

The 1847 Sawyer Portraits – 175 years old

Newsletter No. 35

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Tim Wickens

This newsletter features three “primitive” folk art paintings that many of us grew up with, either at Nannie and Grandpop’s Jefferson Street home in Napa or at Grandma Marty’s homes in Lafayette and Rossmoor. They depict Grandpop’s (H.H. Sawyer’s) father and grandparents, who moved from New England to Napa in 1868 & 1870. Some of us vividly recall their eyes following us around! Since Marty died in 1985, Bert & Donna have stewarded the paintings and, just now, they are going to Sue Sims, who lives in Seal Beach (just south of LA).



French Albert
Sawyer

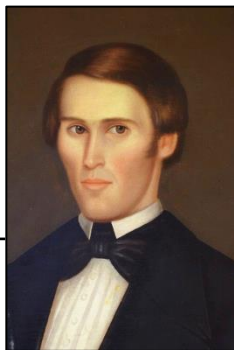
Lois Minerva
Gunnison Sawyer

Benjamin Franklin
Sawyer





Lois Gunnison



B.F. Sawyer



Martha "Mattie" Holden



French Albert Sawyer
1845-1901



Lydia Sophira Sawyer
1847-1865



Herbert Holden Sawyer



Claire Goodman

Herbert H. was the youngest of 5 siblings.

His sisters were Harriet & Lois Mabel. His brothers both died before he was 6mo old.

French's sister Lydia was born April 1847, the year the portraits were painted.

Lydia died at age 17 (1865), when French was 19, and was buried in Newport. Her parents left New England 5 years later, but they inscribed their names on her cemetery monument and her name on their monument in Napa (Tulocay).



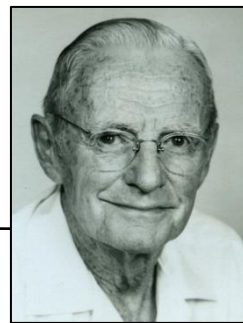
Helen Kingsbury



Herbert Goodman Sawyer



Martha Claire Holden Sawyer



Ridgway Smith

Marge, Judy, Larry, Nancy

Barry, Bert, Paul, Claire

Benjamin Franklin Sawyer (1819–1879)

Herbert H.'s grandfather French Albert's father



San Francisco 1870s

Sawyer portrait album (C3)

Benjamin F. Sawyer was part of the 7th generation of our Sawyer line in America. His parents, Joseph and Ruth, moved to Newport, NH, in 1796, and Benjamin was born there in 1819, the youngest of 9 siblings. He married Lois Gunnison in 1844 and their children French & Lydia were born in 1845 & 1847 (the year the portraits were painted). In 1851, Benjamin took over the family's 150-acre farm, overlooking the Sugar River, which Herbert H. visited as a boy.

Benjamin worked as a teacher, then county superintendent of schools, and then farmer ("yeoman") until 1855, when he purchased Newport's Upper Tannery, shown below. In 1866, he bought a second tannery, 6 miles south in Lois' home town of Goshen. (We have both deeds of purchase.) He also served in the NH Legislature in 1854 and 1868.

In 1870, Benjamin sold his tanning businesses and moved to Napa to help French found a new tannery, BF Sawyer & Co. During his 9 years in Napa before his death, he also served as Superintendent of the Methodist Sunday School and helped found the Napa Collegiate Institute (later part of University of the Pacific). Benjamin died of cancer at age 59, 13 months after his wife Lois died, and he was buried beside her in Tulocay Cemetery.

Newport, NH

BF Sawyer's "Upper Tannery"

on the Sugar River, which he operated from 1855-1870 before moving to Napa.

Maple Street Cemetery

where BF Sawyer's parents, two siblings, and daughter Lydia are buried.



Lois Minerva Gunnison Sawyer (1823–1878)

Herbert H.'s grandmother

French Albert's mother



1847 age 23-24



1860s Newport, NH age early 40's

Sawyer portrait album (C5)

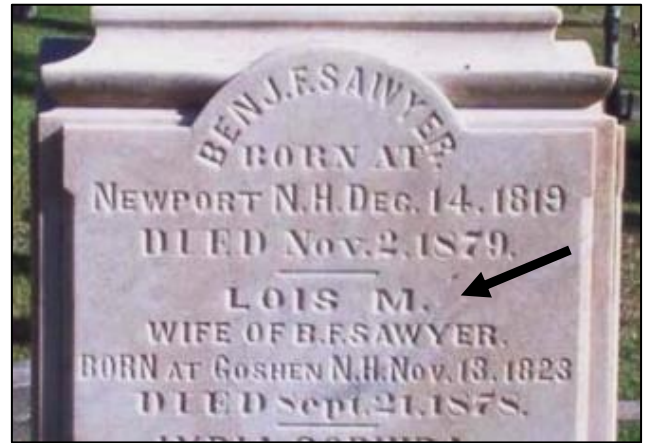
Lois Gunnison's great grandfather Samuel Gunnison (I) moved his family from Kittery, Maine, to remote Goshen, NH, in 1772, where he is considered to be a "pioneer." His son, Samuel (II), probably built the Gunnison House below (still standing), where Lois was undoubtedly born. It's also probably where she married BF Sawyer ("at Goshen," 1844) and where the portraits were painted ("in Goshen"). Lois & Benjamin lived 6 miles up the road in Newport, where their children French & Lydia were born. Lydia died at age 17, leaving French as their only child.

Lois' famous brother John W. Gunnison (after whom Gunnison, CO, was named) was a military explorer killed in Utah in 1853 while leading a U.S. government team working to locate a route for a transcontinental railroad. Because he was born in the Gunnison House, it was placed on the National Historic Register in 1979 (200th anniversary).

Larry Sawyer has a dictionary that Lois gave French in 1866, four years before they moved to Napa. We also have 10 letters Lois sent to French (1860s) & two framed watercolor paintings by her. Lois is buried in Tulocay Cemetery.



Gunnison House, circa 1858 built 1779 (still standing)



Tulocay Cemetery, Napa

Archive B4

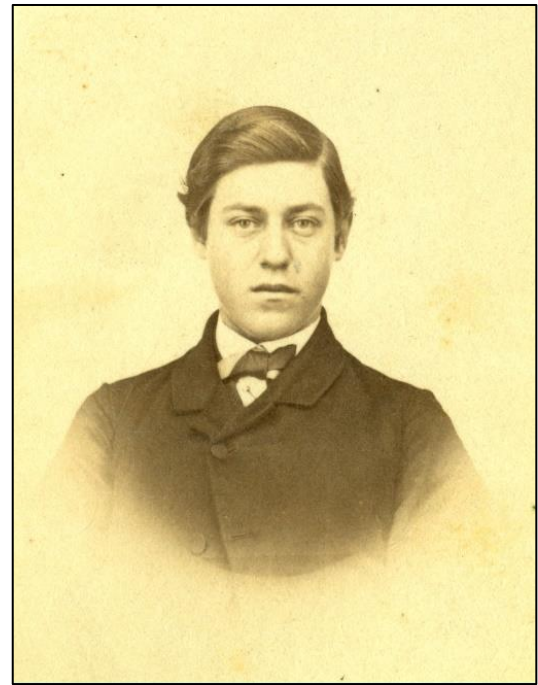
French Albert Sawyer (1845–1901)

Herbert H.'s father

Herbert G. & Martha's grandfather



French Albert Sawyer 1847 age 2



Sawyer portrait album (C4)

Newport, NH circa 1861 (age 16?)

French was born in Newport, NH, in 1845. In 1855, when he was 10, his father, Benjamin, purchased and operated one of Newport's two tanneries. The Civil War occurred during French's high school years, when he attended a Methodist boarding school 40 miles east in Tilton, NH, still operating today. There, he met his future wife, Mattie Holden, whose family operated textile mills (wool) in nearby Concord and elsewhere.

Even in high school, French suffered from health problems severe enough to disrupt his studies and threaten a "break down." They forced him to leave Wesleyan University (CT) and move west to San Francisco, in December 1868, where two of his mother's brothers lived. He ended up settling in Napa in June 1869, where one of her sisters lived, and he convinced Mattie and his parents to move there as well. (We have over 80 of his letters to them.) Together with his father, French founded the BF Sawyer & Co. tannery & wool pullery, which operated for over a century.

French was an enthusiastic and successful entrepreneur, but in 1880, following the deaths of two young sons and both parents, French had a profound mental breakdown while on a business trip east and spent the remaining 21 years of his life at the State Asylum in Concord. He is buried in Tulocay Cemetery.



Archive B4

circa 1870 (age 25?)

maybe taken in SF or Napa

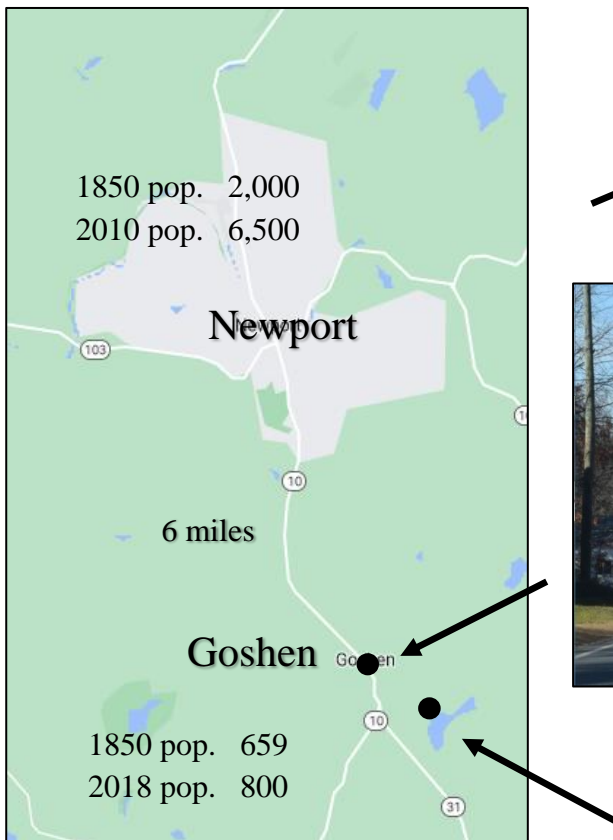
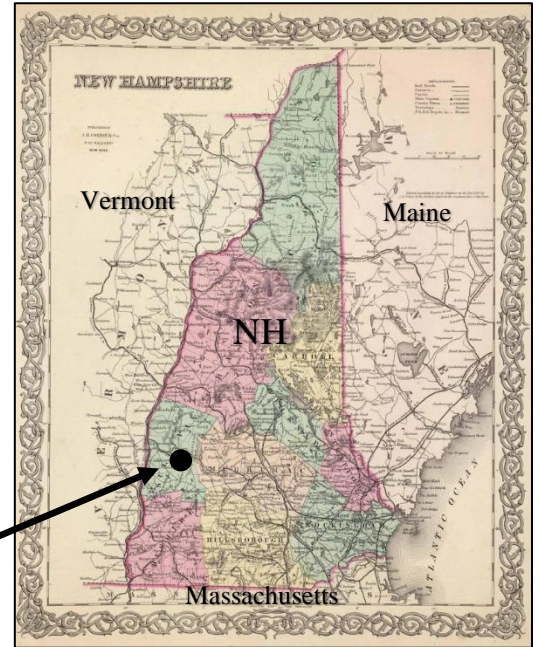
Painted in Goshen, NH

The Sawyers lived in Newport, NH, but Martha Smith wrote “Painted in Goshen, NH” on the portrait’s backs (see p. 16). My guess is that they were painted in the Gunnison home in Goshen, where Lois grew up (shown below).

photos by Tim, Oct 2022



Newport



Goshen



Gunnison home, circa 1858

Lois Gunnison’s childhood home, built 1779 and still standing today (more on p. 4).

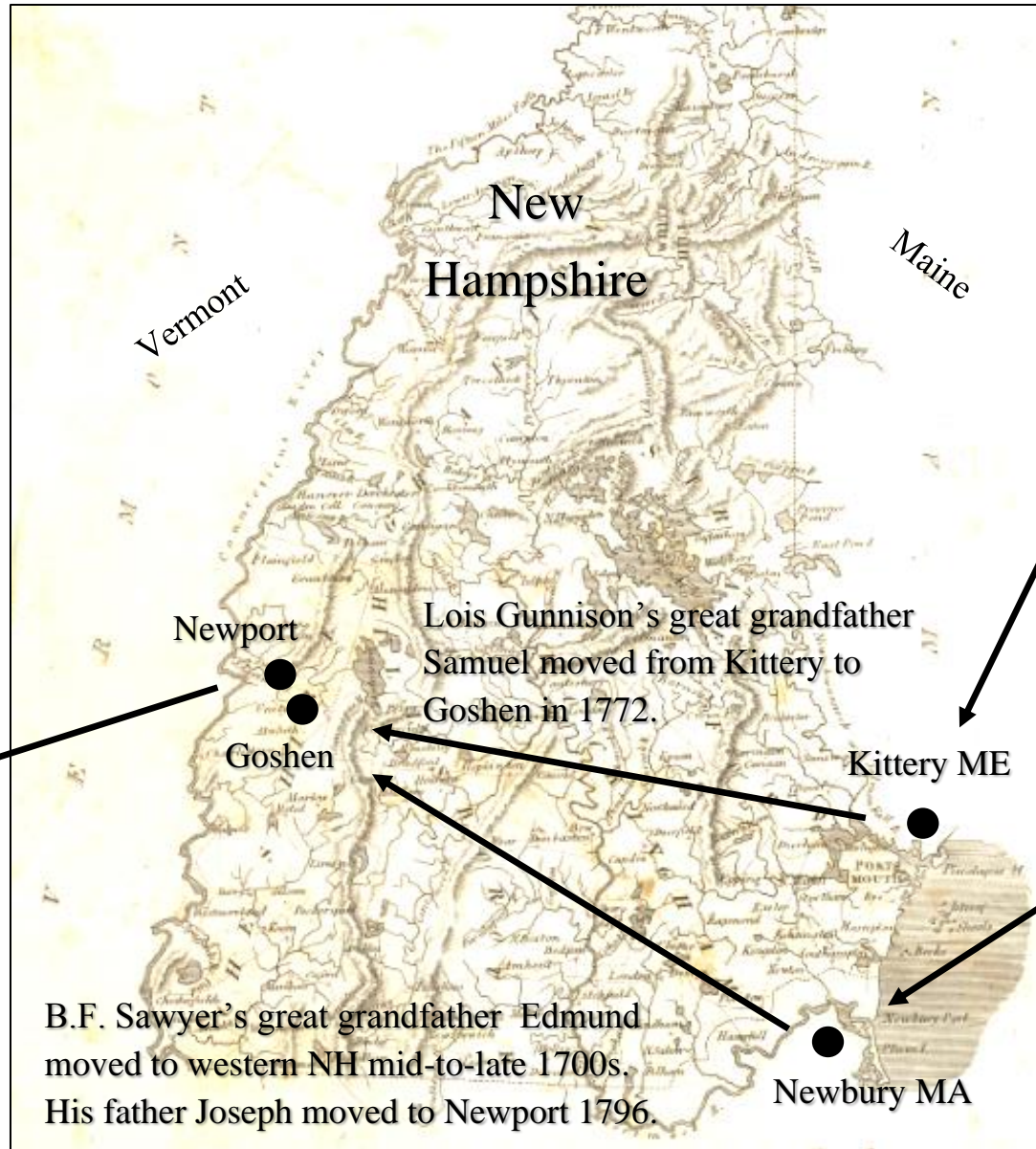
Lois’ parents, Samuel & Elizabeth, are standing at the front door.

Migration of our Sawyer & Gunnison ancestors – 1600s-1800s

The Sawyer portraits were painted in Goshen NH 1847.

B.F. & Lois Sawyer moved to Napa 1870. Their son French had moved in 1869. They built a duplex on Franklin Street & lived together.

Napa



Hugh Gunnison emigrated to Kittery, Maine before 1631



William Sawyer emigrated to Newbury, MA 1635

B.F. Sawyer's great grandfather Edmund moved to western NH mid-to-late 1700s. His father Joseph moved to Newport 1796.

Provenance of the Sawyer portraits

175 years

1847–1870	23 years	BF Sawyer home (presumably)	– Newport, NH
1870–1924?	50+ years	Franklin St duplex (presumably)	– Napa (see below)
1924?–late 60s?	45+ years	HH Sawyer, 605 Jefferson St	– Napa (see pp. 9-10)
late 60s?–1979	10 years	Martha Smith, Happy Valley	– Lafayette (see p. 11)
1979–1985	6 years	Martha Smith, Rossmoor	– Walnut Creek (see p. 12)
1985–2022	37 years	Bert & Donna Smith	– Moraga (see p. 13)
next		Sue Sims	– Seal Beach (just south of LA)

In the 1970s, Sue Sims wrote a college paper on the Sawyer portraits after interviewing her “Aunt Marty” about them and studying the painter and his style. While visiting Marty, Sue took the only photo I know of showing the portraits in the Smith’s Happy Valley home (thank you!). After Marty died in 1985 and her possessions were being split up, Sue expressed an interest in the portraits, and now they are going to her.

The Portraits at the Franklin Street duplex (1870–1924?)

389 & 397 Franklin St, Napa (at Laurel)

Presumably, Benjamin & Lois brought the portraits with them when they moved from NH to Napa in 1870. They may have been transported unframed, given that their grandson, Herbert H. Sawyer, framed them in 1933 (see p. 10). In 1875, the Sawyers built a duplex in Napa in which Benjamin & Lois lived in the south half and French & Mattie lived in the north half. After Mattie died in 1914, Herbert H.’s sister Harriet and her family lived there, and when Harriet moved to MA in 1924, the duplex was rented out as four apartments. The portraits were probably moved out of the duplex and into Herbert H.’s home on Jefferson Street, a few blocks away, between 1914-1924 (my guess is 1924). Herbert sold the duplex in August 1936.



This is one of only three photos I know of inside the Sawyer duplex.

The Sawyer portraits aren’t in this photo but it gives an idea of where they probably were for about 50 years.

circa 1906-1909

The Portraits at H.H. Sawyer's home (1924?–late 1960s?)

605 Jefferson Street, Napa



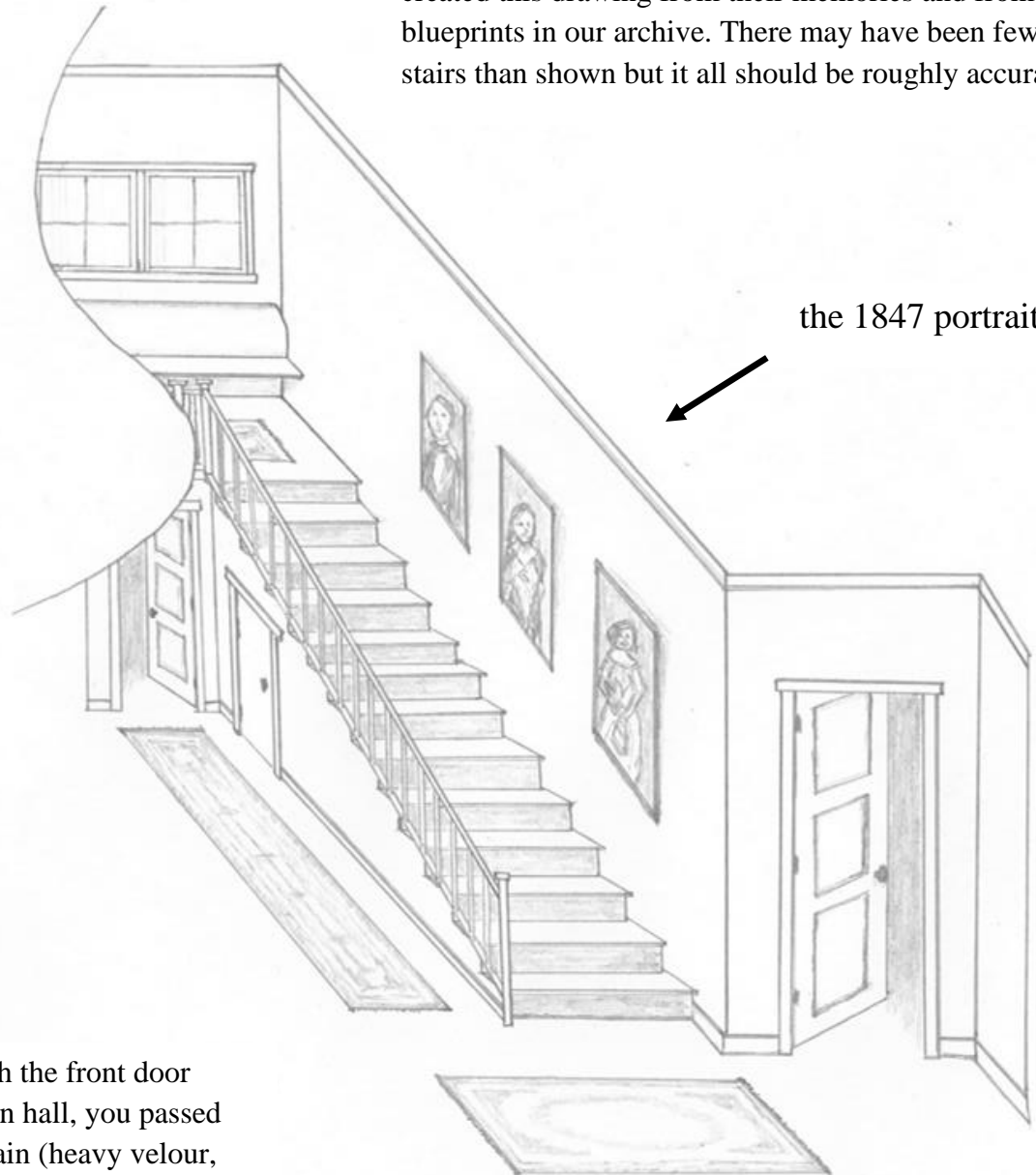
William Peaslee

A fourth portrait, of Lois Gunnison's brother-in-law, also hung along the stairs.

Painted by Lois's niece Etta Booth in 1890, it hung at either the landing or the short, 2nd flight of stairs after the turn at the landing. It's now with Marge.

In November 1932, Herbert H. Sawyer wrote to his sister Mabel (see next page) that he had hung the Sawyer portraits "in our hall above the stairs," where his grandchildren remember them from their childhood.

I haven't found any photos showing them there, so I created this drawing from their memories and from blueprints in our archive. There may have been fewer stairs than shown but it all should be roughly accurate.



After walking through the front door and a 6'x10' reception hall, you passed through an open curtain (heavy velour, where Nannie always pinned her beanie hat) and into this "hall," with a staircase leading up to the 2nd floor bedrooms. The door at the right led into the kitchen, the one at the back was a bathroom, and the one under the stairs is where the Victrola was kept. Off to the left was the living room, where Christmas mornings happened and where Marty & Ridg were married in 1930. The dining room was at the far right. Built by the Sawyers in 1909, the house still stands and is now worth about \$2.5 million.

Framed in 1932-33 by H.H. Sawyer

two letters to his sister Mabel

November 27, 1932

Did I write you that I have hung in our Hall above the stairs the portraits of Grandpa Pessley and the three of F.A. and B.F. and Lois G. Sawyer all painted in 1847 by some wandering artist. I believe they are safer hung on the wall than in any other way. The one of Grandpa Pessley is framed but the others are not so I am going to get some gilt molding and nail it around each to look like a frame.

January 30, 1933

I am enclosing two sets of pictures one set for Richard and one for Roxana of their Grandfather Sawyer when he was three two years old and of their great grandfather and great grandmother Sawyer painted in 1847 by a travelling artist named Bundy. I have put them up on the wall in our hall and put frames around them and Herbert G. volunteered to photograph them as a protection in case they should be ever destroyed or lost. I think the picture of Lois Gunnison Sawyer for whom Mabel was named came out remarkably well for a photograph of a painting. What do you think?

Photographed by Herbert G. Sawyer in 1933

Below is a page from one of H.G.'s photo albums (apparently dismantled).



The Portraits at Martha Smith's homes (late 1960s?–1985)



Marty & Ridg's
home in Lafayette

3993 Happy Valley Rd

in a back bedroom

photo by Sue Sims
circa 1978

Archive S19



Marty's home in Rossmoor
2756 Tice Creek Drive #7
Walnut Creek

circa 1981

Donna & Steve
(portraits on back wall)

Ellie Wagner, Sherrie & Donna

Ellie is Paul Wagner's mother = Sherrie's mother-in-law.
Both photos are from Donna Smith's collection.



The Portraits at Bert & Donna's (1985–2022)



French's portrait in
Bert & Donna's home
in Moraga

2021



Emery Wagner Lewis (2)

Bert & Donna's great granddaughter

bearing a striking resemblance
to her 4th great grandfather
French Albert Sawyer (2)

April 2022

photo comparison created by Shanna Wagner
(Emery's mom)

Donna's file on the Sawyer portraits

Donna Smith has long taken a strong interest in the Sawyer portraits. She took careful photos of each one, researched the artist (Horace Bundy), photographed other paintings by him in a New England gallery, and kept this file of everything she'd learned.



Framed by Martha Smith

likely in 1970s

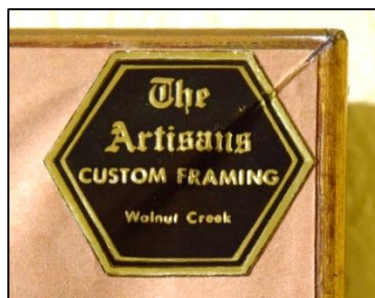
All evidence points to Martha Smith having framed the Sawyer portraits most recently. Her father, Herbert H. Sawyer, framed them in 1933 (see his letter p. 10), as shown in these photos by his son Herbert G., but they had different frames by about 1978, when Sue Sims photographed them in Martha's home in Lafayette (see bottom photo).

Also,

- Writing on the backs of the 2 "parents" portraits matches Marty's handwriting.
- Donna told me Marty said she'd received the paintings rolled up (unframed).
- A frame-shop sticker on the back of the French Albert portraits is from Walnut Creek, near Marty's Lafayette home.

Was French Albert's portrait framed at a different time/place from the other two?

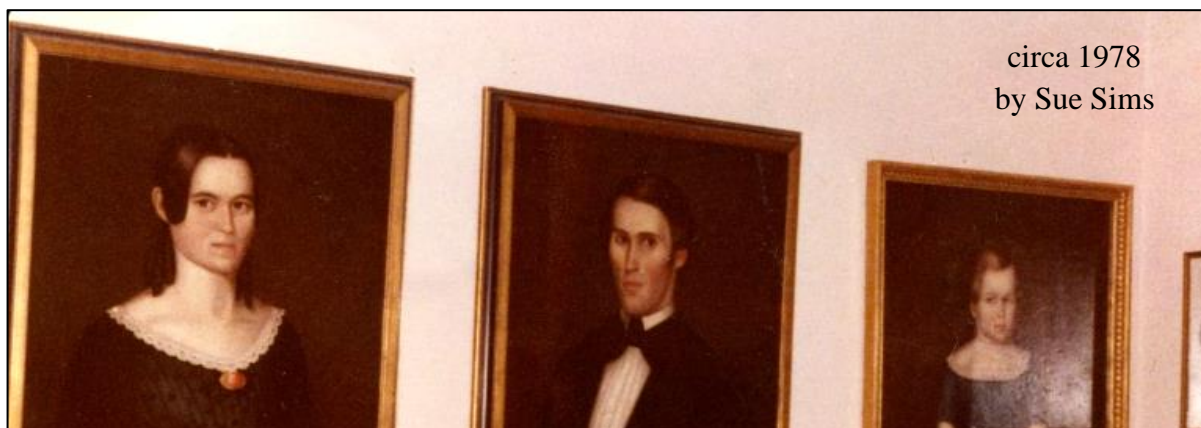
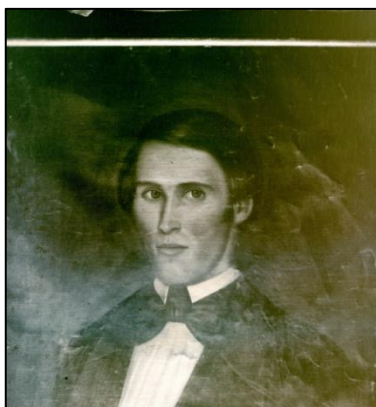
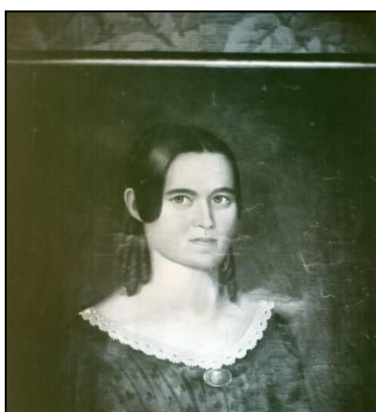
- It has a different frame from the other two.
- It has a sticker that isn't on the other two.
- It doesn't have the writing on the back that is on the other two (see next page).



1933



2022



“Rolled up ... kind of crackled” – Restoration work

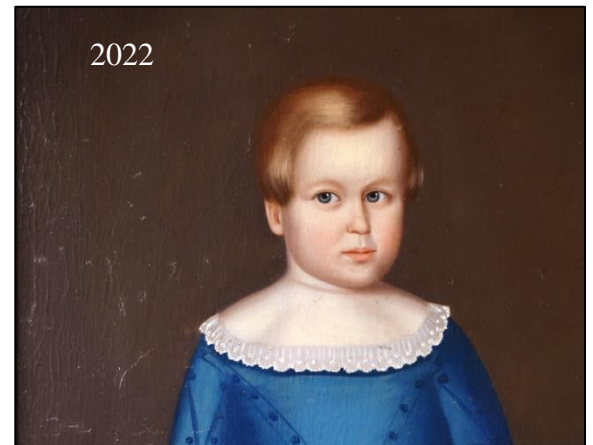
The canvas - The canvas board can be removed by applying heat to the back

“The canvas board can be removed by applying heat to the back.”

(Marty’s handwriting)

Donna recalls Marty saying that when she received the paintings (late 1960s?), they were “rolled up” pieces of canvas and “kind of crackled,” and maybe in a trunk. Together with the note above, it appears that the canvases were mounted to boards using a heat-releasable adhesive, to flatten creases, maybe when Marty had the framing done in the 1970s. Indeed, a stiff board material is visible through small tears in the backings.

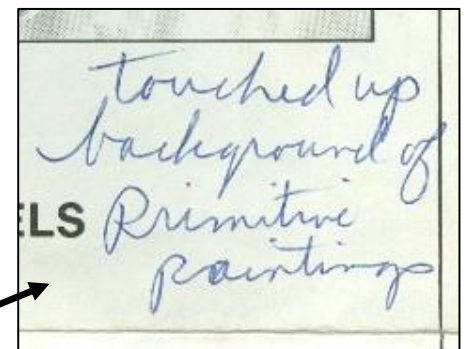
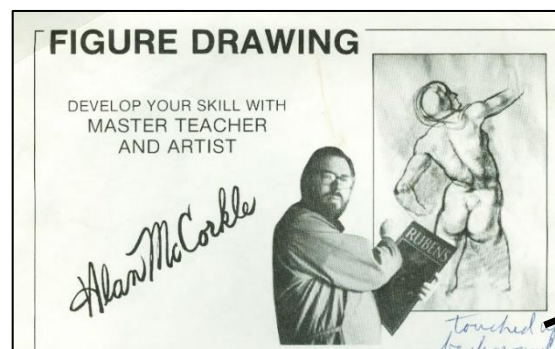
Marty may also have had the backgrounds of the paintings touched up to repair damage. Looking closely at the surfaces, it looks like cracks and small areas of missing paint have been repainted.



Also, among the records Donna kept is a flyer (late-70s or early-80s?) from an artist named Alan McCorkle bearing the note: “touched up background of primitive paintings.” Though the flyer advertises a sketching class in San Francisco, Mr. McCorkle lived on Upper Valley Rd in Lafayette in the 1960s & ’70s, only a few miles from Marty’s home.



Marty may have taken one of his art classes and then hired him to touch up the paintings, or she could have met him at the arts-supply store in Walnut Creek that he operated.



The painter – Horace Bundy

The Sawyer portraits were painted in 1847 by Horace Bundy, an itinerant artist from Vermont. I couldn't find a photo or portrait of him, but many of his paintings can be seen online. The text below is culled mostly from Bundy biographies and from a Shelburne Museum article on New England folk art by Jacquelyn Oak.



This painting shows what it might have looked like when Bundy was sketching the Sawyers in 1847.

unknown artist
circa 1845

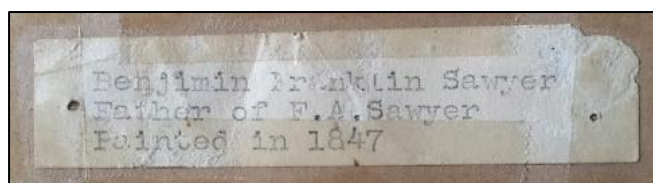
Shelburne Museum
Vermont

Born in 1814 in Hardwick, VT, Bundy became a licensed Adventist preacher in 1842. To support his wife and 8 children, he traveled around New England (mainly VT, NH, MA) during the 1840s and 1850s, preaching and painting. He was part of a movement during the 1800s in which hundreds of folk painters moved from place to place, recording thousands of likenesses and creating one of the largest bodies of work in American art. Earlier artists had usually depicted the wealthy and powerful, but by the 1820s, folk painters were democratizing painting as a new middle class sought portraits of themselves in record numbers. In 1829, one of America's first art critics wrote about the proliferation of folk portraits: "You can hardly open the door of a best-room anywhere without ... being surprised by a picture of somebody ... staring at you with both eyes and a bunch of flowers." *(continued...)*

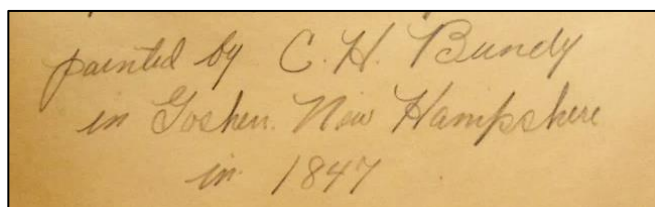


To meet the demand, coach-, house-, and sign-painters, as well as many amateurs, took up the trade. Some artists traveled from town to town, advertising in taverns and stores for only a few weeks, while others established a home base, but almost all worked in rural areas, where there was less competition. Some used commercially-prepared supplies while those in more isolated, rural areas improvised with local materials. A few had formal training, but most learned from contemporaries or instructional art books. They attempted to capture a “correct likeness” (the term most often used), paying particular attention to facial features, with the body sometimes looking rigid, stylized, or awkward (French Albert’s hands).

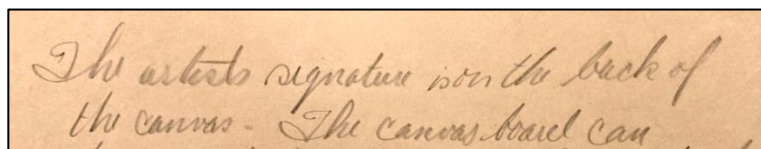
Like others, Bundy was largely self-taught, having worked as a carriage maker, where he likely developed his artistic inclinations by painting decorations on sleighs, buckets & signs. By the time he died in 1883 (age 68), Bundy had been a portrait & landscape artist for nearly 50 years and had become widely known. The Smithsonian has records of 109 of his paintings, including works in the National Gallery of Art and in New England museums and colleges. Dozens have been sold at auction, where many have been valued from \$500-\$1,000, some at \$2,000-3,000, and a few at \$10,000-\$30,000. One sold for \$115,000 in 2006.



← **H.H. Sawyer’s tag** on back of B.F. Sawyer’s portrait (taped onto paper backing - apparently removed from the canvas during reframing by Martha)



← **Martha Smith’s notes** on back of B.F. Sawyer’s portrait, documenting where & when it was painted and that Horace Bundy’s signature is on the back of the canvas. (I think Marty’s “C.H.” is a mistake – should be just “H.”)



On our paintings, Bundy’s signature is hidden because the canvas was adhered to a board during reframing (see p. 14).

Bundy’s signature on the backs of other paintings

