

# VERMONT



# HISTORY

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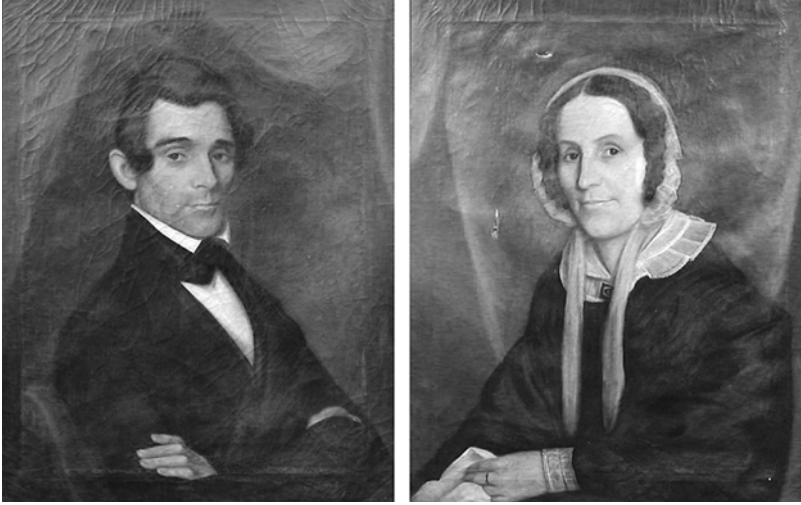
## A Puzzle Solved?

Putting together the pieces of a history puzzle takes perseverance and time—usually lots of time—for all of the information to come together before the full story is revealed. A new museum acquisition for the Vermont Historical Society is a perfect example of how all—or at least most—of the pieces gradually came together to reveal a fuller picture.

The research trail goes back to 1979, when VHS curator Phil Elwert wrote to a possible donor, Walton McKie Wing of Tombstone, Arizona, about portraits of husband and wife, Ezekiel Walton and Prussia Persons Walton. Elwert had heard that Wing might be giving them to VHS. He also asked Wing about portraits of the Wing family illustrated in *Two Journeymen Painters* (1950) by Arthur Healey and Alfred Franckenstein. The book documented and illustrated the work of Vermont artists Benjamin Franklin Mason (1804–1871) and his teacher, Abraham Tuthill (1776–1843). Photos in the book showed portraits done circa 1811 by Tuthill of Ezekiel and Prussia Walton and 1832 portraits by Mason of Harriet and Halsey Wing. All were owned in 1950 by Mrs. Angela Wing Roth of Sacramento, California. Mrs. Roth was Harriet and Halsey Wing’s granddaughter and inherited the portraits from her father, Halsey McKie Wing.

In 1980, Walton McKie Wing replied that he did have portraits of Ezekiel and Prussia Walton and planned to bequeath them to VHS in his will. He had inherited them from a Wing uncle. Wing’s portraits were not the ones illustrated in *Two Journeymen Painters* but later portraits, done when the Waltons were older. He did recall seeing Benjamin Franklin Mason’s 1830s portraits of Harriet Walton Wing (Ezekiel and Prussia Walton’s daughter) and Halsey Roger Wing, her husband. In his letter, Walton McKie Wing recalled seeing a portrait of Eliakim Walton (VHSA-145; front cover) on a visit to the VHS as a young boy. Eliakim Walton was the son of Ezekiel and Prussia Walton and sister of Harriet Walton Wing. He also remembered another portrait he saw of Eliakim Walton, “as a younger man, showing him seated at a desk with

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*Ezekiel Walton, left (VHSA-647), and Prussia Persons Walton, right (VHSA-648), both oil on canvas, painted by Benjamin Franklin Mason in the mid 1830s. Bequest of Walton McKie Wing in 1995.*

an open newspaper on the desk.” Unfortunately, he didn’t reveal where he had seen that portrait, but did mention that his childhood visit to Montpelier was to see Walton relatives. When Walton McKie Wing died in 1995 the portraits of Ezekiel (VHSA-647) and Prussia Walton (VHSA-648) did, as promised, come to VHS. They are not signed by the artist or dated.

In September 2011, the VHS purchased at a New Hampshire auction an early nineteenth-century portrait of Montpelier publisher and U.S. Congressman, Eliakim Walton (VHSA-952, back cover). This is the second portrait of Walton owned by the society. The first, which is the one Walton McKie Wing saw as a young boy, was painted by Thomas Waterman Wood and given to VHS in 1896 by Walton’s wife, sister, and niece to commemorate Walton’s many years service as president of the Society and his work as a Vermont historian. It has hung in various places the VHS has occupied over the years.

Attached to the newly acquired portrait was a handwritten note identifying the sitter as the same Eliakim Walton, the son of Ezekiel and Prussia Walton. The writer noted that Eliakim Walton was his or her great, great uncle and Eliakim’s parents were the writer’s great, great grandparents. This portrait is of a much younger Eliakim Walton than the Wood portrait, though it is easily identifiable as the same man. It

seems to be the second portrait Walton McKie Wing described in his 1980 letter. Unfortunately, the painting is not in good condition and has lost its frame. It is not signed or dated.

With all of these pieces of information in place the identity of the artist who painted the portraits of Ezekiel and Prussia Walton, donated by Walton McKie Wing in 1995, and the newly acquired portrait of the young Eliakim Walton seem clear. I believe all three of these portraits are the work of Benjamin Franklin Mason. Healy and Frankenstein placed Mason in Montpelier sometime during the years 1832 to 1834, when he painted the portraits of Harriet Walton Wing and Halsey Roger Wing. Since the Wings were married in 1835, I conclude that these portraits were done shortly before their marriage. At the same time Mason painted them he did VHS's portraits of Ezekiel and Prussia Walton, and Eliakim Walton. In all likelihood Mason painted other portraits of younger Walton siblings. The two sets of portraits of Ezekiel and Prussia Wing, one by Tuthill and one by Mason, were inherited by Harriet Walton Wing's descendants. Eliakim Walton's portrait by Mason probably stayed in Vermont with one of his descendants, eventually going out of the family but luckily retaining its identifying note.

VHS's Walton puzzle pieces are in place. But where are Tuthill's portraits of the Waltons and Mason's portraits of the Wings? The search for answers continues, perhaps to be solved by a future VHS curator.

JACQUELINE CALDER, *Curator*

*Front cover: Eliakim Walton (VHSA-145), oil on canvas, painted by Thomas Waterman Wood. Presented to VHS in 1896 by Walton's family.*

*Back cover: Eliakim Walton (VHSA-952), oil on canvas, painted by Benjamin Franklin Mason in the mid 1830s. This was described by Walton McKie Wing as a portrait of Eliakim Walton, "as a younger man, showing him seated at a desk with an open newspaper on the desk." Museum purchase, 2011.*

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