INTIMATE PORTRAITS BY JOHN SINGER SARGENT

GROUNDBREAKING MID-CENTURY STUDIO POTTERY EDWIN AND MARY SCHEIER

A FOLK ARTIST'S LIFE REVEALED THE STORY OF IRA CHAFFEE GOODELL

ALL THAT GLITTERS STUNNING JEWELRY FROM NEW YORK'S GILDED AGE

RICHARD BRUNTON SCOUNDREL, ARTIST, OR BOTH? YOU DECIDE
WHEN RICHARD BRUNTON sailed into the port of Boston in July 1774, he was twenty-five years old and had served in his Majesty's 38th Regiment of Foot in Ireland for at least a year before his regiment was dispatched to bolster the British military presence in the colonies. In the ensuing years, he lived a life rich in drama, if not in morals or material goods.
Brunton was soon at the forefront of some of the bloodiest battles of the Revolutionary War—including the Battle of Breeds Hill (aka the Battle of Bunker Hill) until June 1779, when he deserted his unit at Verplanck's Point, New York. What prompted him to desert is not known. Nor is it known how Brunton (aka Brinton and Brenton) spent the time until his marriage to Polly [aka Mary] Fullerton in Boston on October 14, 1779.

Boston was a good choice of destination for Brunton. The British Army had evacuated the city in 1776, and he could move about safely and even use his own name. He knew the city well and still had contacts there in the trades who might help him secure work as an engraver and dye sinker. The latter involved making dies for stamping or embossing designs on coins, medals, and buttons, a craft for which he had apprenticed in his native Birmingham, England, a leading exporter of jewelry, plate, hardware, buckles, watches, and chains to the colonies.

From March 20 through May 4, 1780, an advertisement in the New-England Chronicle cited "Engraving, Jewellery [sic], and Silver-smiths work" by Brunton, Gordon, and Quirk, on Quaker Lane, opposite the Quaker Meeting House in Boston. Like Brunton, James Samuel Gordon trained in his craft in England, arriving in 1769 as an indentured servant to Philadelphia silversmith Edmund Milne.

Quirk's identity remains a mystery.

The trio's operation soon folded, prompting Brunton and his wife...
These proved to be dire times for the couple. Brunton's wife delivered a son, whose death was recorded in the neighboring town of Pepperell on March 5, 1783. It is the second and last record of her. After this date, the couple either parted ways or she, too, died.

The following year, Brunton and his old partner Gordon were paying taxes to the town of Pepperell and may have been fashioning coins from gold and silver deposits being excavated from the Heald mine in Pepperell. Given the dearth of hard currency in the region, such an operation may well have been sanctioned by the locals. This may not have been the first time Brunton had turned his hand to counterfeiting coins. Birmingham diesinkers were skilled at making false coinage that looked already worn when struck. But the promised yields from the mine never materialized, and the operation reportedly soon shut down.

With no ties to bind him, Brunton left Pepperell in the spring of 1784. As he made his way westward, it is perhaps no coincidence that warnings of counterfeit money began to appear in the press wherever he was. Undoubtedly, Brunton was dispersing coins he and Gordon had made.

Brunton next appears in the historical record in the late 1780s, in the thriving port of Middletown, Connecticut, on the Connecticut River. He may have gone there hoping to establish a new counterfeiting operation. If this was his intention, Connecticut was a good choice: the standard punishments of cropping the tops of counterfeiters' ears and branding them with a "c" on the cheek or forehead to warn others had been abandoned. Counterfeiters in Connecticut could expect no more than a maximum prison sentence of three years, and offenders who posted bail were often set free on personal recognizance.

In Middletown, as at Boston, Brunton was quick to acquaint himself with local craftsmen. William Hamlin (1772–1869), Rhode Island's first engraver, credits an English journeyman named Brinton with teaching him engraving when Hamlin served an apprenticeship with silversmith Samuel Canfield at Middletown from 1788 to 1793. This was not the only time Brunton mentored a young talent in engraving. When he moved fifty miles to the west, to New Milford, a thriving trading center
on the post road from Boston to Philadelphia, he met Gideon Fairman (1774–1827),
an apprentice to blacksmith and mechanic Isaac Crane. Brunton encouraged Fairman
to pursue a career in the field, which he later did to great success. Although Brunton
was dismissed as “an English engraver of no great merit” by historian of early
American arts William Dunlap in his 1834 publication, Brunton promoted himself to
be a connoisseur of the art of engraving.9

Around this time, he also began engraving family registers with blank separate
columns for recording births, marriages, and death dates of families. These are
considered to be the earliest preprinted broadside family registers in America and are
what he is best known for today.

Shortly after, Brunton secured a
commission for a family register from
Scottish-born Angus Nickelson, a proprietor
of stoneyards and ironworks in New Milford
(Fig. 3). The plate is clearly signed “R.
Brunton Sculp.” As Nickelson’s youngest
son’s birth date of 16 August 1789 is
inscribed in Brunton’s hand, but not his
death date of 26 September 1791, the plate
had to have been completed before the latter
date. The life dates recorded here make it
possible to identify every sitter in Nickelson’s
family portrait, painted by American-born
portrait artist Ralph Earl (Fig. 4).

During these years, Brunton and Earl
traveled in social circles where literacy was
prized.10 In addition to the work the two
did for the Nickelson family, Brunton
made bookplates for at least two sitters
portrayed by Earl posing with their
books—Elijah Boardman and Oliver
Wolcott. Brunton also made a bookplate
for Earl’s doctor, Samuel Cooley.11

By this time, Brunton’s opportunities for
making an honest living from his craft were
dwindling. An influx of printed matter
from the Continent, along with the arrival
of more skilled engravers offering a greater
variety of engraving techniques, put
Brunton’s rococo style of line engraving out
of fashion. Moreover, his life as an itinerant
craftsman, traveling on rough country roads
by horseback or stage, may have proved too
difficult. Not only was he lame, as reports
indicate, he was getting older.

In about 1792, Brunton moved sixty
miles northeast, to the prosperous
farming town of Suffield, Connecticut.
There he took up residence at the home of

Fig. 6: Richard Brunton (1749–1832), Portrait of
Major Reuben Humphreys, inscribed right lower
corner: “RB.” Facsimile line engraving. Original
copperplate cited in 1951 in the collection of
the New Haven Colony Historical Society. (See
William L. Warren, “Richard Brunton—Itinerant
Craftsman,” Art in America, 39, no. 2 [April
1951]: 89.) Current location unknown.

Fig. 7: Attributed to Richard Brunton (1749–
1832), Portrait of Reuben Humphreys. Oil on
canvas, 44 1/4 x 41 inches. Courtesy of the
Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford
(1970.21). Gift of Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha,
Neb., and Mrs. Frank Willis, Oak Park, Ill.
Humphreys’ military uniform and hat were later
painted over to show him in the more stately
appearance of a judge. Despite careful removal
of the overpainting, his portrait has lost much of
its painted surface and brilliance.
BOSTON,
Plymouth & Sandwich
MAIL STAGE,
CONTINUES TO RUN AS FOLLOWS:
LEAVES Boston every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday mornings
at 5 o'clock, breakfast at Leonard's, Scituate; dine at Boston's, Plymouth;
and arrive in Sandwich the same evening. Leaves Sandwich every Mon-
day, Wednesday and Friday mornings; breakfast at Bruford's, Plymouth;
dine at Leonard's, Scituate, and arrive in Boston the same evening.
Passing through Dorchester, Quincy, Weymouth, Hingham, Scituate, Hanover, Pembroke, Dartmouth, Kingston, Plymouth to Sandwich. Fare
from Boston to Scituate, 1 doll, 95 cts. From Boston to Plymouth, 9 doll,
80 cts. From Boston to Sandwich, 3 dolls, 85 cts.

LEONARD & WOODWARD.

Fig. 8: Richard Brunton (1749–1832), Boston, Plymouth & Sandwich Mail Stage, November 24, 1810. Broadside printed by Leonard & Woodward, Boston, 6½ × 3½ inches. Courtesy of L. N. Phelps Stokes Collection of American Historical Prints, New York Public Library, New York.

This broadside was one of the most popular advertisements of stagecoach schedules in New England in the 1810s. It is inscribed in block letters "Brunton" on the ground below the directional plaque ("Boston, 3 miles") attached to the tree. The image was engraved by Brunton while he was an inmate at the Massachusetts state prison.

Gad Rose, and began counterfeiting paper money from plates he cut himself. In 1795, Brunton was arrested for counterfeiting bank notes along with silversmith Abel Pease (1761–1828) in nearby Enfield. Pease made bail and was set free, while Brunton was taken to Hartford to await sentencing. Eventually, the charges against him were dropped and he returned to Suffield, where he continued to engrave family registers and even dabbled in portrait painting.

In March 1799, he was caught coining in Woodstock, Connecticut, along with Joel White (1751–1834), brother of silversmith and clockmaker Peregrine White (1747–1834). The two brothers kept a shop there conveniently located on the road to Sturbridge, Massachusetts, where passers of counterfeit money could pick up inventory and rush it to markets in Boston or Hartford before authorities learned of any new bogus issue. This time, Brunton was sentenced to two years hard labor at the notorious New-Gate prison in present-day East Granby, Connecticut, and charged with the cost of his prosecution: $48.72.

Forced to pursue legitimate work to clear his debt, he made seals for the state of Connecticut and engraved the most ambitious plate of his career—a view of New-Gate prison (Fig. 5). As was his practice he also made gifts of his artistry to those in charge of his care—for the prison warden, he made a portrait engraving bearing his family's coat of arms (Fig. 6) and pendant portraits of the keeper (Fig. 7) and his wife and daughter.

It is not clear where Brunton went after his release. However, he continued to engrave family registers. He signed one register "RB," with the date 1805 (held at the American Antiquarian Society); a second, of which three copies are known (one in a private collection, one at the Connecticut Historical Society, and one at Old Sturbridge Village), has the year 1806 on the bottom margin, flanked by two sets of initials, "RB" and "DW." The latter initials may be those of a bookseller/printer yet to be identified.

By 1807, Brunton had clearly abandoned any intentions of reforming. After being reported to the authorities as the leader of "a gang of counterfeiters in Pepperell," arrangements were made for his capture. In April 1807, he was arrested in Boston with samples of his bogus bills as well as the tools of his trade. In December, he was sentenced to hard labor in Massachusetts state prison in Charlestown for the rest of his life.

Once again, incarceration bolstered his output of legitimate work. Brunton's best-known work from his time at Charlestown is an engraving of a stagecoach drawn by four horses, with a village townscape on the horizon (Fig 8). Brunton's signature bird holding an olive branch in its beak is emblazoned on the carriage door. As the carriage looks ill-suited for early American roads and it was not the practice in this country to crop horsetails, Brunton may have modeled his design on an English print source yet to be identified. Whether the townscape represents an actual townscape is not known either. It is one of the first graphics to feature transportation in the New Republic.

In 1811, after being granted a pardon from the governor on the grounds of ill health and the promise that he would return to his own country, Brunton returned to Groton with two printing plates, one signed and dated 1811, and a second signed "RB" (Fig. 9), which he had printed and sold locally. During this time, he also began to favor the more affordable medium of watercolor, which was much more forgiving than engraving for an aging artist with failing eyesight and limited work space (Fig. 10). Despite his
claim that he was not long for the world, he lived another twenty-one years before dying in the poorhouse at Groton in 1832.

This article is based on Soldier, Engraver, Forger—Richard Brunton’s Life on the Fringe in America’s New Republic (NEHGS, 2015); extracts are reprinted with permission of the New England Historic Genealogical Society, Boston, Massachusetts. Available from AmericanAncestors.org. The author will hold a book signing on August 6, 2015 at the 58th Annual New Hampshire Antique Dealers Show, Radisson Hotel, Manchester, N.H. [↩]

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1. Muster rolls, 38th Regiment of Foot, WO/5171, National Archives, UK. Thanks to Michael Gandy of the Association of Genealogists and Researchers in Archives for locating Brunton in these muster rolls.