



# Taliaferro Portrait: *Was it painted by Catlin?*

Rena Neumann Coen

FOR NEARLY twenty-five years the Minnesota Historical Society has owned a rather large and imposing portrait of Major Lawrence Taliaferro (1794–1871), United States Indian agent from 1820 to 1839 at the St. Peter's Agency near Fort Snelling. The painting is an oil on canvas, measures 55 inches by 48 inches, and was presented to the society in 1947 by Taliaferro's grandniece and grandnephew, Mrs. Virginia Bonner Pesch and her brother, John F. Bonner. In publications that reproduce the undated, unsigned painting, the artist usually is referred to as "unknown."<sup>1</sup> In this article, the author contends, however, that the portrait is the work of George Catlin, the well-known painter of Indians.

But let us first consider, briefly, the career of Taliaferro (pronounced Tol'-li-ver). The proud member of an old Virginia family with Italian origins, he fought in the War of 1812, at the close of which he was a lieutenant in the regular army. He served in several locations until 1818 when his friend, President James Monroe, appointed him to be the first agent at the

newly designated St. Peter's Agency. The young Taliaferro resigned his army commission because Indian agents, although generally chosen from military ranks, were nevertheless civilians. "The Major," as Taliaferro was called, assumed his duties at St. Peter's in July, 1820, and remained there, with but a few brief interruptions, until his resignation in 1839. For twenty years he was "the most important and influential civil official on the upper Mississippi."<sup>2</sup> For the first seven years his authority extended over the Sioux (Dakota) and Chippewa (Ojibway) tribes of the Upper Mississippi and the Sioux of the St. Peter's (later Minnesota) River as well. After 1827, Indian Agent Henry R. Schoolcraft at Sault Ste. Marie had technical jurisdiction over the Chippewa of the Mississippi headwaters, but Schoolcraft was too far away, so the Chippewa continued to visit Taliaferro instead.

During this time, Indian affairs were managed by the secretary of war through a commissioner of Indian affairs in Washington, D.C., and a number of superintendents scattered through the new territories. Subordinate and directly responsible to these superintendents were the Indian agents. Stationed at frontier outposts such as the one at Fort Snelling, they were supposed to guide and protect the Indians of their regions. Because the implicit paternalism of this system encouraged the agents to be more concerned about the profit of the white traders than the welfare of the Indians, "Major" Taliaferro deserves much credit for being genuinely protective of the Sioux and Chippewa in his charge. He was egotistical and had a thorny personality that got him into many battles, but he served his post with diligence and an honesty that made him "cordially hated by all who could neither bribe nor frighten him to connive at lawbreaking to the harm of Indians."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, the reproduction in Helen McCann White, *Guide to a Microfilm Edition of The Lawrence Taliaferro Papers*, 4 (St. Paul, 1966); in William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:140 (revised edition, St. Paul, 1956); and in Bertha L. Heilbron, *The Thirty-Second State: A Pictorial History of Minnesota*, 55 (St. Paul, 1958).

<sup>2</sup> Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1:141. For a good article on "the Major," see Willoughby M. Babcock, Jr., "Major Lawrence Taliaferro, Indian Agent," in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 11:358–375 (December, 1924).

<sup>3</sup> Folwell, *Minnesota*, 142.

Mrs. Coen, assistant professor of art history at St. Cloud State College, is the author of "Edward K. Thomas: Fort Snelling Artist" that appeared in the Fall, 1969, issue of *Minnesota History*.

WHILE SERVING at Fort Snelling, Taliaferro kept a journal, much of which survives today among the manuscripts holdings of the Minnesota Historical Society. In his journal, he described his daily activities, especially those relating to Indian affairs. He also recorded the arrivals of visitors to Fort Snelling and the agency. Such arrivals were no small occurrences in the days when the fort was a remote and isolated outpost on the edge of largely unsettled territory. One welcome visitor to the agency was the famous painter, George Catlin, who arrived with his wife on the steamboat "Warrior" on Wednesday, June 24, 1835, "in a dashing shower of rain."<sup>4</sup> The Catlins stayed at the agency for about a month before Mrs. Catlin departed for St. Louis on July 18 to await the birth of her first child. The painter remained at St. Peter's until July 27. Then, armed with twelve certificates signed by Taliaferro attesting to the "faithful painting and good likenesses of Indians taken by Mr. Catlin," the artist "departed for Prairie du Chien . . . in a Bark Canoe with Corp. Allen only — as an assistant on his voyage down."<sup>5</sup> Catlin returned to the St. Peter's Agency the following year, but his visit — in the company of Robert Serrill Wood, a traveling Englishman — was briefer than in 1835 and interrupted by a visit to the Pipestone quarries in what is now southwestern Minnesota.<sup>6</sup> (The quarries' distinctive reddish stone, used by the Indians for peace pipes, was later named catlinite in honor of the painter.)

In his journal Taliaferro complimented Catlin several times for the artistic skill he showed before and during his more leisurely visit to the agency during the summer of 1835. In his journal entry of June 29, 1835, in particular, the agent commented on the artist: "Mr. Catlin called at the Agency; and wished 3 Chippeways to call on him at this Fort as he was desirous of Painting their portraits[.] Mr. C. has been engaged for years, and is still zealously progressing in the fine arts — he has secured the most valuable and authentic specimens of 30 Indian tribes — their dresses, ceremonies, Buffalo Hunts[.] dances . . . with many paintings and views of Scenery. . . ." These, Taliaferro felt, provided "vast material for observation and cultivation in the remote territories[.] The great world know [*sic*] nothing as yet of these things and it seems that it has been left to Mr. Catlin to open the Doors of information and by the magic of his pencil to hold the Mirror up to public view."

The agent added that "Mr. C. is takeing [*sic*] several Sioux and Chippeways and intends procuring a number of views of Scenery — such as Little Falls[.] Falls of St. Anthony, two or three views of Fort Snelling, and . . . other descriptive Scenery on the Mississippi and River St. Peter's. Such as I have seen are very cor-

rect as well as interesting and true to Nature."<sup>7</sup>

Catlin, for his part, was equally admiring of Taliaferro. In his monumental work on the North American Indians, Catlin expressed his belief that the Indian agent at St. Peter's "furnishes the only instance probably, of a public servant on these frontiers, who has performed the duties of his office, strictly and faithfully, as well as kindly. . . . The Indians think much of him, and call him Great Father, to whose advice they listen with the greatest attention."<sup>8</sup>

Lawrence Taliaferro and George Catlin, then, had ample opportunity to become well acquainted and, indeed, to admire each other for the skill and proficiency with which each practiced his own calling. It would have been surprising, therefore, if the Indian agent had not asked the artist to paint his portrait (or for Catlin not to have agreed or even to have suggested it himself). In the early nineteenth century, before the days of photography, painting portraits usually was an artist's main business, for this was the only way that a person of importance or means could have his image preserved for posterity. Why, then, would Taliaferro, who seems to have had an excess of personal

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Taliaferro Journal, June 24, 1835, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>5</sup> Taliaferro Journal, July 27, 1835.

<sup>6</sup> Taliaferro Journal, August 17, August 21, September 5, 1836.

<sup>7</sup> Taliaferro Journal, June 29, 1835.

<sup>8</sup> George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians, Written During Eight Years' Travel Amongst the Wildest Tribes of Indians in North America*, 2:137 (London, 1841). This work is available in several editions.

GEORGE CATLIN, painted in 1849 by William Fisk





LAWRENCE TALIAFERRO





**WILLIAM A.  
CLARK**

vanity, not have sat for Catlin, especially during the painter's long visit in the summer of 1835? The answer is that he undoubtedly did and that the result is the hitherto anonymous artist's portrait of Taliaferro in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.<sup>9</sup>

There are, of course, reasons other than opportunity and propinquity for attributing the Taliaferro portrait to Catlin. Chief among these is the stylistic similarity the picture bears to other known non-Indian portraits by Catlin. Before this similarity is discussed, however, the observation should be made that the lack of specific documentary reference to a Catlin portrait of Taliaferro does not in itself constitute evidence against such an attribution. The Taliaferro Papers, for one thing, are not complete. Many were lost in a fire in Taliaferro's Bedford, Pennsylvania, home in 1865, and others were scattered among private owners in a number of places. Secondly, the Indian agent was much less inclined to record personal matters than he was to detail the affairs of the agency and the Indians in his charge. Mrs. Taliaferro, for example, is mentioned very rarely. Taliaferro undoubtedly would have considered a portrait of himself a personal matter unconnected with the business of the agency and something unnecessary to record.

We know, moreover, that Catlin did paint the portraits of other Indian agents whom he met during his travels. These portraits of white men offer an interesting contrast to Catlin's Indian portraits and constitute an as yet relatively unexplored facet of the artist's

work. They are less sketchy, less spontaneous than the Indian portraits. Catlin's impressionistic technique, a shorthand style he adopted for his rapidly-executed Indian paintings, is absent in his portraits of whites. Instead, they evidence a harder line, a more labored drawing, and a smoother finish than his Indian pictures do. The effect is more rigid, more posed, and almost self-consciously monumental.

IT IS SIGNIFICANT that among the Catlin portraits of white men is one of William A. Clark, signed "G. Catlin pinx / St. Louis, 1832."<sup>10</sup> This was the same Clark who joined Meriwether Lewis in leading the famous expedition of 1804-06 from St. Louis to the

<sup>9</sup>The Taliaferro portrait was recently photographed with infrared film by Eugene D. Becker of the society's staff, but this process failed to reveal anything to help solve the mystery of the artist's identity.

<sup>10</sup>This is in the collection of Harold McCracken, director of the Whitney Gallery of Western Art at Cody, Wyoming, and author of *George Catlin and the Old Frontier* (New York, 1959).



**THIS STUDY**  
*of Ah-no-je-  
naje, a Sioux,  
is typical of  
Catlin's Indian  
portrait style.*



BENJAMIN O'FALLON

Pacific Ocean and back. In 1832 Clark was stationed in St. Louis as a superintendent of Indian affairs. In this capacity he was Taliaferro's immediate superior. Catlin portrayed Clark in his office in a three-quarter pose that the artist favored to indicate dignity and importance. The stage props of the statesman-explorer are also there—a globe, a number of bound volumes, an inkwell and quill, and a scroll (on which Clark's right hand rests) containing the 1830 Treaty of Prairie du Chien, signed with the northwestern tribes. The rest of the room is bare as Catlin wasted no time on the other furnishings. This was perhaps the only time, in fact, that Catlin painted the interior of a white man's room. This may indicate that he felt more at home in the out-of-doors and among his Indian friends, whose tepees and lodges appear in many of his paintings.

Catlin's other portraits of white men include those of Stephen Fuller Austin, founder of the first colony

of Texas; Governor De Witt Clinton of New York; General Sam Houston (an ivory miniature); and, stylistically closest of all to the Taliaferro portrait, one of Major Benjamin O'Fallon, a nephew of William Clark and a fellow Indian agent of Taliaferro's to the southwest. O'Fallon first served at Prairie du Chien and in 1819 was appointed Indian agent for the Upper Missouri, making his headquarters at Council Bluffs. He stayed there until 1827 when he resigned and went to St. Louis. For some years before his death in 1842 he was one of the principals of the Missouri Fur Company.<sup>11</sup>

Although the O'Fallon portrait is neither signed nor dated, it was acquired a few years ago by the Maxwell Galleries of San Francisco directly from a St. Louis descendant of Major O'Fallon. A strong family tradition ascribes the painting to Catlin. This attribution gets some support from the fact that Catlin and O'Fallon were friends and that Catlin was employed by O'Fallon to paint portraits of prominent Indian chiefs of the Missouri area in 1832.

In both the O'Fallon and Taliaferro portraits the

<sup>11</sup> For a biographical sketch of O'Fallon, see Dumas Malone, ed., *Dictionary of American Biography*, 13:631 (New York, 1934).

subject stands in three-quarter length and posed in three-quarter view in front of a sketchy landscape background. Both portraits show the subject thrust far forward in the picture plane, and in each picture he dominates, by sheer size, the natural surroundings. Visible in the background of the Taliaferro portrait are part of Fort Snelling, the agency building, and Indians gathered in front of tepees. Hills, a river, Indians, and tepees are included in the background of the O'Fallon portrait. Each background landscape is hastily suggested in the thin oil wash characteristic of many of Catlin's Indian paintings, but the portraits of the men themselves are detailed and precise. The men stand rather stiffly, both with one arm akimbo and holding the plumed hat of their red-sashed, gold-embroidered uniforms. Both paintings exhibit a low horizon line as well as a color scheme in which the bluish-green of the background contrasts effectively with the darker uniforms, the touches of gold, and the vivid red of the wide silk sashes. In spite of the rather rigid poses, however, the two portraits reveal an economy of expression and a quick and facile brush that recalls, but never completely achieves, the sparkle and spontaneity of Catlin's Indian portraits.

In the two portraits of Taliaferro and O'Fallon, the facial features of the men are strong, individualized, and firmly modeled, but the articulation of the limbs is awkward and slightly out of scale. This suggests, perhaps, that Catlin felt more at home sketching and painting his Indian subjects than portraying the white officials appointed to look after them. Both portraits, incidentally, depict men of about forty years of age, an age that fits in well with the theory that the Taliaferro portrait was painted in the summer of 1835, when "the Major" would have been forty-one years old. Although O'Fallon glances away and into the distance, Taliaferro looks directly at the viewer in the candid and direct manner typical of the early American portrait. Both men project a sense of confidence, authority, and, indeed, military pride that was, no doubt, the image they cherished of themselves.

One final word. Those who are at all familiar with

Catlin's work may question the stylistic differences, already noted, between his portraits of the white Indian agents and those of the Indians themselves. The reason for this variant treatment is probably philosophical and rooted in Catlin's attitude toward the native red man. Like other nineteenth-century artists who depicted Indians, he regarded them as "noble savages." It was this romantic attitude, fused with great ethnological curiosity about "the living manners, customs, and character of an interesting race of people," that drove Catlin, in his own words, to journey to "every tribe of Indians on the Continent of North America" with the objective of "bringing home faithful portraits of their principal personages . . . and full notes on their character and history." He thus snatched "from a hasty oblivion . . . the memory of a truly lofty and noble race." Catlin's sentiment is made even clearer when he writes that "black and blue cloth and civilisation are destined, not only to veil, but to obliterate the grace and beauty of Nature. Man, in the simplicity and loftiness of his nature, unrestrained and unfettered by the disguises of art, is surely the most beautiful model for the painter."<sup>12</sup>

That the artist himself felt fettered by "black and blue cloth and civilisation" is apparent in the delight he took in wandering among the Indian tribes of the Northwest and in the free and spontaneous technique with which he painted the Indians, their costumes, their lodges, and even their characteristic pursuits. His feelings of constraint in white civilization are equally apparent in the painterly inhibitions—the harder drawing, smoother finish, and more labored technique—with which Catlin portrayed the representatives of the alien culture that almost destroyed the native one.

---

<sup>12</sup> Catlin, *Indians*, 1:2–3.

THE PAINTING of Catlin is used through courtesy of the National Collection of Fine Arts, Washington, D.C.; that of Clark, courtesy of Harold McCracken; that of Ah-no-jenaj, courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution; that of O'Fallon, courtesy of the Maxwell Galleries, San Francisco.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).