

Coming of Age

The Marine Paintings of John Samuel Blunt

by Deborah M. Child

on the *Piscataqua*



Perhaps because of his short life and the relative scarcity of work signed and dated by John Samuel Blunt (1798–1835) scholarship has been somewhat sparse on this artist. Since beginning a catalogue raisonné on Blunt in 2005, building on earlier research by Nina Fletcher Little and Dr. Robert Bishop¹, I have found it a challenge to make sense of the body of work attributed to this artist. As his career progressed why did his seascapes and landscapes become more realistic and his portraits more elaborate within highly abstracted interiors? Fortunately, with the recent discovery of two sketchbooks — one from 1821 when Blunt was in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and a second begun in 1830 when he moved to Boston — and a manuscript ledger dating from 1826 until his death in 1835, it is now possible to better assess Blunt’s artistic progression and inspirations.

This article explores just one area of the artist’s large body of work, his marine paintings. Blunt advertised myriad artistic endeavors during his career, including orna-

Fig. 1: Attributed to John S. Blunt (American, 1798–1835), *Unknown Lady with Gold Comb or Portrait of Young Woman on Red Couch*, not dated. Oil on canvas, 33 by 28 inches. Photograph courtesy of David A. Schorsch & Eileen M. Smiles American Antiques.

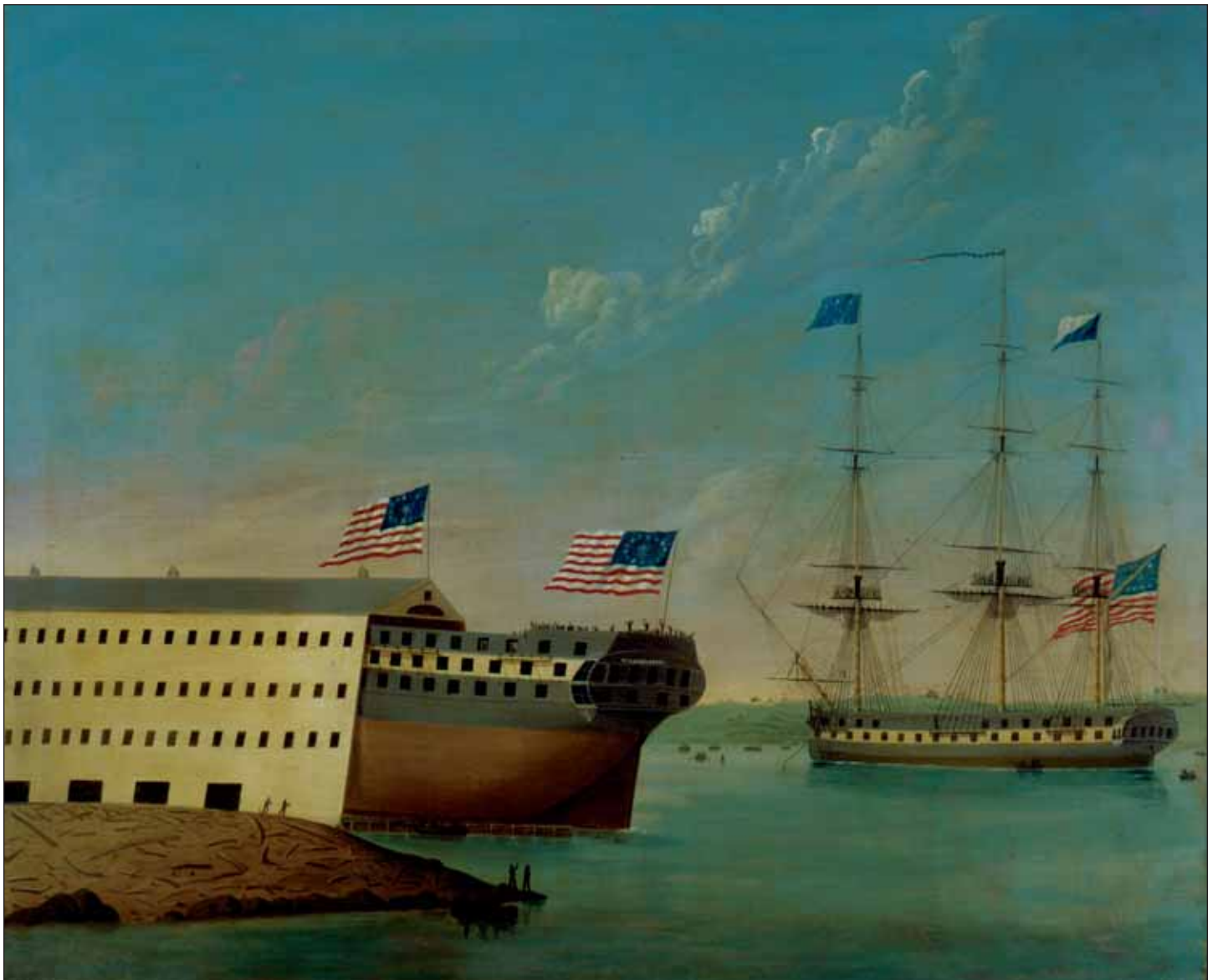


Fig. 2: Attributed to John S. Blunt (American, 1798–1835), *Launching of the U.S. Frigate Washington*, 1814. Oil on canvas, 48¾ by 57⅞ inches. Collection of Historic New England, 1991.891; gift of Bertram K. and Nina Fletcher Little.

mental, sign and glass paintings, enameling on glass, gilding, ship portraits and ornaments, landscapes, fire buckets, and profile miniatures. Also a portraitist (Fig. 1), this body of his work did not attract any critical attention until Dr. Bishop identified Blunt as the Borden Limner, the artist who painted the portraits of Captain Daniel Borden and his wife, of New Bedford, MA (Collection of New Bedford Whaling Museum). New revelations about the portraits attributed to Blunt will be the subject of a separate study.

Born in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in 1798, Blunt was essentially a self-taught artist. Of impressive Yankee lineage, his paternal antecedents were gifted mariners and included his grandfather, Captain John Blunt, George Washington's pilot on his famous 1776

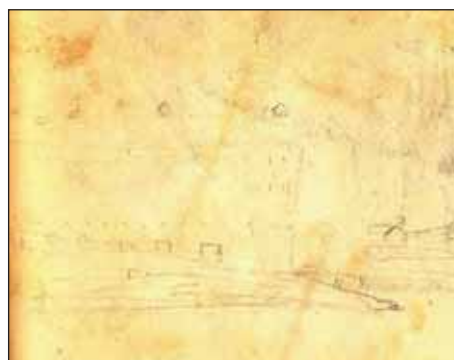


Fig. 3: John S. Blunt (American, 1798–1835), detail of *Ship house, Portsmouth Navy Yard, Badger's Island, Kittery, Maine*, circa 1821. Artist's sketchbook, p. 57. Graphite on laid paper, H. 7¼, W. 4¼ in. Private collection.

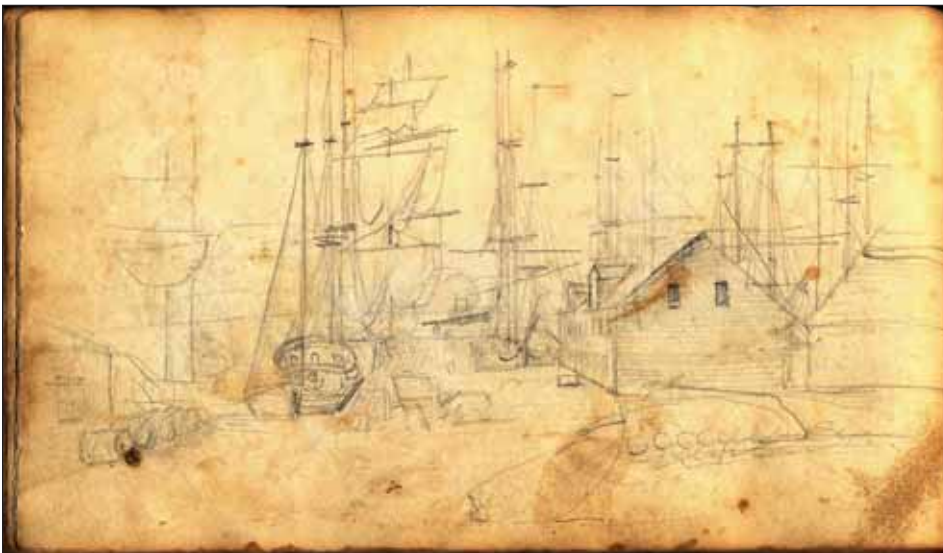
Delaware crossing.² On his mother's side Blunt was descended from generations of talented Rhode Island goldsmiths and master craftsmen, including America's first documented weathervane maker, Shem Drowne (1683–1774), renowned for his grasshopper vane atop Boston's Faneuil Hall.

The artist came of age during the War of 1812, a pivotal time in Portsmouth's maritime and civic history, when mercantile pursuits were severely limited and many locals resorted to risky but lucrative privateering ventures. To make matters worse, a fire swept through the city in 1813, consuming almost the entire central business section. Amongst the subsequent claimants for lost property was the artist's father, Mark S. Blunt, then lieutenant of the privateer *Portsmouth*. The Blunt



Fig. 4: John S. Blunt (American, 1798–1835), Wharf scene, Portsmouth, NH, circa 1821. Artist's sketchbook, p. 93. Graphite on laid paper, H. 7¼, W. 4¼ in. Private collection.

Fig. 5: John S. Blunt (American, 1798–1835), *View of the Piscataqua River from Noble's Wharf, Portsmouth, New Hampshire*, signed and dated lower left "J. S. Blunt 1824." Oil on canvas, 26 x 33 inches. Collection of the Portsmouth Athenaeum; gift of Joseph and Jean Sawtelle.



family's misfortunes did not end there. In January 1815, the *Portsmouth* and all those aboard were lost off the coast of Madeira.

These misfortunes undoubtedly prompted the artist, the oldest of three siblings, to pursue his art in earnest in order to supplement his mother's meager boarding house income. As shipbuilding was one of the mainstays of his hometown's economy, it is not surprising that the frigate *Washington* was the subject of one of Blunt's earliest and most ambitious paintings (Fig. 2). It was the first ship built for the United States Navy in the new Portsmouth Navy Yard and was a great source of local pride. Despite British threats of sabotage, its launch on 1 October 1814 prompted a spirited public celebration. The size and detail of Blunt's canvas conveys the excitement surrounding such an important historical event.

Blunt's fascination with the Portsmouth shipyard apparently continued, as evidenced by a pencil study of the ship house in his 1821 sketchbook (Fig. 3). Growing up in this seafaring town, Blunt evidently became intimately acquainted with all things marine. The sketch seen in figure 4 is one of the sixty-plus wharves engaged in mercantile trade on Portsmouth's waterfront in 1821. Such sketchbook studies further support the identification of Blunt as the artist of the canvas seen in figure 2.³

Following the declaration of peace with England in 1815, Blunt began an apprenticeship at the Boston workshop of John Ritto Penniman (1782–1841), where he learned all manner of ornamental work. In 1819, he ventured up the Merrimack River in search of commissions with portrait artist William P. Codman (1798–1878). This trip culminated with the state seal Blunt painted for the newly built New Hampshire State House in Concord, New Hampshire (Collection of New Hampshire Historical Society).

By 1821, Blunt had married and returned to his hometown, where he listed himself as an ornamental and portrait painter. He was soon exhibiting his work for a modest admission fee, advertising for students for an art school, and buying property. Pencil studies from the artist's 1821 sketchbook confirm that he was also increasingly preoccupied with studying nature firsthand. Such close study of sky and sea conditions and local topography coupled with intimate knowledge of his subject matter, undoubtedly accounts for the pronounced sense of place in Blunt's work.

View of the Piscataqua River from Noble's Wharf, Portsmouth, New Hampshire (Fig. 5) provides a specific view looking east across Noble's Wharf towards the shipyards. However, it is more than a topographical painting. Blunt demonstrates his keen powers of observation by deftly capturing the serene appearance of water under a rising sun. By doing so, he invests his painting with a gentle majesty and tranquility that anticipates the work of the China trade painter Sunqua (active 1830–1870).



Fig. 7: John S. Blunt (American, 1798–1835), *Harbor scene, possibly Boston*, signed and dated “J. S. Blunt del., 1822.” Oil on panel, 15 x 22 inches. Private collection. This painting was presented by the artist to his cousin as a wedding present in 1822 and has descended in the same family.

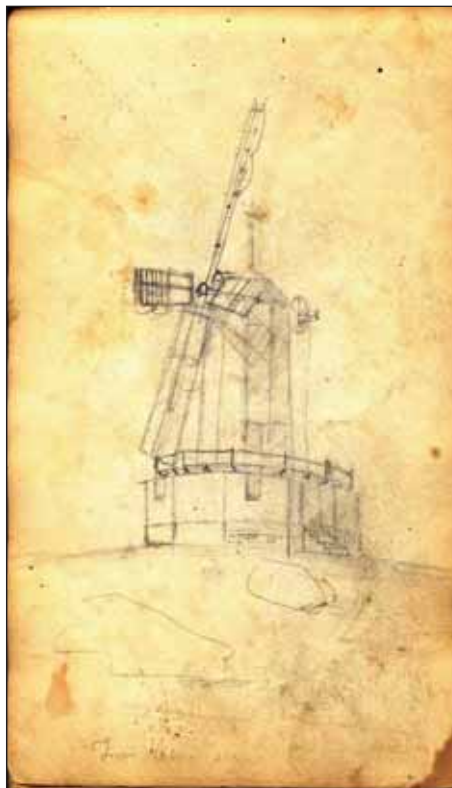


Fig. 6: John S. Blunt (American, 1798–1835), *Windmill study*, captioned “from nature,” circa 1821. Artist's sketchbook, p. 35. Graphite on laid paper, H. 7¼, W. 4¼ in. Private collection.

Close comparison of the artist's sketchbooks with his paintings reveals his working methodology. Note how his windmill study “from nature” (Fig. 6) of 1821 is incorporated into his harbor scene canvas of 1822 (Fig. 7). The figure 7 harbor scene has always been considered a Boston location. Although this painting has certain affinities with other contemporary views of Boston,⁴ Blunt has cleverly manipulated the various structures to give prominence to the windmill. This creates a more dramatic scene that harks back to the seventeenth-century Dutch masters. He used this device in at least one other painting, his signed and dated 1823 oil on panel *Picnick [sic] on Long Island Sound* (Collection of Nina Fletcher Little, present whereabouts unknown), where a windmill is evident in the distance.

In *North Mill Pond, Portsmouth, NH* (Fig. 8), the site of his earlier windmill sketch, Blunt has once again manipulated the landscape to create a more dramatic effect, this time by silhouetting a decomposing hull of a ship against a body of water bathed by a setting sun. In keeping with the picturesque tradition, he has animated his landscape by giving prominence to the figures in the foreground. One can sense the life lessons these children are embracing as they listen to their elder tell the saga of yet another ship that has



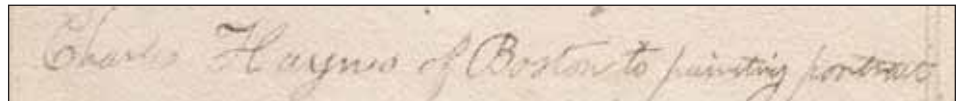
Fig. 8: John S. Blunt (American, 1798–1835), *North Mill Pond, Portsmouth, NH, circa 1822*. Oil on canvas. 19½ x 23¾ inches. Private collection.

served its time at sea.

With access to the artist's sketchbook, it is now possible to more accurately date and identify many of Blunt's painted Portsmouth views. For example, since his sketch of the windmill predates his painted harbor scene of 1822, the windmill is undoubtedly Charles Bowles' grist windmill erected circa 1817 near the site of the North Mill Pond, Portsmouth, the setting for Blunt's painting shown in figure 8.⁵

Despite Blunt's willingness to undertake all manner of artistic endeavors, by the late 1820s the economy was faltering and, like so many Portsmouth natives, the artist was struggling to support his family. In 1830 he moved his family to Boston with hopes of attracting new clientele, however, hardships continued. By March 1835 Blunt was making plans to move out West. An advertisement he placed in the *Daily Evening Transcript* on March 11, 1835, just before his departure, offered "Paintings for sale: Niagara Falls, Winnipiscogee, Notch of White Mountains, and several views in Boston Harbor — *all from original drawings taken at the several places.*" In a letter to his wife written July 1, 1835 from Natchitoches, Louisiana, he notes his health has been good

Fig. 12: Entry dated June 23, 1827, from Blunt Manuscript Ledger Day Book, 1826–1835. Courtesy Portsmouth Athenaeum. S855. Charles Haynes (born MA 1797) is listed in the 1841 Boston directory as a broker at 62 Cornhill, the same street where earlier Blunt had his studio.



on his journey, except at Cincinnati where he was unwell. But the Texas land he purchased was never seen by his family as Blunt perished from yellow fever before he could return to Boston to collect his family.

As a painter, Blunt was ahead of his time and was much more than the provincial or naïve artist he has sometimes been called. His best work, with its sophisticated sky renderings derived from close study (Fig. 10), harks back to such Dutch marine masters as Aelbert Cuyp (1620–1691), and he is clearly aligned with Fitz Henry Lane (1804–1865), another precocious painter who came of age along Yankee docks.

The catalogue raisonné I am preparing for this intriguing artist is still in progress. Many paintings shown at the American Folk Art

Museum exhibit in 1980, *John Blunt: the man, the artist, and his times*, have yet to be located (Fig. 11) and many paintings cited in Blunt's 1826 ledger are still to be found (Fig. 12). An earlier ledger covering the period 1821 to 1826 and a diary for 1821 are in private hands. Although frequently referred to in the Blunt literature they are not available for study. As Blunt worked so closely from nature, I am hopeful that more sketchbooks and original drawings may still be located. I am also interested in locating descendants of the artist, as well as primary documents such as diaries, letters, account books, wills, inventories, and receipts that cite Blunt. If you have personal knowledge of Blunt or any of his works, please contact me at either 8 Rutland St., Dover, NH 03820, 603.969.4021, dmchild@eslamprey.com, or at the Portsmouth Athenaeum, 9 Market Square, Portsmouth, NH 03801, 603.431.2538, www.portsmouthathenaeum.org. Confidentiality is assured.

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1. Nina Fletcher Little brought the first serious critical attention to Blunt with her landmark article "J. S. Blunt, New England Landscape Painter" in *Antiques* 54, no. 3 (September 1948). Robert C. H. Bishop wrote a dissertation on Blunt entitled "The Borden Limner and His Contemporaries" (University of Michigan) and curated an exhibition of the same name at the University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1976–1977, and a second exhibition, *John Blunt: the man, the artist and his times at the American Folk Art Museum, New York*, in 1980. Since Dr. Bishop's demise in 1991, little material on Blunt has been published.
2. The artist's grandfather's legendary role as Washington's pilot on the crossing is part of Blunt family oral history. See Charles W. Brewster, *Rambles about Portsmouth*, first series (Somersworth, NH: New Hampshire Publishing Co., facsimile 1873 edition, 1971), 266.
3. See Nina Fletcher Little, "Indigenous Painting in New Hampshire," *Antiques* 86, no. 1 (July 1964): 63. Though unsigned, this painting has been convincingly attributed to Blunt. For detailed discussion of the attribution to Blunt as well as an excellent overview of Blunt's career, see John Wilmerding, *A History of American Marine Painting* (Boston, Mass.: Peabody Museum of Salem and Little, Brown and Company,



Fig. 10: John S. Blunt (American, 1798–1835), *Boston Harbor or Ships on Ice*, inscribed on verso canvas “Boston Harbor, Jany 12 1835 1 mile below the Castle [Island] looking to the East. J.S. Blunt.” Oil on panel, 20½ x 28½ inches. Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; gift of Martha C. Karolik for the M. and M. Karolik Collection of American Paintings, 1815–1865, 47.1240. Photograph ©2006, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

1968), 148–150. For more background on the painting, see Nancy Carlisle, *Cherished Possessions. A New England Legacy* (Boston, Mass.: Society of New England Antiquities, 2003), 240–241.

4. Compare this view to William James Bennett’s more topographical 1833 Boston, from City Point near Sea Street (Aquatint, hand-colored on paper, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) in which the windmill is just another edifice on the Boston waterfront.
5. See Richard M. Candee. *Building Portsmouth. The Neighborhoods and Architecture of New Hampshire’s Oldest City*. New Edition. Revised and Expanded (Portsmouth, NH: Portsmouth Advocates, 2006), 30.

Fig. 11: John S. Blunt (American, 1798–1835), *Moonlight Landscape or Coastal Inlet by Moonlight*, signed on front “J. S. Blunt 1822.” Oil on canvas, 29 x 34 inches. Present whereabouts unknown. Photograph courtesy of American Folk Art Museum, New York.

