

Winter 1977

The New-England
GALAXY



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OLD STURBRIDGE VILLAGE

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THE NEW-ENGLAND GALAXY

VOL. XVIII, No. 3, WINTER 1977

Contents

Frontispiece, Winter's Toll at the Quaker Meetinghouse. *Photograph by Donald F. Eaton* 2

Seeing the Elephant, *by Gerald Carson* 3

Allium Capa: Three Centuries of Onions, *by Howard Russell* 12

Boston's Poetic Slave, *by Marilyn Jensen* 22

Sarah Kemble Knight, *by Patricia Medeiros* 30

With Calvin Coolidge in Northampton, *by Phillip M. Perry* 37

Rhode Island's Battle of the Stamp, *by Donald J. Boisvert* 44

Grandpa and His Houses, *by Lois Bailey Wills* 52

Taking a Turn, *by L. A. Davidson* 65

The Hand of Winter, *Photographs by Donald F. Eaton* 66

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©1976 Old Sturbridge Inc. Published quarterly by Old Sturbridge Inc. Sturbridge, Mass. 01566. Printed by The Meriden Gravure Co. Second-class postage paid at Sturbridge, Massachusetts. Single copy \$1.25.

Rhode Island's Battle of the Stamp

by Donald J. Boisvert

During the summer of 1939, the attention of American newspaper readers was galvanized by glaring headlines reporting on the military exploits of Adolph Hitler and his Nazi war machine—events which foreshadowed the beginning of the Second World War. But Rhode Island, the smallest state, was already at war—not with Nazi Germany or any member of the Axis Powers, but with the *United States Post Office Department!*

It all began on July 19, 1939. Buried among the momentous news that filled the newspapers of the day was an item from the wire services announcing a Post Office Department proposal to issue a new series of commemorative postage stamps. Included in the series, the article stated, would be a stamp bearing the name and likeness of Rhode Island-born artist Gilbert Charles Stuart, America's famous painter of George Washington and other patriots.

Except among stamp dealers and collectors, the news quite likely went largely unnoticed. In Rhode Island, however, the announce-

ment left local Stuart scholars aghast and touched off a series of broadsides between that State and Washington that reverberated through the halls of the staid old Post Office Department for fourteen months.

Such a controversy could not go nameless for long. Before smoke from the first volley had cleared, the feud had a name. It was known locally as the Battle of the Stamp.

That July 19th announcement rocked the dusty alcoves of Rhode Island historical societies. "Not so!" cried heated historians. "Stuart's name was not Gilbert Charles!" and immediately set about to prove it. Mossy scholars poring over musty old records disinterred the following information.

The first reference to Gilbert Stuart's middle name was found in an early book on American art by William Dunlap entitled, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States*. Published in 1834 by Dunlap himself, this important two-volume work lists the names of most early American artists beginning with the colonial

The old Narragansett Meetinghouse where Stuart was baptized. Photo courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society.



period. Some errors in historical facts, however, crept into Dunlap's writings.

One reason for these errors may lie in the method employed in gathering information. Since at the time Dunlap wrote, modes of transportation were still crude, journeying long distances in order to search out information first hand was not the practice of historians. Most writers obtained their facts through correspondence, and Dunlap wrote letters to living artists asking for biographical material. For information on the deceased, he wrote to friends and surviving members of the family. Many of his correspondents no doubt avoided the time-consuming task of seeking out records, and it appears that the accuracy of much of Dunlap's information was dependent upon the memory of his correspondents.

Thus the Gilbert Stuart entry in

Dunlap's work is not entirely correct. Regarding the famous artist he wrote:

Having arrived at that period which is made memorable in the history of American arts, by the commencement of the career in portrait painting of one who has yet no rival, we, in accordance with our plan, give here a biographical notice of Gilbert Charles Stuart, born in 1754. As M. [sic] Stuart dropped the middle name of "Charles," we will give our reasons for restoring it to him. He was thus baptized, and it marks the attachment of his father to the worthless dynasty so long adhered to by the Scotch. He bore the three names until after manhood. Dr. Waterhouse, his friend and schoolfellow, in a letter before us, dated 27th of May, 1883, says, "I have cut from one of Stuart's letters, his signature of G. C. Stuart, i.e. Gilbert Charles Stuart. I have some doubt whether his widow and children ever knew that he had the middle name of Charles." When writing his name on his own portrait in 1778, he omitted the



Gilbert Stuart birthplace and snuff mill, North Kingstown, Rhode Island, c. 1900. Photo by W. B. Davidson, courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society.

"C." The inscription is "G. Stuart, *Pictor se ipso pinxit, A.D. 1778, aetatis sua 24.*" [G. Stuart, self-portrait painted in 1778 at age of 24.]

The errors in this entry relate to Stuart's date of birth, given as 1754, and the assertion that he was baptized Gilbert Charles Stuart.

Stuart was born on December 3, 1755, not 1754. He was baptized in the Old Narragansett Church, and his baptismal record from the original volume owned by St. Paul's Episcopal Church and now in the safekeeping of the clerk of the town of North Kingstown, Rhode Island, indicates that Stuart was christened Gilbert, not Gilbert Charles.

A second source of information on early painters is Henry T. Tuckerman's *Book of the Artist*, published in 1867. In one part of his book Tuckerman refers to the artist as Gilbert Stuart. One hundred pages later he offers three factual errors in one sentence by stating, "Charles

Gilbert Stuart was born in Narragansett, R.I. in 1756!" No one before or since seems to have referred to Stuart as *Charles*; he was born not in Narragansett but in the town of North Kingstown; and the year of his birth, as previously stated, is 1755, not 1756.

Another reference to Stuart's middle name was made by his daughter Jane. Jane wrote a series of articles about her famous father for *Scribner's Monthly*. In the issue of March 1877, in an article entitled, "The Youth of Gilbert Stuart by His Daughter," Stuart's baptismal record is reproduced, showing that his given name was Gilbert. In spite of this evidence before her, Jane Stuart wrote in referring to her grandparents: "Their son Gilbert *Charles* Stuart, artist, was born on the 3rd of December, 1755."

Nowhere else in her copious writings, however, did she refer to her father as Gilbert Charles.

The most reliable early biographer of Stuart is George C. Mason. In 1879 Mason published *The Life and Works of Gilbert Stuart*, a biography apparently commissioned by Jane Stuart. In the preface to his work, the author made this statement:

This biography of Gilbert Stuart was written at the request of Miss Jane Stuart, the only surviving member of Mr. Stuart's family. Miss Stuart intended to prepare it herself, and had published three papers on the subject in *Scribner's Monthly*; but finding the work too laborious, owing to the demands of her profession on her time, and the difficulty experienced in searching out the pictures painted by Stuart (now widely scattered), it was assigned by her to other hands . . ."

Referring to the painter's name Mason wrote:

To the house and mill on the Petaquamscott [*sic*] he [Gilbert Stuart, Sr.] took his bride, and in that quiet retreat three children were born to them—James, who died in infancy, Ann, who became the wife of Henry Newton and the mother of Stuart Newton [the artist], and Gilbert, who was born December 3rd, 1755."

Mason then entered the baptismal record as follows:

April 11th, 1756, being Palm Sunday, Doctor McSparran read prayers, preached, and baptized a child named Gilbert *Stewart*, son of Gilbert *Stewart*, the Snuff-grinder.

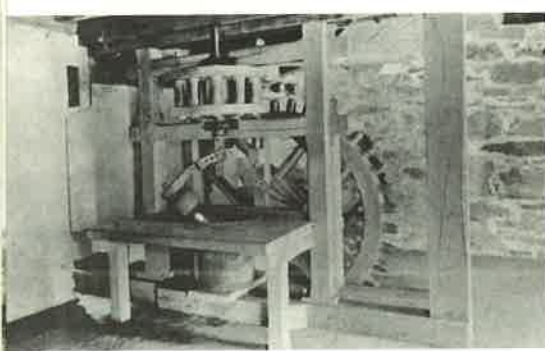


Gilbert Stuart, engraved portrait by D. Edwin from the original painting by John Neagle. Photo courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society.

By way of explanation, Mason wrote:

In this entry two things are noticeable—the spelling of Stuart's name, and absence of "Charles" after the Gilbert: he having been known in early life as Gilbert Charles Stuart. The first may be easily traced to inadvertency in making the entry; and the inserting of Charles in the child's name was probably an after thought of his father, who was as much a Jacobite as was his friend and countryman, Dr. Moffat. The "Charles", Stuart dropped in after years, and answered only to the name of Gilbert Stuart.

Later Rhode Island historians, speculating on the reasons for the difference in the spelling of the family name, have written that



Interior of Gilbert Stuart snuff mill
 Photo courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society.

Bishop MacSparran spelled it in the old Scottish way, *Stewart*, for it was apparently only after Mary Stuart's exile to France that the spelling was changed to *Stuart*.

In the latter part of his statement concerning the name "Charles," Mason was alluding to Gilbert, Sr.'s obvious interest in the exploits of Charles Edward Stuart, the pretender to the English throne. Known variously as "Bonnie Prince Charlie," "The Young Pretender," "The Young Chevalier," Charles was born in Rome, the eldest son of James Edward Stuart and grandson of the deposed James II of England and Scotland. In 1745 Charles tried to win back the English throne with the aid of the Highland clans of Scotland, but his army was decisively defeated on Culloden Moor. Stuart escaped to France and lived on the Continent for the rest of his life.

Some historians have written that Jane Stuart harbored a life-long belief that her Scottish grandfather fought in this Second Jacobite Rebellion (1745-46) on the side of

Prince Charles Edward, "The Young Pretender," proof that she and her father were linked to the royal house of Stuart.

Study of the Stuart genealogy, however, does not support this claim, and most historians have discarded it as romantic wishful thinking on the part of Jane and perhaps of her grandfather as well.

Why Gilbert Stuart was given a middle name at all may have been a matter of simple practicality. Two Gilbert Stuarts in the same household must have presented some problems of identification; thus another distinctive name was in order.

Why the name Charles? If the Stuarts were infatuated with the exploits of The Young Pretender, as they appear to have been, and if Gilbert, Sr., did indeed believe that he was of the royal House of Stuart, what better appellation for his son than that of Charles, after the darling of the Scots and champion of lost causes?

The supposition that Gilbert, Sr., was preoccupied with thoughts of

lineage with the House of Stuart is reinforced by the fact that he named his first son, James, probably after either the Young Pretender's father, James Edward Stuart, or his grandfather, the deposed James II of England.

Why did Gilbert Stuart drop his middle name?

The earliest use of the name Charles, and then only of the initials "G.C.," is in a letter probably written in 1776; the latest appears in another letter written in 1783. No evidence of later use of the name has been found.

This period of seven years in which Stuart appears to have used the middle name of Charles corresponds roughly with the early years of his sojourn in England. He sailed for England in 1775 and lived there until 1787. He next lived in Dublin for five years before returning to America either in the fall of 1792 or early in 1793.

Did Gilbert Stuart, regaled during his youth with stories of royal lineage, search out the family genealogy while in Europe and, finding no validity to family claims of linkage with the House of Stuart, drop his middle name forever?

To get back to the twentieth-century controversy: through the remainder of 1939 and into early 1940, the pot of contention boiled—never quite spilling over, never quite simmering down. Cor-



The controversial Gilbert Stuart stamp issued September 5, 1940.

respondence between Rhode Island and Washington, D.C., flew as Stuart scholars continued the task of assembling information with which to confront the Post Office Department.

Tremors from the first quake had barely subsided when, in the summer of 1940, postal officials caused another, announcing that cancellation of first-day covers and first-day sales of the Stuart stamp would be made from the Post Office in the town of Narragansett, Rhode Island.

In North Kingstown, Stuart's birthplace, fists pounded council tables in anger as town fathers received the news. Two injustices in succession were more than they could take. "Of all the asinine, stupid blunders!" roared one official. "Don't those idiots in Washington know anything?"

Their anger was well placed. In addition to the obvious errors in Stuart's name and birthplace, the town of North Kingstown was being denied the opportunity of receiving priceless national publicity. Instead, Narragansett would scoop up the honors!

At a loss to understand the logic behind the choice of towns for first-day sales, local historians now applied their searching lens to this second obvious blunder by the Post Office Department.

Gilbert Stuart was born in the town of North Kingstown, Kings—now Washington—County, Rhode Island. Again, as in the case of his name, careless writers have erroneously stated that he was born in Narragansett, without explaining what Narragansett was in Stuart's day.

In the *Dictionary of American Biography*, Volume XVIII, the article on Stuart states:

The often repeated statement that he was born in Narragansett is incorrect without the explanation that "Narragansett" at that time was merely a popular name for "the Narragansett Country," that vague territory west of Narragansett Bay and, after 1677, south of East Greenwich.

In the article "The Youth of Gilbert Stuart . . ." in *Scribner's Monthly* for March 1877, Jane Stuart wrote: "The house still stands today as it did on December

3, 1755, in the town of North Kingston [*sic*], a quaint, gable roofed old house."

The house still stands today in the town of North Kingstown. The town of Narragansett was carved out of South Kingstown in 1901, 146 years after Gilbert Stuart's birth.

Armed with documented information about Gilbert Stuart's name and birthplace, Rhode Island officials fired off a voluminous bundle of evidence to Postmaster James Farley together with a plea from William H. Vanderbilt, then Governor of Rhode Island, asking correction of grave errors of historical fact. In time, a reply was received from a third assistant postmaster-general stating that the views expressed by the officials would be given "due consideration."

Confident that the overwhelming and meticulously compiled evidence would suffice to cause the Post Office Department to alter its plans, historians, philatelists, public officials, and citizens alike leaned back to await favorable word from Washington.

On September 5, 1940, a blue pall of fury hung over the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations as 434,521 "sickly-green" one-cent stamps bearing a poor likeness of America's most famous portrait painter, and engraved with the name of Gilbert *Charles* Stuart

went on sale at the Post Office in *Narragansett*, Rhode Island.

Incredibly, the Post Office Department had paid no heed whatsoever to Rhode Island efforts to correct the historical errors of postal officials!

Thus Rhode Island's Battle of the Stamp came to an end, but not without a series of parting shots from Stuart scholar J. H. Morgan:

"Stuart the famous painter," wrote Morgan, "was christened Gilbert but the wisecracs of our Post

Office Department have seen fit to dub him Gilbert Charles Stuart . . . from these careless and rather stupid blunders many will believe that Stuart's given name was Gilbert Charles and that he was born in the present town of Narragansett."

With resounding finality Morgan concluded: "He was christened 'Gilbert,' he used the name for sixty years of his life, the record of his burial, and the tablet which marks his grave so name him, and HIS NAME WAS GILBERT STUART!"

DONALD J. BOISVERT lives in an 18th-century house, is a part-time farmer and a Lieutenant Colonel in the prestigious Kentish Guards, Rhode Island Militia. His articles on Rhode Island history have appeared in *Yankee* magazine and in numerous newspapers and regional publications.

TORNADO!

"They on their journey past & saw the spot where lately stood the house & barns (Smith's Tavern in Orange) now swept clear of every movable they had by the wind Sabbath eve before last & scattered for many miles. One of the feather beds was found on Hubbardston common, and many boards, shingles &c. were found in this Town, supposed to come from Orange—a heavy drag & chain was found looped on a tree—about half of the roof of a barn was found in Fitzburg supposed to come from that quarter or region—the family (Mr. Smiths) saved their lives probably by going into the celler, except a girl, who was crushed to death by the tavern—Two houses in Northfield were blown down—and twelve barns were swept away in the course of the hurricane. Four lives were lost & several people wounded—How grateful ought we to be who escaped this awful scene."

Journal of Ruth Henshaw Bascom,
17 Sept. 1821, American Anti-
quarian Society.