

The Legacy of Nathaniel Rogers (1787-1844)
Long Island Artist from Bridgehampton
By Natalie A. Naylor, Professor Emerita, Hofstra University
Delivered April 10, 2003

Nathaniel Rogers gained his fame painting miniature portraits in New York City, but had well-established roots on eastern Long Island. He was born in Bridgehampton on August 1, 1787, the son of John T. Rogers, a farmer, and Sarah Brown, the eldest daughter of the second Presbyterian minister in Bridgehampton, James Brown. Within the family he was called Nathan, but he always used his full first name, Nathaniel, as an artist.

Rogers was well known in his day. Benjamin Thompson, writing between the late 1830s and 1849, has the most extensive treatment of him in Long Island histories. Bridgehampton historians have included him in their local histories, but he has been overlooked by twentieth-century Long Island historians. Of course, some might question whether Rogers should be considered a Long Island artist. Although he grew up in Bridgehampton, summered, and retired there, he did most of his painting in New York City. His roots on eastern Long Island are deep, however, and that is where he began painting. Furthermore, his legacy in the architecture of his home in Bridgehampton remains with us today.

Art historians do recognize Nathaniel Rogers as one of the leading miniaturists in the early nineteenth century. The Heckscher Museum of Art in Huntington had a series of exhibitions in the 1970s featuring "Artists of Suffolk County." They exhibited four of Rogers' miniatures, two in 1970 and two different ones in 1976. Currently, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City has seven of Rogers' miniatures in a display of thirty miniature portraits. An exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in 1990-91, "Tokens of Affection: The Portrait Miniature in America," included fourteen of his miniatures. That exhibition and the accompanying catalog had a total of 311 miniatures by 109 identified artists. Nearly half of the artists (52) were represented by only one miniature, twenty-two artists had two, and fifteen had three miniatures. Only eleven artists had six or more miniatures in the exhibit-and the fourteen by Rogers was second only to James Peale's nineteen (the artist with the next highest number had nine) - so clearly Rogers' miniatures have been deemed worthy of collecting. His miniatures sell for several thousand dollars today.

Early Life and Family

Nathan Rogers had a sister and three brothers. Only one of the four sons could inherit the family farmland, and John Rogers, as the eldest, probably had first choice on the farm. Two of the brothers chose to become merchants. After attending the local district school, Nathan was apprenticed at fifteen to a ship builder in Hudson, New York, which is about thirty miles south of Albany. His duties, as he later recounted, were "to keep the

accounts, pay off the workmen, and serve out the grog." He also did drafting and constructed ship models.

Rogers became a miniaturist painter literally by accident. His apprenticeship as a ship carpenter ended after a year when he accidentally cut his knee - "the most fortunate cut he ever made," his friends said later. At the time, however, he suffered considerable pain, and there were fears that his leg might need to be amputated. Rogers probably walked with a limp later, since a contemporary account states that his "knee was never perfectly restored to action." Rogers returned home to Bridgehampton and, while recovering under the care of Dr. Samuel H. Rose, pursued his interest in drawing. He read books and copied prints. Dr. Rose gave him a box of watercolors, some pencils and instructions in their use. ("Pencils" were the small, but full-bodied artist brushes, which were used for painting miniatures; they had a sharp point made of sable or camel's hair.) Rogers copied miniatures and painted portraits of some of his friends. His first miniatures were done on paper or cardboard. He began painting and selling his miniatures on ivory on a visit to Saybrook, Connecticut. He credited Capt. Danford Clark in Saybrook for giving him his start as a painter. Rogers may have met Anson Dickinson while he was in Connecticut; his early portraits are said to show similarities to Dickinson's work. (Dickinson was a miniaturist who worked in New Haven until he moved to New York City in 1804.)

Rogers went to New York City and studied with miniaturists Uriah Brown and P. Howell (a native of Long Island), from about 1806-1808. He taught school briefly (probably in the Bridgehampton area), but as a contemporary, William Dunlap, observed, "his mind was more occupied by the children of his fancy, than by those of the rustic yeomanry intrusted to his care; and he soon relinquished a task which his youth and extremely mild disposition, made him . . . very unfit for." Rogers' father was willing to educate him for one of the learned professions (namely, law, medicine, or the ministry), and he spent a brief time in school in preparation, but art was now of greater interest to him.

Rogers returned to New York City and in 1811 was being instructed by Joseph Wood, a miniature portrait painter. He "progressed rapidly," and soon opened his own studio. He is first listed in New York City directories as a "miniature painter" in 1811, by which time he was 24 years old. The next year Wood moved to Philadelphia, leaving the miniature field in New York City open to Rogers who prospered. Rogers moved almost every year in his first decade in New York City, which was not uncommon. (May 1st was traditionally moving day in New York.) He probably painted in the rooms where he lived. The first year that the city directories list him as having a different address for his home and business was 1827. His studio was located at 1 Courtlandt Street from 1827-1839, and he lived at 197 East Broadway from 1830-1839. (These locations today are in lower Manhattan. New York City, of course, at that time, had not expanded very far north.)

Rogers first exhibited at the American Academy of Fine Arts in 1817, and showed one to five or more miniatures at the Academy every year to 1824 (with the exception of 1821). He was elected to the American Academy in 1825. Rogers was a founder of the

National Academy of Art and Design, and exhibited his miniatures regularly there from 1826-1830.

Rogers probably maintained his Bridgehampton ties during the years he pursued his career in New York City. When he married in 1817 at the age of 30, his wife was sixteen-year old Caroline Matilda Denison, daughter of Captain and Mrs. Samuel Denison from nearby Sag Harbor.

Caroline and Nathan Rogers had six children, two daughters and four sons. One daughter, Sarah Matilda, died when she was only four years old. Their eldest son, Samuel Denison, became an Episcopal minister, but died at 31. The second son, Edmund, died at sea two days out of Sag Harbor while a passenger on the steamship *Champion* in 1861. He was only 36 years old. Their son George went to California in the gold rush when he was 22; he died in New York City in 1862 at the age of 35. Daughter Helen married Henry Manning who later owned a steam mill in Madison, Wisconsin. When she died in 1883 at the age of 49, the Mannings were living in New York City. The Rogers' youngest son, James, went to Williams College and became a physician who practiced in Sag Harbor. Born in 1829, he died in Bridgehampton in 1901, and was the only one of the children who had a long life. In his later years, Dr. Rogers spent time in Florida and summers in East Hampton where he had a home. It is interesting that though four of the Rogers' children died in New York City years after their parents had moved to Bridgehampton, at least three of them were buried in Bridgehampton. It attests to the importance of Bridgehampton to the family. When Nathan died in Bridgehampton in 1844, four of his five surviving children were under 21. His widow, Caroline, died in Wisconsin in 1857, while visiting her daughter, but she too is buried in Bridgehampton. The Rogers' plot in the Old Cemetery by the Presbyterian Church also includes a monument to the daughter who died at four and mentions the son Edmund who died at sea.

Portrait Miniatures

Portrait miniatures are not something that most of us are familiar with today. Even a contemporary art historian refers to them as "a little-understood art form."¹² A little background will enable us to better appreciate Rogers' artistic work. Some of the most eminent artists of the day painted miniatures, including John Singleton Copley, Thomas Sully, James and Charles Peale, as well as artists whose names are not as well known today, such as Edward Malbone, Walter Robinson, and, yes, Nathaniel Rogers.

Miniature portraits on ivory were very popular in the late eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century. The ivory had to be prepared—degreased, bleached, and smoothed. Then it was attached to a card or paper. Most miniaturists used watercolors which took advantage of the luminosity of the ivory, though oil paints were sometimes used. A gum arabic or other binder was added to enable the paint to adhere to the ivory. Without getting too technical, the painting techniques usually were either stippling (small dots), hatching (parallel brush strokes), or a combination of the two, together with an "even wash" of wet color. The finished portrait was covered by a convex glass cover and put in a locket or other case. Oval shapes predominated initially. After

the turn of the century, larger, rectangular portraits became popular, which were designed to be displayed rather than worn as pendants.

Typically, the small paintings were commissioned to be given as mementoes. Miniature portraits were often exchanged when couples became engaged or married, or if someone were leaving home or had died. Obviously miniatures were very portable. They were designed to be worn in locket or brooches or kept in a pocket. Many full-sized portraits of the period show women wearing or holding miniatures. Some had locks of hair of the person braided on the reverse side, and others used chopped hair of the subject in the paint. (Hair pieces were also popular in the nineteenth century; we have a remnant today in keeping locks of hair in baby books.) Miniatures could take several sittings to paint and could command prices comparable to those paid for head-size oil portraits.

Miniatures went out of fashion with the development of photography, beginning with daguerreotypes in the 1840s. Photography in the 1850s provided negatives, which permitted multiple copies and that was the final blow. Some artists continued painting miniatures in the late nineteenth century, though it was usually not done professionally.

Rogers' Portraits

Rogers became very successful and soon was painting "most of the 'fashionables' of his day." He painted miniatures of some of the most eminent people of his day, including Philip Livingston, Mrs. Stephen (Cornelia Patterson) Van Rensselaer, and Chancellor Robert Livingston. He painted a few full-size portraits, but his miniatures were more popular. One of his most charming paintings is his own miniature self-portrait. (See fig. 1.) Jaunty, with a cigar angled firmly in his mouth, Rogers' blue eyes are the most striking feature of the portrait. The National Academy of Design in New York City owns that portrait and a miniature he painted of his wife Caroline. Rogers also painted miniatures and portraits of his daughter, Helen, and other members of his family.

Many miniatures have been passed down in families and are privately owned, but some, including many of Rogers' miniatures, now can be found in museum collections. His miniatures are in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of the City of New York, New-York Historical Society, Yale University, Worcester Art Museum, Cleveland Museum of Art, and other museums. The Suffolk County Historical Society in Riverhead owns three miniatures by Rogers. They are of Miss Hetty Cook (see fig. 2), and (in one frame) Nathan Topping Cook (1762-1822), and Mary Howell Cook (1774-1860). The Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities (SPLIA), owns a Rogers' portrait of Matthew Hildreth. The full-size (29" x 36") oil painting is on display in their Custom House museum in Sag Harbor.

A total of more than one hundred of portraits by Nathaniel Rogers have been identified by the author, forty percent of which are in museums. These paintings are only a small percentage of his total work, since he was actively painting for nearly three decades. Of these, two-thirds are men and the identity of one in five subjects is now unknown. A few (mainly family members) are full-size bust portraits rather than miniatures. Rogers usually painted in watercolor, sometimes in oil, on oval-shaped or

later (after the mid-1820s), rectangular ivory. The sizes range from two and one-half to nearly four inches in height and usually are between two and three inches in width.¹⁷ He signed some of his miniatures on the side and other on the paper backing; some are unsigned. Most of his miniatures are in "plain gold locket" with a ring at the top and inner beaded rims on the front and back.

Rogers was the most sought after miniature painter in New York City from about 1815 through the 1830s. William Dunlap, himself a miniature artist, stated in 1834, that Rogers "has long been of the first in rank among American miniature painters." Of art critics since that time, only one has criticized Rogers' miniatures. Writing in 1927, Harry B. Wehle, assistant curator of paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, criticized Rogers for his drawing, flesh colors, and what he described as the "nearly expressionless" faces of his sitters. Frederick Sherman, however, six years later, in an article in *Art in America*, maintained that "the individuality of each and every sitter is unmistakably portrayed by a painstaking fidelity in the drawing of heads and features and the modelling of the faces." Sherman noted, "It was presumably because of his success in picturing personality in this way without the further aid of attractive though unsubstantial and often elusive elements in portraiture that he won and held until he voluntarily retired from practice an enviable position in a city where his work held its own with the best." Sherman praised Rogers' color, flesh tones, and particularly his "rendering of hair." In Sherman's judgment, Rogers' technique was "the equal of any but the greatest of our native workers on ivory."

Phyllis Braff, currently an art critic for the Long Island section of the *New York Times*, reviewed an exhibition of Suffolk County Artists at the Heckscher Museum for the *East Hampton Star* in 1970. She focused on two miniatures by Rogers of Mr. and Mrs. John Schermerhorn Bussing owned by the Museum of the City of New York. Braff indicated that they "effectively combined overly rouged cheeks and clear blue touches in the clothing with the silvery translucency of the ivory."

Dale T. Johnson, who curated the exhibition of miniature portraits from the Manney Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1991, judges Rogers to be "one of New York City's leading miniaturists of the early nineteenth century." She notes that he "employed a palette of clear, lively color" and he early produced "delicate and sophisticated" work. She further observes, "The subjects of his highly individualized portraits are presented in a direct and appealing manner. . . . He painted faces with a delicate stipple, often modeling the shadows in tones of red and emphasizing the eyes. When representing women he tended to make the heads disproportionately large and the bodies small. Details of dress are sharply defined with gum arabic." Rogers is described as one of "America's best artists of the 1820's and 1830's" in an article which Johnson jointly authored with Robin Bolton-Smith (of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C.) in *Antiques* in 1990.

Legacy in Bridgehampton

Nathaniel Rogers became wealthy as a miniaturist, though his father initially had been apprehensive as to whether he would be able to support himself and a family as an artist. (Soon after establishing himself in New York City, he sent "a handsome sum in bank-notes" to his father to invest for him, which relieved his anxiety.) William Dunlap, in a contemporary biographical account of Rogers, wrote that Rogers "has continued prosperously to maintain a large family honourably, educate his children to his wish, and accumulate property." He also aided his former teacher, Joseph Wood and his family, when they came on hard times. Although we don't have details, Rogers is reported to have served as "a trustee of the public schools and of several charitable and moral institutions" in New York City. Dunlap concluded his biographical account of Rogers by stating, "the life, conduct, and prosperity of this gentleman, are lessons for our younger artists."

Rogers contracted tuberculosis in 1825, and thereafter he spent more time in Bridgehampton. Dunlap observed in 1834, "by hard riding, and relaxing from business" that Rogers "has long been restored to health." Dunlap also noted that Rogers had only painted in New York City, "now is independent, and contemplates relinquishing painting as a profession, though he never can as an amusement."²³ As mentioned earlier, Rogers did not exhibit his paintings in New York after 1830, though he retained a home and studio in New York City until 1839, when he fully retired to Bridgehampton. His membership in the National Academy was shifted to Honorary because of nonresidence. Rogers had become wealthy and was able to retire in his early fifties, at a time when most people could not afford to retire from working. Geoffrey Fleming has pointed out that he was the third wealthiest man in the Town of Southampton, based on his property in Bridgehampton.

Bridgehampton at this time was described by Benjamin Thompson as "a most desirable place of habitation." It was relatively small, but nearby Sag Harbor was booming, thanks in large measure to the "whale fishery." Thompson described Sag Harbor, with its 3,000 inhabitants and four churches, as "the most populous, wealthy, and commercial place in the county, and may therefore not improperly be considered the emporium of Suffolk."

When in Bridgehampton in earlier years, Nathan Rogers may have stayed in the family home on Hayground Road just north of today's Montauk Highway. About the time he retired to Bridgehampton, Rogers purchased a house from Judge Abraham T. Rose, the son of his former doctor who had presented him with his first set of brushes and watercolors. When Judge Rose inherited the house across the street, he sold his house to Rogers. There are no pictures of what that house looked like when Rogers purchased it.

It is Nathan Rogers who expanded and remodeled the house in the then fashionable Greek Revival style. (See fig. 3.) This house still stands across from the monument, at the southeast corner of Ocean Avenue and Main Street (Montauk Highway or Route 27). Rogers probably designed it himself, drawing on pattern books, perhaps, as Sherrill

Foster has suggested, Minard Lafever's *Modern Builder's Guide*.

Rogers served on the building committee for the Bridgehampton Presbyterian Church in 1842. Joseph P. Lamb of Sag Harbor, was the builder; he had probably built many Greek Revival houses in Sag Harbor. The church has Ionic capitals on its pilasters, just as Rogers' own house has Ionic columns. In 1845, Long Island historian Nathaniel Prime wrote of the church, "for simple beauty, chaste neatness, just proportions and absolute convenience, it is not exceeded by any church in the county." James Truslow Adams, a Bridgehampton resident who was to become an eminent American historian, stated in 1916, "This Church and the Hampton House are, architecturally, the two best buildings in the village, and it is noteworthy that the artist, Nathan Rogers, who has already been spoken of, should have built the one and been on the building committee for the other."

Unfortunately, Rogers lived in his new Bridgehampton home for only a few years. He died on 6 December 1844 at the age of 57. The estate inventory of property in Bridgehampton, where he owned twenty-five acres of land, included a cow, farm implements, two horses, two ponies, chickens, and several wagons. Their house must have been lavishly furnished. They had several Brussels carpets, 67 (!) chairs, four sofas, four clocks, five bird cages, silver tankard, trays, pitcher, and teaspoons. The inventory goes on and on. They had a "piano forte" and an organ, which was the most highly valued single item at \$300. Nathan Rogers' estate inventory indicates he owned considerable property in New York City or mortgages, bonds, and notes on New York City property, making him one of the wealthiest men in Suffolk County.

Caroline Rogers, his widow, lived in the remodeled Bridgehampton house until she died in 1857. It was purchased by Capt. James Hunting who lived there until the early 1870s. The owners in the next two decades were DeBost, to 1881, and a Mr. Storms in the late 1880s (he had a bar and hotel which he called Hampton House, but it did not flourish). In 1894, the house was purchased and renovated by Capt. John Hedges and his son-in-law, Frank Hopping, who operated it as a "first class hotel and boarding house." Hopping's wife, Caroline Augusta Hopping, operated Hampton House as a summer boarding house into the late 1940s. In 1956, Paul Curts wrote of this house, "The passing of time has brought changes and decay. . . The handsome old fence that surrounded the grounds is gone. Another fine landmark is on its way to oblivion." The Town of Southampton purchased the house and its remaining six acres of property from a member of the Hopping family in 2003 (for something over \$3 million dollars) with \$550,000 raised from private funds for the house itself.

The house has architectural significance today. In 1936, the Hampton House was one of twenty-three structures in Suffolk County selected to be included in the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS). New York State's Long Island Landmarks in 1969, stated "Hampton House, facing onto Montauk Highway, is one of the best Greek Revival structures in the state, with two-story Ionic columns across its front center. The local pride typified by a recent repainting holds out a bright future for the area."

In 1992, the AIA Architectural Guide by the Long Island Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities, included Rogers' house with this description:

Its five-bay, two-story center block preserves a full-facade porch supported on four Ionic columns, a form more commonly associated with the Greek Revival style of the Southeastern states. The impressive columns are echoed by pilasters at the corners of the block and two flanking wings; a roofline balustrade that at one time graced the main house was destroyed by the hurricane of 1938. Also lacking its decorative rooftop cupola as a result of that catastrophe, the house retains other features that are characteristic of the Greek Revival idiom, such as its front-door surround made up of pilasters topped with a frieze and cornice with Ionic columns framing the inset entryway.

More recently, SPLIA referred to the Greek Revival House as "architecturally significant," and one of the two most important surviving Greek Revival structures on Long Island.

Conclusion

Nathaniel Rogers was a gifted and prolific artist in his day, very successful both artistically and financially. Miniature portraits are not prized as much today as they were in his time since we rely on photographs. Nor is it easy to mount an exhibit of miniatures. Hence, Rogers' reputation has not been widely sustained, except in the specialized field of portrait miniatures.

Nathan Rogers remodeled his home into an elegant Greek Revival-style house. It might be appropriate to recognize his architectural legacy by including his name in the designation, as the Rogers-Hampton House. Regardless of what the house is called, I hope someday we will be able to see it returned to its earlier splendor. That would enable people to remember this Bridgehampton native son who became an eminent artist in New York City, and returned to his home community where he enhanced Main Street with his remodeled home.

Note

I appreciate the assistance of Geoffrey Fleming, the Bridge Hampton Historical Society, and Ann Sandford in my research. Dale T. Johnson was very helpful when I first began to research Nathaniel Rogers some years ago. This is revised from the presentation at the East Hampton Library lecture series on April 10, 2003, under the title "Nathan Rogers of Bridgehampton: Portrait Painter and Amateur Architect." The library has a copy with full endnotes and a "Checklist of Portraits by Nathaniel Rogers." In a slightly revised form, this will be an article in the vol. 15 (-Spring 2003) issue of the Long Island Historical Journal, with illustrations of two miniatures by Rogers (including his self-portrait) and a c. 1910 picture of his Hampton House.

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Natalie A. Naylor, Professor Emerita, Hofstra University

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