

Painting the Elite



How does a self taught artist come to be known as the go-to guy for the rising, middle-class personalities of the day? We don't know. Family tradition tells us that Patrick Henry Davenport caught the artist bug at 16 years of age when Asa Park, a Kentucky portrait artist, came to his home to paint one of his brothers.

Four years later, at the age of 20, we know that Davenport was signing portraits he painted for some of the most influential people of his community. Although he moved to Illinois in his fifties where he continued painting, he was most famously known as the portrait artist of the Kentucky elite. Governors and their wives would commission him to do their likenesses.

Apparently, the family of abolitionist John Brown hired Davenport to paint him, the result of which is depicted above. For some reason, they never came to collect the painting and it remained in the Davenport family's care for many years after.

Since the painting was created around 1860, and Brown died a year prior, it is clear that Davenport painted from a photograph (or a number of photographs) of the subject. On the back of the painting, Davenport inscribed, "A Martyr to the Cause of Freedom John Brown, who was hung at Harper's Ferry, Va. December 21 [Dec. 2], 1859 aged 63 [59] years."

It was considered an odd inscription as Davenport himself was a slave owner at the time. Perhaps his views were changing or perhaps he was simply responding to the sensibilities of his patron's family. It remains unclear as to how he personally felt about the subject he was painting.

Patrick Henry Davenport is the third great-grandfather of my aunt Candy.

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