

“The Powell Boys”

Poignant and Political Messages of Samuel M. Shaver

By April Strader Bullin

East Tennessee on the eve of the the Civil War was a place of division¹ pitting North against South, neighbor against neighbor, and brother against brother. The region had great military implication for both the Union and Confederates based on it's geographic situation between Virginia and the lower South with access via the railroad.² Knoxville's importance in this scenario can be further analyzed through a mid-nineteenth century painting by Tennessee artist Samuel Shaver known as “The Powell Boys” (fig. 1). In the painting we see four young brothers fishing by Second Creek in Knoxville, where in 1863-64, Union occupation sources built a small fort to oversee the town and the railroad.³ What might not be immediately apparent are the other messages this painting seeks to tell us about this family and east Tennessee, in a time before the Civil War, when the political climate was not so toxic and the landmarks included in the background were symbols of the future of Knoxville.

The earliest portrait artists in Tennessee were itinerant limners with wide and varying degrees of training and talent. They were drawn to these areas to escape more fierce competition back East where their abilities may have been viewed as inferior. Washington Bogart Cooper and brother William were, by family tradition, discovered by one of these traveling artists who took them to Murfreesboro for instruction.⁴ Another native



Fig. 1: Boys of the Powell Family, Samuel Moore Shaver, Knoxville, Tennessee, c.1860

Oil on canvas

HOA: 67"; LOA: 67"

Anne P. and Thomas A. Gray MESDA Purchase Fund (5658)

¹ Seymour, Digby Gordon. *Divided loyalties; Fort Sanders and the Civil War in East Tennessee*. University of Tennessee Press Knoxville, 1963

² Young, Namuni Hale. *Art & Furniture of East Tennessee*. Knoxville, Tennessee: The East Tennessee Historical Society, 1997, 63-64.

³ The Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area funded an archaeological study of the site in 2009.

⁴ Kelly, James C. "Portrait Painting in Tennessee." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*. XLVI. no. 4, 1987, 198-235.

Tennessean, William Harrison Scarborough, was born in West Tennessee but lived and painted in the Rogersville area in 1834-35 before moving to Columbia and Charleston, South Carolina. All three artists were fairly accomplished and all three, in the tradition of early itinerant painters, moved about during their careers. William Scarborough's path crossed with that of another promising young artist during his brief stay in Rogersville. He has been documented as providing instruction to native Tennessean Samuel M. Shaver. Shaver, whose earliest artistic efforts could be seen in the overmantel paintings of his parents home,⁵ would become Knoxville's first permanently established artist. The son of David Shaver and Catherine Barringer originally from North Carolina,⁶ he was born in the Reedy Creek area of Sullivan County. His family was prominent in the area with his father serving as a justice of the peace.⁷ He married Mary Hannah Elizabeth Powel on December 30, 1845. Miss Powel, who was not related to the Powells of this painting, was the daughter of the prominent Judge and Congressman Samuel Powel and Mary "Molly" Caldwell Rutledge of Rogersville.⁸ Becoming a part of the Powel family, who were fierce Confederates, would indicate that Shaver also had Confederate sympathies.⁹ After their marriage, Shaver painted a large number of the his wife's relatives including her mother and father which lead to other commissions. His most active years were 1845 and 1846 when Shaver's work was centered in Rogersville. His early portraits were very simple in style focused on the head of the individual with a very plain background. This style can be seen paintings of John Augustine McKinney ca. 1842, and Joseph Pharaoh Kyle ca.1846. By 1851 he was teaching at the Odd Fellows Female Institute in Rogersville.¹⁰ He is listed as "Professor Samuel M. Shaver; Drawing - Linear and Perspective; Painting of Miniatures and Painting in Water and Oil Colors."¹¹

In 1856, after a time of absence from the records, Shaver reappeared in Rogersville upon his wife's death. This tragic event, prompts him to send his young children to live with their grandmother, Mary Rutledge Powell, in Jerseyville, Illinois. Shaver focused heavily on his work after his wife's death but must have kept the well being of his children at the forefront as well. While his son, George Powell, remained with his grandmother, two of his daughters, Annis P. and Mattie were members of the preparatory class of the Rogersville Female Institute in 1859.¹² Later all three of his daughters, Annis, Mattie, and Mollie, attended Salem Female Academy in Salem, North Carolina in the early 1860's.¹³

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ White, Betsy K. *Great Road Style The Decorative Arts Legacy of southwest Virginia and Northeast Tennessee*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2006, 16-17.

⁷ Barnett, Kay Clemens. "The Samuel Shaver Portrait Puzzle." *The Courier*. XXXII. no. 3 1994, 4-6.

⁸ McBride, Robert M., and Dan M. Robison. *Biographical Directory of the Tennessee General Assembly*. Nashville: The Tennessee State Library and Archives and the Tennessee Historical Commission, 1975, 598.

⁹ Young, *Art & Furniture of East Tennessee*, 63-64.

¹⁰ Bishop, Budd H. "Three Tennessee painters: Samuel M. Shaver, Washington B. Cooper, and James Cameron." *The Magazine Antiques*, September 1971, 432-434.

¹¹ Price, Prentiss. "Samuel Shaver: Portrait Painter." East Tennessee Historical Society, 1952, 92.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ DigitalNC Library . "Catalogue of the Teachers and Scholars of Salem Female Academy, Salem, NC during the Scholastic Year from July 1862 to June 1863."

This time of solitude allowed Shaver to refocus his efforts. His later portraits incorporated a more European formal style. His interpretation of this style included detailed backgrounds featuring architecture, classical elements, and landscapes; much more demanding than his earlier compositions. Patrons of prominence preferred this style which reflected their success and social standing.¹⁴ His portraits of Susan Penniman Dickinson (with the Dickinson home on Main Street in the background); Martha Findley Mitchell Hampton (with the proposed Rogersville Women's Synodical College over her left shoulder); and John Roper Branner (whose portrait includes a train representing the East Tennessee & Virginia Railroad of which he was president as well as the Branner home "The Maples") are all examples of Shaver's more ambitious landscapes. These portraits are also all three quarters to full length, a format that dominated Shaver's later work. This style defines the second half Shaver's career. Of the one hundred or so known Shaver paintings approximately one-quarter of them include these valuable glimpses of past places and landscapes.

In 1859 Shaver moved to Knoxville where he established a studio on Gay Street between Church and Cumberland streets.¹⁵ This confirmed him as Knoxville's first artist in residence and great demand for his portraits followed. In an effort to build his business, Shaver advertised that he could copy photographs and daguerreotypes and supplemented his income by painting masonic aprons.¹⁶ In the years that followed, Shaver became the most noteworthy and productive antebellum painter in East Tennessee.¹⁷

Shaver was one of the organizers of the East Tennessee Art Association in the early 1860's. On the surface this was a cultural organization but in actuality it was an early example of a Confederate heritage group. The group delegated Shaver to paint portraits of Confederate President Jefferson Davis and fourteen other prominent Confederate politicians and generals.¹⁸ It is not known whether Shaver completed this commission since only one portrait, that of Major General E. Kirby Smith, is known today. The association met at Patton's Dry Goods Store on Gay Street until the end of 1862 as Knoxville was on the verge of falling to Union troops. With the occupation of Knoxville, some artist and businessmen left the city while others, including Shaver, chose to stay. He continued to work in Knoxville through the Civil War even placing advertisements in the local daily paper.¹⁹

One especially intriguing Shaver painting, is a group portrait, "The Powell Boys" in the collection of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) (fig. 2). An imposing

<http://library.digitalnc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/yearbooks/id/5198/rec/56>.

¹⁴ Masler, Marilyn. "Painting in Nineteenth-Century Tennessee," in *A History of Tennessee Arts*, edited by Carroll Van West, 79-97. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2004, 79-98.

¹⁵ Mitchell, John L., ed. *John L. Mitchell's Tennessee State Gazetteer and Business Directory 1860-61*. Vol. 1. Nashville: John L. Mitchell, 1860, 104.

¹⁶ Kelly, James C. "Portrait Painting in Tennessee," 198-235.

¹⁷ Young, Art & Furniture of East Tennessee, 63-64.

¹⁸ Price, Prentiss. "Samuel Shaver: Portrait Painter." East Tennessee Historical Society, 1952, 92.

¹⁹ Bishop, Budd H. "Three Tennessee painters: Samuel M. Shaver, Washington B. Cooper, and James Cameron," 432-434.

painting measuring 5' 7" square it dates to approximately 1860. Typical of Shaver's later style, it includes a full length view of the boys and a very ambitious background. The subjects in the painting are the four sons of Thomas J. Powell who according to the 1860 Tennessee census are John age 11, Kyle age 8, Walter age 7 and Thomas age 3. The buildings in the background include a tannery as well as buildings that constitute the early campus of the University of Tennessee.

What do we know about this Powell family? Thomas Jefferson Powell was born about 1825 in Virginia. According to Tennessee marriage records he married Margaret L. Drake on August 5, 1845. Within five years their son John was born followed by brothers Kyle, Walter and Thomas. Powell established a dry goods business in Knoxville with his shop on Gay Street between Church and Clinch Streets, just one block from Shaver's studio.



Fig. 2: Shaver's painting of the Powell Boys hangs in the Catawba Gallery of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts at Old Salem. Photography by Wes Stewart.

Advertisements for his business there can be seen regularly in "Brownlow's Weekly Whig" where he offers a new assortment of dry goods, crockery, queensware, and hardware. Powell does "more than \$40,000.00 worth of business with Confederate purchasing agents prior to the arrival of Union forces" in 1863.²⁰ In addition to running his shop, he was a director in the Bank of Tennessee²¹ and he served as Knoxville's mayor briefly between August 1857 to January 1858. During roughly the same time, John J. Craig of Florence, Alabama built a magnificent Italianate home overlooking the north shore of the Tennessee River which he named "Lucknow". The house was situated in an area known as "The Hill" where the campus of Blount College was located; this school later became the University of Tennessee. Powell owned the property from 1862-1865 which was described as "-a mansion by Knoxville standards, complete with marble fireplaces and a spiral staircase-".²² He was temporarily removed from the house when two companies of the Thirty-sixth Massachusetts moved in and began to knock loopholes into the outer walls. With the certainty of Union control apparent, he left Knoxville for a temporary stay in Cincinnati.

²⁰ McKenzie, Robert Tracy. *Lincolnites and Rebels A Divided Town in the Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 178-79.

²¹ Mitchell, John L., ed. *John L. Mitchell's Tennessee State Gazetteer and Business Directory 1860-61*, 97.

²² McKenzie, Robert Tracy. *Lincolnites and Rebels A Divided Town in the Civil War*, 164.

After the war, his personal aversion to East Tennessee brought a final decision to move permanently to New York City.²³



Fig. 3: Advertisement for Powell's Dry Goods Business, *Brownlow's Weekly Whig*, August 3, 1861

Shaver's painting of Thomas Powell's sons provides an interpretation of the landscape of Knoxville prior to the Civil War. By 1830 there were five tanyards in Knoxville.²⁴ An early enterprise noted by French botanist François Michaux as he passed through Knoxville in 1802 observing that "this little town has not yet any kind of establishment or manufactory, except some tanneries."²⁵ The tannery in the painting on Second Creek was probably operated by Rutherford & White; it's very existence confirmed the long history of bark and leather processing in the city. The buildings in the far right background were on the campus of Blount College which became the University of Tennessee in 1879. "The Hill", as this area was known, had long been a symbol of higher education in the state. Blount College was established on land that had been surveyed by Charles McClung in 1792. James White hired McClung to do the work and ultimately sold three of the 64 lots established by the survey to the trustees of the college. One of the early buildings on the campus was "Lucknow" the Italianate home built by Craig which would become the home of Powell and his sons during a portion of the Civil War. The irony of this scene is that the tannery and the college

buildings represent not only landmarks but the political climate of pre-war Knoxville (fig. 4). More directly the struggle between Jacksonian Democrats, so represented in Knoxville by Andrew Johnson, and the Whig Party initially assembled by Kentucky native Henry Clay, and led in Knoxville by W. G."Parson" Brownlow. The new Democratic party sought to protect the rights of it's constituents against any unfair benefit that the "American System" of Clay's party might introduce to the privileged or wealthy elite. It was the party of the farmer, the laborer and the mechanic.²⁶ We see this ordinary man manifest in the image of the tannery; a long time trade in the backcountry. The Whigs on the other hand, preferred a government that would encourage economic growth through a national bank, federal aid

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Mellen, Ph. D., George F., and J. Woolridge. *Standard History of Knoxville, Tennessee*. Edited by William Rule. Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1900, 194-225.

²⁵ Michaux, François Andre. *1805 Travels to the Westward of the Allegheny Mountains*. Translated by B. Crosby and J. F. Hughes. J. Mawman, London, 89.

²⁶ Atkins, Jonathan M. "Jacksonians," *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History & Culture*, ed. Carroll Van West, Connie L. Lester, Margaret Duncan Binnicker, Anne-Leslie Owens, Susan L. Gordon (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 474-476.

to fund construction of internal improvements, and a program of modernization.²⁷ The college buildings including what would become Powell's home represent this modernization - using education to further the cause.

Does Shaver's composition, which places the sons of a wealthy merchant in a "gritty" part of town where ordinary people labor instead of by the Tennessee River that flows near their future home, speak to his own beliefs or is he simply telling a story? A story of the common men of the Second Creek area representing the past, placed in juxtaposition to "The Hill" which had long been symbolic of higher education and thus the future.²⁸ Does his use of the tannery in this painting hint at his allegiance to Jackson's philosophies? His affiliation with the East Tennessee Art Association would indicate that this is the case. Shaver was a Confederate who continued to live and work in Knoxville through the Civil War. His patron, Thomas Powell, was arrested by Major General E. Kirby Smith in late 1861. The arrest was the result of a visit he made to William Gannaway "Parson" Brownlow who was a controversial figure in East Tennessee during the period. Brownlow, was the editor of the Knoxville Whig, a newspaper known for its pro-union, pro-whig, and anti secession stances. The account was recorded in a letter written by the "Parson's" son John B. Brownlow.²⁹ Powell who had been a friend of Brownlow for some 25 years offered him money to help support his family while he was imprisoned. This caused Powell's loyalty to the south to be questioned and resulted in the arrest. Powell sends for his longtime friend and brother-in-law Landon Carter Haynes who speaks to Smith on his behalf. Powell was "taken before Smith who said to him: 'You are fortunate, Sir, in having Col. Haynes for a friend, for but for his indorsement [sic] of you as a good Southern man I should have sent you to ____.'"³⁰ and here the letter becomes illegible. It is interesting to note that the



Fig. 4: Detail of Tannery and Early Buildings of Blount College

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ University of Tennessee Knoxville, "Tennessee Traditions." Last modified 2012. Accessed September 4, 2012. <http://www.utk.edu/aboutut/traditions.shtml>.

²⁹ Brownlow, John B. John B. Brownlow to Oliver Perry Temple, 8 February 1892. In *The O.P. Temple Papers, 1832-1909*, University of Tennessee Special collections Library. <http://idserver.utk.edu/?id=20080000003478>

³⁰ Ibid.

arresting officer, Major General E. Kirby Smith, was the only Confederate that Shaver ever painted for the East Tennessee Art Association.

In conclusion, Samuel M. Shaver was commissioned to paint a portrait of the sons of Thomas J. Powell. In that portrait he included the subjects, as well as the University of Tennessee, Second Creek, and a tanyard. The painting provided a lasting image of the young Powell boys while imprinting Shaver's own beliefs by the addition of specific landmarks in the background. Political views caused the paths of these men to cross when Shaver was delegated by the East Tennessee Art Association to paint a portrait of Major General E. Kirby Smith who ultimately had Powell arrested, questioning his allegiance to the South. Both men appear to be pro-Confederate, but Shaver was a democrat and Powell appears to have been a Whig. Both had businesses on Gay Street in Knoxville and both advertised in Brownlow's newspaper. Their personal lives as well as their public and political associations represent the complexities of politics, economic and geographical development in Knoxville. At the time the portrait was painted the Powell's had no attachment either to "Lucknow" the house on the campus of the university or to the tannery located along Second Creek. The fact that Shaver has chosen to use the canvas as a sounding board to proclaim his beliefs becomes evident. As a result, his poignant painting of "The Powell Boys" provides a perfect barometer of the politics of the developing city of Knoxville.

Samuel Shaver spent most of his adult life as a portrait painter in East Tennessee. It is believed by some that he may have worked in North Carolina. In 1868 Shaver joined his family in Jerseyville, Illinois and continued painting at the gallery of R.C. Gledhill. An article from the Jersey County Democrat dated December 4, 1869 states: "Mr. G. has secured the services of Mr. S. M. Shaver, a portrait and landscape painter of no mean repute, and such has been the success of the gallery that Mr. Shaver's whole time is occupied in painting portraits upon canvas...Of course every feature and every expression of the features is perfect, it cannot be otherwise, and when completed, a portrait is the result, which will be handed down from one generation to another as an heir-loom [sic] - a priceless treasure." What prophetic words! Many of Shaver's Tennessee heirlooms are known; however, there are still other "priceless treasures" from Tennessee, Illinois, and possibly North Carolina to be discovered.