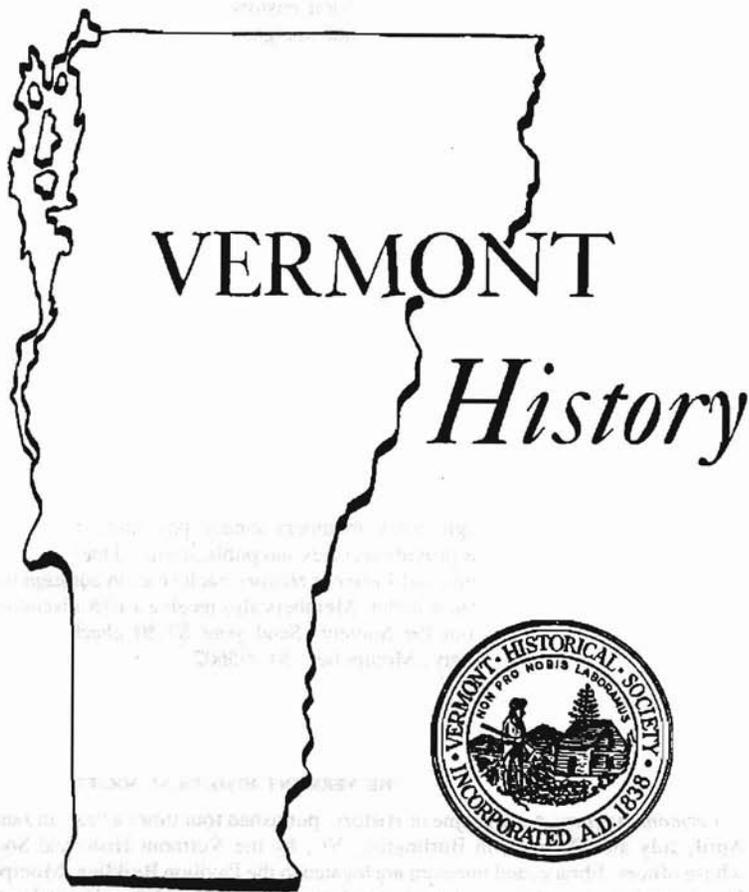


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Once a prominent engraver, he has been largely forgotten since his death in 1873.

## George White — Vermont's “Unknown Artist”

By CARL TAYLOR, JR.\*

NEW YORK'S Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1969 published a card with a reproduction of an engraving entitled “Kitty,” identified on the back as being the work of a nineteenth century “unknown American artist.”<sup>1</sup> In reality, “Kitty” was the work of George White, an artist, engraver, and mapmaker who worked in the small community of Greenbush, Vermont, during the first half of the nineteenth century. Although Greenbush still exists today — three miles south of Felchville on the road between Woodstock and Springfield (Route 106) — it is now so small as to have disappeared completely from Vermont road maps.

Although the “Greenbush school” of engravers was once well-known in Vermont and George White was one of its prominent members, the fact that even the Metropolitan Museum was unable to identify one of his engravings is an indication of how thoroughly the intervening century has obliterated knowledge about White and his work. The Metropolitan's publication of “Kitty” showed that while White's work is still valued, the man who created it had receded into the oblivion of an “unknown artist.” Curiously, in the communities where George White lived, his son Azro “Hank” White, who enjoyed passing renown as a black-face minstrel, is far better remembered than his engraver father.

During the past few years, an effort to turn up information on White has produced a rather meager harvest of facts, but at least some picture of the

\* I am much indebted to Mrs. Pauline B. Taylor of New York, N. Y. for invaluable help in researching this article.

1. Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), 1969 Card Catalog, No. 47.

*Photograph of George White, undated but probably taken late in life. (Original in the possession of the author.)*



*"Morrill's Indian Pain Extractor" label, copperplate intaglio engraving by George White, date unknown. (Copy made with permission from original in Bennington Museum, Bennington, Vermont.)*

man's life and character can be pieced together. Grandson of a Massachusetts soldier who died during the Revolutionary War (Captain Samuel White), George White was the son of Thomas White, who migrated from Massachusetts to Westmoreland, N. H., and then to Cavendish, Vermont, where his son George was born in 1797. Nothing is known about Thomas White, except that he was one of the early settlers of Cavendish and that he lived in the easternmost part of the township; the village nearest to the White home was thus not Cavendish but Greenbush, which although in Weathersfield township, was only a mile or two away. Thomas White died when George was only eight.<sup>2</sup>

In his teens, George White was apprenticed to the printing and engraving establishment operated by the Eddys in nearby Greenbush.<sup>3</sup> The leading figure here was Isaac Eddy, probably Vermont's first engraver, best known for his 1812 engraved illustrations of the Windsor Bible. Eddy was a man of many talents; he bought, rebuilt, and for a while operated at Greenbush the first printing press brought to Vermont, and he was also an inventor who manufactured ink, patented machinery, and experimented with perpetual motion.<sup>4</sup> George White, who subsequently developed a similarly broad range of talents and avocations, must have been greatly influenced by this

2. Information provided by Mrs. Gordon Churchill, Proctorsville, Vt.; also, Thomas and Samuel White, *Ancestral and Chronological Record of the William White Family* (Concord, N.H., 1895), pp. 245-7; Gilbert A. Davis, *History of Reading* (Windsor, Vt., 1903), Vol. II, p. 307.

3. *Interstate Journal*, White River Junction, Vt., April 1900, p. 10.

4. *Vermont Journal*, Windsor, Vt., June 15, 1967, p. 6; Lewis Cass Aldrich and Frank R. Holmes, *History of Windsor County, Vermont* (Syracuse, 1891), p. 708.

pioneer in engraving and printing.

Although the evidence is not conclusive, White's fortunes seem for a while to have been linked with those of Oliver Tarbell Eddy, Isaac Eddy's son, who was nearly the same age as White (O. T. Eddy was born in 1799) and who also learned the printing and engraving trade from his father; Oliver Eddy later became a well-known portrait painter. How much influence they exerted on each other is difficult to determine, but there is some similarity in texture between Oliver Eddy's first copperplate engraving ("Death of General Pike at York," c. 1814) and one of White's first known engravings ("Kitty," c. 1821-3). Both seem to have worked for a while in Walpole, N.H., where Oliver Eddy's second known engraving, a line-engraved folio map of New Hampshire, was published in 1817.<sup>5</sup>

Both White and Oliver Eddy appear to have returned to Greenbush after a rather brief period in Walpole; White was apparently back in Weathersfield township at the time of his marriage to Electa Cushman in 1831.<sup>6</sup> Also, the engravings "Kitty" and "The Happy Family" (a scene of three puppies) were probably produced in Greenbush between 1821 and 1823. White may again have been under the guidance of Isaac Eddy for a while, since "Kitty," with its bewildering variety of textures and techniques looks as though it might have been an exercise executed at the suggestion of a teacher.<sup>7</sup>

White's association with the Eddys appears to have ended shortly. Oliver Eddy left Vermont sometime before the end of 1822, and by April 1823 White had moved to Quechee, where his first two children were born.<sup>8</sup> In Quechee White worked in the printing establishment of Captain Ebenezer Hutchinson, who was best known for publishing the *New England Farmers Diary and Almanac* and a large map of Vermont which he sold by the thousands from 1821 on. After joining Hutchinson's establishment, White reportedly printed this map for him (it was engraved by another noted Vermont engraver, Moody M. Peabody), and it must have been at this time that his interest in map-making began.<sup>9</sup> Hutchinson's establishment also produced wallpaper printed from wood-cuts, and White learned this craft, too; a sample of White's wallpaper, made in 1827, is in the possession of the Bennington Museum in Bennington, Vermont.

Probably in the late 1820's White moved back to Greenbush and set

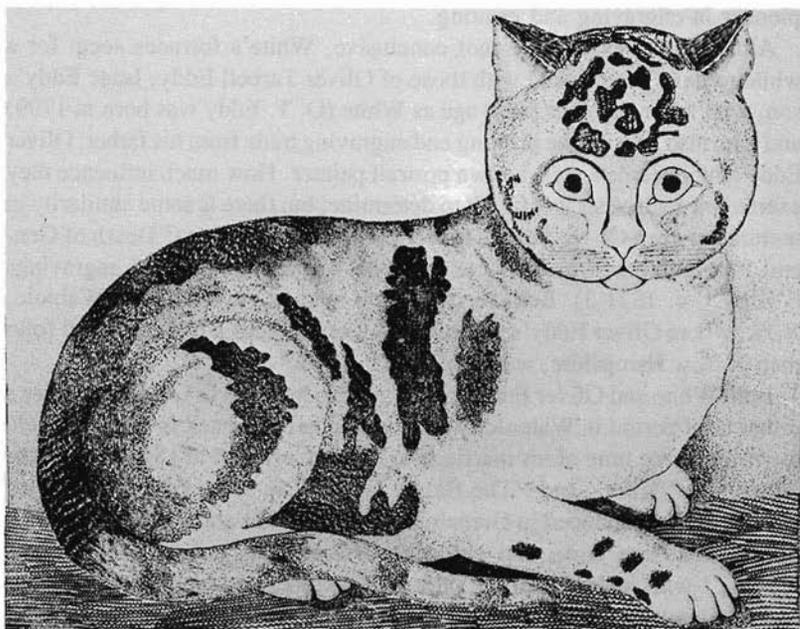
5. Edith Bishop, *Oliver Tarbell Eddy, 1799-1868* (Newark Museum Association, Newark, 1950), pp. 10, 21, 41; letter from White's granddaughter, Georgia White, to Harold Rugg dated Jan. 28, 1938 (in Vermont Historical Society Library).

6. Henry Wyles Cushman, *A Historical Biographical Genealogy of the Cushmans* (Boston, 1855), p. 437.

7. I am indebted to Prof. Emeritus Ray Nash of Dartmouth College for this interpretation.

8. Edith H. Bishop, "Oliver Tarbell Eddy," *Vermont Life*, Summer 1951, p. 18; Davis, *History*, p. 309.

9. Georgia White letter of Jan. 28, 1938; unpublished paper on Vermont engravers (undated) by Harold G. Rugg (in Vermont Historical Society Library).



"Kitty," an engraving by George White probably done in Greenbush, Vermont, between 1821 and 1823. (Print made with permission from an original copperplate in the collection of the Bennington Museum, Bennington, Vermont.)

himself up in business. Two developments appear to have paved the way for White's return to Greenbush. One was the departure of Hutchinson from Quechee in the late 1820's and the apparent scaling down of his publishing business; he ceased publishing almanacs after 1823 and he was reported living in Woodstock in the 1830's. According to White's son, White inherited some plates from Hutchinson.<sup>10</sup> The other event may have been Isaac Eddy's departure from Greenbush in 1826, which cleared the way for White to open a business there. White may have taken over Eddy's printing shop on the east side of the village.<sup>11</sup>

The exact timing and details of White's move from Quechee to Greenbush are obscure and can only be guessed at from the birthplaces of his children. His third child, Aurora, was born in Cavendish in 1829. By this time,

10. Milton Drake, *Almanacs of the United States, Part II* (New York, 1962), pp. 1296-99; Marcus A. McCorison, *Vermont Imprints 1778-1820* (Worcester, Mass., 1963), p. 513; Georgia White letter of Jan. 28, 1938.

11. George C. Groce and David H. Wallace, *The New York Historical Society's Dictionary of Artists in America* (New Haven, 1957), p. 205; George R. Dalphin and Marcus A. McCorison, "Lewis Robinson — Entrepreneur", *Vermont History*, Vol. XXX, No. 4 (October 1962), pp. 299-300.

White's mother had died, but at least one brother still lived in the Cavendish-Greenbush area, and since the White homestead was only a mile or two from Greenbush, his daughter's birth in Cavendish suggests that White had already returned to Greenbush in 1829. In any case, White's fourth through eighth children were all born in or very near Greenbush in the years 1833-1844, and he was established in Greenbush for over two decades.<sup>12</sup>

While in Greenbush, White engraved and published the twin maps of Vermont and New Hampshire — his best known works, since these maps still turn up periodically in old book and antique shops. He must have produced a considerable quantity of them. Judging from the rail lines shown on the two maps, the Vermont map must have been published about 1850-51, and the New Hampshire map seems to have appeared about three years later. Like his earlier pictorial engravings, these maps were copperplate intaglio engravings. Of his other printing and engraving work in Greenbush, little remains or is identifiable as his work, although his son recorded that he engraved pictures as well as maps during this period. The label for "Morrill's Indian Pain Extractor" (now in the collection of the Bennington Museum) — a crude but humorous depiction of an Indian bearing an arrow and a bouquet of flowers — is probably representative of many small commercial jobs through which he made ends meet and expressed his humor and talent. The only other surviving work from White's Greenbush period is the large Greenbush Temperance Society banner (also in the Bennington Museum). Under the legend "We hail'd the dawning light" is a hand-painted scene of a smiling sun rising over some crudely depicted hills; the floral-patterned border appears to have been printed with wood blocks. Like all White's other works, this one is undated, but the crudity of the painting suggests that it is rather early. In all his work in Greenbush, White was helped by his several sons.

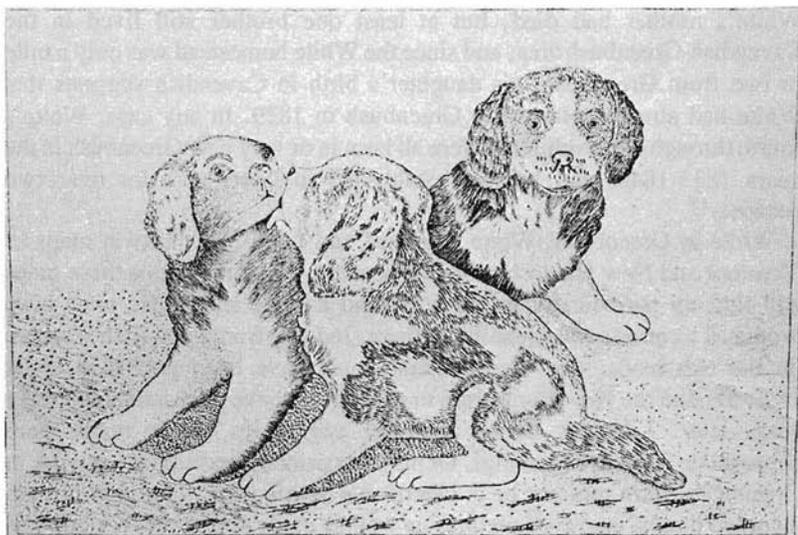
Despite his ability and varied activities, White never seems to have become even moderately well-off in Greenbush; a biographical sketch of his minstrel-son Hank describes George White and his wife Electa as "poor but respectable parents."<sup>13</sup> The very small size of the house where White lived in his later years also attests to his modest circumstances. Perhaps to supplement his income, White served as Greenbush postmaster from 1840 to 1847 and perhaps to as late as 1850.<sup>14</sup>

It was possibly in search of greater prosperity that sometime in the

12. Information from Mrs. Gordon Churchill, Proctorsville, Vt.; also, Davis, *History*, p. 309.

13. Article on "Hank" White by "Dio Genes" in Gilbert A. Davis, *Centennial Celebration, Together with an Historical Sketch of Reading* (Bellows Falls, Vt., 1874), p. 166.

14. *The Vermont Almanac* (Montpelier, 1840-2, Woodstock, 1843-7); Aldrich and Holmes, *op. cit.*, p. 708.



*"The Happy Family," an engraving by George White probably done in Greenbush, Vermont, between 1821 and 1823. (Print made with permission from an original copperplate in the collection of the Bennington Museum, Bennington, Vermont.)*

mid-1850's White moved his family and business three miles north to Felchville.<sup>15</sup> Felchville was then a much more thriving community than Greenbush, and White had a sister living there. White remained in Felchville until his death in 1873. Again there are regrettably few identifiable examples of White's work during his Felchville period. Soon after the move, he issued another map of Vermont — actually a new state of the Greenbush map. The original copperplate was altered, with new rail lines added and the address "Felchville" substituted for "Greenbush" under White's name. Judging from the new railroads shown on it, the Felchville state of the map was probably issued around 1855; its rarity today suggests that it was published in lesser quantities than the Greenbush map of Vermont.

Probably also produced during his Felchville period were engraved portraits of Millard Fillmore and James Buchanan for use as political badges during the 1856 presidential election campaign. Political badges at that time were not buttons but elongated strips of printed cloth to be pinned to clothing. The engraved portraits of Fillmore and Buchanan were ordered by

15. Since Hosea Doten's 1855 map of Windsor County shows White as still living in Greenbush, 1855 is apparently the earliest he could have moved to Felchville. Judging from the apparent date of the Felchville state of his map of Vermont, however, he must have moved in that year or very soon afterwards.

a New York firm which apparently printed and distributed them. These portraits appear to have been printed from intaglio engravings on steel plates. They seem to be copies of photographs, and whether White did the copying as well as the engraving is unclear.<sup>16</sup> Whatever the case, however, these portraits attest to a considerable growth in White's skill as an engraver. Although technically more accomplished than any of White's earlier works, these presidential portraits lack the individuality and humor of his earlier engravings — although doubtless political campaign badges could not be otherwise. Nevertheless, the fact that a New York firm ordered engravings for a national campaign from an engraver in a small Vermont town indicates that by then White had more than a local reputation as an artist and engraver.

From 1856 until his death in 1873, there are no samples of White's work, and it seems likely that in his last years he was not very active — or at least produced little original work.

To attempt an appreciation of White is difficult, not only because of the

16. Again, I am indebted to Prof. Nash of Dartmouth for this analysis.



*Map of Vermont, engraved, printed, and published in Greenbush, Vermont, about 1850-1851.*

small number of existing works which are identifiably his, but also because what little has been recorded about him either puts him in the shadow of his minstrel-son Hank or seems overly influenced by family or local pride. Only a very sketchy picture of White as a man can be assembled. We know that in religion he was a Universalist — a fact which may mark him as something of a free thinker for his day.<sup>17</sup> We also know that he was said to have been a man of “contagious humor” and that he apparently had a deep influence on his sons, all of whom followed him into the printing trade at some point in their lives.<sup>18</sup> A Vermont historian’s description of White as “a genius of all sorts,” however, seems a little overblown.<sup>19</sup> Another writer’s description of him as “of more than ordinary intelligence” is probably closer to the mark.<sup>20</sup> It is clear that he was a man of unusually wide-ranging interest and talents; aside from engraving and printing (and probably also manufacturing printer’s ink), the activities he engaged in included painting, composing humorous poetry (none of which survives), and constructing delicate and detailed ship models inside bottles.<sup>21</sup> In a local context, he seems to have been something of a renaissance man.

As for White’s work, the Vermont historian Arthur F. Stone claims that his maps “preserved the topographical history of Vermont for posterity” and in another passage comments that White’s “many maps of Vermont [aided in] the preservation of the topographical department of the State’s history.”<sup>22</sup> A comparison, however, of White’s maps with those of other map-makers of the period — such as the maps produced by Lewis Robinson in nearby Reading — reveals nothing particularly original from a topographical point of view, and it is doubtful that they really contributed much to current topographical knowledge. The maps are, however, accurate and reasonably detailed for their time and were doubtless contributions to public knowledge in Vermont and New Hampshire in the mid-19th century. Their value today is largely antiquarian and artistic.

As for White’s pictorial works, the copperplate engravings “Kitty” and “The Happy Family” are evidence enough of his skill, humor, and originality. The Metropolitan Museum’s 1969 publication of “Kitty” was further evidence of its lasting worth. It is regrettable that aside from these early prints and the 1856 presidential portraits, no other pictorial prints are so far identifiable as White’s. Since both “Kitty” and “The Happy Family” are

17. Hiram Carleton, *Genealogical and Family History of the State of Vermont* (New York, 1903), Vol. II, p. 369.

18. Arthur F. Stone, *The Vermont of Today* (New York, 1929), Vol. IV, pp. 669-70.

19. Stone, *op. cit.*, p. 668.

20. Unattributed article, *Interstate Journal*, April 1900, p. 10.

21. Stone, *op. cit.*, p. 668; and from White’s grand-daughter, Mrs. Richard Billings, of Woodstock, Vt. (now deceased).

22. Stone, *op. cit.*, pp. 668, 670.

unsigned, they are known to be White's work only because the plates were carefully preserved by his son and later by his granddaughter (and ultimately bequeathed to the Bennington Museum). Who knows what other unsigned White works may be adding to the charm and value of print collections in museums and private hands?

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## CATALOGUE OF WORKS OF GEORGE WHITE

### *Key to Location Symbols*

DLC	Library of Congress
MWA	American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.
NhD	Dartmouth College
NhHi	New Hampshire Historical Society
NyM	Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, N.Y.
VtBeM	Bennington (Vermont) Museum
VtHi	Vermont Historical Society
VtU	University of Vermont

### *Maps*

Map of Vermont, Greenbush, Vt. No date but probably about 1850-1, colored, 7½ x 11 inches. Scale ¾ inch: 10 miles. DLC; NhD; VtBeM; VtHi; VtU.

Map of New Hampshire, Greenbush, Vt. No date but probably about 1853-4, colored, 8 x 12½ inches. Scale ¾ inch: 10 miles. NhHi.

Map of Vermont, Felchville, Vt. No date, but probably about 1855, colored. A new state of the Greenbush map of Vermont, showing new rail lines. Dimensions and scale the same. MWA.

Copperplate of Felchville map of Vermont. Priv.

### *Prints*

"The Happy Family", c. 1821-3, colored, 5¾ x 6½ inches. VtHi. (Copperplate at VtBeM).

"Kitty", c. 1821-3, colored, 10¾ x 11¾ inches. NyM. (Copperplate at VtBeM).

Specimen of wallpaper (wood-cut), 1827, 3¼ x 5 inches. VtBeM.

"Greenbush Temperance Society" banner (combination wood-cut print and painting, on linen). No date, 33½ x 42 inches. VtBeM.

"Morrill's Indian Pain Extractor" label. No date, 2½ x 2½ inches. VtBeM.

Millard Fillmore. Silk campaign badge, 1856, 3 x 8½ inches. VtBeM.

James Buchanan. Silk campaign Badge, 1856, 3¼ x 8¼ inches. VtBeM.