

SAMUEL JORDAN



A R T I S T,

T H I E F,

V I L L A I N

BY DEBORAH M. CHILD



PROMPT JUSTICE. A man of plausible appearance, calling himself Charles Francis, hired a horse and chaise at the Hvery stable of Mr. Johnson, in this town, on the 24th ult. under pretence of going to Hopkinton. Next day, Mr. J.'s suspicious being excited, he started in pursuit, got upon his track, and on the 25th discovered and had him arrested in Boston; where on the week following he was indicted before the Municipal Court, convicted and sentenced (under the name of John Jordan) to the State Prison. The Court commended the energy and perseverance of Mr. Johnson, ordered his expenses paid, and a proper compensation for the time spent in the pursuit and prosecution.—*State Jour.*

The artist Samuel Jordan was also known as John Jordon, John Jourdan, and Charles Francis. If not for a handful of paintings signed either “S. Jordan” or “Samuel Jordan,” he might never have been given a place in the annals of American art history. Though once described as “Mr. Jordan, the portrait artist...and a real social fellow and a gentleman in appearance,”¹ he spent almost a decade in the state prison in Charlestown, Massachusetts (Fig. 1)—for Jordan was also a

counterfeiter, a thief, and an all-round scoundrel. In an 1829 interview with Massachusetts State Prison Chaplain Jared Curtis, twenty-five-year-old Jordan said “*he was never given to Drink & that this is almost the only vice to which he was not addicted*”² This black humor may have gotten him through his several years in prison and aided his development as an artist during his years behind bars.

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Fig. 1: Unknown artist, *Massachusetts State Prison, Charlestown, Mass., 1829*. Watercolor, paper, and ink, 10 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 18 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches (without frame). Inscribed along bottom: “A View of the Mass. Prison and Workshops taken from the center of the yard, 1829.” Collection of Bostonian Society, Boston, Mass. (1924.0016).

Designed by Charles Bullfinch and built in 1805 on five acres at Lynde’s Point, Charlestown, Mass., the massive four-story granite dormitory on the far left was added in 1826. Jordan was an inmate of this prison for almost a decade.

Fig. 2: “Prompt Justice” *Salem Gazette* (December 23, 1825), vol. III, Issue 102, page 3.

Jordan’s choice of an alias at this time was undoubtedly prompted by his acquaintance with Charles Francis, shipmaster of the privateer *Sloop Henry*. (See NewEnglandAncestors.org.)

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Fig. 3: Attributed to Richard Brunton (1750-1831), *Mrs. Reuben Humphreys and Child*, circa 1800. Oil on canvas, 44 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 40 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Courtesy The Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Conn. Gift of Joslyn Art Museum, through Mrs. Frank Willis.

Brunton was incarcerated for making tools for counterfeiting. While in the Newgate Prison, East Granby, Connecticut, he painted this portrait of the jailor’s wife and child.

trying to turn his life around.

To be fair, Jordan’s criminal history should be viewed within the context of the times in which he lived. Employment options for returning sailors like Jordan who had served in the War of 1812 were minimal. The twenty-year-old Jordan may have passed his first bogus bills because he was desperate for food and lodging. He appears, however, to have been already leading a life of dissipation even before



Jordan’s first incarceration was a two-year sentence for passing counterfeit money. Three months after his release, he was arrested again and served five years of an eight-year sentence for horse theft (Fig. 2) and for writing a threatening letter. Charged with burglary in 1834, he was given a life sentence. But just two years later, in September 1836, he made a successful escape, after which nothing more is known about his whereabouts or circumstances.³

Of the five signed paintings illustrated here, all were executed after his second release from prison, in the fall of 1830, when he appears to have been pursuing a career as an artist in earnest and

the premature death of his father in 1817, which left his widowed mother to raise six children on a soldier’s pension. After interviewing Jordan on July 19, 1829, Chaplain Curtis recorded the following: *Born & brot up in Medford. Early in life, was kept at school. When young, got uneasy, ran away and went to sea. After following the sea for a time, came home and his father, finding he had a taste for the seafaring life told him if he would improve his time, he would send him to an Academy for two years, that he might fit himself to command a vessel. He accordingly went, and after five months, the preceptor died. He then went away from home again and enlisted on*



Fig. 4: Attributed to Samuel Jordan (1804–?),
Harriet Edson Skerry (1802–1851), ca. 1831.
 Oil on canvas, 26¾ x 23½ inches. Courtesy private collection.



Fig. 5: Attributed to Samuel Jordan (1804–?),
Ebenezer Ward Skerry (1801–1838), ca. 1831.
 Oil on canvas, 26¾ x 23½ inches. Courtesy private collection.

These portraits have many of the hallmarks of Jordan's hand. Ebenezer Ward Skerry served as the postmaster for Oakham, Mass., in 1831, and his wife is shown holding a letter addressed "Oakham, MA." Jordan may have traveled as far west as Oakham before his arrest approximately forty miles east in Acton on burglary charges in November 1833.

*board a privateer & continued in this business till the war closed. In 1817 his father died. At sea had become very wild & vicious.*⁴

William Going (1767–1847), who served as Keeper of Massachusetts State Prison for nineteen years before resigning on May 31, 1828, also provided instances of Jordan's criminality in his memoir: *While I was keeper of the prison a convict by the name of John Jordan, who I have already named as one [of] the great rioters, conducted very bad while under my charge... I discharged him at the expiration of his sentence to hard labor; and not long afterwards I received a letter signed by the name of Richard III, saying in the letter he would murder me and hang me on the lamp-post; first ravish my wife and then murder her and my child, then steal my horse, ride him all night and kill him in the morning... later [Jordan] confessed to me he was the person that wrote the letter.*⁵

Jordan Turns to Painting

When exactly Jordan decided to pursue painting is not clear. As his first offence involved altering banknotes as well as passing bogus bills, he must have been literate and reasonably competent with a pen and ink before even entering prison. In 1825, a general search of the prison revealed bills in process of alteration, a supply of small bills suitable for alteration and between 20 and 30 copper plate dies prepared and neatly engraved for the purpose of altering bills. In brief, young Jordan couldn't have found a better place to advance his skills in the manufacture of counterfeit money than the Charlestown prison.

According to Chaplain Curtis' observations of 1829, "Sometime like 2 ys ago, [Jordan] turned his thoughts to painting, & practiced some rough sketches, finding he had some talent at it, was led to think whether he might not yet be something in the world & get respectable & honest living by pursuing it..."

Although Jordan is not the first American artist to have landed in prison, he may be one of the first who learned to paint there. Connecticut-born artist Ralph Earl (1751–1801) was already well-versed in the practice of portraiture prior to his 1786 incarceration for debt in the jail at New York City Hall. By plying his trade within the prison walls, Earl was able to clear his debts and secure his freedom in 1788. In another case an artist's skill prompted his incarceration. Richard Brunton made a portrait of the jailor's wife and child (Fig. 3) while serving time in the Newgate Prison, East Granby, Connecticut, for making tools for counterfeiting.

While other inmates were relegated to hard labor, according to Chaplain Curtis, Jordan was "permitted to devote some of his time...to painting because he was much attached to it, & has doubtless had a very happy effect upon his mind & conduct." The idea of his being encouraged to practice art as a

Fig. 6: Samuel Jordan (1804-?),
Double Portrait.
Signed on left "S. Jordan Pinxit 1831."
Oil on canvas, 23 x 28½ inches.
Courtesy Fenimore Art Museum,
Cooperstown, New York (NYHS, N-390.61).

Jordan boarded with Plaistow, New Hampshire, postmaster and merchant Moses Flint Peaslee (1801-1868) and his wife Sarah Bradley (1799-1876). Diarist Isaac W. Merrill records the couple sitting for Jordan on March 24, 1831.



Fig. 7: Samuel Jordan (1804-?),
Woman and Man Holding Bible.
signed on left "Samuel Jordan Pinxit 1831."
Oil on canvas, 23 x 28½ inches.
Courtesy Fenimore Art Museum,
Cooperstown, New York (NYHS, N-389.61).

The fact that the portraits in figures 6 and 7 are the same size, scale, and format, are painted in a similar palette, and have the same provenance strongly suggests a familial relationship existed between the sitters. Given the 1831 dating, it seems plausible this is a portrait of Reuben Peaslee (1777-1840) and his wife, Sarah Peavey (1780-1862). The father of Moses Peaslee, according to his death notice, Elder Reuben Peaslee, a Quaker by birth, was a respected and zealous preacher "in the Methodist connexion [sic]." (*Haverhill Gazette* [Jan. 21, 1840]).



form of therapy makes sense given Jordan's track record. Jordan was not only the bully of the prison—stealing food and property from other inmates, dealing in contraband such as tobacco, and destroying property including books belonging to inmates,⁶ he was also involved in numerous escape attempts.

To date, no work by Jordan from this period has come to light. Although the paper trail is sparse, financial records from the prison confirm that Jordan earned money from his art. For

instance, Rufus Holbrook, a watchman at the prison, paid \$10 for two portraits with frames on August 28, 1830.⁷ Other entries for that year include payments for three more portraits, a fireboard from other auxiliary staff, a painting of a sea skirmish, and a painting of the *Loss of Ship Fawn*. The prison warden at the time, William Austin, clearly promoted fine arts at the prison and was an advocate for Jordan. At his prodding, the former keeper William Going signed a petition for Jordan's early release. With

no more entries for paintings in the record book after Jordan's September 16, 1830 discharge, it appears that he was the only artist being paid for his services.

Samuel Jordan, Portrait Painter

Pardoned on the condition that he leave the United States for four years, Jordan's arrival in Plaistow, New Hampshire, in February of

In his diary, Merrill refers to Jordan as a portrait painter boarding at the Plaistow household of Moses F. Peaslee, a graduate of Bradford Academy, class of 1817 (and possibly a former classmate of Jordan's, if that was where he studied for the five months mentioned in the prison chaplain's account). In 1830 Peaslee was serving his first term as state representative, town clerk, and postmaster, and his home would have been an excellent location for



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Fig. 8: Samuel Jordan (1804-?), *Young Man Seated* (probably Isaac Watts Merrill), 1831. Signed "S. Jordan, Pinxit 1831." Oil on canvas, 28¾ x 19¾ inches. Provenance: J. Stuart Halladay and Herrel George Thomas, Sheffield, Mass. Collection of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, Colonial Williamsburg, Va (58.100.38).

The book labeled *Wats* that the sitter is holding is one of the many hymn books by Isaac Watts (1674-1748). As Isaac Watts Merrill (1803-1879) was named for Watts and was himself a member of the Sacred Music Society, it seems plausible this is the portrait he recorded in his diary on April 11, 1831: "sat again today for Mr. Jordan to paint." The misspelling of "Watts" is not unusual for Jordan. His inscription on the back of the Eaton memorial (Fig. 9) cites "Hamshire" without the "p."

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Fig. 9a: Samuel Jordan (1804-?), *Eaton Family Memorial*, 1831. Oil on finely woven canvas, 21⅞ x 15½ inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch. Provenance: recorded as from New Hampshire; Edith Gregor Halpert, American Folk Art Gallery, New York; 1949 sold to Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch.

Fig. 9b: Eaton family memorial inscribed on back: "Painted AD 1831 in Plaistow, N, Hamshire [*sic*]/ by Samuel Jordan; lower right reverse in pseudo-Greek: Samuel Jordan of Boston / painted AD 1831 / Aged 27." Courtesy curatorial research files, Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, NY.

1831, is puzzling. But perhaps he considered himself sufficiently beyond the reach of Massachusetts authorities, since in these years each state kept their own records and enforced their own laws with little or no reciprocity. A number of portraits dating from 1831 and attributed to Jordan (Figs. 4, 5), however, represent people living in the Massachusetts area; he evidently felt he could tempt fate. Jordan's presence in both Plaistow and across state lines in Haverhill, Massachusetts, is documented in a diary kept by Isaac Watts Merrill (1803-1879), the latter community's shoemaker and a farmer.

Jordan to meet potential clients. Merrill records Peaslee and his wife sitting for Jordan on March 24, 1831 (Figs. 6, 7).

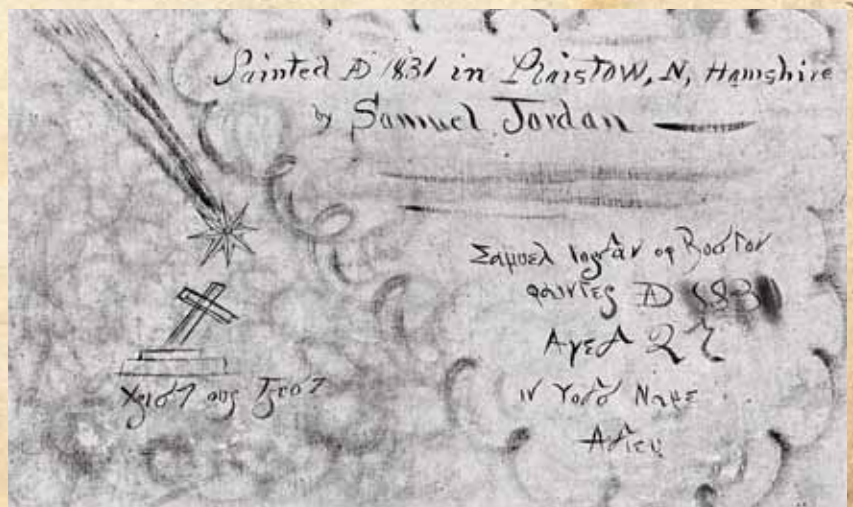
Merrill enjoyed his time spent with Jordan, posed for him, wrote him a letter on the "death of the *New Hampshire Journal*" and played "Ball" with him on numerous occasions. While Merrill records on April 11, 1831, "[I] sat again today for Mr. Jordan, to paint," there is no record of payment for his portrait (Fig. 8). Perhaps Jordan gave it to him as a token of friendship in lieu of soliciting patrons on his behalf. Jordan has included a copy of

Watts' Hymns in Merrill's hand. This famous hymnal was one of the most frequently pictured books in early New England portraits, and a reference to the sitter's religious devotion. Merrill, the grandson of a minister, regularly attended the North Parish Church on the border between Haverhill and Plaistow. He also served as the secretary for the Sacred Music Society in Plaistow and the north parish of Haverhill, and took great personal delight in singing.

Judging from his diary entries Merrill was somewhat ambivalent about Jordan's artistic abilities. On June 12, 1831, he made his last entry citing Jordan: "Called into Col. Tucker's saw Jordan's portraits. Don't think they look very natural or at least most of them." At no juncture does he question Jordan's social standing or his morals.

As a group the portraits reveal several distinctive features of Jordan's hand: pursed cupid's-bow mouths; stubby, curving fingers with pointed nails; awkwardly foreshortened arms often splayed over paint-decorated Windsor chairs. His most consistent feature is his distorted physiognomy, misaligned or asymmetrical features, often resulting in noses pressed to one side—perhaps what Merrill was referring to in his comments on Jordan's talents. It is possible that these distortions were due to visual impairment on Jordan's part. His prison entry for Jan. 21, 1834, records that he had a small scar on the side of his left eye and that his eyes had a slight appearance of deformity.

A variant of Jordan's work is a family memorial made for Samuel Eaton (born in Plaistow in 1802). Eaton met Jordan at Merrill's home on April 16, and probably commissioned the memorial shortly thereafter (Fig. 9a). A graduate of Bradford Academy, class of 1824, he undoubtedly requested the inclusion of a distant view of the Bradford Common (now part of Haverhill) in the image. That Jordan signed the work with his birth name indicates that he may actually have been trying to earn an honest living as an artist (Fig. 9b).



The pseudo-Greek inscription on the back of the memorial ends with “In God’s name, Adieu” encircled within a cloud.⁸ As Jordan was once incarcerated for stealing a horse and chaise, the presence of the white carriage horse with a riding saddle in the foreground of the memorial is most intriguing. While the horse is most likely associated with someone in the memorial, perhaps it also symbolized Jordan’s *adieu* to his former life as a horse thief.

and dated August 20, 1822: “Samuel Jordan, age 18 years, born Boston, MA, light complexion.”⁹

The Mystery Years

It is not known where Jordan spent his time from the fall of 1831 until November 1833 when he painted the portrait of Haverhill resident Daniel Mitchell (Fig. 10). In 1835, Mitchell advertised



Fig. 10: Samuel Jordan (1804–?), *Daniel Mitchell* (1808–1875), signed “S. Jordan Pinxit 1833.” Oil on canvas, 28 x 23 inches. Courtesy collection of Suzanne and Michael Payne.

The sitter is identified by a letter on the table addressed to “Mr. Daniel Mitchell / Haverhill, Mass.”

A further inscription on the back—“Samuel Jordan, born Boston, 1831, age 27”—has also proved invaluable for establishing his true identity, as knowing his age confirms his known history. Although there are no birth records for Boston establishing his place and year of birth (the City of Boston has few records from this period), this information is cited in his prison entry records (see endnote 3) and is consistent with his Seamen’s Protection Certificate #942 issued in Gloucester, Massachusetts,

penmanship classes at the Haverhill Academy; by the 1850 census he is cited as a hatter. Mitchell’s portrait is embellished with a profusion of fancy details that are in sharp contrast to Jordan’s earlier, more austere likenesses. It is hard to assess if this variance can be attributed to the sitter’s preference or if Mitchell compensated Jordan so well for his portrait that it gave Jordan the first real opportunity to be free with his use of paint and time.

Arrested Again

Alas, Jordan's period of reformation proved short-lived. Keeper William Going recorded in his memoir that the next time he saw Jordan was after his pardon, when "he was in court for attempting to murder a woman in Acton [Massachusetts] possibly for selling her body for dissection." Court records, however, present a far less sensational story. On November 18, 1833, Jordan and an unnamed accomplice were caught entering a private residence in Acton with intent to rob. Jordan, described as "lately a resident in Concord and a laborer" was sentenced to twenty years in the state prison. Tried under the name of "Samuel F. Jordan," upon his arrival at the prison on January 21, 1834, he was promptly recognized as a "third-comer" and the sentence changed to life in prison.

His years of respectability as a gentleman portrait painter were over. This time there are no entries in the prison account books citing payments to Jordan for portraits. Did he lose his desire to paint? Or, as a lifer, was his special status to pursue painting revoked? From the scant daily records as well as the diaries of Charles Lincoln (who was stabbed to death in the prison in 1843),¹⁰ it would appear that the philosophy at the prison had changed. Reformation and rehabilitation had given way to discipline and forced labor. The code of silence was vehemently enforced; those that were disobedient were promptly punished with public lashing (known as "striping") and/or solitary confinement.

Into Thin Air

On September 17, 1836, Jordan escaped from the state prison with six others who planned to make their way to Texas. Their leader was a man named Jacob Edwards, a former customs' officer in Vermont, serving a life sentence for counterfeiting. Newspaper accounts cited Edwards' key accomplice as "Samuel F. Jordan, age 33, a hair brained fellow, but fearless and keen for an adventure." While Edwards was recaptured within days, the others made good their escape.

Nothing more is known about Jordan. Did he end up in Texas and return to a life of crime using his skills to make and pass bogus bills? After all, in 1829, he told the prison chaplain he had "calculated largely to go in to the [counterfeiting] business." Or did he return to a life of art? If so, who were his subjects and what name did he use to sign his paintings? While the present research has filled some critical gaps in Jordan's biography, these and more questions remain to be answered. AEN

Deborah M. Child is an independent art historian and museum consultant based in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. She would like to thank Richard M. Candee, Tom Hardiman, and Barbara R. Luck for their contributions to this article. Should you know of other paintings by Samuel



Detail of figure 10. Collection of Suzanne and Michael Payne.

Jordan or by other artists who spent time in the state prison in Charlestown, Mass., she would be delighted to hear from you. You can contact her at 8 Rutland St., Dover, NH 03820, 603.969.4021, or at dmchild@eslamprey.com.

1. Entry dated Feb. 15, 1831, in diary of Isaac Watts Merrill (1803–1879). Special Collections, Haverhill Public Library, Haverhill, Mass. Transcribed by Julian Miller, Haverhill, Mass.
2. Philip F. Gura, editor. *Buried from the World*. Inside the Massachusetts State Prison, 1829–1831. The Memorandum Books of the Reverend Jared Curtis (1777–1862). Boston, Mass.: Massachusetts State Historical Society, 2001, 114–115.
3. Entries of Convicts in the State Prison, Charlestown, Mass., 1805–1818, case #1457: John Jordon [sic], age 20 years, 5' 8, blue eyes, brown hair, light skin, born Boston, MA, Convicted Boston. Admitted June 7, 1823 for 2 years sentence for counterfeiting. Case #534: John Jordon [sic], scar in corner left eye. Parents live in Medford. Age 20, blue eyes, brown hair, light skin, born Boston, Suffolk, Mass. June 6, 1823 convicted in Boston for counterfeiting. Received June 7, 1823. Two years labor. Discharged Sept. 18, 1825. Case #762: John Jordon [sic]. Second comer: age 22, blue eyes, brown hair, light skin. Born Boston. Convicted Dec. 10 1825 Boston. Horse-stealing. Received Dec. 10, 1825. 15 day solitary, 2 year sentence. Additional sentence given Feb. 7, 1826 with 1-day solitary and seven year sentence. Conditional pardon granted Sept. 6, 1830. Case #1481 Samuel F. Jordan, age 30. Third comer, John Jordan. Blue eyes, light hair, light skin. Scar on left arm and left breast, small scar side of left eye. Eyes have a slight appearance of deformity. Jan. 21 1834 convicted in Cambridge of burglary. Received Jan 21, 1834. 20-year sentence. Escaped Sept. 17, 1836. Commitment Register, Charlestown State Prison, 1818–1840. Massachusetts State Archives, Dorchester, Mass. GSU-134.
4. The death of his father, Samuel Ferson Jordan, is recorded in vital records of Medford, Mass., for June 25, 1817. Cause of death was rheumatic fever. See www.NewEnglandAncestors.org.
5. In *Memoir of William Going* (Boston, Mass.: William Going, 1841), 47–48.
6. Daily Transactions of Massachusetts State Prison Log Book, Massachusetts State Archives, Dorchester, Mass. HS9.01 285x 1805–1829 & 1830–1848. Records are incomplete. Charles Lincoln, Jr. Manuscript Diaries. Two bound journals. First journal entries date from May 15, 1822 to October 17, 1830. Collection of Boston Athenaeum, Boston, Mass. The author wishes to thank the Boston Athenaeum for granting permission to access the unpublished diaries of Charles Lincoln Jr. First journal entries date from May 15, 1822 to October 17, 1830.
7. Charlestown State Prison Account Books, 1827–1855. One bound volume. MA State Archives, Dorchester, Mass.
8. See Deborah Chotner and Julie Aronson. *American Naive Paintings* (Washington: National Gallery of Washington, Oxford University Press, 1992), 136–138, for full catalog entry regarding this memorial painting.
9. Seamen's Protection Certificate Register Database, Mystic Seaport, CT. Viewed www.mysticseaport.org.
10. Lincoln Manuscript Diaries. Collection of Boston Athenaeum.