



Colonial Williamsburg

EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION

**THE FIRST TENNESSEE WORKS OF FINE ART
BY ARTIST CLOSE TO ANDREW JACKSON JOIN
THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG COLLECTIONS**



Two Ralph E.W. Earl Portraits Will Be Added to New Exhibition

Opening in November at the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum

Williamsburg, VA (Sept. 25, 2017)—While the Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg are filled with extraordinary collections of works of fine, decorative and folk art, a common thread connects them: they each help to tell the story of America and its people, especially in the nation’s early days. Furthering this mission is the acquisition of two oil-on-canvas portraits from Nashville, Tennessee, c. 1825, by the artist Ralph E.W. Earl (c. 1788-1838) marking the first illustration of any kind from Tennessee to join the Colonial Williamsburg collections. Especially notable is that the subjects of the portraits were leaders and associates of Andrew Jackson painted by a notable artist from the region.

“It is exciting to add these fine examples of portraiture to the Foundation’s collections,” said Mitchell B. Reiss, president and CEO of Colonial Williamsburg. “Owning pieces of material culture from this region helps us to better understand and interpret the history of our country and the people who shaped it.” “Colonial Williamsburg has collected notable Tennessee furniture, ceramics, metals, and textiles in recent years, but important paintings had eluded us,” said Ronald L. Hurst, the Foundation’s Carlisle Humelsine chief curator and vice president for collections, conservation, and museums. “The acquisition of these outstanding Earl portraits is a major step in our efforts to share the culture of Tennessee and other inland southern states with our guests.”

Ralph Eleaser Whiteside Earl (more commonly known as Ralph E.W. Earl) was the son of Connecticut painter Ralph Earl and was likely born in New York. He studied painting with his father until 1809 when he went to London to study for a year under Benjamin West and John Trumbull. From there he spent four years in Norwich, England, with his mother Anne Whiteside’s family before going to Paris for a year to study Napoleon’s collected masterworks. He returned to America in 1815 with the intention to create grand

historical paintings in the European style and decided that his first would be of the Battle of New Orleans.

Earl arrived in Nashville on New Year's Day in 1817 to paint a portrait of Gen. Andrew Jackson, hero of the Battle of Orleans, and ended up remaining there and painted several portraits of Jackson and his family. Later that year, through introductions made by Jackson, Earl met and quickly married Jane Caffery, Mrs. Jackson's niece. (Unfortunately, Jane died the next year in childbirth along with their son.) Earl remained close with the Jackson family after his wife's death and lived with them at their Nashville home, The Hermitage. In 1829, when Jackson became president, Earl accompanied him to the White House and painted so many portraits of him that he became known as the court painter to the president. After Jackson's second term in office, Earl returned with him to Tennessee and died at The Hermitage in September 1838.

“Ralph E.W. Earl's association with Andrew Jackson is outstanding and probably overlooked,” said Laura Pass Barry, Colonial Williamsburg's Juli Granger curator of paintings, drawings and sculpture. “I can think of no other artist who formed such a relationship with a notable subject, except perhaps Gilbert Stuart with George Washington. The elder Earl is celebrated and known today because so much scholarship has focused on the Northeast; because so many of the younger Earl's works are in private and Tennessee state institutions, they are lesser known.”

The subjects of these Earl portraits are Thomas Claiborne, Jr. and his wife, Sara Lewis King Claiborne. Thomas was born in 1780 in Brunswick County, Virginia, to Col. Thomas and Mary Claiborne. He moved to Tennessee in 1807 and in the following year was admitted as a charter member of the Nashville Bar. In 1812 he married the widowed Mrs. James King. He served on Andrew Jackson's staff during the Creek War in 1813-1814 and, as first lieutenant, served as aide-de-camp to Brigadier General Thomas Johnson of the West Tennessee Militia. During the same years he was also the first Grandmaster of the Grand Lodge of Tennessee, Free and Accepted Masons. A portrait of him in Masonic regalia still hangs today in Nashville's Grand Lodge. Claiborne served in the Tennessee House of Representatives from 1811-1815, where he was the Speaker of the House, and again in 1831-1833. He was elected as a Democrat to the U.S. House of Representatives and served there from 1817-1819, during which time he was also the mayor of Nashville. He died there in January 1856.

Mrs. Claiborne, the daughter of Col. Joel Lewis and Miriam Eastham of Albemarle County, Virginia, is believed to have been the widow of James King, whose brother William owned the Kings Saltworks near Bristol, Virginia. Sarah moved to Tennessee with her parents in 1787 (the year she was born) by way of Surrey, North Carolina. James and Sarah King had three children before 1812, the February in which Sarah married Thomas Claiborne in Nashville. The Claibornes had nine children together.

The Earl portraits of the Claibornes will be highlighted in the exhibition *Artists on the Move: Portraits for a New Nation*, which will open on November 18, 2017, at the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum, and which Ms. Barry is organizing. “I'm particularly excited because we are adding representative pieces by this artist to the paintings collection and representing the Tennessee region at the same time.”

*Images (left to right): *Thomas Claiborne, Jr. and Sara Lewis King Claiborne*, Ralph E.W. Earl, Nashville, Tennessee, c. 1825, oil on canvas, Museum Purchase, 2017-300 and 2017-301.