

Then & Now – Famous Resident

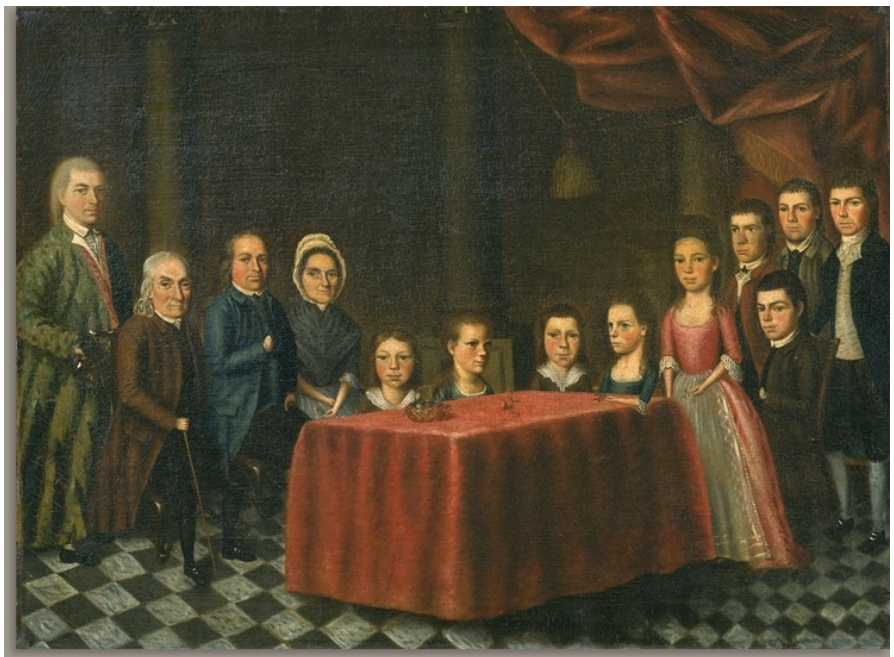
Edward Savage: Princeton Artist – 11/26/1761 to 7/6/1817

Edward Savage was born in Princeton, Massachusetts in 1761, and he was the second child of Seth and Linda (Craige) Savage and grandson of Edward Savage who came to Massachusetts in 1696 from Ireland. His great-grandfather, Abraham Sauvage came to this new land having been driven from St. Algis, Picardy in France by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. The Savage homestead was located in the area of Savage Hill near the Hubbardston/Princeton town-line.

By the early 1780's, Savage was painting commissioned copies of portraits of prominent Bostonians, which were originally painted by John Singleton Copley. In 1789, Harvard University sent this aspiring artist to paint a portrait of then-president George Washington.

His style was classic 18th century: the major figures are arranged as if on a stage, a large curtain defines the left side of the picture and there is a landscape (the Potomac) in the background. Washington is portrayed as the paterfamilias as well as the father of his country. Savage was the first of a long series of artists who have called Princeton home.

Savage became an outstanding artist of the 18th century. He started out as a goldsmith, then turned engraver and later a self-taught painter. As was the norm for artists of his time he studied abroad, most notably with Benjamin West. His work before he left for England was naïve in style, though quite accomplished. A wonderful portrait of his family can be seen at the Worcester Art Museum. The parents and children are all lined up behind a table, but the heads are very much out of scale with the bodies. Much of his later work concerned people in the newly emerging United States.



This 1779 Painting is in the Worcester Art Museum

He did portraits of John Adams and George Washington among others. Most well-known is his magnificent painting at the National Gallery of Art of George Washington and his Family, painted in 1789. An engraved copy of that painting can be seen in Princeton's Historical Society Collection. This is a well-known image, often found in American history texts.

This early connection to Washington defined Savage's career. He painted at least seven portraits of Washington and two of Martha Washington. Undoubtedly his most famous work, The Washington Family, was the only contemporary painting to depict the first president at Mount Vernon.¹



Edward Savage 1791 Self Portrait

In 1791, Savage traveled to London to engrave and publish his initial portraits of Washington. There he produced a handful of prints and worked on his canvas for The Washington Family. Based on multiple sittings with members of the Washington family both before and after his time in London, the ambitious group portrait depicts George and Martha Washington, Martha's grandchildren (Eleanor Parke Custis and George Washington Parke Custis), and slave William Lee around a table at Mount Vernon. Pierre Charles L'Enfant's plan for the new capitol at Washington rests on the table at the center of the picture, while columns and swags frame Mount Vernon's Potomac River view in the background.

By depicting Washington dressed in his military uniform surrounded by his family and with his hand resting on evidence of his greatest presidential achievement, The Washington Family echoes the comparison between Washington and the Roman general Cincinnatus so familiar to late [eighteenth-century Americans](#).²

Upon his return to the United States in 1794, Savage married Sarah Seaver on October 13, 1794 in Boston. He then completed his group portrait of the Washingtons, and immediately set to work exhibiting and engraving the large-scale painting. Washington himself ordered four copies, hanging one in the family dining room at Mount Vernon.

Savage went to Philadelphia in 1795, where his brother John Savage had a business. In July he exhibited his panorama of London, and the following February he



Edward's Portrait of Sarah Seaver 1791

opened the Columbian Gallery, "a large collection of ancient and modern Paintings and Prints." (Gazette of the United States, 20 February 1796). From then until 1801 he worked in Philadelphia as a painter, engraver, print publisher and gallery operator. Although his painting and engraving techniques had improved in England, he relied considerably on the assistance of his apprentice John Wesley Jarvis and English engraver David Edwin. Later they and others claimed that their talents added significantly to the quality of Savage's work in these years.

He then seemingly went to New York City and from there back to Massachusetts, as his fifth child was born in New York in 1802 and his sixth child was born in Princeton in 1805.

The majority of the approximately 100 surviving paintings attributed to Savage are portraits; however, around 1807 he produced a number of watercolor landscapes, likely studies for a [series of engravings](#).³ Sometime between 1787 and 1791, Savage visited Mount Vernon and painted two small canvases of the east and west fronts of the house. These detailed oil paintings are the earliest known images of the plantation, were widely exhibited during Savage's lifetime, and most likely inspired a [host of other early views](#).⁴



He is listed in New York city directories through 1810 as a "historical painter and museum proprietor." Gallery exhibits included his paintings of The Washington Family, Liberty, The Landing of Columbus ("from a picture in the collection of

Washington family by Edward Savage (American, 1761 - 1817), 1798, Ink on paper; stipple engraving, M-1152, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. the Grand Duke of Tuscany") and his copy of West's Cupid Stung by a Bee. Engravings of

"Liberty, Columbus, Etna, Vesuvius, a large whole length of Washington...and many other Prints published by E. Savage" were for sale. The museum offered natural history exhibits that were "arranged, agreeably to the ideas of Sir Hans Sloane, and with the addition of a number of paintings, and other interesting articles, will form a complete source of amusement for every class, particularly the amateurs of Arts and Sciences." (The Daily Advertiser 10 June 1802). Charles Bird King was a pupil in 1800-1805. In the winter of 1805-1806 he and [Charles Willson Peale](#) exchanged natural history specimens. The following summer he made a sketching trip to Niagara Falls.



Savage went briefly to Baltimore in 1810, where he advertised as a portrait painter in March (American, and Commercial Daily Advertiser, 19 March 1810). He moved that year to Boston, where he re-established the Columbian Museum on Tremont Street. He died seven years later, in 1817, on his farm in Princeton, Worcester County, Massachusetts. One of many talented artists of the Federal period, Savage is best remembered as one of the first proprietors of a museum and picture gallery. At the turn of the century, the enterprising Savage was also the proprietor of some of the earliest art galleries in [New York](#), Boston, and Philadelphia, where he exhibited his own work, other Americans' pictures, paintings and prints by European and old master artists, and natural history specimens.⁵ Savage died at his Princeton farm in 1817. While his abilities as a painter and engraver have been questioned by historians of American art since the mid-nineteenth century, The Washington Family remains one of the [most popular images of Washington](#).⁶

Resources:

- Blakes
- Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Savage_\(artist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Savage_(artist))
- National Gallery of Art <https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.1861.html>
- George Washington's Mount Hermon <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/edward-savage/>

Assembled and written by William Brooks in 2023.

Additional Artwork



The West Front of Mount Vernon by Edward Savage (American, 1761 - 1817), c. 1787-1792, oil on canvas, H-2445/B, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Bequest of Helen W. Thompson.



The East Front of Mount Vernon by Edward Savage (American, 1761 - 1817), c. 1787-1792, oil on canvas, H-2445/A, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Bequest of Helen W. Thompson.

