

SON OF WHOM?

A Collector's Journey

by John A. Herdeg

When my wife and I acquired a portrait at a Sotheby's Important Americana auction in 1990 (Fig. 1), the catalogue entry read, "According to tradition, this young man is said to be the son of a gentleman and lady whose portraits are in the collection of Bertram K. and Nina Fletcher Little."¹ We acquired the portrait and a day later I called Nina Little to inquire about the children of the couple in question, Rufus and Hannah Lathrop of Connecticut. "What children?" she replied. "They didn't have any."

The subject of the portrait, though now lacking a surname, nevertheless presented a pleasing image of a young mariner in a blue coat with large brass buttons and a tri-cornered hat tucked under his arm. In the background is a ship, indicating the means of his livelihood. The young seaman looks confidently at the viewer with his right hand cocked on his hip.

The auction catalogue attributed the portrait to John Durand (active 1765–1782), an artist who first appeared in Virginia, then later established himself in New York City. Among his works are the portraits of the six Beekman children, painted in 1766, one of which is illustrated as figure 2. Two years later, he produced

one of his most noted portraits, that of the Rapalje children (Fig. 3). These images are characterized by linear definition and simple but bright colors. While our young mariner reflected more modeling than either of these two portraits, it contains the same strong linear definition and pleasing colors. Moreover, the mariner's right hand is identical

to that belonging to one of the figures in the Rapalje portrait.

If the young mariner was not a son of Rufus and Hannah Lathrop, then who was he? Thinking he might be a member of a different branch of the Lathrop family I contacted the Connecticut Historical Society, since the Lathrops were a distinguished Connecticut family.² The family genealogy revealed nothing beyond confirming that indeed, Rufus and Hannah Lathrop had no children.

I next contacted antiques dealers Avis and Rockwell Gardiner of Connecticut, who were among the previous owners of the portrait.³ They had purchased the painting from Robert C. Eldred & Company, East Dennis, Massachusetts. Beyond the fact that they thought the portrait had probably been painted in New York City in the mid-1760s, they could add nothing. Tracking down the Eldred catalogue for the August 1980 sale, I found the following description of the portrait: "A three-quarter length portrait of an eighteenth-century sea captain; a British man-of-war inset to right."⁴ When contacted, the staff at Eldred's could give no further information.

Having come to another dead end, I decided to take another tack. Since it was not unusual for couples in the

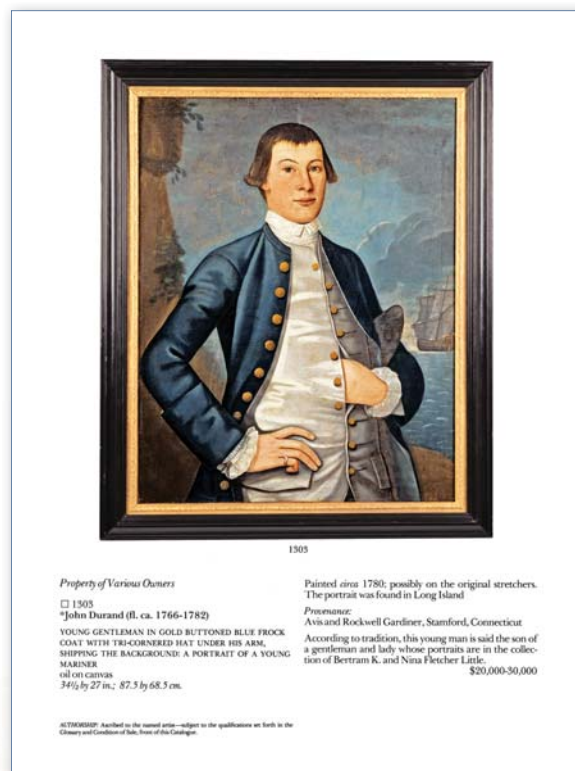


Fig. 1: Auction catalogue, Sotheby's Important Americana, New York, Sale no. 5968, January 24, 1990, lot 1303. Courtesy of Sotheby's.



eighteenth century to have their portraits painted, I decided to look for the painting of a female sitter that might match that of the young mariner in our collection. To obtain such information I turned my attention to the National Portrait Gallery and the National Museum of American Art at the Smithsonian Institute, who maintain a database of colonial paintings by artist. I established certain criteria to define my search: the portrait must be a three-quarter view of a woman of roughly the same age; there must be no companion male portrait; the artist must be Durand; and

the canvas should measure approximately 34½ x 27 inches, the size of the young mariner's portrait (Fig. 4).

The information from the National Portrait Gallery's *Catalog of American Portraits* unfortunately reported no dimensions.⁵ I had more luck with the National Museum of American Art's *Inventories of American Paintings*.⁶ While dimensions were provided, there were few canvases of the desired size. Of the possibilities, one — Mary Bontecou Lathrop — was an exact match and had no accompanying male portrait. This looked

promising. I found a photograph of the portrait in Robert Bishop's *Folk Painters of America* (1979), and not only did it have an identical canvas size, it was a three-quarter portrait of a lady appearing to be around the same age as the young mariner.⁷ The background also had a nearly identical rock outcrop along the left side of the canvas.

The portrait was in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 5). I contacted Carrie Reborá (then Assistant Curator, American Paintings and Sculpture; now Carrie Reborá Barrett, Associate Director of the Metropolitan) who responded that their research indicated the portrait had been painted before Mary's marriage into the Lathrop family, and that I should instead research the Bontecou line.

A return visit to the research library at the Connecticut Historical Society produced the Bontecou genealogy.⁸ I discovered that the founding member, Pierre Bontecou, a Huguenot from France, had a number of sons, among them, Timothy. Timothy in turn had five children, the youngest of whom was identified

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Fig. 2: John Durand (active 1765–1782), *Portrait of Abraham Keteltas Beekman* (1756–1816), 1766. Oil on linen, 36 x 28 inches. Collection of The New-York Historical Society. Gift of the Beekman Family Association (1962.70).

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Fig. 3: John Durand (active 1765–1782), *Portrait of the Rapalje Children*, 1768. Oil on canvas, 50¾ x 40 inches. Collection of The New-York Historical Society. Gift of Mrs. Eliza J. Watson in memory of her husband, John Jay Watson (1946.201).





Fig. 4: John Durand (active 1765-1782), *Portrait of Young Mariner*, ca. 1768-1772. Oil on canvas, 34½ x 27 inches. Collection of John and Judith Herdeg.

simply as “a daughter,” and recorded as having married a Mr. Lathrop, a cabinet-maker of New Haven, and having no children. Based on the evidence, it would seem that this was Mary Lathrop Bontecou.

Of Mary’s four brothers, the oldest was Peter, born in 1738, and described as “captain of the barque *Hawke*, of 47 tons, trading to Ireland, and returning via the West Indies.” Was it possible that our portrait of the young mariner was actually Peter Bontecou (fig. 4), older brother of Mary?

The correlations between the two portraits were strong: canvas size, age and presentation of the sitters, and the rock outcropping. In addition, Peter was a seaman like the subject of the portrait and Mary’s painting had been found in the possession of Peter’s granddaughter.⁹ The search for the identity of the

young mariner appeared to be over.

Was it still reasonable, however, to attribute his portrait to John Durand of New York City when Peter and Mary lived in New Haven? Research revealed that Durand travelled to New Haven in 1768, where he painted a portrait of Dr. Leverett Hubbard.¹⁰ Four years later, he returned and painted the portrait of Benjamin Douglas.¹¹ Given these connections to New Haven, and the similarities between these portraits and others by Durand, it is safe to continue to attribute the painting to him, and to suggest that the two portraits were painted circa 1768 to 1772.

But the story doesn’t end here. The Bontecou genealogy also revealed that Peter had married Susannah Thomas in 1762. They built a home on the corner of Olive and Wooster Streets on New Haven’s waterfront and raised a family. By 1768, the year of Durand’s first visit, they had three children; by 1772, they had a fourth child. Peter lived another seven years. On one of his home-

ward voyages, he was captured by the British and imprisoned on a ship in New York harbor. He escaped, but prior to doing so he caught smallpox; he died in 1779 without making it home to New Haven.¹² Susannah survived her husband by twenty years, dying in 1799. Both were alive during the time the portraits would have been painted.


The question, then, is whether the portrait of the female is of Peter’s sister, Mary, or his wife, Susannah. Would the latter have stepped aside and let her husband be painted



Fig. 5: John Durand (active, 1765–1782), *Portrait of Susannah or Mary Bontecou*, ca. 1768–1772. Oil on canvas, 35½ x 27⅝ inches. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, 1962 (62.256.6).

with his young unmarried sister rather than herself? Let's consider the facts: The portrait heretofore thought to be Mary was found in the possession of Susannah's granddaughter and not the Lathrop family, where one would expect it have descended if the subject was Mary. On the other hand, a portrait of Susannah is likely to have been in the possession of her descendants, which is what appears indeed to have happened. And so, it seems entirely possible to propose that our portrait of the young mariner is indeed Peter Bontecou,

and that the Met's portrait is actually of Peter's wife, Susannah, and not his sister, Mary.¹³

Not all research turns out so satisfyingly, but as collectors, sometimes we succeed—often with a surprise at the end! 

This article is based on an upcoming paper being published in *The Walpole Society Note Book* (2009–2010), and is published here with the permission of the Society.

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1. Sotheby's Important Americana, New York, Sale no. 5968, January 24, 1990, lot 1303.
2. E. B. Huntington, *A Genealogical Memoir of the Lo-Lathrop Family in this Country* (Ridgefield, Conn., 1884).
3. See the Avis & Rockwell Gardiner advertisement, *The Magazine Antiques* (November 1982): 968.
4. Robert C. Eldred Co.'s American & Marine Art, East Dennis, Mass., August 7, 1980, lot 499.
5. When this portion of the research was being undertaken, the information was not digitized. The records are now online and include dimensions for most images. See www.npgportraits.si.edu/eMuseumNPG.
6. Serial No. 36120042 in the artist index for John Durand from the *Inventory of American Paintings Executed Before 1914*, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. The information was not digitized when this phase of the research was being done. See <http://sirius-artinventories.si.edu>.
7. Robert Bishop, *Folk Painters of America* (New York: Greenwich House, 1979), 80.
8. *A Record of the Descendants of Pierre Bontecou, a Huguenot Refugee from France, in the Lines of his Sons*, compiled by John E. Morris (Hartford, Conn.: Lockwood & Brainard Company, 1885), 43–52. See www.archive.org/stream/bontecougenealog00morr.
9. *Ibid.*, 44.
10. The portrait is dated 1768. See advertisement of Kennedy Galleries, Inc., *The Magazine Antiques* (August 1990): 182–183.
11. The portrait is dated 1772. See Little, 92–93.
12. Morris, *A Record of the Descendants of Pierre Bontecou*, 44.
13. As a result of sharing my research with the Met, they have now amended the details of the portrait in their possession to suggest that it may be either that of Susannah Bontecou or Mary Bontecou Lathrop.