

Ammi Phillips, Colebrook Native

Ammi Phillips is acknowledged today to have been one of America's premier folk artists. It was not always so, for in spite of the fact that he was quite a prolific producer of American portraits, many were unsigned. It wasn't until the twentieth century that techniques were developed that permitted art historians and curators to begin to identify his works and to eventually elevate him to the position he now holds among American artists.

Samuel Phillips, his grandfather, was the fifteenth settler in Colebrook, and settled on what is today Shantry Road, about opposite No.77. Ammi was born April 24, 1788 in Colebrook, named for his father's brother, who in turn had been named for the Reverend Ammi Ruhamah Robbins, pastor of the Norfolk, Connecticut Congregational Church.

As far as is known, he painted his first portrait in 1811. The subject was a Stockbridge, Mass. tavern owner named Gideon Smith. On March 18, 1813, he married Laura Brockway of Schodack, New York, in Nassau, N. Y. We next hear of him when he settled in Troy, New York in 1817, where he remained until departing for Rhinebeck, New York in 1828. Two years later his wife Laura died and was buried in Rhinebeck.

On July 15, 1830, he married Jane Ann Caulkins of North East, New York. In all, he produced nine children, four by Laura, five by Jane Ann.

We assume that during this time period, he was what might be described as a struggling artist, as it is recorded in 1836 that he got some good commissions in Kent, Connecticut at \$10.00 per portrait. On one occasion he produced eight portraits for one family in exchange for a horse. Six of these still exist.

In 1838 he moved his family to Amenia, New York, where Jane Ann's family lived. The late 1840s finds him returning to the Litchfield County area where he is known to have painted portraits in Colebrook, Torrington and Winchester.

By this time, his father, Samuel Phillips, was no longer in the vicinity, having followed his son Halsey to Ohio. Halsey, in 1814, had departed for New Connecticut, the northeast corner of Ohio that was made up of the Western Reserve, or the lands awarded to Connecticut after the end of the War of Independence. Upon arriving in the uncharted lands of Ashtabula County, he proceeded to hew out a niche for himself in the virgin forest, and when things began to take shape, named the spot Colebrook, after his old home site in Connecticut. The town exists to this day.

1860 finds 72 year old Ammi settling in Curtisville (now Interlaken, Mass., near West Stockbridge) and two years later produced his last known dated painting, although there may have been later ones.

In 1863 his will was drawn, to dispose of an estate of about \$850.00.

He died on July 11, 1865 in Curtisville and was buried in Amenia, New York.

Before his work was adequately identified, some were attributed to "the Kent limner", and others to "the Border limner". (The definition of the word limner means a painter, especially a portrait painter.) The term "border" refers to the New York-Massachusetts border that Phillips criss-crossed doing his portraits. The association with the name "Kent" goes back to a small summer fair held at Kent, Connecticut in 1924, at which local residents brought paintings from their homes for public exhibition, among which were eight distinctive portraits painted in the area almost ninety years before. The unknown artist was dubbed "the Kent Limner" in an art publication.

There are known to be over 800 of his paintings around today, of which only 11 were signed. These were done over a fifty-year period, with six major changes in style, continuing beyond the advent of the camera. His territory encompassed both sides of the Hudson River and east to Litchfield County, and from Bennington, Vermont on the north to Putnam County, New York on the south.

An art critic, writing in a catalog for an exhibit that was held in New York City used phrases such as: “possessing purity of line, clear color and incorruptible honesty”, and went on to say “By almost any standard, Phillips is the best and certainly the most prolific of any American painter of the nineteenth century”.

The Colebrook Historical Society possesses one of his portraits, that of Rebecca Beebe Rockwell, wife of Reuben (the first), and mother of Reuben who owned and operated the Colebrook Store, and who had built the gray barn, now home to the Colebrook Town Hall. Rebecca lived in the house now designated as 561 Colebrook Road, where the portrait was no doubt painted. The painting was given to the Colebrook Historical Society by William Rockwell, a direct descendant, which gives this particular portrait an ambiance probably unique in the history of his works, coupled with the fact that it now resides no more than 100 yards from the spot where Rebecca sat for her portrait.

Historic Bytes

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