

University of Maine

From the Selected Works of Desiree Butterfield-Nagy

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Who Was Clarinda Brettun Strickland?

Desiree Butterfield-Nagy



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by Desirée Butterfield-Nagy, Archivist, Special Collections Department



Recently a group of community volunteers visited for a tour of the Special Collections Department, giving us a chance to discuss several paintings and artifacts around the department reading room. We took a few moments to look at the original landscape design for the university campus, referred to as the "Industrial College of the State of Maine," drawn by the firm of Olmsted and Vaux in 1867. We discussed a sign that came to us with a larger collection of records documenting the history of the Katahdin Iron Works and subsequent companies from 1846 to 1975. We had a chance to admire several portraits painted by Jeremiah P. Hardy, including those of Ellen and Hannibal Hamlin.

Then we found ourselves standing in front of a painting of a woman identified by a brass plate on the frame that reads, "Clarinda Brettun Strickland." I turned to the group and admitted that although we knew that Hardy was the artist, we didn't know much about Clarinda Strickland. One of the members of the tour suggested that she may have a connection to what is now known as the Phillips-Strickland House,

a Bangor retirement community. She explained that the current community had formed when two historic homes, the Phillips House for Women and the Strickland House for Men, had merged.

With this lead, I began searching and discovered that Clarinda Strickland was in fact the aunt of the founder of the Strickland House, Lysander Strickland. Two homes for the aging were founded in the 1800s and the Strickland property merged with the Mary Phillips home for women in the 1970s. Although the original Phillips House is gone, the Strickland home still stands, a three story building near Miller Drug on State Street in Bangor.

Several members of the Strickland family were known as prominent lumbermen in Bangor for several generations, beginning with brothers Hastings and John (Lysander's father). Clarinda Brettun of Livermore, Maine, married Hastings Strickland on November 3, 1828. Their two children, William Hastings and Philo Augustus, were also prominent Bangor businessmen. The Bangor Directory for 1864-1865 notes that the parents and both sons had homes next each other at 49, 52, and 57 Broadway. Photographs of the Philo A. Strickland house, in particular, appear in several publications related to the history of Bangor and its historic buildings.

Within the *Journals of John Edwards Godfrey, Bangor Maine, 1863-1865*, there are several mentions of Hastings, Philo, and Lysander, but no mention of the women of the families. It was easy enough to learn that Clarinda Strickland was born in 1808, died in 1889, and was buried at Mount Hope Cemetery. Additional details about her life, however, proved more difficult to find.



Philo A. Strickland House

The account book and ledger of the artist, Jeremiah P. Hardy, reveal that Mrs. Strickland sat for the painting in the Bangor studio in December, 1842. This puts the painting into what some scholars have referred to as “Hardy’s Mature, Documented Period” of 1840-56. In an article, *Brushstrokes On the Hardy Canvas: A new Analysis of J.P. Hardy’s Life and Work*, Diane Vatne describes the work by saying, “the best of [this period’s] paintings are exquisite. Clarinda Strickland is pensive and comely. Strong light over her left shoulder highlights her hair and casts shadows onto her neck from her face and ringlets. Her head is framed by a curtained window, through which a moody, dark landscape can be seen.”

During his lifetime, several of Hardy’s contemporaries commented that he did not receive the recognition he deserved for his work. In referring to Hardy, an 1835 article in the *Bangor Freeman* noted that, “We do not sufficiently appreciate the talents of our artists.” In a piece to accompany an exhibition at the Colby College Art Museum in 1966, H. J. Gourley noted, “After his death, as has been the case with many nineteenth century artists, his name was known to few except those owning his portraits.” In 1939, however, his grandniece, Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, published a major article about his life and work in *Old Time New England, the Bulletin of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities*. Eckstorm, well known for her work as a writer and folklorist, detailed her great-uncle’s humble beginnings. Hardy’s father, a tanner, moved his family to the thriving community of Hampden in 1811, a city larger than Bangor at that time. Jeremiah Hardy began his career at the age of 27, returning to Hampden after minimal training in Boston and New York. He sold his first painting in 1828 for twenty-five dollars. Even in 1828, his ledger indicates that this amount was hardly more than necessary to purchase a six dollar hat and broadcloth for a suit at seven dollars a yard. Some of Hardy’s most famous paintings are from his early period, including Sarah Polasses, a Penobscot Indian girl, and Abraham Hanson, a black barber in Bangor. Hardy was known for nurturing area artists, including his daughter, Anna Eliza, and sister, Mary Ann, during a time when formal art training was virtually unavailable to women. During his career, Hardy painted portraits of several of central Maine’s most prominent citizens.

Clarinda Strickland’s descendents played significant roles in the early years of the University of Maine’s history. Her son, William, was president of the Board of Trustees of Maine State College at Orono until his death in 1891. Her grandson, Frederic Hastings, also served as president of the Board of Trustees and was particularly active in tense negotiations for university funding with Governor Percival Baxter. Paperwork related to the acquisition of the painting



Jeremiah Pearson Hardy

suggests that these connections to the university’s history encouraged Mrs. Strickland’s great-great-great grandson, Frederic Hastings Stetson of the class of 1939, to donate the painting to the university.

My search for information about Clarinda Brettun Strickland was by no means exhaustive. I had hoped to find more about her life. If an obituary appeared among the impressively busy columns of the *Bangor Daily Commercial* in the days that followed her death, I am afraid that I missed it. I am glad to be more aware of her life, however, and her connection to the history of the University of Maine. I am certainly better prepared for the next chance to provide a tour of the department. In the meantime, I can admire the painting, and admit that I tend to agree with Diane Vatne’s assessment... Exquisite. Pensive. Lovely.

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