Recent Accessions to the Society's Museum Collections: Portraits of Captain and Mrs. Isaac Manchester

By SUSAN PARSONS

AMONG the Society's recent acquisitions, as a bequest of Miss Evelyn A. Munroe, is the pair of portraits shown here, of Captain Isaac Manchester of Bristol, Rhode Island, and his wife, Priscilla Taber, painted by Cephas Thompson of Middleboro, Massachusetts.

Isaac Manchester, who was born in 1768/1769, the son of Archer Manchester and his first wife, Elizabeth Gifford, was a resident of Westport, Massachusetts, at the time of his marriage in 1792. His bride, Priscilla Taber, daughter of Lemuel and Sarah (Brightman) Taber, lived in Tiverton, Rhode Island, where she had been born in 1773 and where, on June 24, 1792, she and Isaac Manchester were married. Shortly thereafter the young couple decided to move across Mount Hope Bay to Bristol, Rhode Island, where they were to spend the rest of their lives. They could not have made a more fortunate decision, for Bristol, a sleepy village whose population of about 1,400 had scarcely changed in the last fifty years, was about to experience a great period of growth and prosperity. Its commercial importance would increase far more rapidly than its population and thus this little port, located midway between the far larger towns of Newport and Providence, could offer much to a young man like Isaac Manchester, energetic and ambitious, but lacking the financial backing and personal connections necessary for success in larger and more stable communities.

Bristol's rise to importance at this time was largely due to the willingness of its citizens to participate in an activity which had begun to suffer from a growing lack of respectability, increasing legal restrictions and higher risks—the slave trade. This triangular exchange of New England rum, African slaves and West Indian molasses which had for many years before the Revolution been the source of much of Newport's wealth had proved profitable to merchants in a number of other New England ports as well. But by 1788 it was forbidden by state law in Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island, federal prohibition seemed inevitable, and the trade, though still highly lucrative, lost practically all of its participants outside of Newport and Bristol. During the next twenty years, until the trade was prohibited by federal law in 1808, the merchant shipmasters of the smaller port of Bristol sent almost as many vessels to Africa (in defiance of state law) as did those of Newport.

The key figures in Bristol during this period were the five deWolf brothers—Charles, James, John, William and Levi, the sons of Mark Antony deWolf. In his youth, as an obscure young supercargo from Guadaloupe, Mark Antony had married his employer's sister, a Bristol girl, and settled there, where they raised one of the most remarkable families in

the state. Although three of Mark Antony's sons died at sea by 1780 these five survivors soon succeeded both in acquiring sizable fortunes as shipmasters and merchants and in bringing the great spurt of commercial activity to the town. By the time Isaac Manchester moved to Bristol these deWolf brothers, just a few years his senior, were already well established in the trade and were increasing their fortunes and their power by acquiring not only ships, but rum distilleries in Bristol and sugar plantations in Cuba as well.

Three years after his marriage, in 1795, Isaac Manchester succeeded in impressing two deWolf brothers, John and William, enough to be made master of their 109-ton snow, the *Sally*.[1] There is no question as to the nature of her cargo on this first voyage of Captain Manchester's. Cleared for Africa by the Newport customshouse on September 29, she probably reached the African coast some time in November. Although the *Sally*'s exact whereabouts for the next three months are unrecorded, Captain Manchester was undoubtedly engaged in the usual process of coasting and trading along West African shores. Trading posts were widely scattered over 1,500 miles of coast line, the captains of Yankee vessels tended to be far more interested in saving money than time, and a day when only one or two new slaves were acquired was considered a good one. Consequently, many weeks or months would pass before the last hogshead of Bristol rum had been replaced by its value in human cargo. By February 29, 1796, according to the log of the ship *Mary* of Providence,[2] the *Sally* had reached the English settlement of Anamabo on the Gold Coast, a favorite trading center, where she lay at anchor with three English and two other Rhode Island ships. A few weeks later, when another Bristol shipmaster wrote from St. Thomas to James deWolf in Bristol, he mentioned that he had "left Captain Isaac Manchester at Anemebue with ninety slaves on board, all well."[3] The *Sally* finally left the coast, well laden with slaves, on the morning of Friday, March 18. If the voyage was on schedule Captain Manchester should have reached the West Indies early in May, disposed of his cargo as instructed by the deWolfs, reloaded with molasses and returned to Bristol. As can be seen, a typical triangular voyage could take up the good part of a year, most of that time being spent in African waters.

Captain Manchester's trip to Africa was repeated with slight variations the following year. On this occasion he went first to Boston in the late summer where the *Sally* remained for some weeks for repairs. After personally attending to such last-minute matters as the purchase of twenty-seven gallons of vinegar (for washing down slave quarters between decks) and two medicine chests, on October 17 he dashed off the following note to John deWolf in Bristol:[4]

Boston, October 17, 1796

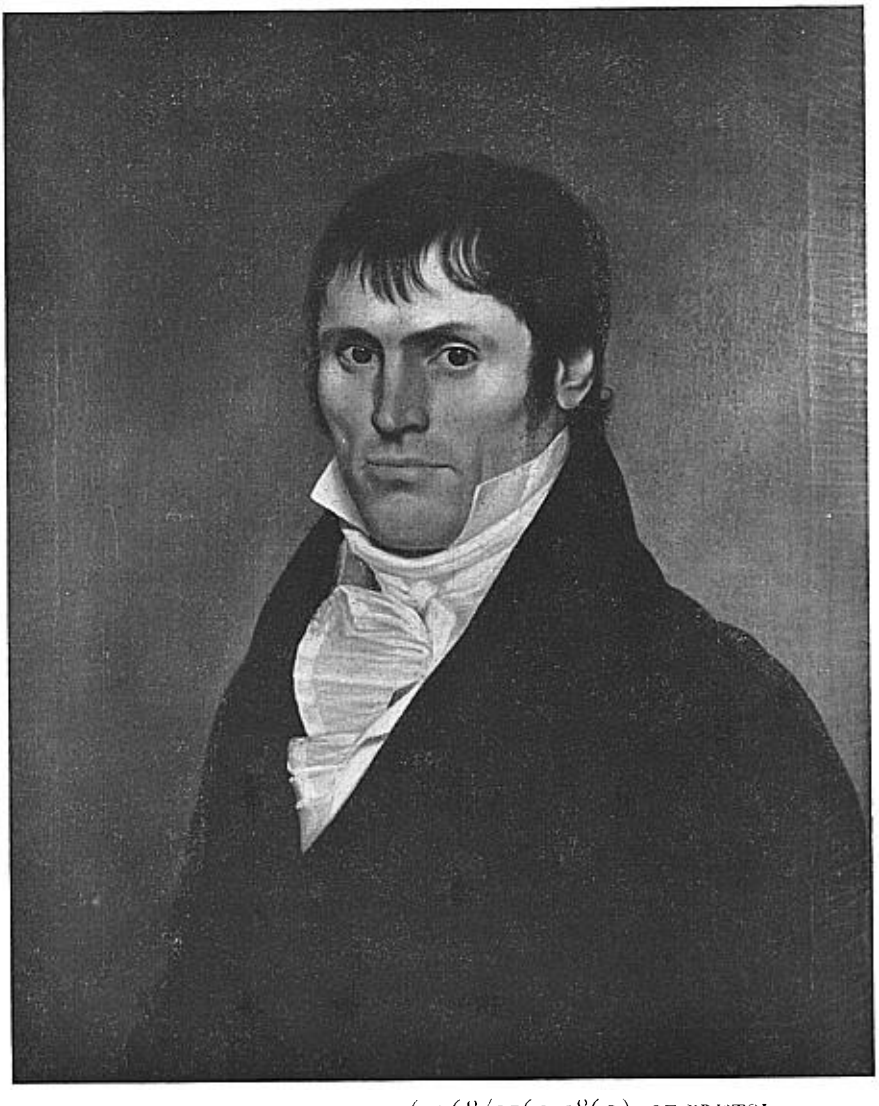
Gentlemen:

I have got all Ready for Sea & I expect to Sail in a few hours If I Can git all My Salors On Board. I have given George D'Wolfe the Old Portage bills. I have Received of him Eighty Dollars. I won't Send you My Bill of Expenses for I do Not [know] What truble I Shall Be at before I git away. Give My Complements to My Wife. Remaining your Most Obt. & Humble Servant

Isaac Manchester

Snow Sally—

Once more he was off again for a long winter in the tropics, while Priscilla was



CAPT. ISAAC MANCHESTER (1768/1769-1860), OF BRISTOL, RHODE ISLAND, PAINTED BY CEPHAS THOMPSON
Photograph by Henry D. Childs.

PRISCILLA (TABER) MANCHESTER (1773-1852), OF BRISTOL, RHODE ISLAND, PAINTED BY CEPHAS THOMPSON
Photograph by Henry D. Childs.

left alone with year-old Sarah, first of their ten children. As he had done the previous spring, Captain Manchester finished up his trading at the English fort of Anamabo. The final stop of this voyage, however, was Savannah, where he disposed of a cargo of 149 slaves in June.

Captain Manchester was apparently well suited for his work and successful at it. Following a term as master of another slave ship, James, John, William and Levi deWolf's 75-ton schooner *Juno* in 1798, after four years of sailing other people's ships, Captain Manchester was finally able to buy a vessel of his own. This little sloop, the *Sally*, was fifteen years old and only 43 feet long, far smaller than the deWolf's *Sally*, but certainly large enough by Bristol standards for the African trade. Fortune continued to smile on him and at all times during the next few years he held part or full ownership in at least one of a series of similar vessels, generally ranging in size from about fifty to seventy tons. Some of these he sailed himself.

In 1806, at about the time that he and his wife had their portraits painted, Captain Manchester's name disappears from the customs records as either shipowner or captain. This may mean that he decided to retire from a seagoing life. However, it is also possible that after January 1, 1808, when the slave trade became illegal under federal law, he was still strongly enough attracted to its high profits to try the tricks of foreign registration and false identification which enabled certain Bristol vessels which now avoided American waters to continue in the trade. At any rate, no trace of his activities on land or sea can be found until the year 1825. At that time, for reasons now unknown, and at the age of fifty-seven, he served as master of the *Rebecca*, a 264-ton ship which was enrolled for the coasting trade, in which he held part ownership. The vessel was unfortunately wrecked. To add to his misfortunes, Captain Manchester is said to have been forced into bankruptcy when General George deWolf, a nephew of Captain Manchester's first employers, went bankrupt himself and fled to his sugar plantation in Cuba. DeWolf's failure marked the real turning point in Bristol's brief period as a major port and from this time the town went into a commercial decline. Almost everyone in town, rich and poor, had invested some of their savings with deWolf, for his speculative ventures had proven consistently profitable. Captain Manchester's savings, like those of several others, were so completely involved that he is said to have lost everything he had—everything being an estate that town historians estimate at $80,000.[5] They also say that the remaining years of the Captain's very long life were a dreary and sad contrast to his earlier successes and that from this time until his death he was forced to eke out a living peddling clams.[6] His wife Priscilla died in Bristol on April 2, 1852, at the age of seventy-eight, and eight years later, on February 13, 1860, the Captain died at ninety-one, one of the last survivors of Bristol's "golden age."

Although these portraits of Isaac and Priscilla Manchester are unsigned, they have been identified as the work of Cephas Thompson (1775-1856), an itinerant portrait painter from Middleboro, Massachusetts, whose name is far better known in the southern states than it is in his native New England. Perhaps because he disliked the New England climate, or because he simply had itchy feet, he began

around 1804 to spend his winters in various towns in the south, where in each he would rent a room, advertise his presence in the local newspaper and wait for clients, who would seem to have come in large numbers. Between 1804 and the time when he finally settled down permanently in Middleboro with a second wife in 1825, Thompson is known to have worked in Baltimore, Charleston, Richmond, Norfolk, Alexandria and New Orleans. However, it was not generally known until recently that during the same period he worked in Rhode Island as well, in the town of Bristol.

Thompson evidently used the same methods of attracting clients in Rhode Island as he did in the south, for the June 20, 1807, issue of Bristol's short-lived newspaper, *The Mount Hope Eagle*,[7] carries the following advertisement, similar in wording to those he placed in the south:

PORTRAIT PAINTING
C. THOMPSON

Informs the inhabitants of Bristol, that he is soon to leave the place. Those who have contemplated employing him in the line of his profession, are invited to call immediately at his Room, over the Mount-Hope Insurance Office.
June 6, 1807

Like Isaac Manchester, Cephas Thompson had the foresight to arrive in Bristol at a time when his talents were greatly in demand. By 1807, the year of his advertisement there, Bristol could boast of a number of people who could easily afford to have their likenesses transferred to canvas. And Thompson was evidently well prepared to offer whatever services his prospective clients desired, for in Charleston in 1804 he had advertised his willingness not only to paint "Likenesses in large, demi, and small sizes," but to cut "PROFILES, with his machine, . . . [likewise] paint PROFILES, and execute them in gold."[8] Captain Manchester, with a successful career behind him and middle age fast approaching, was ready for the best—portraits painted on canvas, and large ones, at that.

Although by his own account Cephas Thompson painted a total of 130 portraits in Bristol during three visits there,[9] because of his general failure to sign his work few of them have as yet been identified. His presence in Bristol has long been overlooked by local historians, aware only of his son and student, Cephas Giovanni Thompson (1809-1888) who has been credited with painting members of the deWolf family at a later period, probably in the late 1820's or early 1830's.[10] However, Cephas Giovanni's highly romantic style is easily distinguished from that of his father. In 1948, when the Valentine Museum in Richmond, Virginia, held an exhibition of portraits of early residents of that area, seven of them, all painted about 1809-1810, were attributed to Cephas Thompson (Senior) on the basis of their resemblance to two documented examples of his work. All seven, which were illustrated in the catalog of that exhibition[11] were said to combine ivory flesh tones with olive-green backgrounds and to show fine and detailed brushwork. In addition, all were similar in size and had identical frames, canvas and stretchers. A pair of portraits owned by the Bristol Historical Society, apparently similar to the Richmond group and notable for their resemblance to the Manchester portraits, should be mentioned here. They are of Captain Leonard Jarvis Bradford (1779-1812) and his wife Sally (Turner) Bradford.[12] These portraits were most certainly painted by the same hand at about the same time (1805-1810) as the Manches-

ter pair and they have also been attributed to Cephas Thompson. The similarity of color scheme employed in the four portraits is particularly striking. Flesh tones are ivory (as in Richmond) and the backgrounds of all four consist of a combination of olive-green with rusty-brown tones, although in Mrs. Manchester's portrait the brown background gradually shades into a light blue. The gold frames are all decorated with a simple leaf molding on the inside edge and appear to have a common origin. The Manchester portraits measure 21½ by 27 inches (sight size) and are thus almost identical with the Bradford pair (22 by 27 inches). In short, the similarities of the Manchester and Bradford portraits, both to each other and to the Richmond examples, are so strong that identification of further examples of Cephas Thompson's Bristol work may prove relatively easy.

NOTES

[1] Unless otherwise noted all information which follows about Captain Manchester's vessels and voyages is found in the United States Works Progress Administration, *Ships Documents of Rhode Island: Newport* (Providence, 1938-1941), 2 vols., and *Ships Documents of Rhode Island: Bristol* (Providence, 1941), and Elizabeth Donnan, *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America* (Washington, 1930-1935), 4 vols.

[2] Published in Donnan, III, 360-378.

[3] Letter from Captain Jeremiah Diman to James deWolf dated April 1, 1796, quoted in Wilfred H. Munro, *The Story of the Mount Hope Lands* (Providence, 1880), pp. 350-351.

[4] Bills and letter among papers of John deWolf, currently on loan to the Bristol Historical Society.

[5] Both Charles O. F. Thompson in *Sketches of Old Bristol* (Providence, 1942), p. 117, and George Howe, in *Mount Hope: a New England Chronicle* (New York, 1959), pp. 232-233, mention Isaac Manchester in their histories of Bristol chiefly to say that he lost a fortune of $80,000 at the time of General George deWolf's bankruptcy. The scanty records which have survived the years neither prove nor disprove their statements, but available facts indicate that although he, like everyone else, may have suffered great reverses at about this time his previous net worth was probably far less than the $80,000 figure given.

[6] It is quite likely that Captain Manchester did spend at least some of the next thirty-five years peddling clams. From this time onward Bristol's maritime economy declined rapidly and the prospects for aging sea captains who had lost their savings were hardly as bright as they had been for energetic young men thirty years earlier. At the time of his death in 1860 the Bristol "death books" give Captain Manchester's occupation as "laborer" although in legal documents made out in his youth he was invariably listed as a "mariner." Any savings he may have had were dispersed by the time of his death, for although he left an estate valued at $13,036, almost every dollar of it and every article of personal property listed in his inventory had in the last few months come to him after the death of his son, Benjamin F. Manchester, a widower of thirty-eight. Benjamin died on board the *Lapwing*, a New Bedford whaler, in August of 1859, just three months before his ship's return from a three-year voyage to the whaling grounds of the Indian Ocean. His estate was valued at $13,579. Nothing is more indicative of the decline of Bristol as a port than the fact that Benjamin had to go to Fall River and New Bedford in order to make his living by the sea.

[7] The paper was published only between Jan. 10, 1807, and Oct. 8, 1808.

[8] Charleston *Times*, Dec. 10, 1804, as quoted in Anna Wells Rutledge, *Artists in the Life of Charleston* (Philadelphia, 1949), p. 221.

[9] This fact was made available by Mrs. Sidney W. Edmonds of Northampton, Mass., a descendant of the artist and the authority on his life and work. Final attribution of the Manchester portraits to Cephas Thompson was made when she found that "Captain Manchester and his wife" were included on a list Thompson made of his sitters which is now in her possession.

After this article had gone to press Mrs. Edmonds wrote further to say that the Manchester portraits, because of their position on this list, must have been painted in the latter part of 1806. She added that Cephas Thompson "made three (possibly four) trips to that town. During the years 1804 through 1807 he painted 93 portraits. A second visit in 1816 resulted in 27 portraits; a third in 1821, only ten."

[10] As illustrated in Alicia Hopton Middleton, *Life in Carolina and New England During the Nineteenth Century* (Bristol, R. I., 1929).

[11] *Richmond Portraits: In an Exhibition of Makers of Richmond, 1737-1860* (Richmond, 1949).

[12] The houses of both still stand today in Bristol. Captain Manchester's simple eighteenth-century farmhouse was located on the southeast corner of Hope and Oliver Streets; Captain Bradford's, a little newer and a little finer, was a few doors south on Hope Street on the opposite side of the street. Both were only a block away from the harbor. In spite of about a ten-year difference in their ages, the wives at least must have become friendly during the long months while their husbands were at sea and when both women were left alone with small children.