

# Understanding the Prior-Hamblen School of Artists a Little Bit Better

by David Krashes

Portraits by William Mathew Prior and other artists who lived in close proximity to him for a long time in Boston in the mid-19th century are today considered highly desirable by folk art collectors. Renowned collector Nina Fletcher Little first brought these artists as a group to light in the April 1976 issue of *Maine Antique Digest*.<sup>1</sup>

These artists produced many portraits that generally show simplicity, a lack of reality, and a charm that collectors consider desirable. Because these artists influenced each other but signed few paintings, there is sometimes debate about which artist produced a given painting and to whom a given painting should be attributed.<sup>2</sup> It seems useful that 35 years after Little's original article, we pay attention to how to differentiate among the artists when examining their paintings.

In the paintings by the Prior-Hamblen artists, anatomical features, particularly faces, arms, and hands, are portrayed to show what they are but not completely realistically. (Although Prior himself painted some very realistic portraits and signed them, most of his work is not realistic.) Frequently flesh tones are light with a hint of rouging at the cheeks, although this is not a universal feature; and only rarely is gray shadow shown under chins. The major focus of these paintings is usually on the individuals in them, not the accoutrements (such as flooring, flowers around the exterior of the painting, etc.). The brushstrokes of Prior himself are likely to be long and sweeping, as can be seen best in the paintings of skirts of children and, at times, in the outlining of arms.

These strokes indicate that Prior was

probably a "whole-arm" painter, meaning that he painted quickly using an outstretched arm hinged from the shoulder rather than using small short motions from the wrist or elbow. Despite the generalizations, there are exceptions—witness Prior's occasional inclusion of a partly pulled-back drapery over an open window, and Hamblen's use of windows with a tree or a bird outside.

Little listed five other artists as being influenced by Prior: Prior's brother-in-law Sturtevant Hamblen, whose family the Prior family lived with in Maine and in Boston in the 1830's and 1840's; George Hartwell, whose niece Elizabeth Hartwell married a Hamblen son, James, and who also lived in Boston<sup>3</sup> during the time that Prior lived there; J. (Jacob) Bailey Moore of Candia, New Hampshire, for whom Little showed no relationship but to whom she attributed a painting, possibly because it was in a simple style, on a board, and of similar size to a Prior (Fig. 1); William W. Kennedy, who painted in New Bedford and Nantucket, Massachusetts, but mainly in Baltimore, Maryland, and for whom no direct relationship to Prior has ever been shown<sup>4, 5</sup> (other than that he published an advertisement in New Bedford that looks similar to advertisements used by Prior); and E.W. Blake, about whom she said little was known except for one signed painting that she owned.

E.W. Blake is listed in the Boston City Directory as a physician at the Boston Lunatic Hospital living on Beach Street near Harrison Avenue in Boston in 1843 and from 1844 through at least 1849 at 28 Harrison Avenue. Both locations were within easy walking distance of Prior's

residence on Marion Street.

Blake was undoubtedly influenced by Prior, as he frequently used a small-size format similar to that used by Prior and had a simple style, not realistic; he also lived close to Prior. Blake's portraits, except for two known signed paintings, have almost always been attributed to Prior. For example, at the Winter Antiques Show in New York City in January 2009, I saw four paintings for sale attributed to Prior that I believe were by Blake.

In her article Little attributes only one painting to Moore; it is done in a flat style similar to Prior's. On the other hand, six small oil portraits attributed to Moore in two New Hampshire institutions<sup>6, 7</sup> (the Griffin Free Public Library and Museum in Auburn and the Fitts Museum in Candia) are more realistic than the usual Prior paintings. Four large pastels attributed to Moore and owned by the Manchester (New Hampshire) Historic Association are decidedly un-Prior-like (Fig. 2).

As we said, a relationship between William Kennedy and Prior has not been established, but they may have crossed paths in the early 1850's when both lived in Baltimore<sup>8</sup> for a short period of time. The Smithsonian Institution Research Information System (SIRIS) indicates Kennedy copied seven paintings by Blake<sup>9</sup> in the 1870's. Kennedy signed many of his paintings with pencil<sup>10</sup> on the frame or backboard, so identifying them generally should not be a problem. Whether Kennedy is truly a Prior-Hamblen group artist is a matter of individual judgment at this time.

What is probably of most interest to readers is how to attribute an unsigned

portrait to a member of the group. The best option, placing the painting in question next to one for whom the artist is known and then comparing, is usually difficult because of disparities of ownership and geographic locations. But because each artist of the group did sign some paintings that still exist, by looking for specific features in those paintings and then checking other paintings attributed to the same artist to see if those features are common throughout the artist's work, it is possible to pinpoint some specific details that can suggest which artist did which painting. Many of these details are known to professionals in the field of folk art. Showing some of them in black and white when they might be better depicted in color may be difficult, but we will try.

Two paintings by Prior are the place to begin. In 1850 in Boston, Prior painted a young boy (Fig. 3) and signed the painting on the back. In 1846 he painted Eliza C. Allen (Fig. 4); Eliza's family signed it on the back for Prior, and it is close to Prior's well-known flat, unshadowed style. The hands and chin in each of these paintings are of particular interest—the hands are broad, stubby fingers with nails depicted by thin lines on a broad plane of whitish flesh. Hands like this do not appear on paintings by Hamblen, Hartwell, or Blake.

In each Prior portrait, notice the thin line slightly above the bottom round line of the face delineating the chin. The other artists, except occasionally for Blake, did not depict a chin in this way, and when Blake used the chin line it was broader and more diffuse. So even with those simple small portraits without hands that are dubbed "Prior-Hamblen," examination of the chin may prove a deciding clue.

There seem to be only seven known signed portraits by Sturtevant Hamblen.<sup>11</sup> One (Fig. 6) has been sold twice by Sotheby's,<sup>12</sup> and the other (Fig. 7) is in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. A notable characteristic of each painting is the fairly well-known Hamblen indicator of the pointed hand (Fig. 8). The fourth finger is the longest; the next three fingers are progressively shorter down to the pinky.

Not so well known is the visual symmetry about a vertical centerline that is a feature of these two signed paintings and many other Hamblen portraits. In figure 6, imagine a centerline from the top of the painting through the part of the hair, through the nose, and down to the waist and see how everything painted to the left of the centerline seems symmetrical to everything on the right. Even the angles at which the ears protrude from the head seem equal. In figure 7, there is a similar symmetry about a vertical centerline through the child. In some cases, the symmetry exists except for the hair or may exist vertically only partway down the painting.

A typical Hamblen chin, which may not be visible in the pictures shown here, is an almost imaginary circle with its top an inverted arc visible beneath the lower lip. If a portrait suspected to be by either Prior or Hamblen contains no hands but shows a significant symmetry about the vertical centerline of the figure, or possibly the inverted arc chin, it may well be by Hamblen.

Frequently appearing on the market, the simplistic work of another artist is almost always attributed to Prior. This artist produced large portraits of children like those of Prior and Hamblen shown in this article and also produced small portraits of children on cardboard, generally 14" x 10½", similar to those frequently attributed to Prior. Similarities of image plus the size and use of cardboard seem to be the reasons for the attribution to Prior. A main characteristic of this artist's work (Fig. 9) is the rounded simplistic face, symmetrical on the right and left sides of a vertical



Figure 1. Portrait of a man attributed to J. Bailey Moore by Nina Fletcher Little, oil on panel, 16 3/8" x 11". Moore used "J" not Jacob to distinguish himself from another Jacob Bailey Moore of Candia, New Hampshire. Owner unknown. Photo courtesy Sotheby's.



Figure 2. The 28½" x 20" pastel on paper portrait of a man attributed to J. Bailey Moore and an accompanying portrait of a woman hung for many decades in the Hooksett (New Hampshire) Tavern and were always said to be by Moore. Collection of Manchester (New Hampshire) Historic Association.

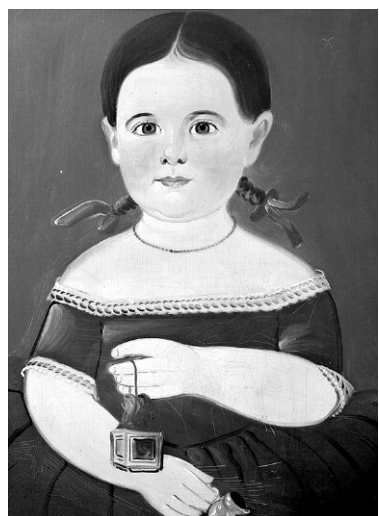


Figure 4. Eliza C. Allen, oil on board, 16" x 12", painted on back by the family "Eliza C. Allen...M. Pryor 46" plus several undecipherable numbers. Privately owned. Stephen Ericson photo.

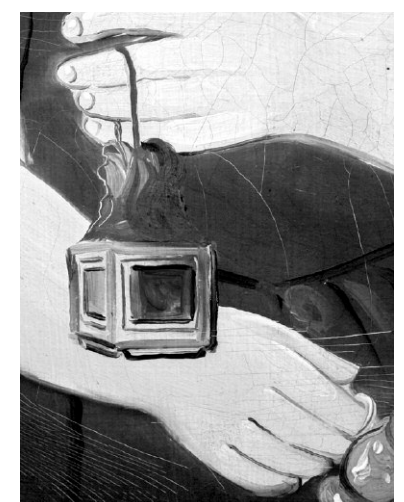


Figure 5. Eliza Allen's hands. See the uncovered plane of flesh between the tips of the fingers. Stephen Ericson photo.



Figure 3. *The Whippersnapper*, oil on canvas, 35" x 28½", signed on back with paint "W.M. Prior. Trenton Street 31 Section By W.M. Prior East Boston 1850." Note the broad hands and arms and the impressionistic fingernails. Privately owned. Stephen Ericson photo.



Figure 6. Portrait of a child, oil on canvas, 27½" x 22¼", signed on left shoe "S.J. Hamblen," auctioned twice by Sotheby's. Owner unknown. Photo courtesy Sotheby's.



Figure 7. Portrait of a mother and child, oil on canvas, 27 1/8" x 22 1/8", signed on back (now covered by relining) "Hamblin/East Boston/ 1848." Collection of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, 1981.

centerline. The top lip, usually very thin, has two pyramidal bumps separated by a deep central cleft. Note the pointed finger at the bottom of the painting.

Before being identified, which is really being done for the first time in this article, this artist was called by some the "Pointed Finger Artist" and by others the "Three Swag Artist" because his/her portraits often contain the pointed finger on the hand and/or three swags (loops of drapery) at the top of the picture. The painting in figure 9 is said to be one of the four children (paintings of the three others are known) of Hopkins Choice, who lived in New Hampshire. A picture of a large painting of a child by the same artist showing a simplistic face, a pointed finger, and three swags at the top may be seen in the Sotheby's catalog<sup>13</sup> of the Laracy auction, January 20, 2007.

Similarities between the work of the "Pointed Finger Artist" and works of Prior and Hamblen, plus the large body of work that has been observed, indicate that he/she was a prolific individual who knew them. The two signed paintings (Figs. 10 and 11) by E.W. Blake show the typical simplistic head and pointed finger of the unknown artist. The heads and pointed fingers in these two signed paintings are shown in figures 12-15. The current owner of the painting of Charles William Poor (Fig. 10), whose photograph was furnished by Sotheby's, is unknown. The painting of Leroy G. Darling (Fig. 11) is at the Shelburne Museum in Vermont.

Undoubtedly, E.W. Blake is the "Pointed Finger Artist." So far, only portraits of children by Blake have been observed. Prior's influence is evident, and Blake is certainly one of the Prior-Hamblen group.

Fruitlands Museum in Harvard, Massachusetts, has two paintings signed by George Hartwell, one of which is shown (Fig. 16). Hartwell's and Prior's paintings generally are not alike, but the same overall descriptions might apply: highly stylized, nonrealistic chubby arms (when bare) and sweeping brushstrokes indicating a "whole-arm" painter. The main distinguishing feature of many of Hartwell's paintings is the tonality of the lips (difficult to show in black and white): a fairly solid dark red field as the upper lip and a lighter reddish-whitish field as the lower lip, with the two lips separated by a brown line (Fig. 17).

Hartwell's fingers are likely to be separated by strong brown lines, each individual finger tapered and sometimes showing fingernails. Figures 18 and 19 from unsigned Hartwell paintings show a hand and the lips in detail.

When attempting attributions, care must be taken. Similarities among paintings indicate that the artists borrowed from each other. For example, the chin of the Hamblen baby in figure 7 is like a Prior chin. Hands by Hartwell and Hamblen are at times quite similar. Thus there are no absolutes. Details must be examined, and the more details that can be seen and evaluated on each portrait, the more certain the viewer can be of his/her attribution.



Figure 8. Typical Hamblen hand with tapered alignment of fingers.

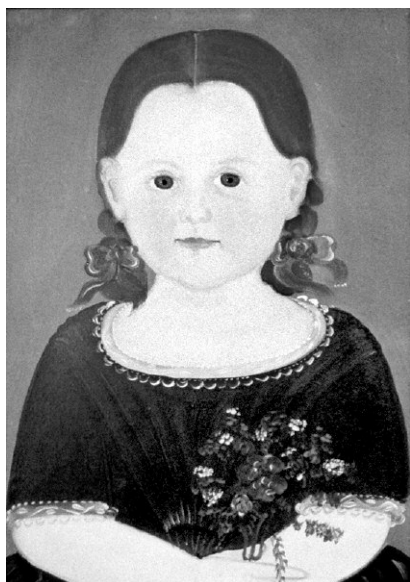


Figure 9. Daughter of Hopkins Choice, oil on board, 14" x 10 1/8", attributed to the "Pointed Finger Artist." See forefinger pointing to right at bottom. Privately owned. Stephen Ericson photo.

The four artists probably occasionally worked together, saw each other's work, and discussed how to depict various features. That all were creative is shown by the way they simplified their depiction of features and artifacts to create impressions, possibly to save painting time.

William Mathew Prior was a creative artistic genius who found ways to supply what many people wanted quickly and affordably. He deserves to be placed on the same type of pedestal as those on



Figure 11. Leroy G. Darling, oil canvas, 40" x 28 3/4", painted on back "Leroy G. Darling, Died Oct. 29, 1845, Painted by E.W. Blake." Collection of Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont. Shelburne Museum photo.



Figure 15. Leroy Darling's right hand. Shelburne Museum photo.



Figure 10. Charles William Poor, oil on canvas, 38" x 42 1/2", signed "E.W. Blake Artist, Charles Wm. Poor Age 3 & 1/2. Painted in 1846." Owner unknown. Photo courtesy Sotheby's.

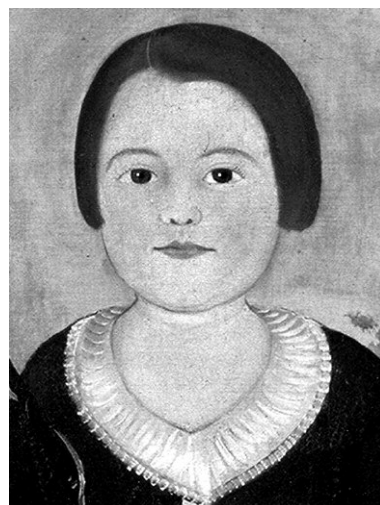


Figure 12. Charles William Poor's head.

which we find the other creative geniuses of mid-19th-century America.

(There is great gratitude to David Wheatcroft for the time he spent discussing attributions and for giving information useful in this article.)

Notes

1. Nina Fletcher Little, "William Mathew Prior and Some of His Contemporaries," *Maine Antique Digest*, April 1976, p. 19-A. See also lot 329 in Sotheby's auction of the Bertram K. Little and Nina Fletcher Little collection, January 29, 1994.
2. Lita Solis-Cohen, "Keno Auctions' Inaugural Sale," *Maine Antique Digest*, July 2010, p. 30-C.
3. Known based on painting signed in Boston in 1845. See caption for figure 16.
4. Stacy C. Hollander, "William W. Kennedy," in *Encyclopedia of American Folk Art*, ed. Gerard C. Wertkin (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 272-73.
5. Paul S. D'Ambrosio and Charlotte M. Emans, *Folk Art's Many Faces* (Cooperstown, N.Y.: New York State Historical Association, 1987), p. 107.
6. Frank O. Spinney, "J. Bailey Moore," *Old-Time New England*, Vol. XLII, No. 3, January-March 1952, pp. 57-62. (A copy was obtained from the librarian at Historic New England, Boston.)
7. The Griffin Free Public Library and Museum, Auburn, New Hampshire, and the Fitts Museum, Candia, New Hampshire.
8. Charlotte Emans Moore, *A Window into Collecting American Folk Art: The Edward Duff Balken Collection at Princeton* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Art Museum, 1999), pp. 75-76.
9. Smithsonian Institution Research Information System (SIRIS), ([www.siris.si.edu](http://www.siris.si.edu)). Cites copies by Kennedy; identification of ownership is restricted.
10. Information given to the author by David Wheatcroft.
11. Deborah Chotner, *American Naïve Paintings* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1992), p. 164.
12. See Sotheby's catalog for the collection of Mark and Susan Laracy, January 20, 2007, lot 63.
13. *Ibid*, lot 218.



Figure 14. Leroy Darling's head. Shelburne Museum photo.



Figure 13. Charles William Poor's pointed forefinger with the whip cleverly wrapped around it.

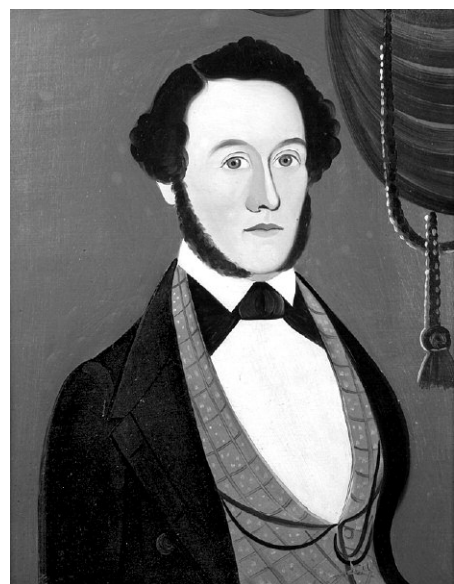


Figure 16. Portrait of Jonathan B. Wheeler, oil on canvas, 26 1/4" x 21 1/2", signed on back "Lowell August the 1 - 1845 taken by Mr. Hartwell, Boston Jonathan B. Wheeler, age 29." Collection of Fruitlands Museum, Harvard, Massachusetts. Stephen Ericson photo.



Figure 17. Jonathan B. Wheeler's lips. Stephen Ericson photo.



Figure 18. From a painting attributed to George Hartwell, oil on canvas, showing Hartwell's depiction of a hand. Privately owned. Stephen Ericson photo.



Figure 19. Typical Hartwell lips from another attributed painting. Stephen Ericson photo.