

John Neagle Papers
1817-1865
Mss.B.N125.p

American Philosophical Society
2002
105 South Fifth Street
Philadelphia, PA, 19106
215-440-3400
manuscripts@amphilsoc.org

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Summary Information

Repository	American Philosophical Society
Creator	Neagle, John, 1796-1865
Title	John Neagle Papers
Date [inclusive]	1817-1865
Call number	Mss.B.N125.p
Extent	0.5 Linear feet
Location	LH-MV-C-14; LH-MV-E-3 (Bound volumes)
Language	English
Abstract	<p>John Neagle was among the better known portrait painters in Philadelphia during the first half of the nineteenth century and was the husband of Thomas Sully's niece, Mary C. Sully.</p> <p>The Neagle Papers is a small assemblage of personal correspondence, documents, and notes assembled by Neagle during his career. The letters are primarily of a personal nature, but along with the five bound volumes, offer insight into Neagle's study of painting and the techniques he employed. Included among the bound volumes are recipes for varnish, megellup, and drying oils and notes on watercolor painting.</p>
Preferred Citation	Cite as: John Neagle Papers, American Philosophical Society.

Background note

Like Benjamin Franklin before him, John Neagle was a Bostonian by birth and a Philadelphian by nature. One of Philadelphia's better known portrait painters during the first half of the nineteenth century and a promoter of the fine arts, Neagle was born into a family of middling means in 1796. After his father, Maurice, an Irish immigrant, died in 1800, John was raised in Philadelphia. In his autobiography, Neagle describes becoming obsessed with drawing at an early age, despite little family encouragement.

While serving as an apprentice to the "coach and ornamental painter," Thomas Wilson, Neagle began to explore the possibility of painting as a career. Through Wilson, Neagle was introduced to the portrait painter Bass Otis, whose work, he wrote, "set me on fire." After two months study with Otis, and committed research on his own, Neagle committed himself to becoming a portrait painter.

Having earned praise for his ambition and the quality of his work, Neagle turned away from coach painting and at the end of his apprenticeship in 1818, he struck out for Lexington, Kentucky, in the hopes of establishing himself in business. Finding that another painter, Matthew Harris Jouett, was already well entrenched there, Neagle moved to New Orleans, where he was again thwarted by the competition, before returning to Philadelphia.

In his home city, Neagle's career slowly began to develop. Exhibiting at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts from 1821 on, and becoming the protege of Thomas Sully by 1824, Neagle continued his studies. In 1825, he traveled to Boston to study with Gilbert Stuart for a year, returning to Philadelphia to marry Mary Chester Sully, Sully's niece and stepdaughter.

Over the next decade, Neagle worked in both New York and Philadelphia, producing his best known works, including *Pat Lyon at the Forge* and his portrait of the physician, William Potts Dewees (1833). In 1842, he was commissioned to paint his last great work, the massive portrait of Henry Clay that now hangs in the Union League of Philadelphia.

Neagle's artistic output began to wane following the death of his wife in 1845, and he began gradually to withdraw from public life. In the late 1850s, he suffered a severe stroke which left him partially paralyzed. He died at home in Philadelphia on September 17, 1865.

Scope & content

The Neagle Papers contains less than 0.25 linear feet of personal letters and documents and five notebooks relating to the life and work of the painter, John Neagle. The letters to his wife and children are affectionate, intimate, and generally relate strictly to personal or family matters, such as planning vacations or excursions. There are membership certificates in the Masonic Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania and a share in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

Several letters, however, provide glimpses into Neagle's work, including a letter from Kentucky, March 18, 1843, notifying Levi Dickson that he had completed his portrait of Henry Clay (now in the Union League), and letter written to Sully in 1838, congratulating him on winning a commission to paint Queen Victoria. In this letter, Neagle writes:

The bound volumes offer valuable insights into Neagle's artistic techniques. The volumes include recipes for megellup, varnishes, and drying oils, instructions for cleaning and restoring works of art, notes on watercolor and landscape techniques employed by John Varley, Thomas Sully, and others, and Neagle's "Hints for a painter with regard to his method of study."

Administrative Information

Publication Information

American Philosophical Society 2002

Provenance

Acquisition Information

Series II was acquired in 1959; Series I was purchased at Sotheby's, 1985.

Processing Information

Recatalogued by rsc, 2002.

Alternative Form Available

Series II is available on microfilm (Film 1388)

Related Materials

Related Material

Additional Neagle Papers are located at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania ([Collection2112](#),), which also houses Neagle's commonplace book ([Collection448](#))

Indexing Terms

Corporate Name(s)

- Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

Family Name(s)

- Neagle family
- Sully family

Genre(s)

- Art
- Autobiographies.
- Autobiography
- Family Correspondence
- General Correspondence
- Manuscript Essays
- Notebooks
- Recipes
- Sketchbooks
- Valentines
- Watercolor paintings

Personal Name(s)

- Neagle, Mary Chester Sully
- Sully, Thomas, 1783-1872
- Varley, John, 1778-1842

Subject(s)

- Artists' materials
- Artists--Pennsylvania
- Landscape painting
- Literature, Arts, and Culture
- Painting--Study and teaching
- Whist

Other Descriptive Information

The John Neagle Papers provides a window into the world and the work of this nineteenth century portrait painter. The collection contains many insights on how Neagle approached his craft. It begins with an interesting notebook he kept on the history of painting. This volume is dated 1817. It traces the history of art from Etruria to the present. He discusses renaissance artists in some depth, such as Michelangelo and Raphael. He also discusses modern artistic training, mentioning the types of study done in Rome

and France. Other notebooks contain essays Neagle wrote on art and artists, such as “hints for a painter.” His notebook “Lessons on Landscape Painting” include a few watercolors that appear to be copies of landscape work done by Thomas Sully.

The letters in the collection often deal with Neagle and his family. It also contains a Valentine’s Day poem sent to him, a lease that Neagle took out from Matthew Carey for his house on Walnut St., and various broadsides and stock certificates.

Finally, the collection contains what appears to be an autobiographical “sketch” written by Neagle in the 1850s and one small sketch of “Jim Brown” from 1861.

Bibliography

Torchia, Robert, *John Neagle: Philadelphia Portrait Painter* (Philadelphia: HSP, 1989). **Call no.:** B N25t

Series I. Correspondence and notes

Collection Inventory

Series I. Correspondence and notes	1817-1865	37 items; 0.25 linear feet	(B N125p)
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 History of Painting (notebook)	1817 May 30	51p.	Box 1
Fragmentary notes written at age 19, based on reading on the lives of Raphael, Michaelangelo, the Carraccis, Titian, Rubens, LeBrun, and Reynolds.			
Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania Membership certificate in Freemasons	1818 May 6		Box 1
Carey, Matthew ADS lease to John Neagle and George Catlin	1822 October 21		Box 1
Lease of house at 116 Walnut Street to Neagle and Catlin for one year. "The said Neagle & Catlin hereby pledge themselves to keep the house in good order."			
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 ALS to Mary C. Sully	1825 August 3		Box 1
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 ALS to Moggy,(i.e Mary C. Sully)	1825 December 10		Box 1
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 Journal (fragments)	1826 May 26-1832 August 14	7p.	Box 1
The remainder of the journal is located in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, filed with the "Blotter Book."			
Ennis, Susan ALS to John Neagle	1826 August 1826		Box 1

Series I. Correspondence and notes

Neagle, Alfred ALS to John Neagle	1826?	Box 1
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 ALS to Thomas Sully	1838 February 6	Box 1
Written on back of a printed prospectus, "John Neagle Proposes to Publish, By Subscription, A Series of Well Engraved Portraits of the Medical Professors of the University of Pennsylvania, From original Paintings, To Be Executed By Himself, Expressly for the Work."		
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 ALS to Blanch Sully	1838 June 23	Box 1
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 ALS to Levi Dickson	1843 March 18	Box 1
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 ALS to "children"	1844 August	Box 1
Tiers, Arundius ALS to John Neagle	1846 April 21	Box 1
E.C. AL to John Neagle	1850 February 14	Box 1
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Stock Certificate	1850 May 29	Box 1
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 ALS to "children"	1850 August 9	Box 1
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 ALS to "children"	1850 August 13	Box 1
Sully, Mary C. ALS to Sally Sully	1850 August 19	Box 1
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 ALS to Bettie and Sallie Neagle	1850 August 19	Box 1

Series I. Correspondence and notes

Neagle, John, 1796-1865 Manuscript sketches of my career as an artist	1850?	7p.	Box 1
Account of an Annuity settled by the late Levi Taylor	1852 July 14		Box 1
Memorandum of the illness and death of Margaret Dickson Neagle (called "Moggie"), daughter of John Neagle, Artist, & Mary Chester Sully	1853 June 26	3p.	Box 1
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 ALS to "children"	1855 August 3		Box 1
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 ALS to "children"	1855 August 4		Box 1
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 ALS to Susan Neagle?	1859 April 25		Box 1
Envelope--G. Robertson to John Neagle	1859 September 8		Box 1
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 ALS to Mary Neagle	1861 April 2		Box 1
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 Sketch of Jim Brown Pencil sketch on back of small envelope	1861		Box 1
Moore, David P. DS Invoice for funeral of John Neagle	1865 September 17		Box 1
Envelope--John Neagle to Elizabeth I. Neagle and sisters	n.d.		Box 1
Carey, Henry C. ALS to John Neagle	n.d.		Box 1

Series I. Correspondence and notes

Neagle, John, 1796-1865 Clipped signatures	n.d.		Box 1
Neagle family genealogical material	n.d.		Box 1
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 ALS to unidentified recipient	n.d.		Box 1
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 Thomas Sully's advice about cleaning, varnishing, and restoring paintings Includes notes on Sully's techniques, palette.	n.d.	5p.	Box 1
Sully family genealogical material	n.d.	6p.	Box 1
Sully family list of births, deaths and marriages	n.d.		Box 1

Series II. Bound volumes

Series II. Bound volumes	1825-1850	5 vols.	(B N125)
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 On Whist	1850		Volume 1
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 Receipts for making Megellup, Varnish, & Drying Oil; also for cleaning pictures . . .	1825		Volume 2
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 Hints for a painter with regard to his Method of Study, etc.	n.d.		Volume 3
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 [On artists and works of art]	1826		Volume 4
Neagle, John, 1796-1865 Lessons on Landscape painting . . . Illustrated with copies from Sully's copies, Varley and others	1827	27p.	Volume 5
Includes samples of watercolor paints, copies of landscapes by John Varley, and extensive notes on the watercolor techniques employed by Varley, Sully, Titian, Rubens, and others. "Presented by J. Neagle to his daughter Elizabeth J. Neagle, Augt. 1842"			