Mare, John [1]

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by Elizabeth Vann Moore, 1991

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John Mare, painter, merchant, and politician, was born in New York City, the oldest child of John and Mary Bes Mare. His father was from Devonshire, England, and his mother was presumably of Dutch origin. His sister Mary married the English painter, William Williams, who may have given young Mare encouragement and assistance, though nothing is known of the boy's education or training. In 1759 Mare and his wife Anne Morris moved to Albany, N.Y., where their son John was baptized in 1760. Apparently she and the child died before Mare returned to New York in 1761.

The earliest portraits attributed to Mare are those of the brothers Henry and Robert G. Livingston. Henry's is signed and dated 1760; Robert's is unsigned and undated. Both are believed to be copies by Mare of earlier portraits by John Wollaston. The first official record of Mare as an artist is his admittance to the freedom of the city of New York as a "limner" in 1765. In 1766 the city council paid him for a portrait of King George III, which probably did not survive the American Revolution. His best-known portraits, both done in 1767, are those of Jeremiah Platt (owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art [2]) and John Keteltas (owned by the New-York Historical Society [3]). The latter is famous for a fly on Keteltas's wristband, "the first, widely known *trompe l'oeil* in American art history [and] the only case . . . where an insect was put into a portrait." In the same year he copied a Wollaston portrait for Dr. James Lloyd of Boston. In 1768 he painted John Torrey of Boston and probably Torrey's brother William, whose strikingly similar portrait is now known only from a photograph. A 1769 portrait of Gerard Beekman (at the Philipse Castle Restoration near Peekskill, N.Y.) and an undated portrait of a member of the Werden-Wilcocks family (at Old Deer-field, Mass.) are attributed to Mare.

Returning to Albany in 1772, he painted a portrait (now owned by the state of New York) of Sir John Johnson, who became one of the chief Tories [4] of the Revolutionary period [5]. In 1774, back in New York, Mare did portraits of Dr. Benjamin Youngs Prime and John Covenhoven (the latter his only known pastel, owned by the Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vt.). A recently discovered portrait of an unknown man, unsigned and undated, is attributed to Mare partly because of its display of Masonic emblems.

Masonry remained an important interest in Mare's life even after he stopped painting. It may have provided his contact with Sir John Johnson, who was provincial grand master. In Albany Mare joined Master's Lodge No. 2, and he and Johnson were visiting brothers of St. Patrick's Lodge, Johnstown, N.Y., in the winter of 1772–73. On his return to New York he transferred to St. John's Lodge No. 2, of which he was senior warden when he made his first visits to Unanimity Lodge, Edenton [6], N.C., in 1776 and 1777. In 1778 he became a member of Unanimity Lodge, in 1779 its master, and for the next twenty years its mainspring. He is believed to have helped draft the constitution of the Grand Lodge of North Carolina, and in 1787 he presided at the Masonic convention that revived it.

Why Mare moved from New York to North Carolina is unknown, as is why he stopped painting. His nephew, the younger William (Joseph) Williams, was living in his household and painting portraits in 1785, but Mare had dropped art and gone into business as a merchant. For about fifteen years he was very successful, trading with the West Indies and acquiring much land in several counties, as well as property in Edenton. His last years, however, were fraught with financial difficulties and apparently a disabling illness, and he died in almost desperate circumstances.

From his earliest years in North Carolina, Mare aligned himself with the Revolutionary leaders of Chowan County [7]. In 1780 he suffered the loss of a ship he owned with other merchants when it was captured by the British. He provided supplies for North Carolina troops. When British row galleys got into Albemarle Sound, he contributed £1,000 to the expedition to drive them out.

Mare's public career began with three years as postmaster (1783–86), followed by two years as county coroner (1786–88). In 1786 he became treasurer of the town of Edenton and in 1789 a town commissioner, serving for years in both capacities. From 1787 to 1799 he was a notably conscientious justice of the peace, frequently serving as auditor of legal accounts. The height of his political career was his appointment to the Council of State in 1787, when his friend Samuel Johnston [8] became governor. He was renominated in 1789 when Johnston was reelected, but he was not reappointed, because Johnston became senator without taking office as governor. In the same year Mare represented the borough of Edenton at the convention that ratified the U.S. Constitution and voted for ratification.

John Mare's second wife, Marion Boyd Wells (daughter of William Boyd of Chowan County and widow of Dr. George Wells), died long before him. His only survivors were two young daughters, Mary and Elizabeth Ann. A member of St. Paul's Church, Edenton, he may have been buried in its churchyard.

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Subjects:
Artists [12]
Biographies [13]
Merchants [14]
Political leaders [15]
Authors:
Moore, Elizabeth Vann [16]
Origin - location:
Chowan County [17]
Edenton [18]
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