

To Phoebe,
all her work
Carroll
3/14/88

The Search for Joshua Johnson

Early America's Black Portrait Painter

by Carroll Greene, Jr.

Nearly two centuries ago, Joshua Johnson lived and worked in America as a portrait painter. The ink on the U.S. Constitution was still relatively fresh when Johnson was turning out his prim and proper likenesses.

That would not be unusual in itself: Early America had many portrait painters, though almost all worked only part time at it. What is unusual is that Johnson was black and free, at a time when most American blacks were enslaved. Moreover, he earned his living as a portrait painter south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

Art experts, by patiently pursuing elusive clues and using widely accepted techniques for identifying artists' workmanship, have thus far found just over 80 works that they attribute to Johnson. An exhibition of 40 of them opened in Baltimore, his hometown in late September, at the Maryland Historical Society, which is co-sponsor of the show. It is the largest collection of his work ever shown.

Though we know black artists existed in colonial America and several names and works have survived from the federal period, Joshua Johnson has two distinctions: A substantial body of work is attributed to him, and he is the best documented of the early Afro-American painters.

The current exhibition has enhanced that documentation; nevertheless, Johnson remains an elusive and enigmatic figure. For example, his racial identity as a man of color did not re-emerge until some 50 years ago, and then only through the dogged persistence of an undaunted researcher. We don't know where or when Johnson was born. We don't know whether he had been a slave earlier in his life.

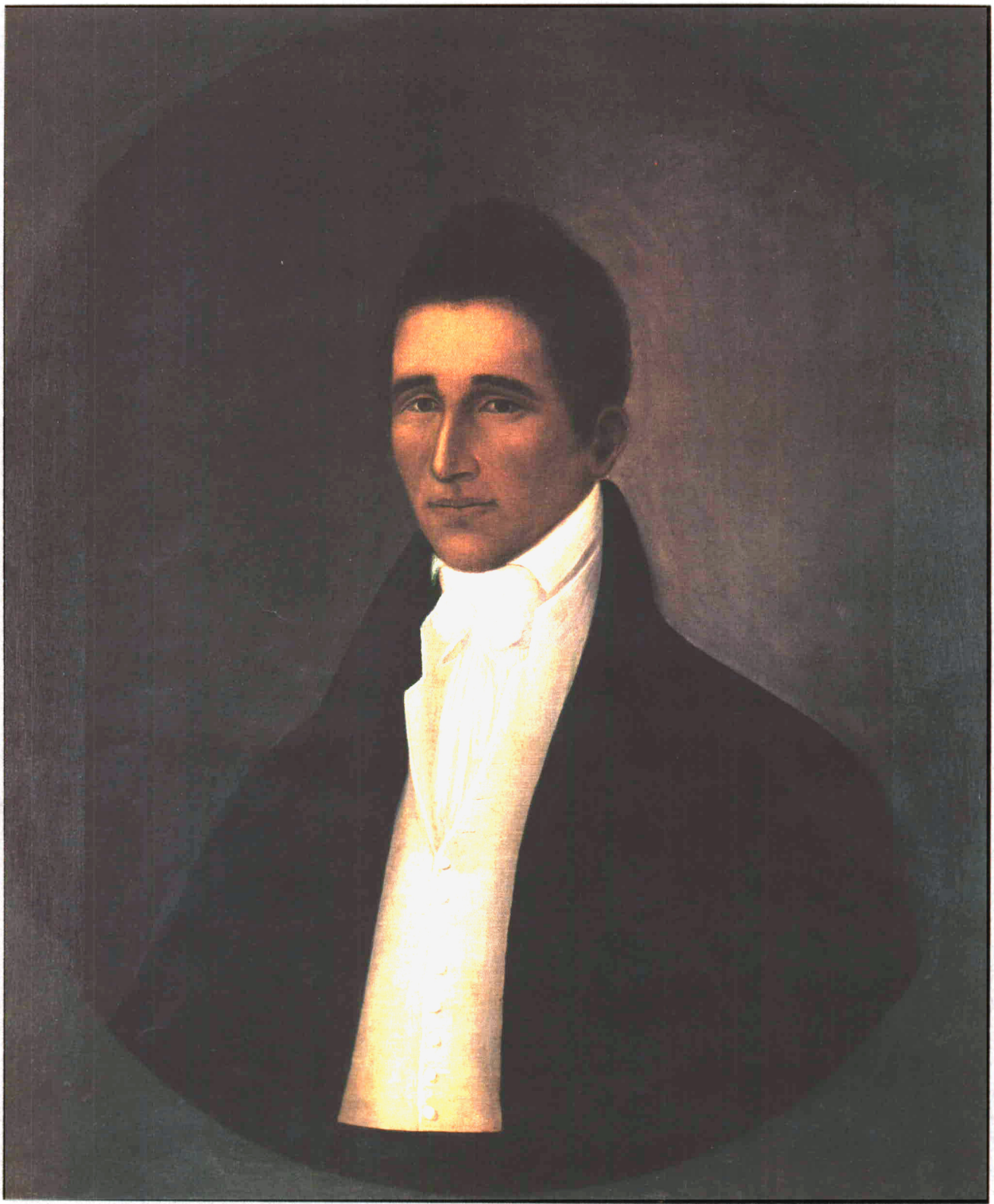
City records have yielded some very specific information about the years from 1796 to 1830. All the rest is blank, save for some strong bits of oral tradition passed down through some of the families whose members sat for him. From these sources come hints that he may have been a valet in the household of the famous portraitist

Charles Willson Peale. . . that he may have supplemented his income with blacksmithing. . . that he may have spoken French, from a West Indies background.

We may never get a firm yes or no about these tantalizing *maybes*. The scholars associated with the current exhibition have scrupulously dealt with many of them. Through their efforts, we can begin to appreciate not just Johnson himself but also some of the complexities that beset any researcher on early Afro-American history.

As for the show itself, "It's a major exhibition, the culmination of six—really, eight—years of work," states Stiles Colwill, museum director at the Maryland Historical Society. "We are finally doing the exhibition that Dr. J. Hall Pleasants, our long-time trustee who discovered Johnson, would like to have done."

The exhibition is now in historic Williamsburg, at the home of its co-sponsor, the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center. (Check the Calendar for New York City and Stamford showings



Daniel Coker? (1780–1846). Oil on canvas. American Museum, Bath, England.

Baltimore circa 1800

Leroy Graham, Baltimore historian, describes the Baltimore of 1796, when Johnson first surfaces in the public record, as a city where slavery was declining. The 1790 census showed twice as many slaves as free persons of color; by 1820, Baltimore records showed 10,326 free blacks and 4,356 slaves.

The city had some influential anti-slavery groups, especially Quakers and Methodists, who were important in steering customers to Johnson. This network of support for the black community is best exemplified by the Quaker merchant, philanthropist Elisha Tyson, (1749–1824) a fierce foe of slavery who masterminded the Petition of Freedom suits. This legal stragem, based on British law, resulted in a 1797 decision declaring hundreds of Maryland slaves free.

When the kidnapping of free blacks, always a problem, became rampant in Baltimore around 1815, these same abolitionists formed an official Protection Society, and many served, at great personal risk, as vigilantes against kidnapping and other abuses. This kind of support gave free blacks such as Johnson a measure of assurance and stability.

scheduled later in 1988.) AARFAC is, in truth, as much parent as sponsor. When Carolyn Weekley became curator there in 1979, she put forward the idea of a major Joshua Johnson exhibition. AARFAC approached the Maryland Historical Society, repository of Pleasants' original research on Johnson. With assistance from the Exxon Corporation, the two historically oriented institutions joined efforts to produce the exhibition.

Weekley's catalog essay, "Who Was Joshua Johnson?", notes that Pleasants (1873–1957) published his first article on Johnson in 1939 in *The Walpole Society Notebook*. A more widely read and cited article appeared in the 1942 issue of *Maryland Historical Magazine*. In both, Pleasants argued that the artist was a Negro, basing his conclusion on the extensive oral traditions mentioned above and on data collected from such Baltimore primary sources as census records and city directories.

(Pleasants' own history is as intriguing as that of the man whose life he tracked so diligently. He left the medical faculty at Johns Hopkins Hospital

in 1934 to devote his life to art and art history. Over the years, Pleasants brought together a collection of 3,000 photographs of portraits, miniatures and landscapes of early painters.)

Crucial to Pleasants' contention that Johnson was black is the 1816/1817 Baltimore city directory, which lists Joshua Johnson, portrait painter on Nelson Street in the Old Town section, as a "Free Householder of Colour." Weekley notes that that was the only edition of the directory that listed blacks separately—at the back of the book.

The account of an early Baltimore painter, a slave of Colonel John Moale named William Johnson, had passed down through the Moale family. Even though that first name proved to be in error, the last name was remembered correctly. And it is the last name that is significant, according to historian Leroy Graham, author of *Baltimore, the Nineteenth Century Black Capital*, because "few blacks in Baltimore had

Baltimore from Federal Hill
Aquatint engraving by W.J. Bennett,
1831
Maryland Historical Society



last names before 1820.”

During the 1960s and 1970s, some art historians began to question Pleasants’ conclusion that Johnson was, in fact, black. The scepticism was based on doubts about “the accuracy of the family memories” recorded by Pleasants and on some new research.

Because of this spate of doubts, researchers who worked on the current exhibition painstakingly reexamined Pleasants’ original documentation and critically reviewed the oral traditions he had gathered from descendants of the original sitters. “It is very unlikely that the eight independent traditions now known—several in addition to those published by Pleasants—could have evolved without some basis in fact,” states Weekley. Continuing, she notes “that despite some conflicting statements among the group, these are inconsequential when compared with the strong consensus that Johnson was not Caucasian.”

Weekley takes particular note of one tradition that “had been known by some scholars for years, but was unknown to Pleasants.” It surrounds a portrait of Sarah Gustin, the only one that bears Johnson’s name. (In the freer orthography of the period, Johnson sometimes spelled his name with a *t*.) It maintains that Joshua was a very bright young man who was valet to Charles Willson Peale, a prominent portraitist of the period.

Yet another tradition has come down through the family of Hugh McCurdy, another of Johnson’s subjects. According to this bit of oral history, Johnson had come from the West Indies. The account takes on added interest when one knows that McCurdy was a successful merchant-importer who carried on a lucrative trade with the West Indies.

Some thought has been given, in light of the blank pages before 1796, to the possibility that Johnson might have been among the large influx of refugees, both black and white, who fled from Haiti to Baltimore in the 1790s following the slave insurrections. Current researchers discount



Archibald Dobbin, Jr. (1764–1830). Oil on canvas. Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland.

Did He or Didn't He?

by Stiles T. Colwill

In doing research for any exhibition, the first step for the curatorial staff is to examine all of the existing paintings in the period to study stylistic comparisons of the featured artist. In the case of Joshua Johnson, one painting came to light in the Maryland Historical Society (MHS) collection which proved to be not similar to Johnson’s work, but in fact, the work of Joshua Johnson. . . . Upon re-examining this particular portrait, several features stood out as being typical of Johnson’s work. The feigned oval format of the painting was hidden under a massive Victorian frame. Layers of grit and grime covered the canvas. Still visible, however, was the overall coloration of the portrait, Johnson’s somewhat awkward shading of the face, thinly applied paint and the almond-shaped eyes with strange white highlighting underneath.

This, combined with other Johnson trademarks like the overall format of the painting and positioning of the subject on the canvas, strongly suggested we should examine the painting further.

Consultation with Carolyn Weekley. . . and Sian Jones, conservator on the Johnson project, confirmed that this long unrecognized painting was indeed a Joshua Johnson. Conservation has revealed that this is one of the finest representations of Joshua Johnson’s work.

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the possibility, however. As Weekley points out, the West Indian blacks who came at that time were generally feared by the whites, and Johnson's success as a portrait painter points to a considerable level of trust, as he worked in the households of his clients. Her judgment is that he probably *was* from the West Indies but that he had arrived earlier, as did so many U.S. blacks.

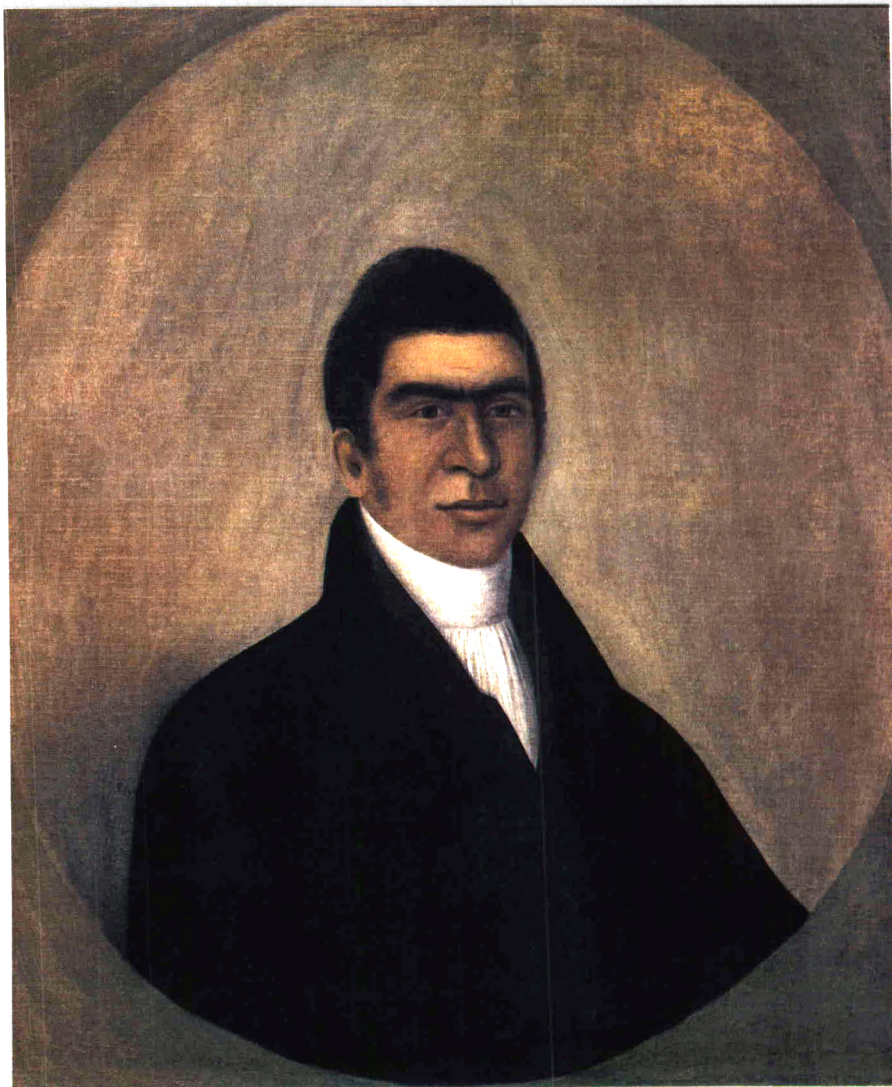
Did Johnson speak French, as is held by another family tradition? Here again, one cannot know for certain. However, two bits of evidence support that possibility. His portrait of Basil Brown bears an October date abbreviated in the French manner, *Octbre*. Possible links to the Peale family and to the West Indies re-emerge, in tracing out this thread in the skein.

Peale "owned a French serving-man," race unspecified. Was Johnson that person? French was spoken on a number of the West Indian islands in Johnson's time.

Stepping aside from the delicate task of dissecting and reassembling the fragile clues to Johnson's identity, what do the portraits themselves tell us of the artist and the times he worked in? Certainly the works themselves must figure large in the research process, especially when so many other tools of the art detective's trade are conspicuously lacking—family and public records, signatures, printed biographies, clear narratives in letters and journals.

Can the subjects themselves help shed light on the artist? Not necessarily. For example, if one is looking for support for the Johnson-was-black-thesis on the basis of a large portfolio of black subjects, that is a nonstarter. Only two portraits attributed to Johnson are of black subjects.

The *Portrait of an Unidentified Gentleman* (heretofore titled *Portrait of a Cleric*), owned by Bowdoin College, has been seen in various exhibitions of Afro-American art for the past 20 years or so. No identification of the



young gentleman has yet been made. A more recently identified portrait is assumed to be that of Reverend Daniel Coker, an early leader in the movement for an independent black denomination who emigrated to Liberia in 1820.

Other portraits of Afro-Americans by Johnson may yet be identified; but there is little doubt that his clientele would be drawn overwhelmingly from the comfortable white bourgeoisie and not from the struggling part-free, part-slave black community of antebellum Baltimore.

All of the paintings attributed to Johnson are portraits. Famed American artist John Singleton Copley (1738–1815) observed that Americans were not interested in art except for portraiture. Copley, who had the advantage of travel and study in Europe declared, in dismay, "There is no great art in America because there is no market for it."

Unidentified Gentleman
Oil on canvas
Bowdoin College Museum of Art,
Brunswick, Maine

Newly independent from Great Britain, Americans were too busy developing a nation and settling a continent. Shaped by the Protestant work ethic, these were a pragmatic people. However, few of the portrait painters had reason to complain. They were, after all, the photographers of the day. The invention of Daguerreotype photography (1839) was not far off, but until that day, portraits were the choice of the art-buying public. They wanted heirlooms for the dynasties they hoped they were establishing.

In early America, most painters were self-taught, including some of the best. The apprenticeship system was in widespread use in all of the craft professions, and that included portrait

painting. Newspapers of the times are filled with ads for apprentices as young as 10 and 11 who would be bound to an employer for a specified period.

Beginning with Pleasants, art historians have recognized many fundamental similarities between the work of the Peales and Johnson—too many, according to Weekley, to be accounted for other than by close association, especially with Charles Peale Polk. Mere occasional viewings of the Peales's paintings would not have provided him with an intimate knowledge of their painting methods.

Since Raphaelle Peale had established his museum (the present-day Peale Museum) a block from Johnson's home in 1798, is it not possible that Johnson might have seen the Peale portraits there? There can be little doubt that Johnson would have been familiar with the museum. Weekley discounts this possibility. Peale's museum was devoted chiefly to displays of patriots and local notables and would not have included the broad range of domestic portraiture that the Peales and Polk produced for Maryland and Pennsylvania families over a number of years and which served as Johnson's models.

The art historians on the current research team pressed to the limit the traditional techniques whereby attributions are made in the art world. When they reached a point beyond which these standard methodologies could not take them, they turned for help to another discipline.

They decided they needed someone familiar with the history of black Baltimore and skilled at researching the federal period, who could situate Johnson even more clearly in his place and time. They found that person in Leroy Graham, a Fulbright scholar. The resulting collaboration provides a rare instance in which art scholars and a historian specializing in Afro-American history joined forces to overcome the unique problems surrounding any probe of the Afro-American experience in early America. Graham describes those problems this way:

At that time, Afro-Americans were in the main ahistorical: Nobody thought that black activities were worth recording; and, since most blacks themselves were illiterate, they were not creating the kinds of records one finds for whites. Most of the facts of black history in Baltimore of the early national period are incidental.

There is no great body of archival material in one place that details what was happening in the Baltimore black community at that time. Frequently, the information was contained only in personal correspondence, newspapers and documents scattered all over the East Coast. And as with so much black history, the information had to be extracted bit by bit. It is really like looking for a needle in a haystack.

That haystack has produced some reliable facts for the years from 1796 to 1830. During that period, Johnson is recorded at nine addresses, and his clientele in the main came from the neighborhoods in which he lived. He seems to have exhausted work opportunities in one place, then moved on to a fresh scene of action. With one exception, he lived around fairly well-to-do folks.

Pleasants had found evidence that Johnson had a wife named Sarah. Graham states that he may have been married twice, since there is also evidence of a wife named Clarissa or Clara, "a free African." The Johnsons had several children, but recent attempts to locate descendants have been fruitless. Researchers agree that Johnson was an atypical black for his day. However, there were other atypical blacks of the period as well: Benjamin Banneker lived ten miles

away; even closer to home was the Rev. Daniel Coker. Johnson and his family seem to have lived much like their neighbors, who were lower-scale white artisans.

Early American folk portraiture was a popular art that modern America appreciates more with each passing year. Understandably, for it is an authentic art born out of national circumstances and national character. It is an authentic reflection of the simplicity, charm and innocence we associate with early America, extolling the traditional values of family, hearth and home.

The domestic portraiture of which Johnson is an exemplar exhibits a certain uprightness, even righteousness. It presents the sitter to the world as he wants to be seen and remembered—clad in Sunday go-to-meeting best and showing no warts.

Joshua Johnson was there. He set out to make a living and, in the end, he created a significant American legacy. Just as unknowingly, his art has become the "stepping stone" into the study of the long Afro-American tradition in the visual arts.

Carroll Greene is a cultural resources consultant specializing in Afro-American projects. His last story for American Visions was "Summertime: In the Highland Beach Tradition," in the June 1986 issue.

Joshua Johnson,
No. 52, North Gay Street,
RETURNS his most grateful thanks to his friends and the public in general for the encouragement they have been pleased to afford him, towards establishing him in the line of **PORTRAIT PAINTING**; he, therefore, flatters himself, from an unremitting attention to give general satisfaction to the ladies and gentlemen of Baltimore, to merit a continuance of their favors, as he is determined to reduce his prices agreeable to the times, and use every effort to please them.

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