

The Mysterious Denison Limner



The Mystery of the "Denison Limner" Portraits

Pictured above are two Denison ancestors whose portraits were gifted to the National Gallery of Art by Colonel Edgar William Garbisch and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch. The identity of the paintings' subjects has never been a mystery; they are Captain Elisha Denison (1752- 1841) and Elizabeth Noyes Denison (1750 - 1831). The husband and wife were both second-great-grandchildren to Captain George Denison and Ann Borodell. The true mystery is the identity of the artist; were they a Denison?



The unknown painter of these Denison family portraits is over a 200 year-old mystery. The artist's subjects were all from the Stonington, Connecticut area and fit the fashion of portraiture of the time period (1790s/1810s).

One theory is simply that the artist was Captain Elisha Denison himself due to the fact that a portrait of his son depicts the child holding a card that flaunts his father's name. Could that have been the artist signing his work?

Another theory of the artist's identity comes from Mr. Ralph Thomas of the New Haven Historical Society. In 1956 Thomas theorized that the Denison portraits were painted by artist Joseph Steward. Thomas' evidence for the artists' identity is based on a receipt of sale tying Steward's name to a portrait known to be his. In 1789, Steward made note of a paid invoice for Mr. John Avery and Lucy Avery's portraits; these portraits share such strong similarities with the Denison portraits that this theory cannot be discounted.

The Denison Limner (nga.gov)