

# BENJAMIN WEST AND HIS VISIT TO LANCASTER.

By Hon. Charles I. Landis.

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How history is falsified by careless writers is proverbial. An illustration of this well-known fact will be seen in the recent History of Lancaster County, wherein it is stated that the first Court House built in Lancaster in Centre Square was of logs. See History of Lancaster County published in 1924 by Lewis Historical Publishing Co., Vol. 1, page 328. Of course, every one who has given the matter any attention knows that it was of brick, and if that chronicler would have read Witham Marshe's Journal—the Secretary of the Maryland Commissioners at the Indian Treaty with the Iroquois in 1744—he would have found the Court House there described in every particular. Mr. Marshe says: "It is a pretty large brick building, two stories high." (See Egles Notes & Queries, Vol. 1, Third Series, p. 277.) Some years ago a writer in one of our newspapers said that it was of logs, and although the statement was fully refuted by Mr. F. R. Diffenderffer at the time, the historical lie still lived. I hope, however, that in the future we may have no more misrepresentation on this subject.

And so I think it has been concerning Benjamin West and his early work. Many stories have been told about him, some of which are merely tradition and are not sustained by any proof; and some do not seem to have any foundation. I have thought it might be interesting to briefly present a few of them, together with certain facts as I have gathered them.

Benjamin West was born near Springfield, now Morton, Chester County, on October 10, 1738. He was the son of John West and Sarah Pearson West. His mother was the daughter of Thomas Pearson, who came from England with William Penn. She was born on February 8, 1697, and died in 1756, aged fifty-nine years. She was a birth-right Quaker, but John West was not. He came to Pennsylvania in 1714, but only joined the Meeting about 1759.

It is said by Harris, in his Biographical History, that Benjamin West came to Lancaster in 1749, and that, while there, at the suggestion of William Henry, he painted his picture of "The Death of Socrates." This claim cannot, I think, be substantiated. In the first place, he was at that time only eleven years of age, and as he had no schooling, it is unlikely that he could have conceived such an allegorical picture. But as Galt says that he soon returned to his home on hearing of his mother's illness, and as she died in 1756, it is pretty certain that he was not in Lancaster in 1749, but in 1756. Jordan gives the year in which the painting was executed as 1757. Galt also says that, in August, 1756, he went to Philadelphia. But there are equally forcible facts which disapprove these claims.

William Henry was born in Chester County on May 19, 1729. His father died in 1747 and the family became pretty much scattered. He then came to Lancaster and apprenticed himself to Matthew Roesser, a gunsmith, who lived on West King Street in this town. The usual term of apprenticeships was seven years, and, in 1749, he was serving his apprenticeship. He, on March 8, 1756, married Ann Wood, and it is improbable that before his marriage he had gone to housekeeping. That year he became a tenant of Leonard Bender, whose house was located on North Queen Street, about where Miller's drug store now is. This is shown by the accessment lists of 1756, which contain the entry: "William Henry, tenant to Leonard Pentner,

½ Lott, 1 horse, 1 horse, 1 horned cattle." Another strong circumstance is that West painted the pictures of William Henry and his wife, now hanging on the walls of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. He could not have painted these pictures before 1756, because, as I have shown, Henry and his wife were only married in that year. In 1757, Henry became rifle manufacturer to the Colonial Army and took the field.

It has also been said that West visited William Henry in Lancaster when Henry lived on East King Street, on ground occupied by Watt & Shand's store. There is no proof, at all, to sustain any such contention. In his Auto biography, written three weeks before his death, Henry said: "In 1759, I closed my partnership in the hardware business with a gentleman in Lancaster (Joseph Simon), and this is the reason why I made my voyage to England." Some persons, including his biographer, Francis Jordan, Jr., supposed that, from this expression, Henry at that time ended his partnership with Simon. What he meant was, that he closed the bargain, and entered into the partnership. In 1760, he sailed for England on the ship "Friendship." The vessel was captured at the entrance of the English Channel. The ship and passengers were taken to Spain, but after several months he arrived in England. He sailed for home in November, 1761, and he arrived the latter part of December, 1761. In the Philadelphia Gazette of February 11, 1762, the following advertisement appeared: "Simon & Henry advertise a new cargo by the latest vessels at their Hardware Store in Lancaster next door to Slough's Tavern. Lancaster, February, 1762. Just imported by the latest vessels from England by Simon & Henry, and to be sold cheap for cash or short credit at their Hardware Store at the corner of King Street, next door to Matthias Slough's Tavern, near the Court House, in Lancaster, Iron-mongers' goods, locks," etc.

At this time, the property on the corner of East King Street and Centre Square, now owned by Watt & Shand, belonged to David Franks. On April 6, 1764, Franks sold it to Joseph Simon. Until that time Simon & Henry must have occupied it as renters. The partnership was in existence on April 28, 1773, as appears by an advertisement in the Philadelphia Gazette of that date, but it was not in existence in 1775 as Simon & Levy carried on the business. It continued until about the beginning of the Revolutionary War. Henry found his private interests in dealing with war materials incompatible with his public duty, and for this reason dissolved it.

William Henry never owned nor lived in the Watt & Shand property. On April 12, 1762, Francis Sanderson and wife deeded lot No. 127 which is the second lot from the corner and contained 23½ feet front on East King Street by 66 feet in depth, to John Henry and Peter Lane. John Henry, who was a brother of William Henry, died intestate about May, 1777, leaving a widow, Elizabeth Henry, and three children, viz.: William Henry, Elizabeth Henry and Charlotte Henry. John Henry was a gun-smith, and carried on business at this place, and the business was continued by his widow after his death. On August 24, 1778, Peter Lane conveyed his interest to the widow and heirs of John Henry, and on September 19, 1794, William Henry, the son, conveyed his interest to his mother. The property only passed out of the heirs of John Henry in 1847. No doubt the confusion arose in that the name of William Henry, son of John Henry, was the same as that of his celebrated uncle.

In 1759, Henry lived in a house owned by John Wood, as appears by the assessment lists, and on February 7, 1760, he purchased from Alexander Steadman the brick dwelling house on the Market Place, which was to the north of the present City Hall, and is now covered by the City Market. Francis Jordan, Jr., mentioned this house as a stone house, but the deeds state that it was of brick. Here he lived until his death. It was in this

house that the Juliana Library was stored during the Revolutionary War, and here for a time David Rittenhouse as Treasurer of the State lived.

It has been said that West painted his first picture in Lancaster. There is no definite evidence upon this subject. Upon its face, it does not seem probable. It must be remembered that West had no classical education. Mrs. West, speaking to Farrington, said that he (West) "was so devoted to drawing while a child and a youth that every other part of his education was neglected." This is not entirely correct, for after West went to Philadelphia, he was taken up by Provost William Smith, of the College of Philadelphia, Bishop William White and Francis Hopkinson, and others. It is likely that he received his inspiration from these men. These gentlemen were college graduates and were likely to impart historical knowledge to him.

When West first went to Philadelphia, he resided with a Mr. Pennington, who presented him with a box of paints and brushes and six engravings by Greving. He also lived at the house of a Mr. Flower, and was there introduced by an English lady, the governess of Mr. Flower's children, to the historians and poets of his friend's library. The first oil painting which he saw was by Williams, and that artist, finding that West's reading did not extend beyond the Bible, lent him the works of Fresnoy and Richardson. The latter was the leading artist of his day in England. Dr. Jonathan Morris gave him a few dollars with which to buy painting material, and the first money which he received for his work as an artist from a Mr. Wayne and was in exchange for drawings made on poplar boards. Afterwards he received two and a half guineas for a head and five guineas for a half length. For the painting of a Mr. Kelly of New York, he received fifty guineas, which was to assist him upon his contemplated journey abroad.

On July 13, 1753, "The Academy and Charitable School of the Province of Pennsylvania" was incorporated. In the Catalogue of Matriculates of the University of Pennsylvania, 1894, it is said that West entered the School in 1753 or 1754. On June 16, 1755, an additional charter was granted, whereby the name of the School was changed to "The College, Academy and Charity School of Philadelphia." Rev. Dr. William Smith became in that year the Provost of the College, and continued to occupy that place until 1791. In the American Magazine, which was published from October, 1757, to October, 1758, edited "by a Society of Gentlemen" of whom Dr. Smith was chief, there appears in the February Number, 1758, the following:

"With respect to the following little poems, they are selected out of many that we have from their several authors, because the occasions on which most of them are written require their immediate publication. The first upon one of Mr. West's portraits we communicate with particular pleasure, when we consider that the lady who sat, the painter who guided the pencil, and the poet who so well describes the whole, are all natives of this place and are very young." Then comes the following note at the bottom of the page: "We are glad of this opportunity of making known to the world the name of an extraordinary genius, as Mr. West. He was born in Chester County, in this Province, and without the assistance of any master, has acquired such a delicacy and correctness of expression in his paintings, joined to such considerable thirst of improvement, that we are persuaded, when he shall have obtained more experience, and proper opportunities of viewing the production of able masters, he will become truly eminent in his profession." On the next page is a poem, entitled "Upon Seeing Portrait of Miss..... by Mr. West."

West at this time was not yet twenty years old, and the article is contemporaneous with his residence in Philadelphia. After he left Philadelphia, he went to New York, where he remained eleven months and until shortly before he sailed for Italy.

Then, too, it was said by some persons that the picture was painted in Philadelphia, as painted at all, and not in Lancaster. It is somewhat improbable that, on a short visit such as West evidently then made, he should have brought with him his painting equipment. He may, however, have drawn the sketch here and made the painting afterwards, or he may have taken a picture home with him and completed the painting there from it.

In the May and June numbers of the *Universal Magazine*, published in London in 1805, there is what purports to be a full list of the paintings, drawings and sketches of West up to that date, and in this article "The Death of Socrates" is noted among the drawings and not among the paintings. This, however, is not conclusive, as an examination of the list will show that all of his paintings are not there noted, and as a matter of fact there is refutation of the claim that it is a full list in the circumstance concerning such a painting which I shall hereafter narrate.

Galt says that, when William Henry suggested to West to paint this picture, West knew nothing about the story of Socrates, and that Henry then went to his library and got out Plutarch's *Lives*. This is not correct for the *Life of Socrates* is not one of those about whom Plutarch wrote. An examination of this book proves conclusively this fact. On the other hand, Mr. John Jordan, in the note to the *Life of Rev. Dr. William Smith*, Vol. 1, p. 592, states that the volume in Mr. Henry's library was not Plutarch's *Lives*, but was Rollin's *Ancient History*. Dunlap, in his *Book of Painters*, says that "a gunsmith of the name of Henry employed him to paint the Death of Socrates." Mr. Jordan also stated that the painting and an engraving of it were in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, in the possession of a great-grandson of Mr. Henry.

This, then, was the real question which called for investigation; and on Wednesday, June 3, 1925, in company with two other gentlemen, the president and vice-president of this society, I visited the home of Mr. Charles Henry and Misses Sophia and Clara Henry, who live near the Borough of Nazareth, in Northampton County. They are great-great-grandchildren of William Henry, and on the wall of their parlor hangs a painting, about twelve inches by twenty inches in size, which depicts Socrates drinking the hemlock. In another small frame is a wood-cut, which shows on its face that it was taken from Rollin's *Ancient History*. Mr. Henry told us that both of these pictures had been handed down in the family, the one as having been taken from the book of William Henry which Benjamin West saw in Henry's house in Lancaster, and the other being the painting made from it by Benjamin West; that they both descended from William Henry of Lancaster, though they were brought from Philadelphia to Nazareth after his death by either his son, William Henry, of Nazareth, or John Joseph Henry, his grandson, more than one hundred years ago, where they have remained ever since. These statements made by this gentleman and his sisters are in my judgment entitled to full credit.

The painting is crudely done, and it is not a copy of the wood-cut. The figure of Socrates is nearly in the same position, but back of him are eight or nine figures, purporting no doubt to be his friends, and in front a number of soldiers with helmets. These figures were no doubt put in to balance up the painting and were West's conception of the scene.

This is the whole story as I have found it.

Benjamin West sailed for Italy on or about April 5, 1760, in the ship *Betty Sally*, a Letter of Marque, bearing 12 carriage guns and 20 men. Captain Sneed was in command. Chief Justice William Allen, per Mr. John Sully, writing to Jackson & Rutherford, Merchants in Leghorn, on that date, said: "In this vessel comes a passenger, Mr. West, a young ingenious painter of this City, who is desirous to improve himself in that science by visiting

Florence and Rome, but being unacquainted how to have his money remitted has lodged with me One Hundred Pounds, Sterling, which I shall remit to Messrs. David Barclay and Sons upon his account. I beg, therefore, you would give him a credit for that sum, and take his bills for the amount, and should be further obliged to you for any kindness shown him, as he has among us the character of a very deserving young man. I am in hopes I shall have more opportunities of writing to you this summer." John Allen, son of the Chief Justice, and Joseph Shippen, Major of Brigade to General Forbes, accompanied West on his journey. Judge Allen further wrote on April 16, 1760, to D. Barclay & Sons: "My son sailed out of our Capes the 12th of this inst. . . . You have enclosed William Plumstead's & David Frank's Bill. . . . for £. 101 6s. 2d. Ster., which I am desired by Mr. Benjamin West to remit to you, and which you will be pleased to carry to his credit, when received. He is a young Painter that goes passenger in the Ship with my son in order to improve himself in the Science of Painting, and lodges the money with you in order to answer his expenses whilst in Italy." It is said that William Henry met West in Philadelphia immediately before his departure.

West, while in Italy, became embarrassed from lack of funds. How this information was conveyed to his friends in Philadelphia does not appear. It was no doubt through John Allen. But on April 10, 1761, Judge Allen wrote to Mess. Barclay and Sons the following letter: "I have not time at present to write to my son, John, but beg you would tell him I received his letter by the Pacquet, and that I approve of his advancing the £.60 to Mr. West and that his uncle and I have agreed to advance him £. 100 more, which additional sum I desire he would remit Mr. West as soon as possible, which I beg you would be so kind as to pay to my son on Mr. West's order. From all accounts he is like to turn out a very extraordinary person in the painting way, and it is a pity such a genius should be cramped for want of a little cash." Again, on October 16, 1762, Judge Allen wrote to the same parties: "Mr. Hamilton and I have employed Mr. West to copy for us a number of the best pictures in Italy, where he has been very much indisposed, and his sickness been so expensive to him that he cannot continue there without cash be remitted to him. I have already supplied him with £. 150 Sterling. Mr. Hamilton has promised to give me a bill of exchange for a like sum in order to put the young fellow in cash. I must, therefore, desire you would immediately advise Messrs. Jackson & Rutherford of Leghorn that you will honor their bills for any sum not exceeding £. 150 on Mr. West's account, and carry the same when paid to my debt. We have such an extraordinary account of Mr. West's genius in the painting way that we venture to afford him these supplies, and for his encouragement take it out in copies."

The Mr. Hamilton referred to in the above letter was James Hamilton, the Lieutenant-Governor of the Province, and the person who, with his father, Andrew Hamilton, laid out the town of Lancaster. I do not know what pictures were copied for Judge Allen and Mr. Hamilton, nor when they were delivered. The money originally sent to Mess. Barclay & Sons was West's own money, while the latter sums mentioned were advances.

This subject might be considerably enlarged upon, but I will pause in my dissertation, lest I tire you unduly.

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