

Early Lancaster Artists

JOHN JAY LIBHART

Merchant, Druggist, Judge and Artist.

The ancestors of John Jay Libhart emigrated to America about the year 1728, and settled in York county, then on the frontier of Pennsylvania civilization, in or near the village of Heliam. His father, Henry Liebhart, was an educated man, and received, in the year 1800, from Governor McKean, appointment as Justice of the Peace, which he held and exercised for a number of years, attending also to his farm, until 1812, when he sold out and removed to Marietta, Lancaster county, with his family, two daughters and three sons, of whom the subject of this memoir was the youngest, born in 1806.

Having built a large brick house on the corner of Second and Gay streets, he engaged in the mercantile business, about 1814-15, but was not able to hold out against the panic, consequent upon the wild speculation of that period, which swept over the town, and he lost all his means, like many others, and became bankrupt.

John Jay, the son, thus early thrown upon his own resources, soon developed his artistic and mechanical talents, and was able to assist his father in this extremity by ornamental sign painting, gilding, etc. Already developing a precocious talent for portraiture, it was told of him that when a mere child he would sketch with pen or pencil and produce some striking likenesses. He was notably self-

taught, being entirely uninstructed in the art until Arthur Armstrong, then painting portraits, noticing his natural talent, gave him some lessons in perspective and coloring, and encouraged him to direct his efforts to excel in the line of portraiture. His father being in reduced circumstances when John Jay was about twelve years old, the boy had not the advantages of an early education, only attending two sessions at an Academy in York. But, being ambitious to learn, he soon acquired a superior knowledge of various subjects, and by his keen perceptions easily mastered any line of thought he wished to pursue. Having now diligently studied his art and had due practice, he already obtained some patronage locally. Upon the advice of friends, he proceeded to Harrisburg, where the Legislature was in session, and obtained sittings from the Governor and many members of the Legislature. Among the number he painted a portrait of Governor Joseph Hiester, of Pennsylvania. He also painted portraits at Lebanon and at home about this time, besides doing much work in drawing and painting natural history subjects for illustrating scientific works of the late Prof. S. S. Haldeman, who was his contemporary and lifelong friend.

His talents were not confined to painting; he exhibited a strong mechanical tendency, and, having executed some orders to draw vignettes and engrave plates on metal to print bank notes, he performed creditably and satisfactorily the work assigned him, and upon request of his patrons printed the notes upon a press which he built himself. Besides this work, he executed orders for various wood and metal plates, billheads, etc., and cut many steel punches and dies of

various kinds. In this latter work he improved upon his predecessors by cutting the letters deeper, thus exhibiting a bolder and more permanent impression in the wood or metal upon which they were used. He engraved a note for Gen. Simon Cameron's bank in Middletown, the design being an eagle grasping a shield. The Marietta Pilot, 1813, later the Pioneer (1826) had on its first page as a vignette the cut of a steamboat, drawn and engraved by Libhart.

He taught a class in drawing and sketching in the academy of the late Prof. James P. Wickersham at Marietta in or about the year the Professor was elected the first Superintendent of Public Schools in Lancaster county. In earlier life he had a strong taste for the study of natural history and began a collection of specimens of all branches of that science, and soon had accumulated enough birds, mammals, reptiles, fishes and minerals to form a museum of no mean proportions, which attracted the attention of many lovers of nature and men of tastes similar to his own. This collection was finally dispersed, and he donated a portion of it to the Linnaean Society of Lancaster County, where it is still to be seen.

His tastes were manifold, and after his many efforts in art study in middle age, he was drawn to the cultivation of fruit; when his trees bore fine specimens of pears, apples, peaches, etc., his artistic tastes again manifested themselves, and he drew and painted many exquisite pictures of them.

He did not turn his attention seriously to sculpture, but at one time performed some modeling in clay and wax and produced figures that attracted some attention. He was,

moreover, and ardent admirer of the greatest of modern sculptors, Antonio Canova, and he named his eldest son for him.

About this period he was persuaded to construct some artificial limbs, none at this time being made in the United States. Seeing that those imported from France were imperfect in the knee joint, he invented a joint hinge that very nearly imitated the natural articulation, and enabled the wearer to walk with an elastic, instead of a jerky and halting, step. His attention being drawn to the cultivation of the silk worm and production of raw silk, he invented a reel to expedite the reeling of the minute threads from the cocoons and spinning them at once into the shape required for the looms.

In his mechanical moods he constructed several guns and an extremely sensitive scale to weigh minute parts, and in the several efforts of this mechanical handicraft he made most of his own tools and worked without patterns or templets.

As these various departures from the art he at first pursued no doubt detracted from his success as a portrait painter, his talent enabled him to resume his brush and palette and produce as good work as before. Indeed, up to the time his health failed, and particularly his sight, he painted some pictures of natural objects, as well as portraits, which were very creditable to his reputation.

He loved music; studied it to some extent, and acquired sufficient proficiency to be able to instruct bands and orchestra; he was able to play tolerably upon several instruments himself.

He was, withal, an extremely modest man; never vaunting his talents

nor obtruding his ideas upon others or non-sympathetic people, but content to follow his own course to a conclusion. He spoke of his own work, even to his children, so rarely that our collection of much of it is vague and necessarily more in the nature of reminiscences than exact knowledge. So very indifferent to praise of his own acquirements was he that we feel sure could he revise these reminiscences he would deprecate much we have praised, and claim no particular credit for his own skill.

Mr. Libhart upon the death of Dr. Glatz, of Marietta, was appointed postmaster, and held this position for two years. He also succeeded Dr. Glatz in the drug business by purchasing his store, and continued in this business until his death.

In 1867 he was appointed an Associate Judge for the Courts of this county, and continued in office for five years. Judge Libhart filled nearly all the borough offices of Marietta—those of Burgess, Councilman and School Director—for a term of sixteen years. He was also an early and active member of the free school system of Lancaster county.

So, following him through life, we find his distinctive trait is ever a love of art, even when he was, from necessity, engaged in the more humble occupations of life. Though we can not but admire the versatility of his genius, it is to be regretted that he did not confine himself more specially to the art he at first embraced. He could have produced and left work that would have been worthy the criticism of a connoisseur.

His immediate contemporaries are all dead now, and that his works are almost forgotten or unknown to the present generation is in a great meas-

ure consequent upon his own modesty and the neglect of his heirs to preserve his works and not suffer them to be consigned to oblivion.

Appendix.

Partial list of paintings, portraits, crayon drawings, sketches and natural history subjects by John Jay Libhart:

“Defeat and Death of Gen. Braddock.” Largest of his works. Figures life size, including Washington on horseback and officers on ground surrounding the mortally wounded General.

“Death of Holofernes.” Judith has decapitated him, and the maid holds the sack for the reception of the bloody head.

“Napoleon Crossing the Alps.” First campaign in Italy.

“Immolation of a Greek Lady by Turkish Soldier.” From Greek War of Independence.

“Moor Carrying Off a Christian Lady Prisoner.” Moor on horseback, with lady on saddle bow.

Children feeding swan.

Two young spaniels at play.

Crayon sketch, in colors, of Hunter's Lake, Lycoming county.

Group of Pin-tail ducks.

Wall-eyed pike, Susquehanna salmon.

Portraits of Melchoir Brenneman, Lady Isabel, Joseph C. Rinehart, M. D.; Susan Rinehart Pugh, Mr. and Mrs. John S. Brenneman.

Portraits of his wives: First wife, Harriet Goodman; second wife, Annie L. Rinehart; daughters, Kate and Annie; a miniature of himself.

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