Vital Statistics: American Folk Drawings and Watercolors from a Private Collection
Vital Statistics: American Folk Drawings and Watercolors from a Private Collection

ESSAY BY PHILIP M. ISAACSON H’83

Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine 1986
This catalogue accompanies an exhibition of the same name at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art from September 11 to November 9, 1986.

Cover: Details adapted from catalogue no. 12, *True Lover's Knot*

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There is an irony to this collection of American folk drawings. None of these works was intended by the artist or patron to be collected, much less publicly exhibited. They do not pretend to be high art. Yet, it is that very lack of pretense that makes these drawings so compelling. In them, the artist is employed in the embroidery of facts: dates of births, marriages, and deaths; records of property and ownership. The simple data of life are given grace and dignity.

In his catalogue essay, Philip M. Isaacson h’83, a longtime friend of the museum and an avid student of American folk art, rightly stresses the universal character of folk idioms. What was once boasted of as indigenously American should properly be regarded as no more than a dialect of a global language. Too often, misplaced patriotism clouds our understanding of art. We thank Mr. Isaacson for clearing the air.

*Vital Statistics: American Folk Drawings and Watercolors from a Private Collection* is presented at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art through the friendship and generosity of lenders who have chosen to remain anonymous. Their collection, one of the finest of its kind in the country, has a lyrical innocence and special beauty that is the charm of folk art. We deeply appreciate their willingness to share it with us.

I wish also to express my gratitude to Katharine J. Watson, director of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art; to Stephen Harvard, designer of the catalogue; to Susan L. Ransom, editor of the text; and to Lucie G. Teegarden, associate director of public relations and publications, who supervised production of the catalogue. The entire museum staff contributed to the success of this project. I thank them all.

John W. Coffey II
Curator of Collections
12. Artist unknown  True Lover’s Knot
Vital Statistics

It would be pleasant to be able to say that these late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century watercolors and drawings are spontaneous expressions of the American spirit. And it would be easy to do so. While enough has been written about American folk art to support such a notion, most of it is romantic nonsense. Speaking softly of their time, these gentle works are not truly indigenous to our land. They didn’t spring full-blown from a young national psyche. Their naïveté and optimism are more a compliment to an age than to a people. It would be more accurate to say that most are non-academic forms, universally applied. Although we have adopted them in support of our notion of simpler and perhaps happier national times, they are less ours than we would like them to be. Some among them may indeed prove to be folk art when that term is at last defined, but they will remain less than entirely American.

I know of an enchanting work—mystical, messianic—that many shrewd observers have seen as a Shaker gift drawing, a record of a spiritual vision made by a Shaker sister in Mount Lebanon, New York, in, say, 1845. Appraised more soberly, it must surely be English. But for the Union Jack, exact counterparts of American family records came from English hands in the early 1800s, and a French schoolboy of the period created a copybook which, except for language, could have come from Newburyport, Massachusetts. The true lover’s knot in this collection (no. 12) is an Elizabethan form, and those works with complex Masonic imagery have English parentage. In Paris, I once saw a mourning picture which at first I took to be a school exercise, common to the 1830s, memorializing Washington. On inspection, it proved to commemorate the death of Napoleon. And in Seville, at the Indies Archives, there are illuminated surveys and plans for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century towns in Peru that might have graced the records of the early proprietors of Falmouth or Prout’s Neck, Maine. If this collection is evidence of a gentle innocence, then we must share that quality with other peoples. The openness, optimism, and naïve expectancy of a young nation are on its sheets, but those virtues are more universal than we are accustomed to allowing.

For the most part, the works in the collection, through family statistics, record the passage of time. In them you will find the markings of marriages, births, and ultimately, deaths. While styles vary, there are certain general types, the most common of which is the family record. It is a full account of family events—happy and dolorous—and may span a century or more. It is not unusual to find a record that notes both a birth in the eighteenth century and a death, in succeeding generations, in the twentieth century. The notion of collecting family records is quite new. Their closest relatives, the Pennsylvania frakturs, have been admired for generations. Frakturs, with their easy suavity, ingratiate themselves quickly. When they leave the hand of their maker, they are complete.
41. Artist unknown  Zechariah Wood–Sally Bacon Family Record
They record a single event, a birth, a baptism, perhaps the ownership of a holy book. There is nothing to be added, and hence each is visually homogeneous.

New England family records, on the other hand, were produced as a kind of blank form. The maker noted past events and provided blanks for those yet to occur. Filling in was done over the years by various hands—and pens—with mixed aesthetic results. Because they do not have the immediacy—the quick decorative impact—of the Pennsylvania watercolors, New England family records were late in attracting attention. Recently, however, the New England records, for all of their vagaries and sloppy moments, have come to be admired for their elemental harmony and tranquil measure. Their local innocence and ordered clarity, once observed, are captivating. Birth, marriage, and death records do exist as single documents, but they are much less common. Because they mark one event, like Pennsylvania work, they were complete when produced and are free of latter-day distractions.

The remainder of this collection is bewildering in its variety. It deals not with family landmarks, but with the social and academic concerns of the first third of the last century. There are valentines and their near-relatives, true lover’s knots. There are bookplates, calligraphy exercises, trade cards, sampler facsimiles, presentation pieces, and survey maps. There are name sheets, copybook pages, and memorials. There is even a plan entitled The Funeral Procession of the American Hero George Washington (no. 17). Not included in this collection, but within its genre, are rewards of merit, decorated music sheets, metamorphoses, schoolgirl maps (as they are called), and pious mottoes. There is also an almost uncatalogable body of work relating to the life, death, and apotheosis of George Washington. It is eloquent evidence of his place in the hearts of his countrymen.

Certain themes cut across the works in this collection. Masonry is the most obvious. There is a family record embellished with Masonic devices, a birth record of a Mason-to-be, and an award to a retiring militiaman which has various Masonic references. The acrostic is another popular device found in the works. It appears, among other places, in birth records and presentation pieces. The display of the alphabet as a graphic convention often appears, as do hearts, birds, urns, willows, and portraits. Some of the latter are specific to an event, for example, a willow on a mourning sheet, but others are sprinkled liberally around with more regard for decorative effect than for relevance. The Winthrop Eager Acrostic (no. 23) is, logically, illuminated by a fetchingly fierce portrait of Sargent Eager, but for no obvious reason Calligraphy Examples (no. 37), by Araunah Judd, bears a pair of unidentified figures.

Decorative themes are sometimes entirely idiosyncratic. There are winged heads taken from gravestones, portions of the great seals of our states, and the unique forms of the painter of the Zechariah Wood–Sally Bacon Family Record (no. 41). That unknown artist flourished in Vermont about 1837 and left behind him a graphic system that merges the vision of William Blake with an anticipation of Art Nouveau. It’s a bizarre and remarkable achievement.
On February, my Valentine when every one my choice
the Fourteenth day, I drew, did choose his love itself on you.

A sure as grapes grow on the vine,
I drew you for my Valentine.
The love was cast and I drew,
A fortune granted to be you.

Psst compliments I never could use.
Since that my offer you refuse.
Pry for my boldness the excuse.

As a friend, your love I return again,
To me do not disdain your kind acceptance.
Dare me respect,

As my Valentine,

Hanc ime vertat
As to period, the watercolors range from Moses Banks’s 1770 *A Plan of Division* of Prout’s Neck, Maine (no. 2), to the 1834 *Adoniram J. Hogan–Jane H. Denham Family Record* (no. 44) by the Heart and Hand Artist. The makers, as they are sometimes called, are school children, adult amateurs, and professionals. The maker known as “J.W.” who produced the *James Wilson–Kezia Young Family Record* (no. 22) of 1811 was possibly James Wilson of Harpswell, Maine. He must have been a part-time professional, as was Moses Connor of New Hampshire, the artist of the *Theodore Gilman–Mehitabel Richards Family Record* (no. 27) of 1813. Nathaniel D. Gould, the maker of his trade card (no. 39), was a writing master in Concord, New Hampshire, in 1834 and in Brooklyn, New York, in 1835. William Saville was a professional on the Massachusetts North Shore in the very early nineteenth century. He is represented here by the *Captain Isaac Harding Memorial* (no. 16) of 1801.

The most elusive of the professionals is the Heart and Hand Artist. This maker flourished briefly, from about 1850 to 1855, at a time when the family record tradition was almost closed. Lithographic blanks available from Kellogg in Hartford, Connecticut, and from Currier in New York at small cost were fatal competition. Yet, the Heart and Hand Artist produced what, for the genre, is a sizable body of work and did so with a crisp, linear hand (nos. 43, 44). Such contemporaries as existed had succumbed to the romantic excesses of the age while the Heart and Hand master worked in a manner that would have been comfortable to Moses Connor, the master’s predecessor by at least thirty years.

This, then, is a small accumulation of American watercolors and simple drawings taken from or sharing in the tradition of non-academic European painting, produced by school children as exercises, or by near-professionals to memorialize a range of occasions. Whether they are to be regarded as folk art is not a pressing concern. Of more importance and delight is their evocation of a fresh, optimistic time in our history. The frankness and immediacy of these works makes the spirit of that time more real than the more elaborate efforts of the period’s best painters.
7. Thomas M. Clark
“The Pen”
(calligraphy exercise)

8. Artist unknown
Samuel Shaw–Susan Page
Family Record
## Works in the Exhibition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <em>Anthony and Hannah Mors Family Record</em>, circa 1769</td>
<td>Artist unknown</td>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>Watercolor and ink on paper. 35.5 × 28.5 cm (14 × 11 1/4 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <em>A Plan of Division</em>, 1770</td>
<td>Moses Banks</td>
<td>Scarborough, Maine</td>
<td>Watercolor and ink on paper. 30.8 × 38.9 cm (12 1/8 × 15 1/16 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <em>John Fletcher—Patience Wonson Family Record</em>, 1783</td>
<td>Artist unknown</td>
<td>Newburyport, Massachusetts</td>
<td>Colored inks on paper. 17.8 × 21.5 cm (7 × 8 7/16 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <em>Commerce</em> (calligraphy exercise), 1786</td>
<td>Henry G. Jenks</td>
<td>Boston, Massachusetts</td>
<td>Colored inks on paper. Sight: 32.3 × 19.5 cm (12 1/8 × 7 1/16 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. <em>“The Pen”</em> (calligraphy exercise), 1787</td>
<td>Thomas M. Clark</td>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>Ink on paper. 14.5 × 17.0 cm (5 1/16 × 6 1/16 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. <em>Samuel Shaw—Susan Page Family Record</em>, circa 1787 (?)</td>
<td>Artist unknown</td>
<td>Minot, Maine</td>
<td>Watercolor and ink on paper. Sight: 28.3 × 35.1 cm (11 1/16 × 13 1/16 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. <em>Malachi Brown—William Brown Memorial</em>, 1789</td>
<td>Artist unknown</td>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>Ink on paper. 35.0 × 29.7 cm (13 3/4 × 11 1/16 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. <em>Simon and Sarah Tenney Bookplate</em>, 1794</td>
<td>Artist unknown</td>
<td>Sutton, Massachusetts</td>
<td>Colored inks on paper. 19.2 × 14.8 cm (7 7/16 × 5 13/16 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. <em>True Lover’s Knot</em>, circa 1795</td>
<td>Artist unknown</td>
<td>New York/Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Watercolor and ink on paper. 40.2 × 37.3 cm (15 13/16 × 14 11/16 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. <em>“T.H.” Bookplate</em>, 1799</td>
<td>Thomas Hadley</td>
<td>Woburn, Massachusetts</td>
<td>Ink on paper. 18.5 × 15.5 cm (7 1/4 × 6 1/16 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. <em>Jacob Chamberlain, Jr.—Mary Stockbridge Family Record</em>, 1800</td>
<td>Artist unknown</td>
<td>Alton, New Hampshire</td>
<td>Watercolor and ink on paper. 37.8 × 30.5 cm (14 7/8 × 12 in.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
11. Daniel Tenney, Jr.
Simon and Sarah
Tenney Bookplate

37. Araunah Judd
Calligraphy Examples
with Portraits
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Artist, Location &amp; Date</th>
<th>Medium &amp; Measurements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td><em>On Washington</em> (copybook page), 1801</td>
<td>Betsy Lewis, Dorchester (Boston), Massachusetts</td>
<td>Watercolor and ink on paper 18.5 x 15.3 cm (7 1/16 x 6 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td><em>Captain Isaac Harding Memorial</em>, 1801</td>
<td>William Saville, Gloucester, Massachusetts</td>
<td>Watercolor and ink on paper 38.8 x 30.4 cm (14 1/8 x 12 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td><em>The Funeral Procession of the American Hero George Washington</em>, 1801</td>
<td>Eliiah Metcalf, Franklin, Massachusetts</td>
<td>Ink on paper 33.5 x 19.9 cm (13 3/16 x 7 13/16 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td><em>Gilman Folsom Birth Record</em>, circa 1805</td>
<td>Artist unknown, Epping, New Hampshire</td>
<td>Colored inks on paper 18.7 x 34.0 cm (7 3/8 x 13 3/8 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td><em>Mary Roberhaus Memorial</em>, circa 1808</td>
<td>Artist unknown, Wrentham, Massachusetts</td>
<td>Ink on cut paper, backed with silk 16.8 x 17.3 cm (6 5/8 x 6 13/16 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td><em>Warren Nixon Bookplate</em>, 1808</td>
<td>Warren Nixon, Framingham, Massachusetts</td>
<td>Ink on paper 8.2 x 12.9 cm (3 3/16 x 5 1/16 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td><em>George Taylor Memorial</em>, circa 1808</td>
<td>William Murray, New York State (?)</td>
<td>Watercolor and ink on paper 23.0 x 18.0 cm (9 1/16 x 7 1/16 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td><em>James Wilson–Kezia Young Family Record</em>, 1811</td>
<td>“J.W.” (James Wilson?) Harpstown, Maine</td>
<td>Watercolor and ink on paper 37.8 x 30.1 cm (14 7/8 x 11 7/8 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td><em>Winthrop Eager Acrostic (Masonic)</em>, 1811</td>
<td>H. Wilcox, Connecticut</td>
<td>Watercolor and ink on paper 46.0 x 30.3 cm (18 1/8 x 11 15/16 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td><em>Peltiah Marr–Sarah Tylar Family Record</em>, circa 1811</td>
<td>Artist unknown, Scarborough, Maine</td>
<td>Watercolor and ink on paper 36.3 x 28.2 cm (14 5/16 x 11 1/8 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td><em>Anna Sawtell Birth Record</em>, 1812</td>
<td>Abel Wheeler, Boston, Massachusetts</td>
<td>Ink on paper 22.5 x 17.8 cm (8 7/8 x 7 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td><em>Mercy Abbot Birth Record</em>, 1813</td>
<td>Artist unknown, Sanford, Maine</td>
<td>Ink on paper 14.1 x 14.4 cm (5 1/16 x 5 1/16 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td><em>Theodore Gilman–Mehitabel Richards Family Record</em>, 1813</td>
<td>Moses Connor, New Hampshire</td>
<td>Watercolor and ink on paper 19.4 x 29.0 cm (7 5/8 x 11 7/16 in.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td><em>Jacob Deyo–Ruth Smith Family Record</em>, circa 1813</td>
<td>Artist unknown, Connecticut</td>
<td>Watercolor and ink on paper 34.7 x 24.3 cm (13 11/16 x 9 16 in.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
29 Mary Deering Bookplate, circa 1815
Watercolor and ink on paper
7.3 × 11.5 cm (2 7/8 × 4 1/2 in.)

“J.W.” (James Wilson ?)
Bartlett, New Hampshire

30 Obed Hall—Eliza Fox Family Record, 1817
Watercolor and ink on paper
39.8 × 33.2 cm (15 3/8 × 13 1/16 in.)

31 Jabez A. Amsbury Bookplate, 1818
Watercolor and ink on paper
6.3 × 15.6 cm (2 7/16 × 6 1/8 in.)

32 Presentation to Miss Polly J. Eames, 1818
Watercolor and ink on cut paper, backed with silk
15.7 × 19.1 cm (6 3/16 × 7 1/2 in.)

Moses Connor
New Hampshire

33 Jonathan Chase—Patience Peasley Family Record, circa 1818
Watercolor and ink on paper
30.4 × 25.3 cm (12 × 9 15/16 in.)

Warren Nixon
Framingham, Massachusetts

34 Warren Nixon Bookplate, 1818
Colored inks on paper
4.1 × 7.9 cm (1 1/8 × 3 1/16 in.)

35 Salome Rice Bookplate, 1818
Colored inks on paper
7.6 × 9.8 cm (2 15/16 × 3 13/16 in.)

36 Another example of no. 35.

37 Calligraphy Examples with Portraits, 1822
Watercolor and colored ink on paper
32.9 × 40.6 cm (12 15/16 × 16 in.)

38 Simeon Burnham—Lucy Smith Family Record, circa 1830
Watercolor and ink on paper
20.2 × 25.3 cm (7 15/16 × 9 15/16 in.)

Nathaniel Duren Gould (1781–1864)
Concord, New Hampshire (obverse),
Brooklyn, New York (reverse)

39 Nathaniel D. Gould Trade Cards, 1834 (obverse),
1835 (reverse)
Two cards: sepia and black ink on paper
Sight: 8.7 × 8.7 cm (3 7/16 × 3 7/16 in.)

Ebenezer Legrow
Cumberland, Maine

40 Valentine, circa 1835
Watercolor and ink on paper
Sight: 30.5 × 36.2 cm (12 × 14 1/4 in.)

41 Zechariah Wood—Sally Bacon Family Record, 1837
Watercolor and ink on paper
22.6 × 35.4 cm (8 7/8 × 13 15/16 in.)

42 William Edward Bookplate, 1843
Watercolor and ink on paper
13.6 × 16.2 cm (5 3/8 × 6 3/8 in.)

Heart and Hand Artist
Bowdoin, Maine

43 James O. Dearing Name Sheet, circa 1850
Watercolor and ink on paper
10.0 × 11.4 cm (3 15/16 × 4 3/8 in.)
Heart and Hand Artist  
Bowdoin, Maine

44 Adoniram J. Hogan–Jane H. Denham Family Record, 1854

Watercolor and ink on paper  
Sight: $24.9 \times 34.7 \text{ cm (9}\frac{13}{16} \times 13\frac{11}{16} \text{ in.)}$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names</th>
<th>Births</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Deaths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adoniram J. Hogan</td>
<td>Dec. 5th 1819 Bowdoin, Me.</td>
<td>Nov. 25, 1847 By Luther Hall, Esq.</td>
<td>June 9th 1825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane H. Denham</td>
<td>Mar. 28 1827 Bowdoin, Me.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jan 12 1915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcia Jane Hogan</td>
<td>July 4th 1849 Bowdoin, Me.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Feb 21 1899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marietta Hogan</td>
<td>Aug. 18 1853 Bowdoin, Me.</td>
<td></td>
<td>July 3 1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Hogan</td>
<td>Sept 16 1855 Bowdoin, Me.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Oct 5 1934</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Present Date: Jan 15th 1854
Bowdoin College Museum of Art

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