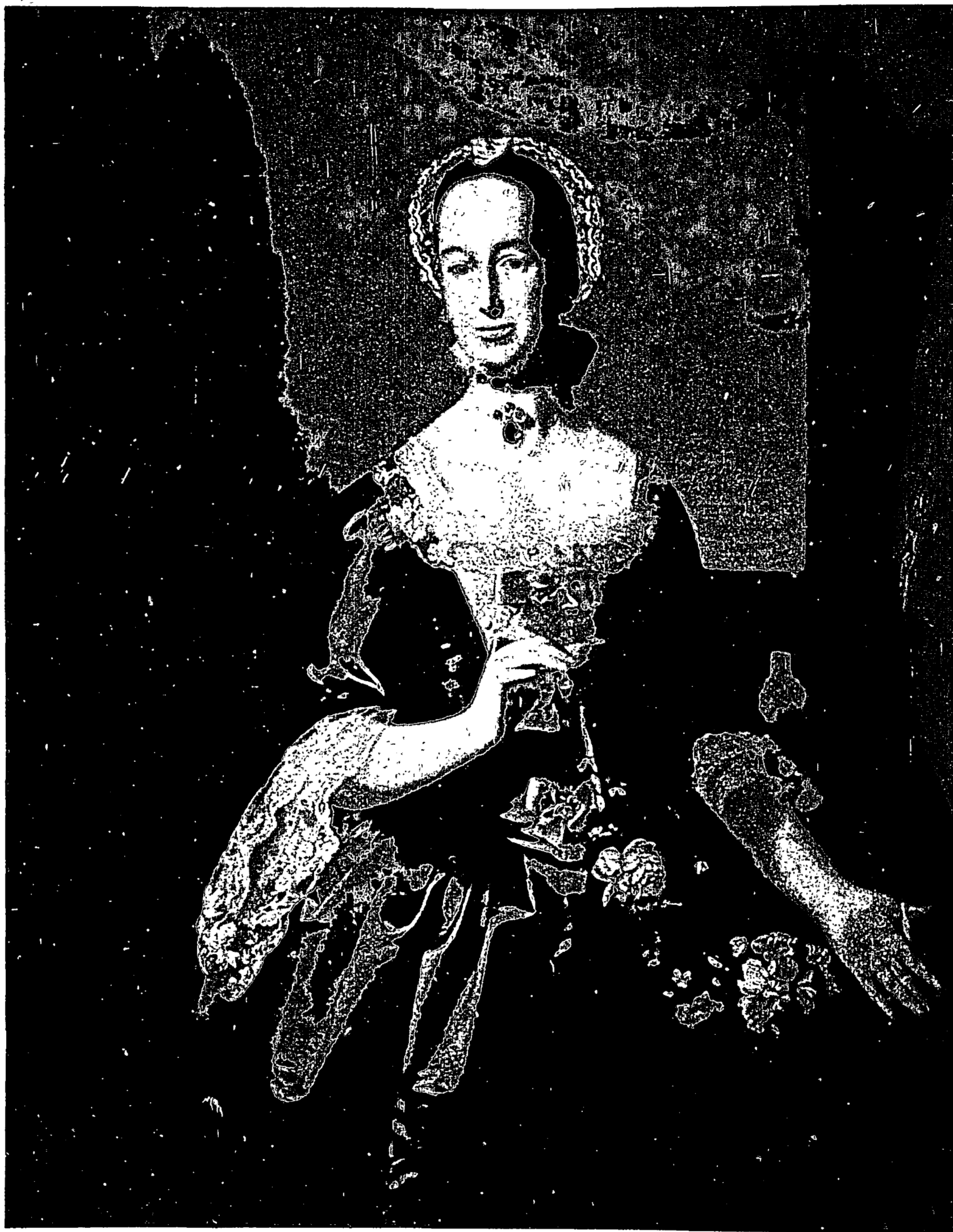


After all these years, she's yours



Copley's Anne Fairchild Bowler, late of Newport, Portsmouth and Providence, has just gone to hang in the National Gallery

By GARRETT D. BYRNES

THE LOVELY LADY on the opposite page has just become your property and mine and that's good. It has taken 205 years for the painting of Mrs. Metcalf Bowler to go from a studio in Boston to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, there to hang with nine other superb Copleys.

Just where the portrait has been in the meantime is partly conjecture, partly a matter of record. It seems probable that from Boston, it went to Newport and then to Portsmouth and then to Providence. Somehow, it got to Lexington, Kentucky, and then to Oyster Bay, Long Island. Until Mrs. Bowler's great-great-granddaughter, Louise Alida Livingston, left the painting to the National Gallery, it seems to have been in the hands of descendants of the Bowlers.

Wrapped in the splendor of her blue satin and lace and with a fortune in sapphires flashing from her throat and ears, the picture of Anne Bowler epitomizes that era in Newport just before the Revolution when men of daring, vision and action and not a little bit of luck became as rich as Croesus overnight, when they could afford to dress their ladies in elegance and send them up to Boston to sit for a young artist named John Singleton Copley. Mrs. Bowler made the trip twice. In 1758, Copley was only 20 and he painted the beauty from Newport holding a cage of birds in her right hand. That painting is now on indefinite loan to the Colby College Art Museum at Waterville, Maine.

Five years later, Mrs. Bowler sat for the artist again. He was largely self-taught and in 1763 was just coming into his own as the finest American portrait painter of the time. He was achieving a more convincing representation of three-dimensional form than any other native artist. After painting an astonishing number of portraits of ladies and gentlemen in the American colonies, Copley in 1774 went to England to gain even greater fame there.

The Metcalf Bowler record is fairly complete because he was a colonial bigwig. Somewhat less is known about the Newport girl who became his wife. She was born at Newport and baptized in Trinity Church on November 8, 1730. Her parents were Major and Bathsheba (Palmer) Fairchild. The father wasn't an officer of anything; Major was his given name. He is referred to as a cooper, and eventually he became a partner of Metcalf Bowler in commercial and shipping enterprises.

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LONDON-BORN BOWLER was 17 when he came to America in 1743 with his father. The father acquired land in Boston on Beacon Hill, and then the Bowlers moved to Portsmouth where the father bought a country estate of 70 acres.

Young Metcalf succeeded mightily in Newport. His ships, four of them privateers, brought home a great deal of money. In May, 1750, he married Anne Fairchild in Trinity and during the next 19 years, they had eleven children, several of whom died young. One of them, Bathsheba, born in 1759, became one of the island belles who so entranced the gentlemen-officers of France who came to Newport during the Revolution. Bashy was married at Portsmouth about 1780 to the Marquis Langfroi de Lisle, an aide-to-camp to Lafayette, and lived out her life in the marquis' chateau at Grenoble.

In 1759, Metcalf Bowler bought from his father the house at Mary and Clarke Streets in Newport and enlarged and beautified it. Today, known as the Vernon House, it is one of the colonial treasures of Newport. Rochambeau had his headquarters there.

Bowler's father married for a second time and took Metcalf's half-brother Charles, born in 1754, to England to be educated. The elder Bowler died intestate and, under the English law and custom, Metcalf as the oldest son took the entire estate. The legend goes that he left 14-year-old Charles penniless in England. However, it gave Metcalf the magnificent estate in Portsmouth.

So now the Bowlers had an elegant town house and a place in the country. Metcalf also had a coach; the only other in Newport was owned by Abraham Redwood. While Anne was having all those children, her husband continued to prosper and hold important offices in the colonial establishment. He represented first Newport and then Portsmouth in the general assembly, he was a judge of the supreme court of the colony, he was one of Rhode Island's delegates to the colonial congress in New York in 1765 to protest the Stamp Act, he signed the Rhode Island Declaration of Independence and he was a warden of Trinity Church. In other words, a big man in the colony with big money.

AT HIS COUNTRY PLACE in Portsmouth, Metcalf Bowler delighted to have the finest gardens in Rhode Island, filled with exotic plants his ships brought back from the West Indies, plants nurtured in hot houses.

If the Copley portrait of 1763 indicates anything, it is that Anne Bowler had the taste and beauty to be more than an adequate chatelaine in Newport and Portsmouth during these years of affluence.

Because Metcalf looms so large and Anne so slightly in the known record, there are a couple of matters one can only wonder about.

Did she, for example, savor the excellence of the cider which came from the Rhode Island greening trees in the Portsmouth orchards? It seems likely.

The greening apples of the Bowler estate were justly famous and the liveliest story about them pops up in the Seventh Baking of "Shepherd Tom" Hazard's *Jonny-Cake Papers*. According to Hazard who, for some years, lived at Vacluse in Portsmouth, the estate adjoining what had been the country place of the Bowlers, a Capt. Green Chausan, skipper of a Bowler ship in the East Indian trade, rescued the son of a Persian shah. The father, understandably grateful, gave the captain a young apple tree which was a direct lineal descendant of the Tree of Knowledge which Eve made famous. The captain gave the sapling to his boss who nourished it first in one of his greenhouses and then put it out in an orchard.

The tree flourished and put forth fruit and Metcalf Bowler discovered that the apples from the sunny, southerly side of the tree made superb cider. "Shepherd Tom" tells of a dinner party given by Bowler at which the guests were Washington, Lafayette, Rochambeau, Admiral de Ternay, William Ellery, Dr. Ezra Stiles and Parson Hopkins. In addition to the 12 bottles of what Hazard called the Eden champagne, Bowler provided a like number of bottles of the finest French champagne. The guests sampled the cider and the wine from France alternately and pronounced the Eden champagne superior. In fact, all except Washington wept over its excellence and the clergymen vowed that thereafter they would take a kindlier view of Mother Eve.

One can only conjecture that Anne Bowler, at one time or another, also sampled this ambrosia.

More to the point, perhaps, did Anne know that her husband was a British spy during the Revolution?

The Bowlers had sold their mansion on Clarke Street in Newport to William Vernon in 1773 and retired to their country place. The war put an end to Metcalf's income from shipping and other sources and then the English came, despoiling Aquidneck. The Bowlers' country estate was ravaged and times were hard when Metcalf began a correspondence with Sir Henry Clinton, commanding the British forces in America. In return for protection from the occupying army plus some cold cash, Metcalf Bowler offered to provide the British with intelligence about the Americans.

Until the Clinton papers came into the possession of the great Clements Library at Ann Arbor, Michigan, in

1926, Metcalf Bowler had been accounted very much an American patriot. But a study of the Clinton papers revealed that Bowler, whose code name was "Rusticus," had made overtures to the British in return for favors and money. He seems to have gotten little of either.

DID ANNE KNOW?

Their fortunes at low ebb, the Bowlers moved to Providence in the early 1780s and Metcalf Bowler set up as a shop keeper on the west side of the great Weybosset Bridge. Later, he ran a genteel boarding house on Benefit Street, nearly opposite the old State House.

In 1789, he died and was carried a few blocks north for burial in the church yard of St. John's. On February 7, 1803, Anne died and was buried by his side. Their graves in the cathedral close are marked by simple, beautifully carved headstones.

Entirely appropriate for such a lovely lady who had known good and bad times was the obituary which appeared on February 22, 1803, in the Newport Mercury. It read:

"DIED—On Monday evening, the 7th inst. at Providence in the 71st year of her age, Mrs. Ann Bowler, relict of Metcalf Bowler, Esq. late of Newport — A lady, the recollection of whose amiable disposition, and pleasing, unaffected deportment, joined to a conscientious discharge of the several Christian, social and domestic duties, while moving in a sphere of ease and affluence, in this her native town, awakens in the breast of her numerous connections, the most lively emotions of grief for her death, and of respect for her memory—fincerely, therefore, do they sympathize with her afflicted family and friends, on a bereavement, the fruit of which no medicine can extract, no argument of consolation affuage, but that firm assurance, that she is transplanted, from a world of pain and sorrow, to a state of endless bliss and happiness — to receive the reward of a virtuous, well-spent life."

Thus, the lovely lady the young Copley painted twice. In the books about John Singleton Copley you'll find several references to his portrait of Metcalf Bowler. The painting seems to have been lost track of in the 1870s when it was mentioned as being in Providence.

In one of the *Jonny-Cake Papers* footnotes, there is a tantalizing reference: "A portrait (of Metcalf Bowler) is said to be in the possession of John Lippitt Snow of Providence."

Old paintings have a miraculous way of surfacing unexpectedly. Maybe someday, somehow, the lost portrait will come to light and be hung beside that of Anne Fairchild Bowler in the National Gallery. □