

PORTRAIT SKETCH OF UNKNOWN MAN BY FRANCIS ALEXANDER

OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND

*A Quarterly Magazine Devoted to the Ancient Buildings,
Household Furnishings, Domestic Arts, Manners and Customs,
and Minor Antiquities of the New England People*

BULLETIN OF THE SOCIETY FOR THE PRESERVATION OF NEW ENGLAND ANTIQUITIES

Volume LVI, No. 2

October-December 1965

Serial No. 202

Further Notes on Francis Alexander

By CATHARINE W. PIERCE

ALTHOUGH many thousands of eyes followed Jacqueline Kennedy's television tour of the White House several years ago, it is probable that only a few saw the notice of a gift to further Mrs. Kennedy's plan to re-decorate the home of presidents. And surely most of those who did read the notice with interest were Bostonians. The notice appearing in *The New York Times* of December 9, 1962, announced that a portrait of President Van Buren by Francis Alexander had been given to the White House by the Mayflower Society. Many portraits by Alexander have been known in Boston and vicinity. After an article on him appeared in OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND (Autumn, 1953), new paintings were reported to the writer. A sketchbook by Alexander and a small volume of a romance by his daughter with ninety illustrations by the father became the property of the writer, a most generous gift from Miss Emily Hallowell of West Medford. It is to bring up-to-date the list of Alexander's works and to describe the two books, unknown till now, that these further notes are written.

The sketchbook (13¾ x 9½ inches, bound in cream paper with vellum spine) may be said to mark the end of Alexander's long period of struggle to advance in an art for which he had had little training. Born in Connecticut in 1800 on a small farm in Killingly, he first essayed to represent in color the fish he had caught. Next, the neighbors paid a dollar or two for portraits (some painted on bed ticking). He acquired a patroness in Providence after having earned enough to get a little instruction in New York, and by 1825 was working in Boston. There he became known, his prices increased and after building a new house for his parents in Killingly he was able to go abroad in 1831 for almost two years of study. After 1833, when he returned to Boston, he was in a more assured place.

The first entry in his new sketchbook reads: "May 28, 1833. Here I sit (waiting for the Vettura to overtake me)—by the Roadside 33 miles from Firenze (Perugia Road) fifth day from Rome. It is one of the most heavenly mornings that I ever experienced in any country. The distant mountains never looked more

softly blue nor the nearer objects more, more —. There is a shepardess tending her flock at a short distance.”

If Alexander thought to combine diary and his sketches in the book, he failed to do so. The only other notes written in were these: Livorno 12 June, 1833, Genova 21st June 1833, Chambéry; and under the first entry: “Torino 25th June 1833. People of all descriptions from the

cation of his nationality or name. Alexander had a fair success in getting the character by concentrating on the head, the summary treatment of the clothes, the lively motion of the neck scarf. The drawing of the girls’ heads (Fig. 1) has the same qualities but, not as finished, it does not give contrast of character. The girls could be but two models viewed from different points, or sisters.



FIG. 1. SKETCH OF GIRLS’ HEADS BY FRANCIS ALEXANDER

most beautiful to the most ugly and deformed. The city itself is magnificent—for an *inland* city—it is surrounded by Mts. and scenery of various descriptions—yet *all* beautiful.”

There are many blank pages in the book, landscapes begun only, quick sketches of various people, a few finished drawings but without names of subjects or places where drawn. The best of the men’s portraits is reproduced here (Frontispiece), a handsome man with no indi-

The ship which brought Alexander home sailed from Southampton which he had reached via the Mont Cenis pass, Paris and London. The crossing produced more sketches. Alexander must have been a good sailor for he was able to record the despair of fellow passengers during a storm on August third. His humor (one hopes) and not reality shows a man who as a “last resort” has hanged himself (Fig. 2). Other days show calmer models: “Crossing the Atlantic in a Tub from



FIG. 2. SKETCHES ON SHIPBOARD BY FRANCIS ALEXANDER, DATED 1833

the fact" (Fig. 3), and a gentleman posing on a stool (Fig. 4).

Three years after his return to Boston, in 1836, Alexander married Lucia Gray Swett, granddaughter of one of the richest men in America. Her portrait he had painted when she had been in Florence

books by hand, decorating the pages with her own illustrations and floral dividers. Her feeling for flowers and plants was very sensitive and charming.

The little book for which Alexander did ninety pen illustrations bears on the title page "Hannah Blackstone | A story



FIG. 3. SKETCH ON SHIPBOARD BY FRANCIS ALEXANDER

in 1832. Their only child, Esther Frances, was born in 1837.

In 1853 the three Alexanders moved from Boston to Italy and from then on lived in Florence all their lives with only one visit to America in 1868-1869. The father gave up his profession of painting and taught his daughter to draw. She developed a style of her own in writing

in three chapters, | with illustrations by | Francis Alexander Esq | The ballad composed by Miss E. F. Alexander | And affectionately dedicated | by both | to Mrs. L. G. Alexander." The book, 4 x 5½ inches, is bound in marbled paper with brown leather corners and spine. It is entirely written by hand and, as there are no watermarks or dates in the book,



FIG. 4. PORTRAIT SKETCH OF UNKNOWN MAN BY FRANCIS ALEXANDER

it is hard to tell when it was composed. The best opinion seems to agree that the book itself could be of English manufacture for sale in Italy. It is known that Fanny, as she was called by the family, did not write a cursive hand but printed until she went to Italy where a priest taught her to write. To date this story of "Hannah Blackstone" one should be an expert graphologist and by comparing the writing of her books of various dates place this one. Probably it is earlier than "La Sorellaccia" of 1877 as there is less freedom in the handling of the very long serifs of the letters.

Nor does the story help in dating it in Fanny's life. It is very naïve, all in verse and juvenile, but that does not prove it to be the work of a young girl for Fanny remained such to the end of her eighty-two years, overprotected by a dominating mother, with Victorian ideas of propriety enhanced by the Puritan antecedents of the family. These were the qualities which later in life recommended her and her drawings to John Ruskin who ever connected art with morals. He bought her drawings for use in his lectures at Oxford, called her his little sister Francesca and made her name known to a larger circle than just those in Florence and Boston.

The tale begins with Hannah Blackstone living with the parents of her husband Martin the fifth spring since he left to hunt gold in California. No word has been received but Hannah still hopes for his return. Then an old man appears to bring her a message—that Martin had found gold, had spent it freely with rough companions and had been drowned with them while *fishing on the Sabbath day*. Hannah had been prepared to hear of his death but the manner of it is too terrible and she says to the old man: "Have you forgot that I have known | My Martin

all his life | For twenty years his friend I was | And then became his wife. | And now you ask that I | believe this tale of pain and sin | Unless I knew his heart was right | His wife I had not been." Then the old man gives her a worn purse with gold in it which she recognizes as one Martin had had since boyhood and she is forced to accept the story the old man has brought. She gives back the purse and gold to him, extracting a promise of silence from him and sends him away. She is bowed down with the thought of Martin's death and the secret shame of his behavior.

Soon Stephen May, a friend of Martin's, finding she no longer thought Martin alive, proposes marriage to her but she refuses. She visits the sick, goes to church, bears the secret sorrow alone and as summer wanes she fails, and dies as the leaves are falling. She is much beloved in the town and crowds come to the funeral at the Blackstone house. And here, just before the burial, her husband Martin appears. He had sent letters and gold twice a year but they had not been received and when he finds his wife dead he wishes he had never left home.

Among the crowd he sees Stephen May and tells him of having sat in Panama on his way home with a dying man who repented of crimes among which was the deceiving of a young woman as to her husband's death and naming Hannah who was desired by Stephen May as his wife. After the man died Martin found his own old leather purse in the man's effects which Stephen May had begged of him as a keepsake on Martin's last day at home five years ago. The two men had been lifelong friends and Stephen had known the purse since childhood. Stephen May acts as though he did not hear, turns and leaves never to be seen



FIG. 5. PEN AND INK ILLUSTRATION BY FRANCIS ALEXANDER FOR THE NARRATIVE, "HANNAH BLACKSTONE," WRITTEN BY HIS DAUGHTER

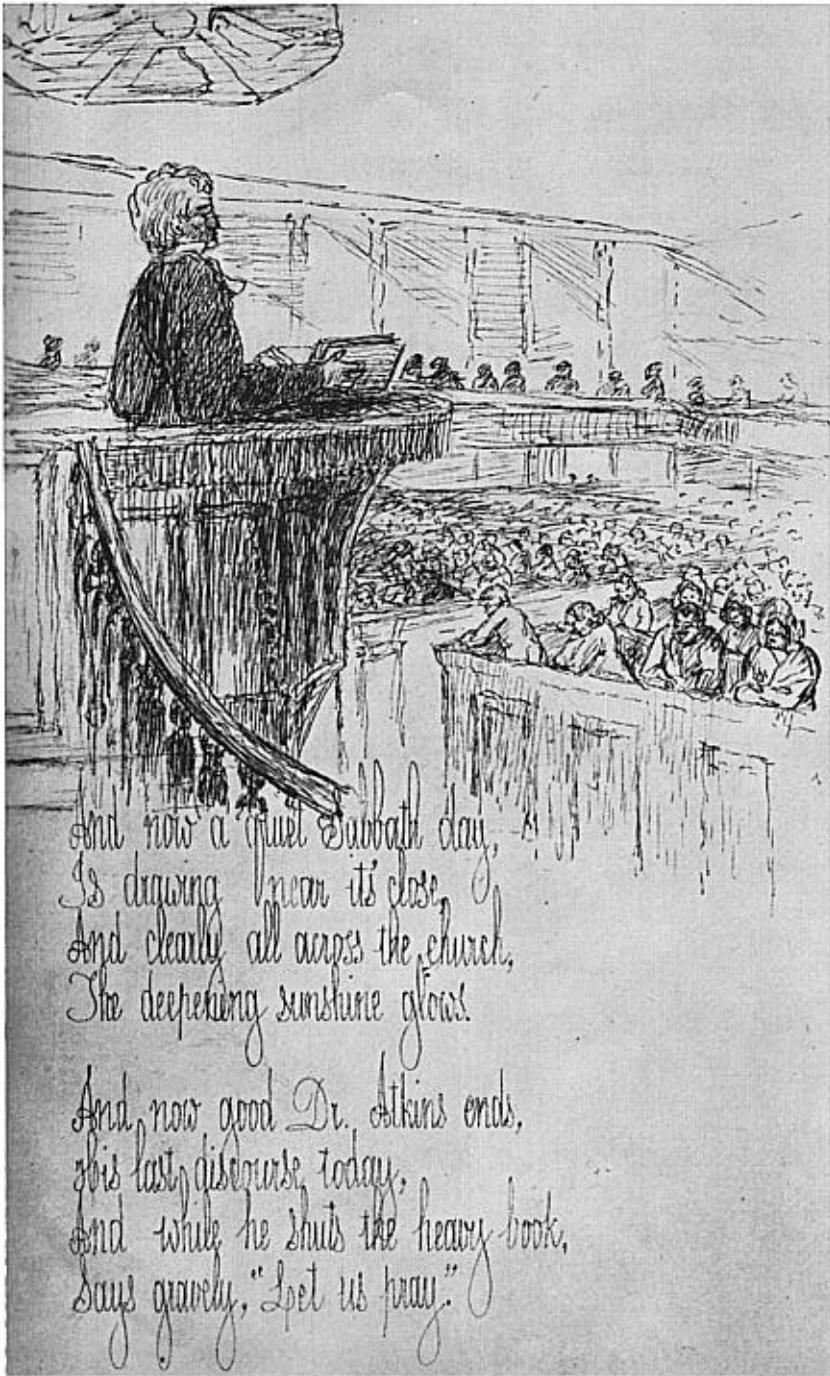


FIG. 6. PEN AND INK ILLUSTRATION BY FRANCIS ALEXANDER FOR THE NARRATIVE, "HANNAH BLACKSTONE," WRITTEN BY HIS DAUGHTER

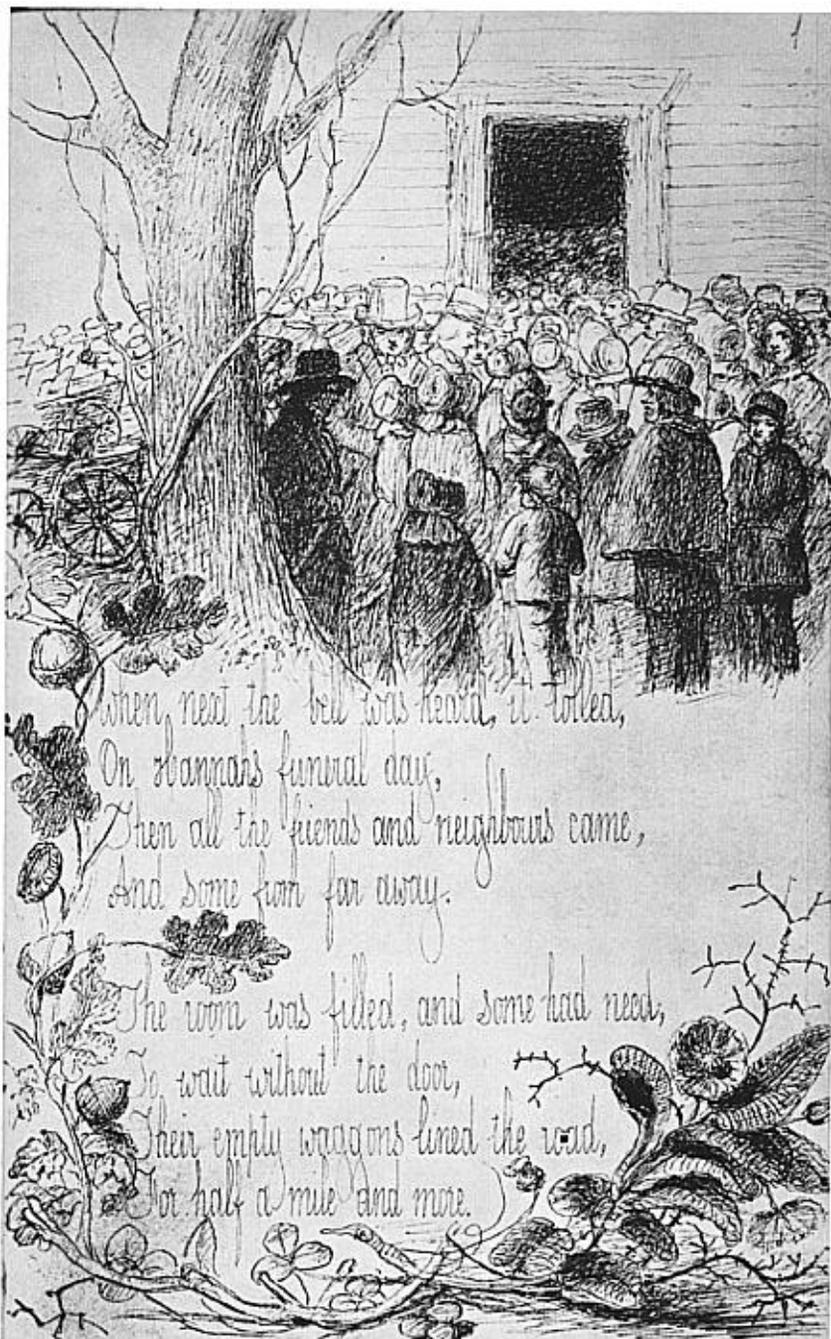


FIG. 7. PEN AND INK ILLUSTRATION BY FRANCIS ALEXANDER FOR THE NARRATIVE, "HANNAH BLACKSTONE," WRITTEN BY HIS DAUGHTER

again in the village. Martin and his parents are left to mourn the saintly Hannah.

The three drawings chosen from the ninety in this book can give no idea of the variety of subjects treated. Francis Alexander must have been hard put to it not to repeat the same scene on pages where no incident occurs and the same people, for instance, continue a conversation for several pages. There is melodrama in some (Hannah posed with eyes rolled heavenwards), the macabre (Hannah in her coffin, face showing), and a definite pleasure in nature, the use of floral borders, ponds with ducks, lilies, the countryside at sunset.

The scene of little Martin buying the purse at a shop is among the best (Fig. 5). It shows the setting of a counter and row on row of tiny drawers for the stock. The shopkeeper in shawl and bonnet accepts the money from Martin who wears a long smock over long trousers and a visored cap on his hair that falls to his shoulders. The purse, though described

in the story as leather, seems here to be a knit one such as were popular in the mid-nineteenth century.

The father probably helped not only with the illustrations but certainly supplied the name of the minister, Dr. Atkins, which was the name of a pastor in Alexander's boyhood home in Connecticut. The view of the village meetinghouse (Fig. 6) is undoubtedly recalled from the same memories, as well as the box pews, the high pulpit, the sounding board.

The last drawing shown, of the crowd at Hannah's funeral before the Blackstone house, has a floral border (Fig. 7). Each of the many borders is appropriate to the spirit of the page, as here the somber oak leaves and acorns, the thorny branch and an unknown flower.

To these two books and the list of works given in OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND in the Autumn of 1953 may now be added the following paintings by Francis Alexander, all in oil unless otherwise noted:

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Washington. White House. *President Martin Van Buren.*
Mrs. John Sylvester. *Marguerite Champlin Jones.* Pastel.

FLORIDA

St. Augustine. Eugene Harrington. *Captain G. Harrington.* Pastel, signed and dated 1851.

MASSACHUSETTS

Arlington. Miss Helen Cook. *Self-portrait.*
Boston. Mrs. Murray Potter. *Solomon Lincoln.*
Medical Library. *John Dixwell.*
George Hayward.
Brookline. Mr. Charles B. Blanchard. *Mrs. Debby Lord Seaver (1769-1851).*
Groton. Mrs. R. Danielson. *Mr. George Danielson.*
Mrs. George Danielson.
Lowell. St. Anne's Church. *Dr. Theodore Edson.*
Manchester. Miss Alice Thorndike. *David Greenough.*
Marblehead. Miss M. G. Harrington. *Anita Powel Jones.* Pastel.
Sherborn. Mrs. H. M. Channing. *Edmund Burke (after Reynolds).*
Southbridge. Jacob Edwards Library. *Landscape of Hamilton Woolen Mills. 1822?*
Sturbridge. Old Sturbridge Village. *Salem Towne, Sr.*
Salem Towne, Jr. Signed and dated 1820.
Daniel F. Newell. 1823.