

**Fact sheet:**

**William W. Kennedy (1817-1871)**

Pair of Portraits, Mr. and Mrs. Elijah Stetson, Gentleman holds the abolitionist newspaper *Herald of Freedom*

Paper reads: "Herald of Freedom (partially obscured) no.39, Concord, NH"

Oil on canvas, each 20" x 24"



Figure 1: William W. Kennedy, Mr. and Mrs. Elijah Stetson

**A newly identified pair of William W. Kennedy portrait paintings**

William W. Kennedy was born in 1817 in New Hampshire and worked as a portrait painter in New Bedford, Massachusetts; Ledyard, Connecticut; and Berwick, Maine from 1845 through 1847. He moved to Maryland in 1849 or 1850, lived at various locations in Baltimore with his wife and three children until 1869, and died in 1871.<sup>i</sup>



William W. Kennedy is part of a stylistically associated group of American folk artists known as the Prior-Hamblin School. The Prior-Hamblin School consisted of five main artists: William Matthew Prior (1806–1873), his brother-in-law Sturtevant J. Hamblin (1817–1884), William W. Kennedy (1817– 1871), George G. Hartwell (1815–1901), and E.W. Blake (active circa 1840–1850s). The group’s size increases if other family members who were artisan painters are included. The term "Prior-Hamblin School” was not used in these artists’ lifetimes: It emerged among art scholars, collectors, and dealers in the 1950s, following the foundational research of renowned American Folk Art scholar Nina Fletcher Little, to describe the stylistic similarities – remarkably close at times – between the works of Prior, Hamblin, and other artists.

Kennedy shared the Prior-Hamblin artists’ fondness for painting flat, almost minimalist portraits. For that reason, it is easy to attribute Prior-Hamblin School works to the wrong artist. That said, Kennedy’s portraits have a recognizable sensibility all their own. His paintings display a high level of technical ability that very competently captures a sitter’s distinctive looks in a uniquely stylized way.

Although stylistically associated with the Prior-Hamblin School of folk portraiture, Kennedy rarely signed his work. While art historians have yet to uncover documents that directly tie Kennedy to Prior or Hamblin, they note that Prior and Kennedy were neighbors in Baltimore beginning in the late 1850s, which certainly points to familiarity between the two artists.<sup>ii</sup>

By the 1970s, numerous portraits attributed to the Prior-Hamblin School or its artists appeared in major and minor American Folk Art auctions in New York City and the Northeast, including the portraits featured in Figure 1, which have remained in the same family’s private collection since January 1974, when they were purchased at Sotheby Parke Bernet as a pair of portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Elijah Stetson under a William Matthew Prior attribution. Since then, the scholarship on Prior-Hamblin School artists has evolved and opened the door to new discoveries, attributions, and re-attributions, shedding light on each artist’s journey.

### **Identification of the Artist and Significance of the Abolitionist Newspaper**

This pair of Stetson portraits was recently re-attributed from William M. Prior to William W. Kennedy by Emily Esser, an American Folk Art specialist who focuses on Kennedy and the Prior-Hamblin School. Esser and her colleagues have taken a deep dive into the biographies and stylistic elements attributable to each artist, advancing scholarship while adding nuance to previous interpretations.

In her analysis, Esser explains that the Stetson pair are very similar to another pair of portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Peace that are signed by William W. Kennedy. The rarely signed and inscribed

Peace portraits underpin Esser’s clear, direct, and immediate stylistic attribution of the Stetson portraits to Kennedy and informs her interpretation of them. Esser notes that Kennedy was commissioned to paint the Peace portraits in Great Falls,<sup>iii</sup> New Hampshire, because they are inscribed au verso “Presented by L.G. Hill, Great Falls” in Kennedy’s lavish script.<sup>iv</sup>

Esser confidently dates the Peace portraits to 1847 because, by that year, Kennedy had successfully merged the styles of his sharply detailed 1845 works with his simplified, soft-faced 1846 paintings. The inscription and stylistic approach make the Peace portraits’ location and year of execution clear and likely reflects the year – 1847 – and location – Great Falls – that Kennedy painted the very similar Stetson portraits. Figure 2 presents the four works for comparison. Furthermore, it is known that Kennedy was producing portraits for clients in Great Falls, including an inscribed portrait of “Miss Hannah” from that year, which bears remarkable facial similarities to the Stetson pair, suggesting that the sitters may have been relatives.



Figure 2: The upper four photos show that the portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Elijah Stetson have a strong stylistic similarity to the bottom four photos of William W. Kennedy’s portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Peace.

Kennedy’s artistic style and interests are certainly linked to those of the artist William Matthew Prior, who was Kennedy’s neighbor in Baltimore, as mentioned earlier, and who almost certainly taught him his art. Prior was an active abolitionist who produced high-quality, dignified likenesses of prosperous Black sitters throughout the 1840s. As a result, historians generally present Prior as a socially reform-minded, abolitionist-leaning folk artist alongside leading political abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison or Frederick Douglass. Scholars note that Prior’s portraits visually asserted Black respectability and challenged racist visual norms of the period, his paintings a countercultural act that aligned Prior and his circle of artists – sometimes at personal or professional risk – with anti-slavery sentiments and social reform.<sup>v</sup>

Many other portraits of people of color can be linked with confidence to Prior-Hamblin School artists. But for almost every artist other than Prior, there is little documentation and, in the absence of proof, almost no way to definitively determine the artists’ beliefs or their sympathies. First- and even second-hand accounts have disappeared with the inexorable passage of time.

However, uniquely and importantly, the Stetson portraits can be interpreted as signals that Kennedy and probably other Prior-Hamblin School artists were sympathetic toward the abolitionist movement. In 19th century America, abolitionists tended to work together and to support one another. Tellingly, the portrait of Mr. Elijah Stetson shows his right hand holding a well-known abolitionist newspaper, *Herald of Freedom*. The issue is identified in printed letters as “no.39, Concord, NH”, which refers to December 20, 1844, and the place of publication (Figure 3). That the sitter holds such a newspaper tells us something about the artist and his beliefs. That the sitter sports a gold earring in his right ear tells us that he was a sailor.<sup>vi</sup> The social, religious, and industrial histories of New Hampshire and the Stetson family’s genealogy tell us more about the milieu of Kennedy and his sitters.

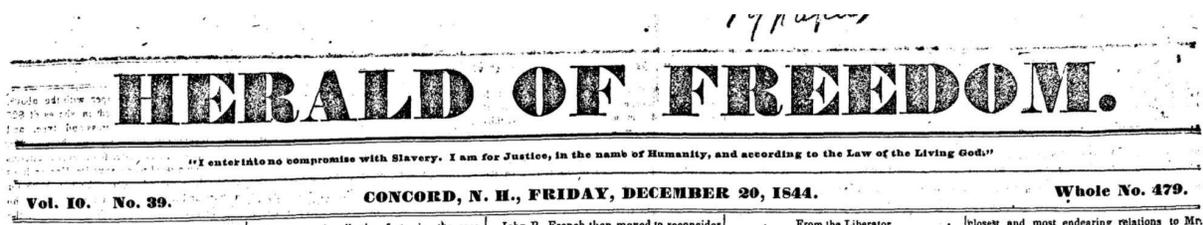


Figure 3: Masthead of the *Herald of Freedom*, No.39, December 20, 1844, the issue held by Mr. Elijah Stetson. The paper’s slogan reads: “I enter into no compromise with slavery. I am for Justice in the name of Humanity, and according to the Law of the Living God.”



Esser's research on the subject finds that Great Falls, New Hampshire, was a vibrant center for the abolitionist movement. The atmosphere in Great Falls during the mid-19th century was defined by the intersection of religious fervor and industrial power. The town's moral pulse was set by Free Will Baptists, a group headquartered in the region that was fiercely committed to abolition. In addition, Great Falls was located less than 20 miles from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, which was heavily dependent on shipbuilding and other maritime industries. Churches established in these towns, such as one in Great Falls and a Free Will Baptist Church in Portsmouth, would have naturally included individuals involved in these trades as members, including seamen, ship builders, and captains.

Notably, New Hampshire Baptists in the 19th century strongly linked human rights and abolition together through their emphasis on individual conscience, autonomy, and biblical interpretation, with figures like Moses Cheney operating the Underground Railroad and Freewill Baptist publications like the *Morning Star* advocating immediate emancipation. This made New Hampshire Baptists key players in the broader northern evangelical anti-slavery movement.

Thus, the inclusion of an anti-slavery newspaper in the portrait of Mr. Elijah Stetson by Willaim W. Kennedy is a decisive statement, especially since the *Herald of Freedom* was the newspaper of the New Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society and known for its exceptionally strong, outspoken stance. Kennedy surely must have known exactly what this paper stood for and undoubtedly painted it based on an actual physical copy of the issue.

The newspaper also must have meant something to the sitter, Mr. Elijah Stetson, and possibly to his wife depicted beside him. Any well-known abolitionist publication of the time would have served as a visual symbol of his political loyalties and been easily understood by his community. The newspaper appears to convey even more meaning since the 1844 issue held by Stetson is an anachronism relative to the likely date of the painting's execution three years later, in 1847.

So, what symbolism did the artist intend by including that specific back-issue of the newspaper? What was its purpose and relation to the sitter? Esser's intensive review of the paper's online archives finds that the December 20, 1844 issue of the *Herald of Freedom* was edited by Nathaniel Peabody Rogers, a fierce advocate for immediate emancipation, women's rights, temperance, and animal rights. The *Herald of Freedom* ceased publication in 1846 following Roger's death. Kennedy's decision to feature that newspaper and that issue implies more than a passing reference; it may signify the sitter's own involvement with abolitionist efforts or serve as a tribute to the late Rogers and those who worked on the paper.

Esser's review of the archives also finds that the *Herald of Freedom* was the subject of an acrimonious ownership dispute in late 1844, one that stemmed from a power struggle between its publisher, John P. French, and other abolitionists. Two known supporters of the paper's disputed publisher were David M. Folsom and James Morrison: both were connected to Great Falls and mentioned in contemporary issues of abolitionist papers. An article in the No.39 newspaper issue depicted in the Stetson portrait describes this chaotic controversy as it was boiling over to a fever pitch. The issue marked the beginning of a resolution to the dispute, which changed control and ownership of the paper.

### **Support and Surmises for the Identification of the Sitters**

Esser's genealogical research confirms that the region was rich in Stetson family members who worked in the ship-building and maritime professions. In addition, the sitter's first name, Elijah, is a classic biblical name suited for Baptists, as is Elisha, with Elijah being significantly more popular as it is the name of a prominent prophet. Therefore, one could speculate that Elijah Stetson was born into a Baptist family that may have had strong ties to traditional northern Baptist anti-slavery and pro-abolitionist beliefs. Various members of the Stetson family in the 19th century were indeed associated with the Baptist faith, with at least one branch having a practicing Free Baptist minister who served in New Hampshire.

While there is a long history of Stetson families and Stetson seamen in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Maine beginning in the 18th century, despite Esser's extensive research, a precise identification and exact location for Kennedy's Stetson sitters remain unverified.<sup>vii</sup> However, that the artist was familiar with mariners remains undisputed: Esser points out that the portrait of Mr. Elijah Stetson resembles a 1845 portrait signed by William W. Kennedy that features a seaman with an earring identified as Captain David Worth (Figure 4). (Recall, as noted earlier, that Stetson wears a gold earring, emblematic of a sailor.)

Furthermore, Esser found Stetsons in 19th century New Hampshire city directories, including that of Manchester, and suggests that it is likely they would show up in other census and vital records. She also found proof of Stetsons as seamen without finding documentation to prove one was Kennedy's sitter. An enticing example, Captain Stetson – of uncertain first name and origin – is recorded as having stopped by the Port of Manchester in mid-1847. Additional records show that others in the Stetson family were strongly involved in New England shipbuilding and maritime work. In a possibly misspelled example, Elisha Stetson, born 1799 in South Scituate, Massachusetts, was active well into the mid-19th century, working on crews in various shipyards and building numerous vessels in Medford, near Boston, and elsewhere.



Figure 4: Two 1845 paintings from Nantucket by William W. Kennedy illustrate his work in an advertisement that announces a “New Style of Portrait Painting”. The portrait on the left presents [Captain David Worth](#) wearing a gold earring and the portrait on the right presents [an unidentified man](#).

American Folk Art portrait painters like William W. Kennedy made significant contributions to the era’s visual culture, particularly when – as with the Stetson portraits featured here – their paintings served as powerful vehicles for abolitionist messaging and White-Black solidarity.<sup>viii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Excerpted from Paul S. D'Ambrosio and Charlotte Emans, *Folk Art's Many Faces: Portraits in the New York State Historical Association*, Cooperstown, 1987, pp. 107; and Beatrix T. Rumford, ed., *American Folk Portraits: Paintings and Drawings from the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center*, Boston, 1981, pp. 138-139.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/02/arts/antiques-before-film-a-family-record-on-canvas.html>.

<sup>iii</sup> Also known as “Summersworth,” Great Falls, NH, was incorporated in 1893 as a city named “Somersworth.”

<sup>iv</sup> The script for *Herald of Freedom* painted on the Mr. Elijah Stetson portrait is nearly identical to the script written on the backs of the Peace portraits and the script used in letters held by sitters that William Kennedy painted.

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/portrait-bold-statement-19th-century-america-180983063/>.

<sup>vi</sup> Sailors have traditionally worn gold earrings to carry wealth that could not easily be lost or stolen, to honor superstitions, and to signal that they were men who existed between worlds, land and sea. The seaman’s earring is most often associated with serving as payment for a sailor’s funeral if he washed ashore. While it is difficult to find historical ledgers proving specific transactions where an undertaker accepted a gold earring as payment, the custom is well-documented in folklore and 19<sup>th</sup> century maritime culture.

<sup>vii</sup> A further search of the physical National Archives will likely reveal a more complete Stetson genealogy.

<sup>viii</sup> We would like to thank Ms. Emily Esser for sharing her research, insights, and writings about the pair of Stetson portraits and her identification and re-attribution of their artist as William W. Kennedy. Ms. Esser maintains a website at <https://www.paintingsworthlookingat.com>.