whom it can be traced.

Ambush (fig. 2) presents a still more refined artistic statement. The artist now positions the protagonists as they are described in the captain’s journal. The main figures are tightly merged and the group is now impressively highlighted against a dark background—a setting which also dramatizes the pistol smoke. The landscape mirrors that of Revolutionary Subject except that in Ambush the perspective has been manipulated to achieve a more effective composition. The hero’s face has taken on the quality of a true portrait, and Peale has created a compelling visual statement of the intrepid captain’s courage and patriotism. The ideal of patriotism pervaded Peale’s Museum during the War of 1812, and art and artifacts alike evoked the Spirit of ’76. It is logical to assume that Ambush is the version painted for the museum and listed in the accession book in December 1813 as a picture of “the attack of Col. McClain of Wilmington.” It has become a “teaching” piece for the public’s edification rather than a private commission for McLane. If, as Sellers wrote, the museum painting was “later withdrawn by the artist” it could also eventually have been acquired from Peale by McLane or one of his sons. As mentioned above, it has been traced back to the second son, Dr. Allen McLane.

Discovery of the third version makes it possible to compare the three

James Peale used the same mullen with a decorative tree in his ca. 1790 painting Pleasure Party by a Mill; see pl. 95, The Peale Family: Creation of a Legacy, 208.

FARL file 114-1,k dates Ambush ca. 1818. There is no evidence supporting this late date unless one interprets Sellers’s remarks in Portraits and Miniatures by Charles Willson Peale, 138, as suggesting that a depiction of the ambush incident by James Peale was painted in gratitude to McLane for his testimony in the mad wife affair (i.e., after 1815).

FARL cites the catalog of the exhibition Kaleidoscope of American Painting, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” Dec. 2, 1977-Jan. 22, 1978, William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, as the basis for the 1818 date. This date was presumably given the Nelson Gallery by the Allan McLane Hurst family when it lent Ambush for the exhibition.
paintings, to postulate the order in which they were painted, and to construct a plausible chronicle of when and why they were painted. My research suggests that the first scene to be painted was *McLane Fighting*, the lost painting represented in the photographic print owned by Katharine McLane Hoffmann. This assumes that *McLane Fighting* would have been the depiction referred to in C. W. Peale's 1803 letter. It is reasonable to suppose that it was painted to McLane's order, that McLane liked it and kept it. The second version, *Revolutionary Subject* (fig. 1), possibly ultimately destined for McLane, was most likely the painting exhibited in Philadelphia in 1811. And, finally, although it too found its way to the McLane family, the third version, completed by the end of 1813, would have been *Ambush* (fig. 2), created for the Peale Museum and presently owned by the University of Utah.

In the absence of additional corroborating evidence these conclusions must remain speculative. However, the interpretation is logically derived from examination of the three scenes and the data of record. The discovery and documentation of the third version have provided a new perspective from which to study these historic paintings and challenge further investigation.

*Annapolis, Maryland* 

*EDITH McLANE EDSON*