

The mysterious portraitist

Joshua Johnson

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The Maryland Historical Society's Department of Manuscripts recently received three volumes of Baltimore County court chattel records—registers of personal property transactions such as mortgages, deeds of gift, powers of attorney, bills of sale, and releases of slaves from bondage.¹ The earliest of the three volumes contains the bill of sale and the manumission record of America's first-known black artist, the mysterious portraitist Joshua Johnson, who was active from 1790 to 1825. These extremely significant documents have survived through pure chance. According to the donor, M. Peter Moser, when the Baltimore City courthouse underwent renovation in 1954, many original documents were slated for destruction. His father, Judge Herman M. Moser, saw the discarded chattel records being thrown into bins and asked if he could have a few of the books, coincidentally saving the volume containing Johnson's sale and manumission records.

Johnson's existence was unknown until 1939, when Baltimore genealogist and art historian J. Hall Pleasants attributed thirteen paintings to him and attempted to reconstruct his career on the basis of fragmentary and often contradictory information. Pleasants characterized Johnson as a "nebulous figure,"² and he has remained so over the last fifty-eight years, despite numerous exhibitions and articles devoted to him. Only one of Johnson's paintings bears his signature, *Sarah Ogden Gustin* (ca. 1805, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), and only one is documented in papers left by a patron, the well-known *Rebecca Myring Everett and Her Children* (1818, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore).³ His life dates are unknown, and historians argue over whether his name was spelled Johnson or Johnston.

Even Johnson's race has been a subject of contention. The idea that the artist was black was challenged when prices for his paintings escalated on the

art market during the early 1970s.⁴ The authors of a history of African-American artists cast stronger doubts when they noted the highly circumstantial and speculative nature of the "evidence."⁵ Pleasants had collected four different accounts from the descendants of old Baltimore families who owned portraits by Johnson in which the artist was variously described as a slave, a slave trained as a blacksmith, a black servant afflicted with consumption, and an immigrant from the West Indies. In the federal censuses for Baltimore of 1790 and 1800, a Joshua Johnson is listed as a free white head of household. In the most comprehensive survey of Johnson's life to date, Carolyn J. Weekley discovered an additional family tradition that held that Johnson was black and one that identified him as a "red man."⁶ Until now, the sole documentary evidence that Joshua Johnson was indeed black was the Baltimore City Directory of 1817–1818, in which he is listed among "Free Householders of Colour."⁷

The issue of Johnson's race has sociological and political ramifications. His gradual rise from anonymity to prominence paralleled the civil rights movement and, more recently, the academic emphasis on multiculturalism. Influenced by this climate, historians have tended to romanticize the artist, often at the expense of historical accuracy. Johnson has progressed from being parenthetically mentioned in a 1954 survey of American art as "a colored artist" who "remained a true primitive,"⁸ to being the African-American artist par excellence.

The chattel records conclusively prove that Johnson was a mulatto, the son of a white man and a black slave woman owned by a William Wheeler, Sr. On July 15, 1782, the clerk of the Baltimore County court enrolled two documents, the bill of sale and the release from bondage of a slave named Joshua, "now aged upwards of Nineteen Years." The bill records that on October 6,

Executors Administrators & Assigns forever and the said William Wheeler Senior for my self my heirs Executors & Adms the said Mulatto Joshua unto the said George Johnson his heirs Executors Adms or assigns and Against every other person or persons whatsoever shall & will Warrent & forever defend— In Witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand this sixth day of October in the Year of our Lord 1764

Test William Wheeler Junr } William Wheeler his Mark
Nathan Wheeler

Received to be recorded July the 15th 1782 same day recorded & Examined — W Gibson Clk

George Johnson } Whereas George Johnson to Mulatto Joshua } of Baltimore County in the State of Maryland having heretofore purchased of William Wheeler of the County a certain Mulatto child named Joshua Johnson which I acknowledge to be my son, and who is now apprentice to a certain William Forepaw Blacksmith in Baltimore Town & now aged upwards of Nineteen Years— Now know ye whom it may concern that the said George Johnson for divers good Causes & Considerations

the said George Johnson do hereby Manumit & make free to all intents & purposes whatsoever the said Joshua Johnson as soon as he shall be out of his said Apprenticeship or arrive to the age of twenty one years which shall first happen— In Witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand & Seal this 15th day of July 1782

Signed sealed & Delivered in presence of John Moale } George Johnson his Mark

Be it remembered that on the 15th day of July 1782 came before me one of the Justices for Baltimore County the Within named George Johnson and Acknowledged the Writing to be his Act & Deed and the Within named Joshua Johnson to be manumitted & set free to all intents & purposes whatsoever Agreeable to the true Intent & meaning of said Writing or Deed Taken & Acknowledged before me In Moale

Received to be recorded July 15th 1782 same day recorded & Examined — W Gibson Clk

This Deposition of William Embrose Junr Aged about thirty One Years being sworn on the Holy Evangelist of Almighty God on the 29th day of June in the Year of our Lord 1782

Bill of sale and manumission for Joshua Johnson, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore.

Know all men by these presents that I William Wheeler Senn for and in Consideration of the sum of twenty five pounds Current Money of Maryland to me in hand paid by George Johnson Have bargained & sold and do by these presents bargain & sell unto the said George Johnston a mulatto boy named Joshua To Have & to hold to the only proper use & behoef of the said George Johnson his Executors Administrators & Assigns forever and I the said William Wheeler Senior for my self my heirs Executors & Adms the said Mulatto Joshua unto the said George Johnson his heirs Executors Adms or assigns and Against every other person or persons whatsoever shall & Will Warrent & forever defend—In Witness Whereof I have hereunto set my hand this sixth day of October in the Year of our Lord 1764

Test William Wheeler Junr } William Wheeler his Mark
Nathan Wheeler

Received to be recorded July the 15th 1782 same day recorded & Examined W Gibson Clk

George Johnson } Whereas I George Johnson of Baltimore to Mulatto Joshua } County in the State of Maryland having heretofore purchased of William Wheeler of the County afore-

said a certain Mulatto child named Joshua Johnson which I acknowledge to be my son, and Who is now apprentice to a certain William Forepaw blacksmith in Baltimore Town & now aged upwards of Nineteen Years—Now know ye whom it may concern, that I the said George Johnson for divers good Causes & Considerations me thereunto Moving do hereby Manumit & make free to all intents & purposes whatsoever the said Joshua Johnson as soon as he shall be out of his said Apprenticeship or arrive to the age of twenty one years which shall first happen— In Witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand & Seal this 15th day of July 1782

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Received to be recorded July 15th 1782 same day recorded & Examined W. Gibson Clk



Joshua Johnson, *Mr. and Mrs. James McCormick*, ca. 1805. Oil on canvas, 50 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 69 $\frac{7}{16}$ in., Maryland Historical Society, Gift of Dr. Thomas C. McCormick.

1764, Wheeler had sold the child to George Johnston or Johnson—the name is spelled both ways in the document—for £25 current money of Maryland, about half the price of an adult male prime slave field hand.⁹ In the second document, Johnson arranged to free Joshua when the young man completed his apprenticeship to Baltimore blacksmith William “Forepaw,” or when he turned twenty-one, whichever came first, and acknowledged that Joshua was his son.¹⁰ For Johnson’s manumission to be valid, it had to be acknowledged before a justice of the peace, in this case the wealthy merchant-planter Colonel John Moale (1731–1798).¹¹

In the eighteenth century a small number of slaves and free blacks were apprenticed to white artisans.¹² The trade that Johnson selected for his son had some precedents for blacks. Before 1760 most slave craftsmen were either carpenters or coopers, but by the 1770s they were engaged in such trades as shoemaking, blacksmithing, bricklaying, and tailoring.¹³ Robert Bradley, a merchant-planter in Prince George’s County, Maryland, had apprenticed a slave to a blacksmith in 1728,¹⁴ and William Digges, another promi-

nent planter, was advertising the sale of “two stout NEGRO BLACKSMITHS” in a Baltimore newspaper in 1779.¹⁵ The manumission record supports one of the family traditions cited by Pleasants: the owner of Johnson’s portrait of Charles John Stricker Wilmans (ca. 1804, Baltimore Museum of Art) identified the artist as “a colored slave, a blacksmith on the estate of Gen. John Stricker.”¹⁶

Scant biographical information about the people mentioned in the documents survives. In 1764 the sheriff of Baltimore County assessed William Wheeler, Sr. (1694–1767), a small farmer, for four pieces of land totaling 244 acres.¹⁷ On his death in 1764, Wheeler’s estate was appraised at £308.15.5.¹⁸ Nathan and William Wheeler, Jr., witnesses to the bill of sale, were Wheeler’s sons.¹⁹ The estate of William Wheeler, Jr., was valued at only £166.13.3 $\frac{1}{2}$.²⁰ George Johnson apparently left no will or inventory, nor does his name occur in Baltimore County land records.²¹ Nothing is known about Joshua’s mother; neither Wheeler’s will nor inventory records any male slaves, although the former mentions two female slaves, one of whom had



R. E. W. Earl, *Family Portrait*, 1804. Oil on canvas, 46 ½ x 63 ½ in., National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch.

two children.²² The blacksmith William Forepaugh was a member of the Mechanical Company of Baltimore in the mid-1760s.²³ During the Revolutionary War, he joined the Baltimore Artificer Company of militia and later the Baltimore Town Battalion.²⁴ Forepaugh and his partner Stephen Bachon advertised a reward for two runaway white apprentices in a Baltimore newspaper in 1779.²⁵

The contents of the documents confirm Pleasants's suspicion that Johnson was a "light mulatto"²⁶ who was easily mistaken for being white. This circumstance may also explain why the rector of St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church never noted Johnson's race in the church registers as he did with other blacks and mulattoes.²⁷ Recordkeepers of the period were often at a loss as to how to categorize persons of mixed blood. For example, the 1850 federal census listed an Alabaman, Jack Coon, as white, but the 1850 state census registered him as a free mulatto; ten years later, the federal census classified Coon as an Indian.²⁸ Maryland never instituted a legal definition for what constituted a Negro.²⁹ Suffice it to say that the issue of determining

an individual's race was confusing and filled with the potential for embarrassment.

The discovery of the bill of sale and manumission record points the way toward a total revision of Johnson's career, and many of the speculative but widely accepted ideas about his origins and training can now be dismissed. It is now clear that he was not a refugee who fled Santo Domingo following the slave insurrection of 1793, that he was never a "slave artist" as he has often been described, and that he was not a slave or apprentice to any members of the Peale family. Even though Johnson advertised himself in a Baltimore newspaper as "a self-taught genius" who had "experienced many insuperable obstacles in the pursuit of his studies,"³⁰ art historians have insisted on associating him with the Peales. It was Pleasants who first discerned a "striking generic resemblance"³¹ between Johnson's work and that of Charles Willson Peale, Charles Peale Polk, and Rembrandt Peale. More recently, Weekley went so far as to speculate that Johnson was a French-speaking slave, servant, or "protégé" of either the elder Peale or Charles Peale Polk

(who had learned to paint from one of those artists).³²

The purely “generic” similarity between Johnson’s portraiture and that of the Peales has been exaggerated beyond proportion. The most common points of comparison—similar poses, costumes, accessories, and linear technique—are best interpreted as artistic conventions common to practitioners of the nonacademic folk tradition of American art. Johnson’s style is more convincingly related to that of Charles Peale Polk, who painted in a distinctly naive and less sophisticated manner than his famous uncle, Charles.³³ In this respect, his work is also related to that of lesser-known limners who were active in the mid-Atlantic region, such as John Drinker (active ca. 1787–1802), Jacob Frymire (1765/74–1822),³⁴ Frederick Kemmelmeyer (active 1788–1816), and Caleb Boyle (active 1795–ca. 1818). Johnson must have been directly familiar with the latter’s work because in 1818 his patron Rebecca Myring Everett commissioned him to copy Boyle’s 1807 portrait of her husband Thomas Everett (1807, Maryland Historical Society).

Pleasants made passing mention of the fact that Johnson’s style was similar to that of the Connecticut artist Ralph Earl (1751–1801), “a painter whom Johnson certainly never saw.”³⁵ Both Johnson and Earl shared a penchant for meticulously accurate delineations of furniture, the decorative use of brass upholstery tacks, and background accessories such as swagged curtains and open window vistas. A far stronger point of comparison exists between Johnson and Earl’s son, Ralph Eleaser Whiteside Earl (1788–1838). The multiple-figure family group portraits for which Johnson is noted were rare in American art of the period. Johnson’s *Mr. and Mrs. James McCormick and Their Children* (ca. 1804, Maryland Historical Society) finds its closest parallel in the sixteen-year-old R. E. W. Earl’s *Family Portrait* (1804, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.),³⁶ a painting that had been influenced by the elder Earl’s *Mrs. Noah Smith and Her Children* (1798, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).³⁷ Both Johnson and the young Earl used symmetrical compositions with the children arranged between their parents, situated on each end of a serpentine-back sofa; the stiff, frontal poses and gestures of the figures are nearly identical.³⁸

Is it possible that such pronounced stylistic affinities can be ascribed to the common visual vocabulary and limited repertory shared by nonacademic folk artists? Only the discovery of further documentation will help determine whether Johnson had any form of direct contact with Ralph Earl or the artists in his circle.

After Johnson completed his apprenticeship to Forepaugh, his activities and whereabouts are unknown. As a freeman he certainly could have been an itinerant portraitist during the 1790s, and it is generally believed that he painted Sarah Ogden Gustin in Berkeley Springs, (West) Virginia, sometime between 1798 and 1802. Certainly the visual evidence and the

paucity of biographical information on Johnson justify the search for artistic influences beyond Maryland. This is just one of the new and fascinating avenues of inquiry opened by the newly discovered documents at the Maryland Historical Society. ■

NOTES

1. M. Peter Moser donated the books, which are dated 1773–1784, 1785–1788, and 1811–1812, to the Maryland Historical Society’s Manuscripts Department in July 1994 (hereafter cited as MD, MDHS). The Maryland Historical Society holds various sources cited in this article in its Reference, Manuscript, and Collection Departments, each of which is cited separately in the following notes.
2. J. Hall Pleasants, “Joshua Johnston, the First American Negro Portrait Painter,” *Maryland Historical Magazine* 37 (June 1942): 121.
3. In a list of legacies made September 1831 and revised August 22, 1833, Rebecca Myring Everett (whose name occurs in the documentary evidence without a final “e” but was subsequently transcribed incorrectly) left “the large Family Painting of my self & 5 children Painted by J Johnson in 1818” to her eldest daughter (photocopy of photostat of original, Filing Case A, Reference Department, Maryland Historical Society Library [hereafter RD, MDHS]).
4. See Wilbur H. Hunter, “No Proof That Joshua Johnston Was Black,” *Evening Sun* (Baltimore), July 16, 1973, p. A10.
5. Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), pp. 3–17.
6. Stiles Tuttle Colwill and Carolyn J. Weekley, *Joshua Johnson: Freeman and Early American Portrait Painter* (Williamsburg, Va.: Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center; Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1987), p. 49.
7. Joshua Johnson is listed in ten of sixteen Baltimore City directories, beginning with the first published in 1796. He placed two advertisements in local newspapers, one in the *Baltimore Intelligencer* of December 19, 1798, and the other in the *Baltimore Telegraph* of October 11, 1802. In 1798, his name appears on a paving petition for German Lane; the following year, he paid a pump tax of \$2.50 for a pump erected at the corner of Hanover Street and German Alley (Baltimore City Archives, City Commissioner’s Records [1798] RG3 S1, box 1, item 10; [1799] RG3 S1, box 2, item 145). Some records may refer to the artist or to another Joshua Johnson living at the same time. The 1790 and 1800 censuses list a Joshua Johnson in Baltimore City. Pleasants assumed the Johnson of the 1800 census was the painter, although other scholars have questioned his assumption since a free black was included in the household. The 1810 census lists a Joshua Johnson in Patapsco Upper Hundred in Baltimore County and a “Josa Johnston” living in Ward 7 in Baltimore City; Weekley thought the latter was the painter. For the much debated baptismal records of St. Peter’s Roman Catholic Church, see n. 27, below.
8. James Thomas Flexner, *History of American Painting, Volume Two: 1760–1835. The Light of Distant Skies* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1954), p. 72.
9. The prices of slaves are discussed in Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680–1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1986), p. 139, n. 37; Kulikoff, “Tobacco and Slaves: Population, Economy and Society in Eighteenth-Century Prince George’s County Maryland” (Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1976), p. 488.
10. Because of the proximity of white men and black women within the slaveholding system, interracial unions did occur. Neither fornication with nor siring a child by a slave woman was considered a crime, but open cohabitation was socially unacceptable and legal

- marriage forbidden (*Tobacco and Slaves*, p.386). Although mulattoes were often the children of their owners, they could also be sons and daughters of overseers, laborers, and poor farmers (Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* [New York: Vintage Books, 1976], p. 421).
11. Edward C. Papenfuse et al., *A Biographical Dictionary of the Maryland Legislature, 1635–1789*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 2: 600–602. Johnson later painted a double portrait of Moale's wife and granddaughter *Ellin North Moale and Ellin North Moale* (ca. 1800, now in the collection of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, Williamsburg, Virginia), whose owner told Pleasants that it "had been painted by a negro artist named William Johnston, who suffered from consumption and was a servant, or possibly a slave, and . . . died not long after this was painted" (1933 communication listed in Pleasants file 1831, Collections Department, Maryland Historical Society, hereafter CD, MDHS). Pleasants noted that in 1796 the artist resided near Moale's town house, and speculated that "possibly Johnston was given painting-room space in a small outbuilding on the Moale property" (Pleasants, "Joshua Johnston," p. 125).
 12. Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p.50. For example, in Baltimore County a two-year-old mulatto boy named James Lewis was bound until he turned twenty-one to a Stephen Fell to be taught carpentry (Baltimore County Court [Minutes], 1772, 1775–1781, f. 37, Maryland State Archives [hereafter MSA] C386).
 13. *Tobacco and Slaves*, p. 398.
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 403.
 15. *Maryland Journal, and Baltimore Advertiser*, February 16, 1779.
 16. Pleasants file 365, CD, MDHS. Pleasants, in 1942, said that Johnson "belonged" to Stricker. The portrait of Wilmans is discussed in Sona K. Johnston, *American Paintings 1750–1900 from the Collection of the Baltimore Museum of Art* (Baltimore: The Museum, 1983), p. 93.
 17. Robert W. Barnes, *Baltimore County Families, 1659–1759* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 1989), p. 679; Sheriff Aquilla Hall Assessment Ledger, Baltimore County, MS. 1565, MD, MDHS.
 18. Baltimore County Register of Wills (Inventories), 1763–1772, MSA CM 155. Gentry estates usually had values of £1,000 and higher. See Aubrey C. Land, "Economic Base and Social Structure: The Northern Chesapeake in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Economic History* 25 (1965): 639– 654.
 19. "Wheeler," Filing Case A, RD, MDHS.
 20. Baltimore County Register of Wills (Inventories), 1772–1776, MSA CM 155.
 21. The estate inventory of William Wheeler, Sr., includes "notes on George Johnson" for £68 (Baltimore County Register of Wills [Inventories], 1763-1772, MSA CM 155). Johnson appears in the 1773 tax list for Back River Upper Hundred in Baltimore County, living on Britain's Range, and he is listed in 1779 in the Baltimore County court minutes as a non-juror to the state's oath of allegiance (Baltimore County Court [Tax List], 1699-1773, MSA CM 918; Baltimore County Court [Minutes], 1772, 1775–1781, MSA C386).
 22. Baltimore County Register of Wills (Wills), 1763–1784, MSA CM 188; Baltimore County Register of Wills (Inventories), 1763–1772, MSA CM 155.
 23. Henry C. Peden, Jr., *Inhabitants of Baltimore County 1763–1774* (Westminster, Md.: Family Line Publications, 1989), p.10.
 24. Baltimore Artificer Company, Revolutionary War Collection, MS. 1814, MD, MDHS; Revolutionary War Military Records, MS. 1146, MD, MDHS. Forepaugh is listed in the "Revolutionary War Oaths of Fidelity," MS. 1586, MD, MDHS, as having taken the state's oath of allegiance in 1778.
 25. *Maryland Journal, and Baltimore Advertiser*, October 19, 1779.
 26. "Joshua Johnston," p. 125.
 27. Special Collections (Co-Cathedral Collection) 1782–1811, MSAM 1510. Registers of St. Peter's Roman Catholic church show baptisms for children of Joshua and Sarah Johnson.-Some have suggested that these records allude to another Joshua Johnson and not to the portraitist. The chattel records, however, seem to strengthen the claims that the baptismal registers do pertain to the artist. One of the children was christened George, and given the naming practices of the time, it is quite likely he was named for his grandfather. A black George Johnson is listed in the Baltimore City Directory for 1822–1823.
 28. Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), p. 161.
 29. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
 30. *Baltimore Intelligencer*, December 19, 1798.
 31. "Joshua Johnston," p. 126.
 32. Colwill and Weekley, *Joshua Johnson*, pp. 51–54. Weekley, p. 49, fortified her opinion with an especially questionable family tradition (unknown to Pleasants) concerning the Gustin portrait, to the effect that it had been painted by a Joshua who was "the valet of Peale . . . [who] was a very bright Black young man." Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, p. 6, dismissed this statement as hearsay because it was not made until ten years after the portrait had surfaced.
 33. Linda Crocker Simmons, *Charles Peale Polk, 1776–1822. A Limner and His Likenesses* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1981), p. 84, has equated Johnson's style with that of Charles Peale Polk, but concludes that "it is not likely they were related as teacher and pupil."
 34. The similarity between Johnson's work and that of Frymire is discussed in Linda Crocker Simmons, *Jacob Frymire, American Limner* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1975), p. 14.
 35. "Joshua Johnston," p. 129.
 36. This portrait is discussed in Deborah Chotner, *American Naive Paintings* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1992), pp. 103–106.
 37. This portrait is discussed in Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, *Ralph Earl: The Face of the Young Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press; Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1991), pp. 219–221; and *American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Volume I. A Catalogue of Works by Artists Born by 1815* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994), pp. 146–148.
 38. Other group portraits by Connecticut artists who were influenced by Ralph Earl bear comparison with Johnson's work, for example Jonathan Budington's *George Eliot and Family* (ca. 1796, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven), which is discussed in Kornhauser, *Ralph Earl*, pp. 251–252.