

This was written for a MCE class by Mark S.

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Fine Arts 102

The Making of an Artist: John Cheney, Engraver

“Nobody ought to engrave who doesn’t know how to draw; and if he can draw he is a fool to engrave.” John Cheney (Cheney, 1889)

Despite his low opinion of his own work, John Cheney is widely considered to be the finest American steel engraver of his time. The American Romantic painter Washington Allston (1779-1843) perhaps described John’s work best in his letter of introduction to the painter Charles Leslie (1794-1859) in 1830: “His prominent quality, one that I am sure you will agree with me is of the highest order, is his delicate *tact* for expression and character...Mr. Cheney adds to this a clearness and grace of line that already entitle him to a decided rank.” (Cheney, 1889) Looking at his prints, I am struck by the delicacy and richness of the images. John Cheney possessed not merely the technical skill to grave steel, but the artistic sense to capture the subtle shadings and gradations of color, light, and shadow from the original works. Indeed, it has been said that he actually *improved* upon some of the originals.

The bulk of his plates were printed in the so-called “gift books” of the 1820’s, 30’s and 40’s: elaborately embellished, printed, and bound volumes of poetry and prose that were considered among the few “proper” gifts a young man could bestow upon a young lady whom he fancied. They were said to be completely free of any trace of vice or impropriety. Several of John’s subjects for those volumes were highly romanticized and idealized heads of young women by the famous American portraitist Thomas Sully (1783-1872) who John met in Philadelphia. John’s finest works include *Martha*

Washington after the portraits by John Wollaston (1742-1775) and Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828), published in the Rev. Jared Sparks' *Writings of George Washington* in 1837. John also produced nine of the earliest known American lithographs, which were original compositions published in souvenir books in 1828 and 1829. One of his latest and most notable accomplishments was the engraving (with his brother Seth) of the last drawings of Washington Allston which had been found in Allston's studio after his death in 1843 and were published in folio in 1850.

How then, did Cheney come by his great talent?

John Cheney was born in 1801, the second son to George and Electa Woodbridge Cheney in the Orford Parish section of East Hartford, now called Manchester, Connecticut. His father was a farmer and miller of apparently modest means, neither poor nor exceptionally prosperous by the standards of the time. John's grandfather Timothy, was a prosperous farmer, clockmaker, and industrialist who manufactured gunpowder during the American Revolution. In 1785, Timothy built the Cheney Homestead, a modest Cape Cod-style house built into the side of a hill. Although John traveled extensively to places as diverse as California and Paris, and studied and worked in Boston, London, and Philadelphia; he always returned to the house in which he was born. He ultimately had seven brothers and a sister. Most of his brothers, except Seth, another artist, became involved in the manufacture of silk fabric. The Cheney Brothers silk business became the largest of its kind and the family profited handsomely.

It could be said, then, that mechanical aptitude was certainly in his genes (or breeches), but what of his artistic talent? Few records or anecdotes of his childhood survive to this day, but what has been passed down to us gives us a picture of a sensitive, bookish youth. He was educated in the typical one-room schoolhouse of the day, and worked on the farm and in the sawmill. A story is told that he was particularly fond of reading. Apparently that fondness was not discouraged by his parents, for it is said that he would stand for hours next to the tall secretary in the parlor, absorbed in a book. Few of the family's earliest books survive in the Homestead's collection, but his library from later years illustrates his wide-ranging interests from natural history to art, and Transcendentalism to phrenology.

I believe that one of the keys to understanding the origin of John's talent lies in his exposure to art at an early age. The Cheney Homestead museum contains the bulk of the furniture and artwork that was passed down through several generations of the family in the same house. From about the mid-1800's, the family looked upon the Homestead with reverence and appears to have maintained its collections intact as a sort of shrine to their forefathers. The collection that has been passed down includes over thirty steel engravings, some dating as far back as the mid-18th Century. While we know that both John and Seth Cheney purchased prints of some of their contemporaries for study, it is apparent that many of the prints in the collection pre-date John and Seth and were, in fact, adorning the walls of the Homestead when they were children. As the only pre-19th Century paintings in the collection are a pair of small 17th Century pictures by the British

artist David Des Granges (ca. 1611-1675) that hang in the parlor, we assume that many of the prints were about the only art in the Homestead when the boys were young.

Among the early prints in the collection are: L.O. Richor, after Raphael (1483-1520), *Vierge du Palais de Bridgewater*; G.S. Miller, after Vanderneer (1603-1677), *Moonlight*, 1766; John Smith, after Stothard (1755-1834), *The Diffidence*, 1780; John Boydell, after Claude Lorraine (1600-1682), *Roman Edifices in Ruins*, 1772; and after Gainborough (1727-1788), *Figures in a Rural Landscape* and *Mother and Child in a Rural Landscape*, both 1767. These have probably hung in the homestead since about 1785 and inspired the boys to artistic expression and a romantic appreciation of nature. A story passed down through the family tells of his rage when his favorite old oak tree was cut down to expand the silk mills.

John Cheney was encouraged by his father to study art and began his formal training with an engraver named Willard in Hartford about 1820. His father loaned him money a number of times to encourage his training in Boston. While John certainly must have recognized his own artistic talent (although he always regarded his brother Seth's much more highly) he also recognized the potential for profit in the business of creating art. In October of 1842 he received the princely sum of \$2000 for executing just eight engravings for *The Gift*. Indeed he did so well in the business of art that he was able to invest his earnings in the fledgling silk business and live quite comfortably off of the dividends.

That leads to a rather interesting contradiction in the life of John Cheney. While his brothers were building opulent mansions, John, who was arguably just as wealthy as they, was content to live out his days in the simplicity of the old Homestead. His birthplace, which was added to and modernized with wood and coal stoves by 1850, was nevertheless an austere place. In contrast to most homes built or modified in the period by wealthy people, the Cheney Homestead is conspicuously lacking in ornamental detail such as elaborate moldings and decorative plaster work. Although plans exist for upgrading the Homestead to a mansion in 1870, the remodeling was never carried out, probably out of sentimental deference to the family's humble beginning. It seems incongruous that a man as wealthy, sensitive, and artistic as John would not build for himself a grand mansion or at least an eclectic artist's retreat in the fashion of the times. We know that John was well acquainted with the latest theories of architecture and landscape design such as those advanced by men such as Andrew Jackson Downing in the magazine *The Horticulturist and Journal of Rural Art and Rural Taste* to which John subscribed. His chief use for that publication, however, seems to be for its articles on fruit growing, of which he was very fond.

What does stand out in the Homestead is the furniture he apparently acquired on the secondary market. He did not favor the ostentatious Victorian designs by makers such as John Belter with which his brothers were furnishing their mansions, although he could certainly afford them. Instead, he collected some of the finest quality late Colonial and early Federal period furniture made in Boston, Philadelphia, and the Connecticut River valley. The quality and style of the Chippendale-style mahogany pieces seems to contrast

sharply with the plain lines of the house. Much of the furniture certainly would have been unaffordable to the family in the early days. I think that as an artist he appreciated the purity of design and line, as well as the quality of the furniture's construction.

Evidence of his practical nature is the studio that was John's retreat on the homestead grounds from 1855 to 1885. Built by his brother Seth just prior to his death, John's studio was a simple wooden building with one room and a small fireplace or stove. He used to lock himself inside for hours, reading and working. He favored plain, simple food, avoided tobacco, and espoused the virtues of Dr. Graham's crackers, and a small portion of meat each day. Due to his frugal nature, he was often observed pacing back and forth in the homestead in winter, beating his arms against his sides to warm himself, rather than stoke up the fires.

In contrast to his romantic pictures, John Cheney's life was an example of simplicity and upright character. He was not given to excesses in dress or entertainment, although many of the leading lights of 19th Century American art and literature were guests at the old Homestead, and acquaintances of John. He and Seth were well-known to Emerson and W. H. Channing. He never married, but was committed to the Cheney family and to his art, so much so that he virtually hung up his graver in 1848 when the quality of the books in which his engravings were published began to decline perceptibly. Although he lived to see photography begin to replace engraving as a means of illustrating books, he appears not to have resented the camera. In fact, he reportedly had a keen interest in the new medium, although it is not known if he, himself ever took pictures.

In sum, John Cheney's work as an engraver of romantic heads and scenes seems to belie his life as a fundamentally pure and practical Yankee. He was fortunate that his family encouraged his artistic talent at a time when industry seemed to be the proper place to make one's mark. It certainly did not hurt that he made a pile of money at engraving, but we certainly owe a debt to the Cheney family for encouraging the arts through to the present day. I believe that he was an excellent role model for artistic talent tempered by Christian virtue.



EGERIA.

Egeria, engraved by John Cheney after Edward Malbone (1777-1807). Published in *The Gift*, 1843.

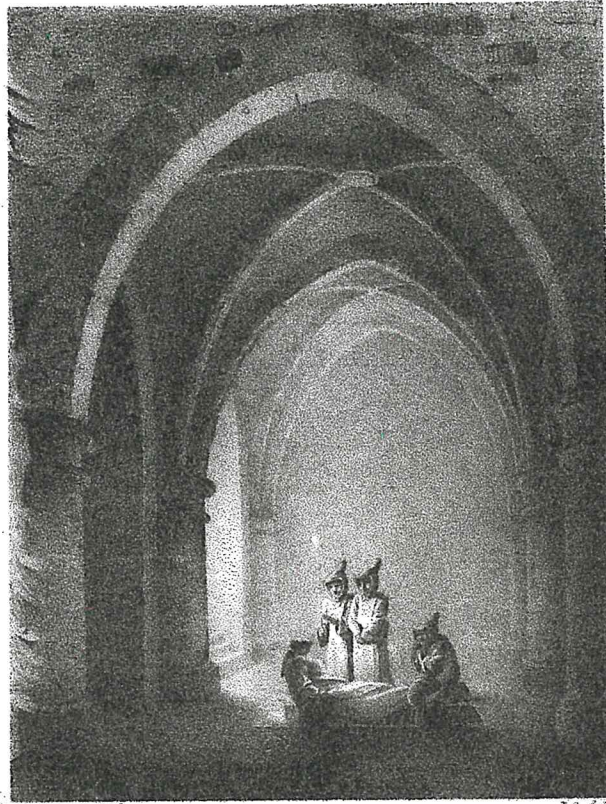


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THE BROKEN HEART.

The Broken Heart, lithograph by John Cheney, published in *The Memorial*, 1828.



Martha Washington, by Gilbert Stuart, 1796.



MARTHA WASHINGTON.

FROM THE ORIGINAL BY WILLIAM
IN PUBLICATION OF THE BOARD OF SENATORS

Martha Washington, engraved by John Cheney, after Gilbert Stuart. Published in the Rev. Jared Sparks' *Writings of George Washington* in 1837.



Engraved by John Cheney, after John Wollaston.

MARTHA WASHINGTON.

Engraved by J. Cheney.

K. 45. 3^d State.
The Token, 1838.
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Martha Washington, engraved by John Cheney, after John Wollaston. Published in the Rev. Jared Sparks' *Writings of George Washington* in 1837.



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The Gipsy, engraved by John Cheney after Thomas Sully. Published in *The Gift*, 1842.

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