

February 22, 1896 – CHESTER TIMES

THE OLD WEST HOUSE – An Interesting Description of the Old Springfield Relic – On Swarthmore's Campus – The Life of the Delaware County Boy Who Painted the Infant's Smile and Became a Fellow of the Royal Society – Written by Mary Rice Miller

The following interesting extract from the New York Times was written by Mark Rice Miller. It describes the birthplace and life of Benjamin West, and is presented as being of interest to Delaware Countians"

"Swarthmore, Pa, August 24th – 'I take my pen in hand' was the trite beginning of letters a hundred years ago and in a small room redolent and resilient with the witchery of long ago, the scribe takes the pen in hand in the attic room which was the dreaming place by night and day of embryo art in America.

"Come up the narrow, steep and winding staircase which little Benjamin West mounted to reach his bed chamber. How small, how quaint. The dormer window sits squarely in the sloping roof, opening with the turning of a wooden button. Leaning out upon the broad sill of the casement, many times, without a doubt, the boy saw friendly Indians lurking among the trees where now are seen the flirting figures, capped and gowned, of the students of the college nearby.

"To every doer of art indeed, to every American, there should be a dramatic charm in the story of the Quaker boy, which should be as familiar as that of Whittington. For is there not a cat in it, and the favor of a monarch and the luxury of London town to cushion his declining years? This interesting West house was built in 1724 – commodious as a dwelling for that time. In 1875 it was put in habitable order, and is now used as a residence by one of the professors of Swarthmore. Its somber color verifies the idea one gets from the picture. The ground about it is today, no doubt, as full of springs as when the maternal Grandfather Pierson discovered a large spring of water in the first field he cleared for cultivation for which reason he called his plantation Springfield.

WEST'S ANCESTRY – "Thomas Pierson was the confidential friend of William Penn, and accompanied him to America. On their first landing at Chester, which was then called by the Swedes, "Upland," Penn said to him: 'Providence has brought us safely hither; thou hast been the companion of my perils, what's wilt thou that I should call this place?' Mr. Pierson replied that, since William Penn had honored him so far as to desire him to give to that part of the country a name, he would, in remembrance of his native country, call it Chester.

"The West family descended from Lord Delaware, who distinguished himself under the Black Prince. About the year 1667 the West family embraced the tenets of the Quakers. In 1669 they immigrated to America.

John West was left to complete his education at the great school of the Quakers at Uxbridge and did not join his relatives in America till the year 1714. Soon after his arrival he married the daughter of Thomas Pierson. Benjamin was born in this stone house on the 10th of October, 1738. At that time the Friends had fixed as one of their indisputable doctrines that things merely ornamental were not necessary to the well-being of man, and that all superfluous things should be excluded from the usages and manners of their society. In this prescription was included the study of art as applied only to embellish pleasures and to gratify the senses at the expense of immortal claims.

"It is recorded as a fact that 'at six years of age Benjamin West had never seen a picture nor an engraving.' Yet his placid life absorbed the beauty of nature, and the first expression of this child, drawn in this dear old house. It is commonly told that it was his sleeping sister who inspired him; but Benjamin was the youngest of the children. The mother of the baby was Benjamin's sister. In the month of June, 1745, she had come with the infant to spend a few days at her father's. When the child was asleep, Mrs. West invited the mother to gather flowers in the garden, giving the little boy a fan with which to flap away the flies while he watched baby in their absence. The child smiled in its sleep. Seizing pen and paper, and having fortunately both red and black ink on a table nearby, he drew a picture which he endeavored to conceal when his mother and sister entered. The mother noticing his confusion requested him to show what he was hiding. Mrs. West looked at the drawing with pleasure and said to her daughter, 'I declare he has made a likeness of little Sally,' and kissed him with fondness and satisfaction. This is chronicled in the celebrated English life of Benjamin West as 'the birth of fine art in the New World.'

WEST'S FIRST PAINTS – "In the course of the summer a party of Indians came to pay their annual visit to Springfield. Being amused with sketches of flowers and birds which Benjamin had made, they taught him to prepare the red and yellow colors with which they painted their own ornaments. To these his mother added blue, by giving him a piece of indigo, so that he was instructed by the Indians to prepare the prismatic colors. They also taught him to be an expert archer, and he sometimes shot birds for models when he wished to copy their plumage in picture.

"Little Benjamin's drawings at length attracted the attention of the neighbors; he was told he ought to have brushes made of camel's hair fastened on a quill. He tried hard to think of a hairy substitute for a camel, he saw his father's favorite black cat. Cutting the fur from the tip of its tail, Benjamin made the first brush. That, however, did not last long, and other brushes were taken from pussy's fine hair coat. At last, his father was grieving over the probable distemper that was spoiling the beauty of his pet; Benjamin confessed his depredations, when the father's respect for the lad's ingenuity tempered his rebuke for misusing Grimalkin.

HIS EARLIEST COMPOSITION – "When Benjamin was eight years old he received a present of a box of paints and pencils and six engravings by Grayling, the first pictures he had seen except his own. That night he slept with the precious box on a chair beside his bed and many times he roused himself to stretch out his hand to touch his treasure, to make sure it was not a passing dream. The next morning he carried it to the garret and busied himself there forgetting to go to school. A messenger coming home from the schoolhouse to ask the cause of his absence, his mother went up to the garret to find him. He was busily engaged, not in making a copy, but a composition from one of the engravings.

"Sixty-seven years afterwards his first juvenile attempt was hung in the Royal Academy in the same room with his sublime painting, "Christ Rejected" and the great painter declared that 'there were inventive touches in the first which, with all his subsequent knowledge and experience, he had not been able to surpass.'

This "inventive" talent comes down to the present time in the person of Frederick Macmonnies, descendant of Benjamin West, who so happily embellished the Columbian

Exposition, and later gave to New York that impersonation of pathos and energy – the bronze statue of Nathan Hale, in the City Hall Park.

“The first money given him was a dollar paid by Mr. Wayne, a gentleman of the neighborhood, for some drawings on pieces of poplar boards, given to Benjamin at a cabinet shop nearby, where he often amused himself with tools. This Mr. Wayne mentioned in West’s Memorial by the artist’s particular request, as its first patron, was afterward famous as Colonel Wayne of the first militia organized in defense of Pennsylvania.

DISCOVERED THE CAMERA – “Young West was sent to Philadelphia, eleven miles from home to study under the Provost of the college there, and resided with his married sister. While there he was confined to his bed with a fever. His room being darkened by the wooden shutters which have been peculiar to Philadelphia to this day, he then and there discovered the camera. He saw the apparitional form of a cow enter at one side of the room and walking over his bed, disappear at the other side. He feared that his mind was affected by the fever; later he told the family that he saw several of their mutual friends passing on the ceiling above his bed, and fowls pecking; he saw even the stones of the street. The physician was summoned, suspected the student was delirious, gave a composing mixture, took his fee and his leave requesting Mrs. Clarkson and her husband to withdraw and leave the patient undisturbed.

“When left alone, Benjamin got up, determined to find out the cause of what he had seen. He discovered a diagonal knothole in one of the window shutters, and upon placing his hand over it, saw that the visions overhead had disappeared. When able to go downstairs, he had permission to make a horizontal aperture in a shutter at the parlor window. To his astonishment he saw the objects pictured on the wall inverted. Returning home, he had a box made with one of its sides perforated, and using the reflective power of a mirror, he contrived a camera without ever having heard of one. Afterward he found this contrivance anticipated. Williams the painter in Philadelphia receiving about this time a complete camera from England. But the superior habit of observation and innate talent of the sixteen-year old lad is proved.

BECAME A PORTRAIT PAINTER – After this illness, Mr. West was anxious that his son should prepare for business. A meeting of the Society of Friends, was called to consider publicity what ought to be done concerning the destiny of Benjamin. IN consideration of his unmistakable talent, the serious-minded men one by one laid their hands on his head and prayed that the Lord might verify in his life the value of the gift which had induced them, in spite of their religious tenets, to allow him to cultivate the faculties of his genius.

“When about twenty-years of age, Benjamin West went to New York for the better chance of painting the portraits of people in business there who wanted to send home to Europe their likenesses. The price which he fixed for his portraits were 2 ½ guineas for a head and 5 guineas for a half-length. There was a Scotchman named John Watson who painted portraits in Philadelphia, about the year 1715, but now well or how long is not recorded.

“John Singleton Copley, who was born in Boston in 1737, is called the first portrait painter, but he was only one year older than our Benjamin, and ‘our artist’ entered the school at fifteen, wo which Copley came the next year, when seventeen. So they were truly contemporaries.

STUDY IN EUROPE – When Benjamin was twenty-two years of age it was decided that he should go abroad to improve himself in his art. He had already tasted sorrow; his mother had died, and his affection for a charming young lady was carried over to a later chapter in his life’s

story. On the 10th of July, 1760, he arrived in Rome. On that very night he was invited to an assembly of distinguished persons, among whom was the blind Cardinal Albani. His Eminence excelled all the virtuosi then in Rome in his knowledge of medals and intaglios. Lord Grantham conducted young West to the Cardinal, saying: 'I have the honor to present a young American who has a letter of introduction to your Eminence. He has come to Italy for the purpose of studying the fine arts.' Fancying an American must be an Indian, the Cardinal exclaimed: 'Is he white or black?' On being told that Benjamin was fair, he asked surprised: 'What, as fair as I am?' This excited mirth at the Cardinal's expense, as his skin was of the darkest Italian olive, while West's was of more than English fairness. The expression 'as fair as the Cardinal' became proverbial satire.

After some questioning, the Cardinal requested young West to come near him, running his sensitive hands over the features of the stranger, he further attracted the attention of the company by the admiration he expressed at the form of the artist's head. By appointment the next morning over thirty of the most magnificent equipages in the capital of Christendom, filled with some of the most erudite men in Europe, formed a procession and conducted the young Quaker to view the master pieces of art. At Parma Italy, the reigning Prince received West at Court; Benjamin being a Quaker kept his hat on during the audience.

"He spent about three years in study divided between Rome, Florence and Parma; very profitable and enjoyable years, he called them. 'Parma and Florence elected him a member of their academies, but from the first he registered home as the university from which he wished to be graduated. From Parma he proceeded to Genoa, and thence to Turin, considering this city the last stage of his professional observation in Italy. He also enjoyed a visit to Leghorn, Venice and Lucca. Of Lucca he wrote: 'The inhabitants of this little republic present the finest view of human nature that I have ever witnessed.' Early in 1763 he arrived in France where he hastily reviewed the treasures of art, then went over to England, in August, desirous of seeing the country of his ancestors, and to rest after such prolonged mental exertion. He met several American families who had come over to visit their relatives, and, by then was naturally led into social life. However, he painted there a portrait and a picture for the exhibition of 1764.

HIS LIFE'S ROMANCE - When he settled down to the new life, mingling the delights of his art with the pleasures of society, his longing for 'the girl' he left behind him' was intensifying. Elizabeth Shewell, an orphan girl, resided with her brother in Philadelphia. An ambitious man, he urged her to marry a wealthy suitor; and refused saying she could not utter false vows.

"I'll tell you whom you shall not marry," he cried, "the beggarly young Quaker. Mind! You are not to see or speak to that rascal of a painter again!"

"Poor, loving Elizabeth was shut up and orders given the servants to refuse admittance to 'Ben West' if he ever came to the door. Five years she waited; then, assisted by friends, watching within and without, she descended a rope ladder from the window of her room, and was hurried into a waiting carriage and driven rapidly down the quiet street (quiet yet, at midnight, in good Philadelphia!) to the wharf where the ship was ready to sail. The father of Benjamin West received her, cared for her during the romantic voyage, and delivered her to the eager lover, who came aboard the ship at Liverpool, and embraced her rapturously.

"Hast thou no welcome for thy old father, Benjamin?" asked the very old man, who stood smiling, to behold their joyful meeting.

"That I have, father!" cried the son, and the father never after felt a moment's neglect.

“They went immediately to the Church of St. Martin’s-in-the-Fields, and were married. This was on the 2nd day of September 1765; a favorite church for weddings to this day.

SKATING HELPED HIS BUSINESS – “That winter there was good ice and rare skating, and West made himself famous by performing the graceful feats he had learned as a youth on American rivers. He received attention as a portrait painter from many persons who were attracted to witness his skating. West’s painting of ‘Agrippina Landing with the Ashes of Germanicus’ so pleased the King, George III that he became his patron, and continued his friend for nearly forth years. George at that time ‘possessed great constitutional charms,’ Benjamin avers, and a tincture of humor; he had read much, and his memory was tenacious; he was fairly entitled to be considered an accomplished gentleman. Under his patronage, and the name of the ‘Royal Academy of the Arts in London,’ that institution was formally opened, on the 10th of December 1768. Sir Joshua Reynolds was its president until his death, when Benjamin West became his successor.

“Mr. West’s first discourse to the students was delivered December 10th, 1792, on the occasion of the distribution of the prizes. Nourished among the simple folk, whose neighborly kindness to each other is sickness is as notable as their quaint and plain language, the Quaker lad no doubt mused about the dreary places where sick people went to suffer and die. In his prime he began a splendid picture of Christ healing the sick, putting into the picture live for his home and sympathy for the hospital in Philadelphia. The picture was bought at \$3,000 in London, but the artist copied it, making a few changes, and presenting the copy to Philadelphia in 1802. In 1804 the Philadelphia Academy of Arts was chartered.

HIS LATER LIFE – “American artists were over, sure of receiving welcome and assistance from West. Charles W. Peale the father of Remondt Peale; Gilbert Stuart and John Trumbull were pupils of West in London. Mrs. West was known as ‘the beautiful American.’ Her letters still in the possession of the family, breathe only of the kindness of all she met; and they speak especially of the favor of ‘our gracious Queen Charlotte.’ West sent a portrait of his wife to her brother as a peace offering. Mr. Jewell never looked at it; it was stowed away in the garret of his mansion. One of his grandchildren remembers having beaten with a switch the portrait of his naughty aunty who studied upon the children playing in the attic, where she had gone to weep, a lovelorn maiden smiled upon them from her calm estate of wedded bliss in old England.

“Leigh Hunt, a relative of Mrs. West, describes their beautiful home in London. Mr. West had added a gallery at the brick of the house, terminating in a couple of lofty rooms. This gallery was a continuation of the house passage, and, together with one of those rooms, and the parlor, formed three sides of a garden, with busts on stands in an arcade. The gallery and all the rooms adjacent were hung with the artist’s sketches. In the further room the visitor generally found him at work. Mt West was prepossessing in appearance. He had regular features and a mild expression. His manner was so gentlemanly, that the moment he exchanged his gown of the studio for a coat he appeared fully dressed. He would talk of his art all day and talking all the while in a charming manner. During the peace of Amiens he visited Paris to pay his homage to the First Consult. Napoleon had been lavish in his admiration of West’s pictures and West thought Napoleon’s smile was enchanting, and declared that his leg was the handsomest he had ever seen. Indeed, he said his love for the Conqueror was a wedded love, “for better or for worse” for he retained it after the downfall.

DECLINED A KNIGHTHOOD – “Mr. West was a wonderfully industrious man; the list of his paintings copied from his books fill many pages and furnish a marvelous evidence of persistent toil and pains. George III offered him the honor of knighthood but the simple-minded Anglo-American withstood the temptation, gratefully and courteously declining an honor which he certainly merited.

“From the account of B. West with His Majesty, which was a running account from 1768 to 1801, these totals are copied:

£ 4,126
21,705
6,930
1,426

“It is said there were at least 430 paintings outside of those made for royalty.

“Mrs. West was an invalid for several years; she died December 6th, 1817. Three years later, on March 10th, 1820, Mr. West expired at his house in Newman Street, and was buried with great funeral pomp in St. Paul’s Cathedral. He was buried beside Sir Joshua Reynolds and Sir Christopher Wren. The following is the inscription on his tombstone”

“ ‘ Here lie the remains of Benjamin West, Esquire; President of the Royal Academy of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture; born October 10 1738 at Springfield, Penn., in America; died in London March 10, 1820.’

“In that honored place the famous artist finds perpetual recognition; but here in Swarthmore the country children yet claim fellowship with the boy who ground charcoal and chalk together and crushed the red juice from wayside berries to vary his colors.”

Keith Lockhart Collection