

Francis Blackwell Mayer

BY JEAN JEPSON PAGE

FRANCIS BLACKWELL MAYER (Fig. 1) was born into a distinguished Baltimore family on December 27, 1827, and while he was baptized Francis, throughout his life he referred to himself as Frank. His grandfather, Christian Mayer, had emigrated from Ulm in Würtemberg about 1784, and had become a leader in the commercial and shipping world of Baltimore. Frank's father, Charles, was a locally renowned lawyer who at one time represented Baltimore in the Maryland Senate and who was a trustee

of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. He was also legal counsel to Peale's Museum in Baltimore, and one of the original members of the Maryland Historical Society, along with his brother, Brantz Mayer, a well-traveled writer. Frank's mother, Eliza, was of Scotch-Irish descent, the daughter of Francis Blackwell, a merchant-ship captain.

Mayer credited Alfred Jacob Miller, a friend of his uncle Brantz, with inspiring him to become a painter. At the age of seventeen Frank apparently felt confident enough of his artistic ability to take his drawings to New York and Philadelphia, where he received some encouragement. In New York a "Mr. Bartlett"¹ expressed the desire to publish some of his designs, and in Philadelphia he showed his drawings to "Messrs. Sully, Rothermel and Wm. Sartain, the engraver, all of whom expressed themselves highly gratified."² At this time his family procured a drawing teacher, a J. Prentiss, for him. In 1847 Mayer sold a colored lithograph of General Zachary Taylor, the Mexican War hero, to a Dr. Frost, a printer in Philadelphia, for \$50, the "first earnings by my pencil"³ as he put it. In September of that year Dr. Frost engaged Mayer to spend six months in Philadelphia preparing lithographs of the recent war in Mexico and designing decorative initial letters.⁴ In the evenings he studied art at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where he "took the 'Antique' Mon and Sat" and "Life—Tues and Fri."⁵

Earlier in the same year (1847) Frank Mayer and some of his fellow artists formed the Maryland Art Association, the first recorded organization of this nature in Baltimore and one of several he helped to found. Among the founding members were his best friend and fellow artist Samuel B. Wetherald, his uncle Brantz, Alfred Jacob Miller, John H. B. Latrobe, and seven others.⁶

The following April, he was back in Baltimore, where he accepted a job as librarian of the Maryland Historical Society of which his father and uncle had been founding members in 1844. This gave him both an income and the time to continue making lithographs. According to an account in the *Baltimore News*⁷ he did a commendable portrait of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, among others, at this time and began to do cabinet-size oils of genre and history subjects. Ernst Fischer, a European artist who had recently come to Baltimore, became his teacher and helped him develop his painting technique.

Frank Mayer spent much of 1850 illustrating a book about Mexico written by Brantz Mayer and published in New York by Nathaniel P. Willis. For this he received \$450, which enabled him to fulfill his long-standing desire to take his sketchbook west into Indian country. The following year he joined an official delegation to Traverse des Sioux, an important trading post and Indian village not far from Fort Snelling, Minnesota (see Figs. 4, 11). It was hoped that a treaty could be arranged with Chief Little Crow and other representatives of the Sioux tribes which would open up the vast Minnesota territory for settlement by homesteaders. The Sioux had gathered in great numbers from far and wide to be present for the historic occasion.



Fig. 1. Francis Blackwell Mayer (1827-1899), c. 1862. Baltimore Museum of Art.



Fig. 2. *Crazy Jakes*. Signed and dated at lower right F. B. Mayer, fecit./1853. Black chalk drawing, 22½ by 18 inches. Crazy Jakes was a Baltimore character whose brothers Frederick and Henry were popular caterers from about 1840 to about 1880. Maryland Historical Museum.

It was a tremendous opportunity for the young artist, who hoped to record Indian life much as Seth Eastman and Alfred Jacob Miller had done before him. Unlike them, however, he went not only as an artist but also as a journalist. He anticipated that his sketches would be used to illustrate his written account in a published book. For three months he lived among the two thousand Indians gathered at Traverse des Sioux and recorded their daily lives, as well as the formal events surrounding the treaty signing. However, he never did succeed in publishing his Indian journal and sketches. The beginning of the Indian troubles on the frontier made his poetic approach to Indian life outdated and unpopular. The artist always considered his Indian studies to be his most significant contribution to the visual history of his times, but not until 1897, two

Fig. 3. *Sam*, 1853. Inscribed at lower left 8 am. July 7. Pikesville. Pencil and white crayon drawing, 7½ by 4¼ inches. This study from one of Mayer's sketchbooks is for a figure in *Leisure and Labor* (Pl. II), one of his first successful oil paintings. The model for Sam may have been Mayer's friend and fellow artist Samuel B. Wetherald. Baltimore Museum of Art.

years before his death, did a patron take interest in this material. In that year he was commissioned to do sixty-three watercolors from his Indian sketches by Henry Walters, the founder of the Walters Art Gallery and son of William Walters, who had commissioned Alfred Jacob Miller to do a series of watercolors on Indian subjects years earlier. Mayer only managed to finish thirty of these watercolors before he died.

Mayer returned to Baltimore from his western expedition in October 1851 and entered wholeheartedly into the artistic life of the community. These years before the Civil War seem to have been by far the most rewarding ones for the painter. He continued to encourage the growth of artistic fellowship in Baltimore by founding the Artists Association of Maryland in 1855 and, in 1860, the Allston Association. Both occasions were reported in the *Crayon*, the New York art magazine published by John Durand, the son of the painter Asher B. Durand. Frank began a correspondence with John Durand soon after the magazine's inception in 1855, and the two became close and lifelong friends. Some





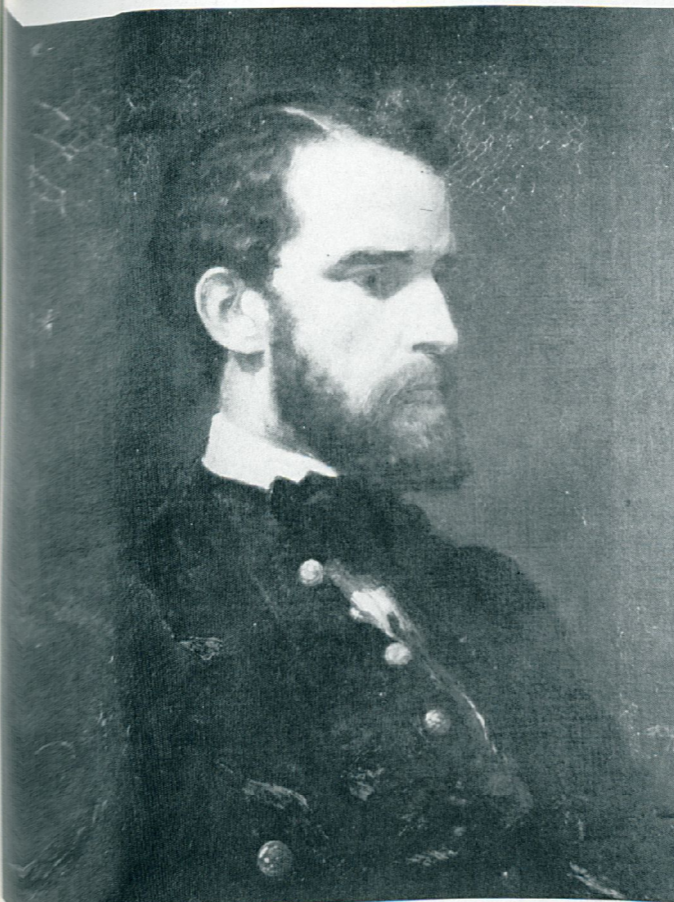
Pl. I. *Independence, Squire Jack Porter*. Signed and dated at lower right F. B. Mayer 1858. Oil on millboard, 12½ by 16 inches. The sitter was Captain John M. Porter, who fought in the War of 1812. He is shown at his farm, Rose Meadow, in Frostburg, Maryland. The brushwork and use of color were quite modern for the time. *National Collection of Fine Arts.*



Fig. 4. *Feast of Mondawin*, 1857. Signed at lower right F. Mayer. Watercolor, 11¼ by 18¾ inches. Mayer observed this ceremony, which is the Indian equivalent of Thanksgiving, in 1851 at Traverse des Sioux. *Collection of the Dietrich Corporation.*



Pl. II. *Leisure and Labor*. Signed and dated at lower right F. B. Mayer/1858. Oil on canvas, 15½ by 23 inches. The sketches for the composition (see Fig. 3) were made at Pikesville, Maryland, where Mayer spent summers visiting his mother's relations. It was first exhibited at the National Art Association in Washington, D.C., in January 1859, where it was bought by William Wilson Corcoran. *Corcoran Gallery of Art.*



of Mayer's most appealing works were painted at this time. Among them are *Independence, Squire Jack Porter* (Pl. I) and *Leisure and Labor* (Pl. II), both executed in 1858 with rather fluid brushwork, and both demonstrating an interest, modern for its time, in the play of light and the juxtaposition of color values.

In 1862, shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War, Mayer left for Paris, where he spent almost a decade. Curiously, although he was exposed to the work of artists such as Renoir and Whistler, who were developing the very techniques with which he had been experimenting in Baltimore, his own draftsmanship became tighter, his use of paint flatter and less spontaneous, and his work increasingly academic. He even came to describe himself as a "figure painter, in treatment based on the style of Meissonnier. . . ." Ernest Meissonnier (1815-1891) had become very

Fig. 5. *Charles Frederick Mayer Jr. U.S.N.* (1832-1888). Signed and dated at lower right FM/1859. Oil on canvas, 24 by 20 inches. The sitter was the artist's younger brother who served in the Navy on the Union side during the Civil War. The Mayers, however, were not unsympathetic to the Southern point of view, which makes this portrait, painted on the eve of the war, especially poignant. *Maryland Historical Society.*



Fig. 6. *My Lady's Visit*. Signed and dated at lower right *Frank B. Mayer/1856*. Oil on canvas, 31½ by 46 inches. The artist described this history painting as a glimpse of a morning call by the Calvert family to the house of Charles Carroll the Barrister in Annapolis. *Maryland Historical Society*.

popular, especially among American collectors (including William Walters), who had begun paying exorbitant prices for his meticulously realistic genre and history paintings.

Shortly after arriving in Paris, Mayer joined the atelier of Marc Gabriel Charles Gleyres (1808-1874) which he called "the most severe drawing school in Paris."⁹ He also found a mentor in Gustave Brion (1824-1877), an Alsatian artist. Mayer exhibited in all the *Salons* from 1865 until his departure in 1870 except for that of 1867, when the American selections were chosen by Samuel Avery and were made up almost exclusively of work by painters from New York and Philadelphia.¹⁰

During the Franco-Prussian war, in October 1870, Mayer fled Paris under fire. When he arrived home in Baltimore in December he found life there very changed. The fortunes of his own family had been considerably diminished by the Civil War and the death of his father in 1864. Moreover, the old camaraderie of the artistic community as he had known it was practically nonexistent. In 1872 a six-week visit to New York, where his brother Alfred then lived, discouraged him from settling there. He believed the city had become excessively affluent, exhibiting "little taste in comparison with expenditure. There seems small place for the Middle Class in New York, so that wealth or careless, thriftless poverty prevail."¹¹

In contrast, a summer trip to Annapolis in 1873 was an inspiration. He loved the "old mansions and gardens, and the beautiful Bay" and noted that they gave him "locality and surrounding . . . the History of Maryland certainly presents a great number of 'situations' for the

Fig. 7. *The Continentals in 1776*. Signed and dated at lower left *F. B. Mayer/1875*. Oil on canvas, 22 by 17 inches. The painting won a medal for figure painting at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876. *National Collection of Fine Arts*.

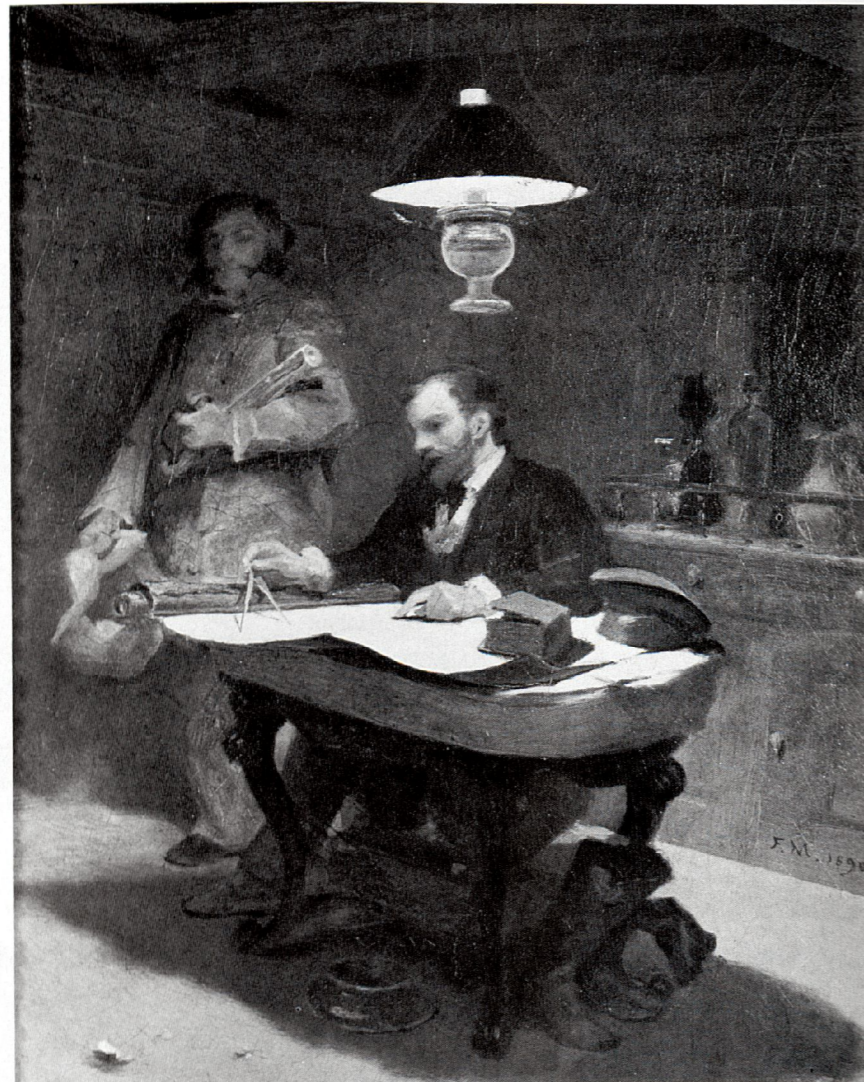


Fig. 8. *Old Annapolis, Francis St.* Signed and dated at lower right *F. M. 1876*. Oil on canvas, 15¾ by 20½ inches. *Metropolitan Museum of Art*.

Fig. 9. *Brice House Garden*. Signed and dated *F. B. Mayer—1884*. Sepia wash drawing, 10 by 13 inches. The figures on the terrace are Colonel James Brice (1746-1802) and his daughter Julianna. *Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley S. Wohl; photograph by M. E. Warren*.



Fig. 10. *Interior of a Ship's Cabin*. Signed and dated at lower right F. M. 1890. Oil on canvas, 17½ by 13½ inches. Captain W. J. Stafford is shown sitting at his desk in the *Casilda*, aboard which the artist went to Europe in October 1862. Maryland Historical Society.



painter with my knowledge of costume, etc."¹² In December 1876 he bought his first house in Annapolis, calling it the Mare's Nest, and more or less retired to the town for the rest of his life. Over the door he inscribed the motto "He lives best who lives well in obscurity."¹³ The year 1876 was a relatively successful one for Mayer. Both of the pictures he entered at the Philadelphia Centennial won awards. One of these, *The Continentals in 1776* (Fig. 7), became very popular and was often copied.

During the 1870's and 1880's he frequently visited Baltimore, teaching regularly at the Charcoal Club, which he helped to found.¹⁴ On February 10, 1883, at the age of fifty-five, he married for the first time. His wife was Ella Brewer Stevenson, a twenty-eight-year-old widow. He was an active citizen of Annapolis, conscientiously helping to beautify the city and preserve its architectural heritage. Among his last commissions were two large paintings for the state house there, *The Planting of the Colony of Maryland* (Fig. 12) and *The Burning of the Peggy Stewart*.

I would appreciate hearing from owners of works of art by Mayer for my *catalogue raisonné* of his work.

¹ Frank Blackwell Mayer to his mother, Eliza B. Mayer, Salisbury Mills, Maryland, August 12, 1844, Mayer Papers, Metropolitan Museum of Art Library.

² *Ibid.*

³ Bertha Heilbron, *With Pen and Pencil on the Frontier in 1851* (Minnesota Historical Society, 1932), p. 7.

⁴ *Baltimore News*, March 2, 1895.

⁵ Sketchbook No. 16, Mayer sketchbooks, Baltimore Museum of Art.

⁶ Sketchbook No. 12, Baltimore Museum.

⁷ *Baltimore News*, March 2, 1895.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Frank Blackwell Mayer to Alfred Jacob Miller, Paris, May 13, 1863, quoted in "Artist's Letters to Alfred Jacob Miller," ed. Marvin C. Ross, Walters Art Gallery.

¹⁰ See Lois Fink, "Artists in France 1850-1870," *American Art Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (November 1973), pp. 32-49.

¹¹ Frank Blackwell Mayer to Brantz Mayer, Baltimore, July 30, 1872, Metropolitan Museum.

¹² *Ibid.*, Annapolis, August 3, 1873, Metropolitan Museum.

¹³ Historic Annapolis Incorporated now occupies the house.

¹⁴ Meredith Janvier, *Baltimore in the 80's and 90's* (Baltimore, 1933), p. 118.

Fig. 11. Sioux Indian encampments, c. 1892. Ink and sepia-wash drawings; page size, 7½ by 8½ inches. These are more finished versions of pencil sketches the artist made during his trip to Traverse des Sioux in 1851. The pencil sketches are in the Ayer collection of the Newberry Library in Chicago. New York Public Library, rare book division; Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

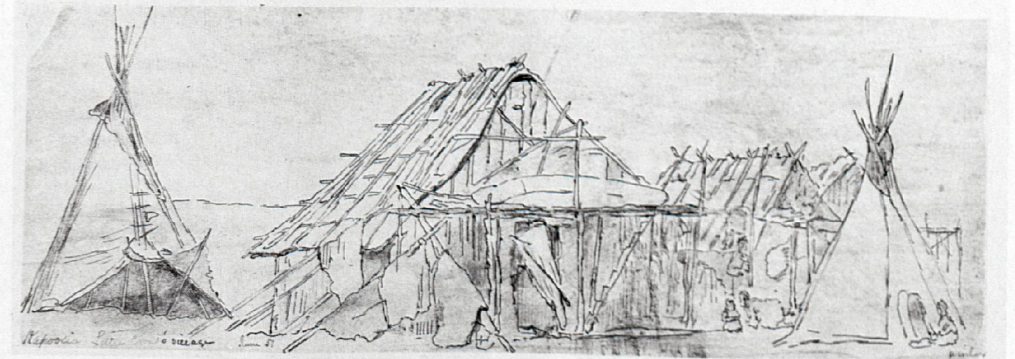


Fig. 12. *The Planting of the Colony of Maryland*. Signed and dated at lower left F. B. Mayer/1893. Oil on canvas, 53 by 72 inches. The painting, commissioned by the state of Maryland, depicts the landing of Leonard Calvert (1606-1647) in Maryland on March 25, 1634. Statehouse, Annapolis; Warren photograph.