



PORTRAIT OF JOHN WATSON, BY HIMSELF.

## JOHN WATSON,

First Professional Painter in America.

**T**WENTY-THREE years before Benjamin West was born, and eight years before the advent of Smybert, there came to this country a young artist named John Watson. Watson is the first professional painter in America of whom we have any record. He was born near Dumfries, Scotland, in 1685. He came to America in 1715, and settled at Perth Amboy, then the capital of the province of New Jersey.

Little is known of his boyhood days. His parents were very poor, and at an early age he was sent into the world to shift for himself. He learned the art of house and sign painting, and became an expert draftsman. He first commenced his art education by copying, in his leisure moments, prints and any drawings that chance threw in his way. At last, so enamored did he become with the work, that he neglected everything else, and set up as a portrait painter in Dumfries.

There is a story that he wooed a pretty country lass, whose father owned many acres of land, and that one evening, about a week before the wedding, he called to see her, but she was not at home. Thinking that she awaited him in the garden, where they were wont to spend their time on pleasant summer evenings, he went there. Walking down the winding path, he came within a few feet of the rustic bench. He heard voices. He halted, and silently parting the boughs of a bush, he looked through the twigs. She was there as he anticipated, but not alone. The man who sat close beside her with his arms about her, was a young piper, whom Watson knew very well. He turned away and left them without a word or sound to betray his presence. It is needless to add that she never became his wife after what he had witnessed.

Utterly dejected, he emigrated to America, to seek refuge from heart troubles. He never again sought the hand of a woman in marriage. Watson was transformed from a genial spirit into a sort of cynic. Years afterward, when his nephew expressed a desire to marry, Watson was greatly irritated. "Never trust a woman," he would exclaim, bitterly. Watson died a bachelor, at the age of eighty-three years.

In his new home at Perth Amboy he opened a studio, and soon acquired a reputation as an artist. Watson's fame seems to have spread much beyond the capital of New Jersey. There is a partial list of his paintings in the possession of Mr. Benson J. Lossing, the American historian, which bears the names of ex-Governor Sir William Keith and Lady Keith, of Pennsylvania, ex-Governor Spottswood, of Virginia, and other persons of distinction in Pennsylvania, Virginia, Delaware, New York and Rhode Island; also Governors Burnet and Morris, and Arent Schuyler, of New Jersey. Watson also painted several miniature portraits of himself. Each of these bore a record of his age when it was executed. In those days portraiture paid so poorly that Watson combined with the practice of his art the profession of a money-lender. He became rich, owned houses in Perth Amboy, and land in the neighborhood. At the age of forty-five Watson visited his old home in Scotland.

On his return to his adopted country, he brought with him a collection of paintings, and formed an attractive art gallery in his house. This, probably, is the first picture-gallery ever seen in America. The painter possessed two houses in Perth Amboy which stood near each other, one of them being appropriated to these paintings, which, it is said, covered the walls. The other was his dwelling, a frame building, having its window-shutters covered with "heads of heroes, and of kings with awe-inspiring crowns."

When old age approached, Watson prevailed upon his niece and nephew, Mary and Alexander Watson, to come to his home at Perth

Amboy. Alexander, who had been a midshipman in the royal navy, became manager of the painter's growing estate and the expectant heir to all his possessions. The old painter became blind, deaf, and at length bedridden. He remained in this condition for several years.

The house in which they dwelt needed repairing, but the artist would not allow expenses to be incurred in making repairs. The nephew, relying upon his uncle's inability to move, see or hear, concluded a bargain with a carpenter to put a new roof on the house. The carpenter agreed to wait for his pay until the old painter would "shuffle off his mortal coil," "which must be very soon," said Alexander, "in the course of nature, you know."

"Accordingly," says Dunlap, "the house was unroofed and reroofed while the owner was living in it, perfectly unconscious of the important operation which was in progress over his head. The strokes of hammers, however, occasionally reached his ear, penetrating the obstacles interposed by art and nature, and the heir was startled by the question, 'What is the meaning of that pecking and knocking that I hear every day?' The nephew, taken by surprise, answered: 'Pecking? pecking? Oh! ay! 'tis the woodpeckers; they are in amazing quantities this year; leave the trees and attack the roofs of the houses; there is no driving them off.' When the roof was finished, the saucy birds ceased pecking."

At last, in the summer of 1768, the venerable painter died. He was buried near the southeast corner of St. Peter's Episcopal Church cemetery, at Perth Amboy. At the head of his grave is a white stone bearing the inscription:

HERE LIES INTERRED THE BODY OF  
JOHN WATSON  
WHO DEPARTED THIS LIFE AUGUST 22, 1768,  
AGED 83 YEARS.

The nephew inherited the property of his uncle. As soon as it came into his possession, he started off "in search of a wife." His travels were not in vain, and he returned to Amboy, bringing with him a very amiable and interesting woman as his wife. Up to this time Alexander had been obliged to lead the life of a bachelor, for his uncle would never listen patiently to his occasional expression of a desire to marry.

At the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, Alexander was compelled to flee from the storm which threatened the adherents to the royal cause in New Jersey. He was afterward captured and carried to Connecticut as a prisoner of war. The deserted house and picture gallery were demolished by a company of New Jersey militiamen. What became of

Mr. Watson's collection of paintings is not known, and as none of his own of any size have come down to us, we are left comparatively in ignorance of his proficiency in the art. There are, however, a number of his india ink sketches in existence.

FRANK E. WASKA,  
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A TOILER, FROM A PAINTING BY DAINGERFIELD.

### THE ART SITUATION IN DENVER.

TO many people, even in this enlightened state of the world, the words Colorado and Denver still suggest the wild and unkempt frontier, wild cowboys, wild bears, and bare Indians. But the State of Colorado is a State of surprises. In Denver and Colorado Springs one finds beautiful architecture, many cultivated people and much refinement, and in a half-day's journey in certain directions one may reach primeval solitudes where a tenpenny nail is a bonanza if one needs and does not happen to have one. Colorado people are cosmopolitan; a large wealth per capita has made them travelers, and very many have visited Europe and are more or less familiar with the art treasures of the old world. This fact has been adverse to resident artists; there was a "can there any good