

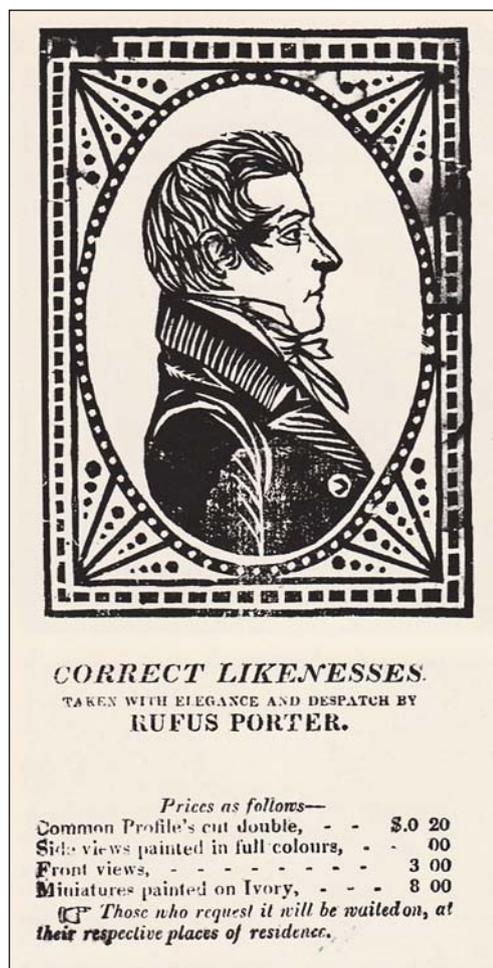
THANK GOODNESS FOR GRANNY NOTES

Rufus Porter and his New England Sitters

by Deborah M. Child

Reconstructing an artist's oeuvre is always a challenge. Although the miniatures of Rufus Porter (1792–1884) are greatly admired, many questions remain as to how his distinctive style evolved. Fortunately, inscriptions found on backing boards and attached to frames, often referred to as “granny notes” since they were frequently added by elderly relatives, have helped identify more than a dozen individuals who sat for Porter. This information has helped clarify the hallmarks of Porter's style and proved instrumental for establishing where he traveled and how his approach to miniatures developed over two decades from 1815 until 1835 (Figs. 1 & 2).

Born in West Boxford, Massachusetts, at the age of twelve, Rufus Porter spent six months in studies at the Fryeburg Academy, Fryeburg, Maine. Despite his lack of additional formal education, he would spend his life pushing boundaries—physically, intellectually, and artistically. Beginning in 1807, he was apprenticed as a shoemaker in West Boxford. When that failed to capture his interest, he then played the fife and fiddle in Portland, Maine, before commencing employment as a house and sign painter in the community. With the outbreak of the War of 1812, he then enlisted in the West Boxford militia company stationed in Portland and painted gunboats and served as a musician. In 1814, he did a brief stint as a teacher before his attention was diverted to the



CORRECT LIKENESSES.
TAKEN WITH ELEGANCE AND DESPATCH BY
RUFUS PORTER.

Prices as follows—

Common Profile's cut double, - -	\$0 20
Side views painted in full colours, - -	00
Front views, - - - - -	3 00
Miniatures painted on Ivory, - - - -	8 00

() *Those who request it will be waited on, at their respective places of residence.*

Fig. 1: Advertising handbill for Rufus Porter. Engraving, 8 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches. American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.

This is the only known handbill advertising the artist's fee schedule for his “Correct Likenesses.”

designing and building of gristmills. In 1816, he moved to New Haven, Connecticut, and assumed the role of dance master. As Jean Lipman, author of the first monograph on the artist,¹ observed he was clearly a true pioneer.

When Porter began to pursue the art of miniature painting in earnest is still being ascertained. Nor is it clear if he was ever formally instructed in the genre. In 2007, a Maine auction included three previously unknown miniature portraits of the family of Benjamin Lane of Minot, Maine. One was inscribed on the backboard in chalk: “R. Porter” (Fig. 3). Like Porter, Lane served with the militia in Portland, Maine, during the War of 1812 and undoubtedly made the artist's acquaintance at that time.² These watercolors, attributed here to Porter, are the earliest known by his hand. They attest to his early interest in miniature painting as well as demonstrate his delicate touch and natural ability to render a likeness. The distinctive grain-painted frames in which they were housed were undoubtedly painted by Porter as well. Having spent his formative years as a decorative painter of houses, gunboats, drums, and trade signs, he would naturally attend to his frames as much as his efforts on paper.

They appear on other early miniatures attributed to the artist³ as well as house many of the family registers printed by Henry Bowen in Boston, which Porter published and hand-colored.

By 1820, Porter had built his own version of a camera obscura,⁴ which he mounted on a handcart to take with him on his travels across New England and beyond. Owing to his dependence on this device, which keeps perspective true during sittings, Porter is often not considered a “genuine” miniature artist. It seems he did not use the device to create traditional black and white silhouettes, for no documented examples are known, but instead used it as a time-saver to capture the profile of his sitter, which he then painted. Its use increased his productivity to such an extent that it has been estimated he had a lifetime production of about a thousand small portraits.⁵

Seven miniatures that have all the hallmarks of Porter’s hand may have been made about the time he built this device. They all bear granny notes clearly identifying them as members of the family of Israel Porter (born in Bedford, Mass, 1746–1837) (Fig. 4, 4a) and were done in Cambridge, Massachusetts, sometime in 1820. At that time, Rufus Porter was soliciting subscriptions for his first publication *A Complete Selection of Valuable and Curious Arts*.⁶ This was the vocation for which he is best known today—the publisher of *Scientific American Magazine*.

Israel Porter, with no known direct relationship to Rufus Porter, was a tavern keeper in Cambridge and revered by his clientele for his wit and his vigor. Israel’s miniature is a prime example of Porter’s ability to invest his sitters with personality and nobility well beyond that of his contemporaries, who also promised “a correct likeness.” It also shows how in a span of five years, how quickly Porter had managed to perfect the art of rendering a likeness. Gone is the tentativeness seen in the earlier Lane miniature. Instead he boldly wields his brush with a complete mastery of his medium.

The family grouping consists of a watercolor of Israel; two watercolors and an ivory of his second wife Sarah Warland (1753–1825)⁷; a watercolor of his son Joseph Porter (1774–1827); and a watercolor and an ivory miniature of his grandson Abraham Edwards (1796–1870).⁸ To date, these two miniatures on ivory are



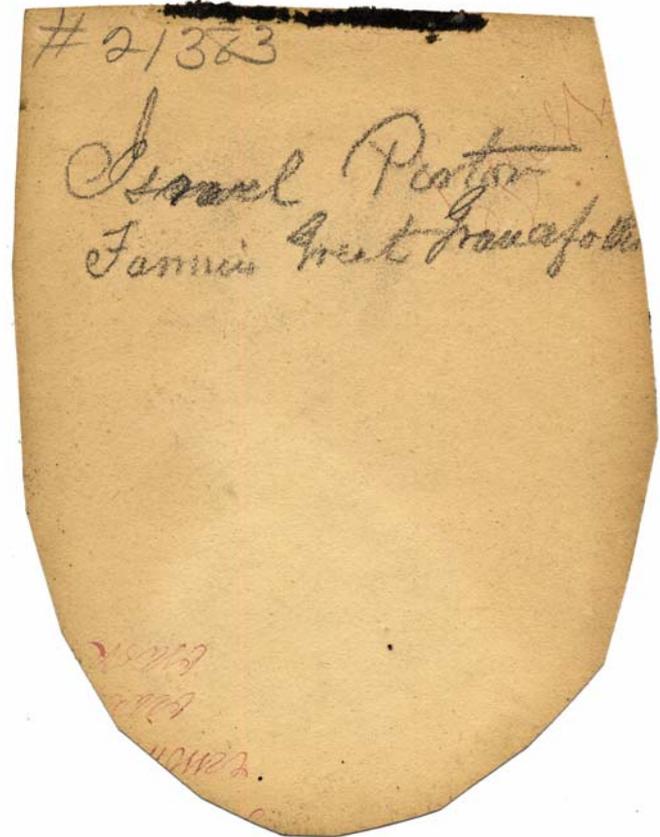
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Fig. 2: Attributed to Rufus Porter, *Portrait of an Officer*, ca/ 1820. Watercolor, gouache & graphite on card, 4 x 3½ inches. Collection of Tracey Goodnow. Photography by: Michael Fredericks.

Although it is not signed, this miniature has many of the hallmarks of Porter’s hand:

1. Paint is applied with great precision—individual eyelashes and shafts of hair are painstakingly rendered
2. The sitter is posed in profile with an absolutely forward gaze
3. The pupil of the sitter’s eye has a distinctive oval shape
4. A deep brown/red line defines the separation of the sitter’s lips
5. There is a distinctive “c” shape to the hollow of his ear
6. Light and shadow are rendered with great skill

Fig. 3: Attributed to Rufus Porter (1792–1884), Child of Lane Family, Minot, Maine, ca. 1815. Inscribed on backboard in a later hand: “R. Porter.” Watercolor, approx. 6 x 4½ inches (framed). Original Porter grained frame. Descended in the family. Charles M. Talbot Associates, Poland, Maine, 2007 estate auction. Image courtesy of Linda Carter Lefko.



Figs. 4, 4a: Attributed to Rufus Porter (1792–1884), *Israel Porter* (1746–1837), Cambridge, Mass., ca. 1820. Watercolor and graphite, 3 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Private collection.

Brushstrokes in the margins as seen on this miniature are another hallmark of Porter’s hand. The inscription on the back of this watercolor is a classic example of a granny note. It reads “Israel Porter/ Fannie’s Great-grandfather,” which is consistent with Israel Porter’s family tree. Fanny Loretta Porter (1845–1899) was his great-granddaughter through his eldest son Joseph Porter. Given the wording, it seems plausible the portrait was inscribed by Fannie’s spouse Grove Gilbert (1843–1919).

the only ones recognized as being by the hand of Porter.

The inscriptions are not contemporary to the time the miniatures were painted and occasionally are quite misleading. For example, the same hand that identified Israel Porter as the sitter for the watercolor portrait (Fig.4), erroneously identified the watercolor of Abraham Edwards (Fig. 5) as “John Porter/Fannie’s Great uncle on the Edwards side of the family.” Fannie’s great uncle John would have been John Porter, born in 1782. He died in Albany, New York, in 1810. Abraham Edwards Jr. was clearly the sitter for the miniature on paper as well as on ivory (Fig. 6), which is identified as Abraham Edwards by a granny note on the back (Fig. 6a).⁹ The miniatures descended in two different branches of the family and are privately owned. Collectively, they provide a glimpse into the artist’s time spent in Cambridge, showing us some of his earliest patrons and the social circles in which he moved.

Given that Porter made three portraits of Israel’s wife Sarah, it seems plausible she might have been the artist’s entrée to the

family. Sarah was a native of Cambridge and the widow of Abel Moore. Before his death in 1794, the couple operated a tavern on North Avenue, the favored meeting place for the Porcellian Club of Harvard College, formally organized in 1791 and noted for its outstanding library. As such, Sarah would have been well acquainted with the Cambridge intelligentsia. In 1796, shortly after her marriage to Israel, the couple purchased the Anchor Tavern, another favorite watering place for Harvard students as well as a popular venue for social gatherings and dancing classes.¹⁰ As Porter was also a dancing instructor and a fiddler, this is perhaps how he first became acquainted with this family. Perhaps he stayed at the tavern and painted the family’s portraits in lieu of payment, a common practice of itinerant artists at this time.

The Israel Porter family may also have been responsible for bringing more work the artist’s way. Cambridge bookstore owner and printer William Hilliard printed the materials for the Washington Benevolent Society, of which Israel Porter was an



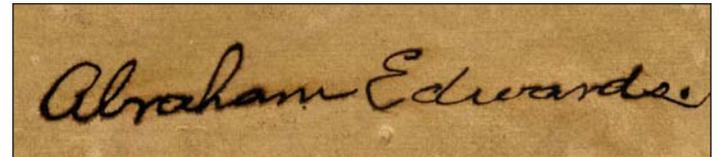
Fig. 5: Attributed to Rufus Porter (1792-1884), *Abraham H. Edwards* (1796-1870), Cambridge, Mass., ca. 1819. Watercolor and graphite, 3½ x 2¾ inches. Private collection.

The grandson of Israel Porter, Abraham's miniature has all the critical hallmarks of Porter's hand: the oval-shaped pupil, the mouth is crisply delineated with a deep brown/red line, and the ear has a distinctive c-shaped hollow. The brushstrokes around the margins are typical of Porter's work and are also present on figure 4 as noted.

active member and a host for their gatherings. At least three members of the Hilliard family sat for Porter.¹¹

By 1822, Porter was on the move again and offering to paint rooms in elegant full colors at prices less than the cost of wallpaper. In his advertisement in *Providence Patriot* of November 20, 1822, he invites "Those gentlemen who are desirous of spending the gloomy winter months amidst pleasant groves and verdant fields . . . to apply as above [Wesson's Coffee-House], where a specimen of the work may be seen, and where he will also paint "correct likenesses, in full colors, for two dollars."

During this time, Porter continued to make advances in miniature painting, investing his portraits with a distinctive elegance and refinement. A stunning double portrait (Fig. 7) is inscribed on the back of the frame: "wedding picture of Allan S. Dewer's great-great-grandparents Smith (mother's side of family)." Thanks to this inscription, the sitters can be firmly identified as Jonathan Smith and his wife Pamela Moore. The couple married in Chelmsford,

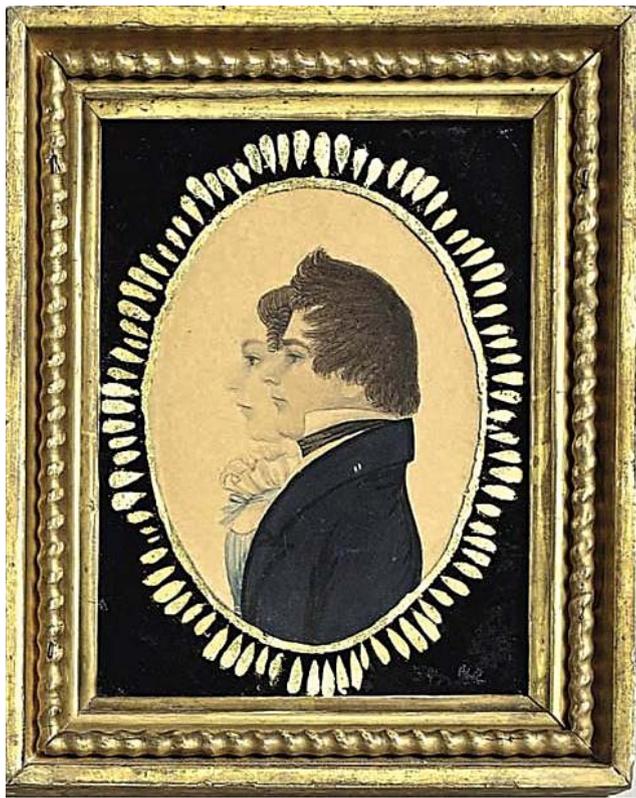


Figs. 6, 6a: Attributed to Rufus Porter (1792-1884), *Abraham H. Edwards*, Cambridge, Mass., ca. 1819. Labeled on back in ink "Abraham Edwards." Watercolor on ivory. Oval sight size: 3½ x 2¾ inches. Private collection.

As demonstrated here, the medium of ivory adds luminosity and richness to a portrait. According to the artist's handbill, this would have cost \$8 or four times the price of "a side view in full colour." The choice of an ivory support may have been prompted by Abraham's graduation from Harvard College in 1819.

Massachusetts, on November 25, 1825; the miniature was most likely painted in commemoration of this event. This miniature is an especially good example of the precision with which Porter painted by this time. Every eyelash and shaft of hair is painstakingly rendered. Despite the small format, the light is so skillfully modulated it gives a three-dimensional reading to the sitters.

Unfortunately the current whereabouts of a miniature painted the same year and inscribed on the wood backing "Sarah Bartlett/1825/Rufus Porter delin." is not known. Sarah was a resident of Haverhill, New Hampshire, and the granddaughter of Josiah Bartlett, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.¹² This is one of two known miniatures clearly inscribed with the artist's first name (See also figure 9). This discrimination is important as Rufus Porter was not the only artist by the name of Porter offering services in miniatures portraits. At this time, John S. Porter was also advertising his services as a portrait and miniature painter. He worked in Boston from 1822 to 1833 and at Lowell in 1834.¹³



By the 1830s, Porter's style had evolved further still. He began to favor frontal poses and to use stippling and cross-hatching for modeling, resulting in an overall effect that is more graphic than sculptural (Figs. 8-9). Judging by the scarcity of known miniatures from his later period, his output in this genre had dropped significantly. Perhaps he was already anticipating that the art of miniature painting would soon be made obsolete by advances in still photography.¹⁴

Instead, Porter was clearly thinking on a much more grandiose scale than small portraits would allow. Rather than working in isolation and in miniature, he was now designing integrated scenic murals for public places such as taverns and supervising a team of assistants with their execution.¹⁵ Soon thereafter, he would become even more preoccupied with science and its application in everyday life. Just as the country was expanding ever westward, Rufus Porter was clearly determined to continue to broaden his horizons as well. [AFA](#)

The largest collection of Rufus Porter images is on view at the Rufus Porter Museum in Bridgton, Maine. For information call 207.647.2828 or visit www.rufusportermuseum.org.

Deborah M. Child is an independent art historian and museum consultant based in Portsmouth, N.H. Her expertise in genealogy has proved critical for authenticating and attributing portraits from the Federal period and establishing provenance. www.deborahmchild.com.

1. Jean Lipman. *Rufus Porter. Yankee Pioneer*. New York, NY: Clarkson, N. Potter, Inc. 1968. & *Rufus Porter Rediscovered. Artist, Inventor, Journalist 1792-1884*. Reprinted 1980.

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Fig. 7: Attributed to Rufus Porter (1792-1884), *Jonathan Smith* (1805-1880) and his wife *Pamelia Moors* (1803-1860), Chelmsford, Mass., 1825. Inscribed on back: "wedding picture of Allan S. Dewey's great-great-grandparents Smith (mother's side of family)." Watercolor, ink, and graphite, 3½ x 2¾ inches. Original églomisé glass and gilt frame. Rufus Porter Museum, Bridgton, ME.

This is a good example of how Porter's style progresses. By 1825, instead of rhythmical deft touches of the brush in watercolor, his focus has shifted to a more precise rendering of light and shadow making for a more static and sculptural reading of his subjects.

Fig 8: Attributed to Rufus Porter (1792-1884), *Reuben Bacon Jr.* (1811-1891), Bedford, Mass., 1830. Inscribed "Watercolor portrait/of Mr. Reuben Bacon of/Bedford Mass./Painted in 1830/He married Miss Ruth Corbin/of New Ipswich N.H. my/great aunt. Picture given/to me by my grandmother/Salome Corbin Tolman/in 1888 Sept 21st/Nellie Tolman." Watercolor, 3¼ x 2¼ inches. Collection of Arthur Kern.

According to Porter's handbill, a front view like this would be cost one dollar more than his two dollar "side view painted in full colours [sic]." Like Israel Porter, Bacon was a native of Bedford, Mass. The artist may have been commissioned to paint this portrait while he was painting grisaille scenic murals in the front parlor of the Job Lane House (www.joblane.org).



2. Gardner W. Pearson's *Records of the Massachusetts volunteer militia, called out by the governor of Massachusetts to suppress a Threatened Invasion during the War of 1812-1814* (Boston, MA: Wright & Potter Printing Col, 1913). The three miniatures were sold by Charles M. Talbot Associates, Poland, Maine, on September 15, 2007. They had descended in the family of Benjamin Lane (1777–1846) of Minot, Maine, along with a family register by the Red Bird artist. The current whereabouts of the miniatures are not known. The register is on view at the Rufus Porter Museum, Bridgton, Maine.
3. For example, a watercolor miniature of Betsy Long Ellis (1796–1867) inscribed "taken in Lewiston [Maine]" and attributed to Porter, was housed in an identical frame. Solid Gold auction, Gardner, Maine, May 31, 2008. This miniature was kindly brought to my attention by Linda Lefko Carter.
4. The invention of the camera obscura, Latin for "dark room," is credited to Leonardo DaVinci in the 15th century. A lens projected a sitter's image against a mirror under the hood of a wooden box where it was focused onto a glass. An artist could then trace the image onto paper and fill it in with ink or paint.
5. Jean Lipman. *Rufus Porter Rediscovered*, 75.
6. "Proposal by Rufus Porter of Cambridge, MA for Publishing by Subscription" *Agricultural Intelligencer*. Published Boston, MA. June 30, 1820.
7. Some discrepancies exist concerning the identification of Porter's miniatures of Sarah. The label on the back of her portrait on ivory identifies the sitter as "Lydia Pillsbury [sic], the second wife of Abraham Edwards." Her watercolor miniature on paper which descended in the same collection is inscribed in another hand: "Lydia Pillsbury, second wife of Abraham Edwards." Although Lydia was the second wife of Abraham Edwards (1768–1809) and the stepmother of Abraham Edwards Jr. (Israel's grandson), she is too young to be the sitter for either portrait. She was born in Newbury, Massachusetts, in 1788, and the sitter is at least two decades older than Lydia. Fortunately a second watercolor miniature of Sarah is inscribed by a third hand on the back in pencil: "Israel Porter's second wife." Given Sarah's life dates and the fact this one descended in another branch of the family that had no direct relation to Lydia, the latter identification has to be the correct one.
8. The only grouping comparable to that of the Israel Porter family belongs to the Lexington Historical Society, Lexington, Mass. Seven of the ten miniatures attributed to Porter are of the children of the Buckman tavern keeper Rufus Merriam (1762–1847) and his wife Martha Simonds (1766–1849). Martha was the daughter of Joshua Simonds (the Revolutionary war hero who had charge of the gun powder in Lexington meeting house). Alas only one miniature is inscribed: "March 20, 1820." See Dean T. Lahikainen, *Lexington Portraits: A catalog of the American Portraits in the Lexington Historical Society 1734–1884*, Lexington, Mass., 1977.
9. Why would Rufus Porter have painted a miniature on ivory of Israel's grandson Abraham? Perhaps because Abraham graduated from Harvard College in 1819, and it may have been done as a sample to secure commissions from the rest of Abraham's graduating class. Or perhaps it was a token of gratitude for helping him gain entrée to Harvard libraries, where Rufus could do research for his inventions.
10. The veneration that Israel Porter's clientele felt for him was acknowledged on the occasion of his retirement by an epitaph "On a Living Landlord, on his Retiring from Business," published in 1830 in Cambridge, MA. Cited *New England Magazine*, Boston, Mass., Volume V, pages 310–312. Accessed books.google.com.
11. A miniature of William Hilliard (1778–1836) was sold along with miniatures of his wife Sarah and his brother-in-law Abraham Hilliard, a Cambridge lawyer, at a Daniel Olmstead Auction, Portsmouth, NH, in 2008. All three miniatures bear the hallmarks of Porter's hand and are still housed in their original églomisé glass and gilt frames. They are now in a private collection.
12. Miniature portrait of Sarah Bartlett (1810–1836), 1825. Sotheby's Sale N07705, Oct. 11, 2001, lot 156. Inscribed on back: "Sarah Bartlett/1825/Rufus Porter delin." Watercolor, pen and ink, 4½ x 3½ inches. Her portrait passed by descent. Current whereabouts unknown
13. As Rufus specifically cites his first name in all other advertisements, it seems highly unlikely the following was his: "Portrait and Miniature Painting. Mr. Porter offers his services to the Gentlemen and Ladies of Concord and its vicinity." *New Hampshire Patriot*, Feb. 2, 1824. Reference courtesy of D-B Garvin. "Likenesses... Calling atten-



Fig. 9: Rufus Porter (1792-1884), Julia Lottie Hills, Plainville, Conn., 1835. Inscribed on back "Lottie Hills aged 15 years, 1835, drawn by Rufus Porter." Watercolor and ink, 4⅞ x 2¾ inches. Courtesy of David A. Schorsch and Eileen M. Smiles, Woodbury, Conn.

This is one of three miniatures of the family of wheelwright Elias Hills. At the time of this sitting, Lottie was residing at her grandfather's farm in Plainville, Connecticut. The artist undoubtedly obtained this commission while marketing his self-adjusting cheese press to local residents. This was his third invention patented the same year he did this portrait.

tion to the advertisement of Mr. John S. Porter, in this day's paper. Mr. Porter is a very respectable artist." *Essex Gazette*. Haverhill, Mass., October 6, 1827. An 1827 miniature of Mrs. Warner Whittier (Ann Bradley White), oil, 3¼ x 2¼ inches, inscribed in pencil "John S. Porter" is in the collection of Haverhill Historical Society, Haverhill, Mass. A miniature on ivory of Stephen Danforth Hassam, signed "J. S. Porter," is in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, 38.146.12. Of the two Porters, John was far more academic and stilted in his approach to rendering a likeness..

14. In 1826, the French inventor Joseph Nicéphore Niépce used a camera obscura to burn a permanent image onto a chemical-coated pewter plate. By 1839, daguerreotype portraits were being made in America.
15. Porter's involvement in mural painting will be the subject of Linda Carter Lefko and Jane E. Radcliffe: *A Very Striking Effect: New England Landscape Murals from the School of Rufus Porter*, to be published by Schiffer Books in spring 2011.