

SHADES OF OUR ANCESTORS

AMERICAN PROFILES AND PROFILISTS

BY

ALICE VAN LEER CARRICK



WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

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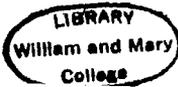
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THE PROFILES OF WILLIAM BACHE

IF ever again I rail against the many letters that fall to my lot to answer, may I forever lose my collector's luck! Because it was the chance of two little notes, written by his descendants, that led me on rather a winding road to the scrapbook of William Bache, one of my favorite American silhouettists. For years I had loved his delicate, characteristic work; rejoiced in the cutting of a charming, unknown lady who graced my walls, but of the profilst himself I knew very little except that his first name was William, and that he had spent some time in Salem, where a number of his finest shades remain to delight us in the Essex Institute.

In her pleasant little book, *Wax Portraits and Silhouettes*, Ethel Stanwood Bolton writes, "Of Bache little is known; on the silhouette of George Wythe of Virginia, cut in 1804 for Jefferson, Mr. Hart found his Christian name. He cut by mechanical means, and probably with the same kind of machine that Peale used. He marked his portraits with a stamp which reads 'Bache's Patent.'" Any lover of old profiles, therefore, can understand my delight at visiting his great-great-niece, Mrs. C. R. Converse, of Elmira, New York; at hearing all about him (not just dry-as-dust facts, but real family history),

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and at turning the pages of this century-old treasure-trove of nearly two thousand shadow portraits. Of finding not only the duplicate of Chancellor Wythe's bust, but the silhouettes of George and Martha Washington; of Mrs. Lawrence Lewis (Nelly Custis), Thomas Jefferson, Edmund Randolph, Jefferson's successor as Secretary of State under Washington, and hundreds of other profiles of everyday people, less well known, but equally well cut; all of them vivid and interesting.

Their maker, William Bache, was born on December 22, 1771, at Bromsgrove, a small town in Worcestershire, England, and, when he was twenty-two, he came to Philadelphia, where one of his older kinsmen, Richard Bache, who married Sally Franklin, was already settled. He seems to have established himself almost at once as a cutter of profiles, beginning his career in Philadelphia; then, as every proper profilist should, wandering farther afield — first through the South, later to the West Indies. After his travels he returned again to Philadelphia, where in 1811 he was married to Miss Anna Page. Soon afterward he and his wife went to visit an old friend of his, John Norris, who was at that time greatly interested in founding the town of Wellsboro. Many inducements were offered to emigrants, and in 1812 Bache decided to cast in his lot with the other pioneers in western Pennsylvania, then very sparsely populated. He bought large tracts of land, and, as there were then no shops of any sort, he immediately built a "general store," and became one of the first merchants of the place. Every-

THE PROFILES OF WILLIAM BACHE

thing in those days had to be bought in Philadelphia, a weary journey away, and hauled overland by ox teams. Also men, women, and children alike worked with their hands; there could be no idlers in a frontier town; harvests were sown and reaped; houses and barns were "raised" by neighborly coöperation; and it was in this way that the accident happened that put an end to Bache's silhouette-cutting except for his own amusement. While he was helping a friend to chop a supply of fuel, a tree crashed down upon him, and his right arm had to be amputated. Luckily, however, he was not at all dependent upon profiles for a livelihood; he was a solid citizen; his business thrived apace, and in 1822 Return Jonathan Meigs, then Postmaster General, appointed William Bache postmaster of Wellsboro, an office he held until his death in 1845.

In a local history, Josiah Emery, a Wellsboro schoolmaster, has left us some interesting personal facts about Bache. "When I came there Mr. William Bache was postmaster, and the office was kept in his dwelling, the tall log house standing where John N. Bache's house now stands. Mr. Bache was a man of strong common sense, well read and with more than ordinary ability. He had a scientific and inquiring turn of mind, was a great lover of Nature, and had a quick and appreciative sense of the ludicrous." Josiah Emery goes on, "He always preserved the character of a Christian, and though manufacturing whiskey for others, he drank but little himself." Still, this was no matter of reproach a

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hundred years ago; in fact, especially on national holidays, if a man were "overset," he would merely apologize to the company for his little mishap, and hope they would forgive him; adding he was sure the Lord would, "for He knew very well it was the Fourth of July." A human and sympathetic age!

I could add another virtue to Josiah Emery's long list — for as a profelist Bache was modesty itself. Usually silhouette advertisements are headed by staring black busts, followed by appeals to the citizens, and general laudations of the cutters themselves, their tools, and all their works. I am glad to have it so; they are the easier to find. Bache, from his very reticence, is most difficult to discover, tangled as his small notices are in a printed maze of sarcenets and Harvard College lotteries, muscovado sugar, and lost moses boats. One appeared in the *Salem Gazette*, September 16, 1808: "W. Bache returns his grateful acknowledgements to the Ladies and Gentlemen of Salem, for their liberal encouragement he has received, and begs leave to inform those who yet intend to have their *Profiles* drawn, that he proposes leaving this place the ensuing week."

Two years later he returned to Salem, where, except for the scrapbook, most of his best work survives. Both the *Essex Register* and the *Salem Gazette* on July 10, 1810, printed the following notice: —

PROFILE LIKENESSES

Mr. Bache has the honor to inform the ladies and gentlemen of Salem of his return to town, and respectfully offers

THE PROFILES OF WILLIAM BACHE

to them his services in the line of his profession, at his room over Mr. Daniel Jenks' store. He invites their attention to a much improved style of

SHADED PROFILES

on a fine vellum paper; and begs leave to introduce his friend, Mr. Nixon, who colors profiles in miniature style, and warrents as good a likeness for *two* dollars as could be obtained for *twenty*.

It may be that this marks the beginning of his more elaborated manner which we to-day admire so much; those engaging shades embellished with soft curls painted in India ink, and the high lights of ruffles and stocks touched in with Chinese white. A Connecticut advertisement of approximately the same date gives us the name of his patent machine; he may have borrowed it from Saint-Mémin who first popularized it in this country.

PROFILES

The subscribers respectfully inform the ladies and gentlemen of New-Haven, that they have taken a room for a short time at Mr. Eld's near the Church, in Church-Street, where they propose cutting, shading and painting Profile Likenesses in a new and elegant style. From their long experience and great success in business, and aided by an improved patent Physiognotrace, the subscribers feel confident of rendering general satisfaction to those who may favor them with their patronage.

W. BACHE
T. NIXON

But was it the Hartford *American Mercury* that printed an earlier notice of Bache's work, before he joined partnership with Nixon? Tucked away in the scrap-book, Mrs. Converse found a little twisted-over note, written in a very flowing and feminine hand, which read, "Miss McBreedy having seen in the *Mercury* Mr.

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Bache's attendance upon Ladies for the purpose of cutting Profiles requests he will attend her whither her servants will direct him." Oh, soft, forgotten phrases! Was Miss McBree as charming as her note, and did her pretty profile linger in William Bache's memory so pleasantly that he could not bear to throw her letter away?

It is the only one left, although the album yielded also a tantalizingly torn scrap of yellowed paper with these words written on it: —

George Wa
the Shadow
for the Washin
their being str
personal know.

It must, I think, refer to the silhouettes Bache cut of General and Mrs. Washington, those first stately shadows in the scrapbook, leading, as they should, the long line of people dead and gone years ago: Nelly Custis, Mrs. Bushrod Washington, Chancellor Wythe, Randolph, Jefferson, and the rest. They could not all have been taken at the same time. We know from Charles Henry Hart's investigations that Wythe's profile was made in 1804; Nelly Custis's coiffure seems a trifle later than the modes of 1799, the year that she was married and that George Washington died, and of course his silhouette, if done from life, must have been cut then or earlier or not at all, since 1799 was the year when the whole country was plunged into deepest mourning for our first president.



SIX SILHOUETTES FROM WILLIAM BACHE'S SCRAPBOOK. COURTESY OF MRS. C. R. CONVERSE
GEORGE WASHINGTON MARTHA WASHINGTON MRS. LAWRENCE LEWIS (NELLY CUSTIS)
CHANCELLOR WYTHE THOMAS JEFFERSON EDMUND RANDOLPH

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