



Michael's Museum

FEATURING ANTIQUE MINIATURE PORTRAITS
OF THE TORMEY-HOLDER COLLECTION

FEATURED ARTIST: GEORGE W. NEWCOMBE (1799-1845)

by Michael I. Tormey
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Miniature portraits by English immigrant George W. Newcombe are represented in the Smithsonian American Art Museum and several important private collections, but fine examples of his work rarely come to market. It would seem that he was not as prolific a painter as many of his peers, despite being a well-exhibited academician who was well respected in mid-nineteenth century New York art circles and society in general. Interestingly, too, little research has been published about Newcombe, leading even the Smithsonian to state that "little is known about George Newcombe's life and career."¹ A review of nineteenth century newspapers, periodicals and genealogical records, however, reveals much about the artist's life and work.

By way of an informative article published in the *Anglo-American* journal two weeks after Newcombe's death in 1845, we learn that he was born in Portsmouth, Hampshire, England on September 28, 1799.² A deep dive into genealogical records of Georgian era Portsmouth, however, has thus far revealed no official record of Newcombe's birth, nor of his parentage and family background.

We further learn from the *Anglo-American* that Newcombe received his primary education in Portsmouth, at a private school run by a French scholar, after which, from the age of 14, he studied drawing and miniature painting under an artist by the name of West (believed to have been William West; ca. 1793-1861.)³ He is also said to have, a few years later, studied in Brighton, under a miniature painter by the name of Frith (identity unknown), after which, in 1822, at the age of 23, he went to London where he applied to study at the Royal Academy of Arts.⁴



Figure 1:

**Jacksonian Era Gentleman
Painted in New York City**

Dated 1838

By George W. Newcombe

*(signed obverse, left edge, "Newcombe";
additionally signed on backing paper to the reverse,
"G. W. Newcombe / 297½ B'way / New York / 1838")*

*watercolor on ivory; housed under glass in a
gilt copper case with a cast foliate border and bail*

1 7/8 x 2 3/8 inches (sight)

Tormey-Holder Collection

Newcombe's skill was deemed worthy enough that he was readily accepted to study at the Royal Academy, but by his own admission later in life, he never fully availed himself of all the Academy had to offer, only having taken two courses there on anatomical drawing and painting techniques.⁵ This might explain why he never reached the pinnacle of fine portraiture that many of his peers did. (Yes, he was a skilled draftsman who was quite effective in rendering recognizable facial features and capturing the character of his subjects, but his miniatures are simply not as refined and "polished" as they might have been had he sought greater instruction in his youth.)

Rather than pursuing additional studies at the Royal Academy, it appears that Newcombe instead sought opportunities to earn a living sooner rather than later. Thus, after only spending a year in London, he embarked on a period of itinerant travel in search of painting commissions throughout England, Scotland and Ireland.⁶ Perhaps with a desire to prove himself to the Royal Academy, however, he returned to London in 1825, where he remained for four years. There, he successfully exhibited works at the Academy in the years 1825-1828.⁷ (See fig. 2.)

It was while living in London that Newcombe met and fell in love with a young tobacconist by the name of Jane Charlotte Manby (1798-1859). She ran a successful shop on Goswel Street, where she sold various tobacco and snuff products.^{8, 9} The two were married on September 16, 1827, at St. John's Church in Clerkenwell, central London.¹⁰ Parish records state that, at the time of the marriage, George was a bachelor (never previously married) and Jane was a widow.¹¹ That Jane was truly a widow, however, is in doubt, as there is no record of her having been previously married. She was, however, a mother, having borne a son, Frederick, who was eight years old at the time of his mother's marriage to George Newcombe.

Examining records of Frederick's birth and baptism, one learns that he was born "illegitimately" (i.e., his parents weren't married).¹² At the time of Frederick's baptism, his father was clearly identified as one George Hayward, a bank clerk by profession, residing on St. James Street in London.¹³ Beyond this reference, however, it has been difficult to pinpoint George Hayward's origins, his supposed death or whether or not he did at some point eventually marry Jane Charlotte Manby. It is known, nonetheless, that George Newcombe readily accepted Frederick as his own son and gave him the Newcombe name – he having for the rest of his life thereafter been known as Frederick Hayward Manby Newcombe (specifically in that order).

It is suggested that, at an American friend's urging, Newcombe decided to visit America in search of better opportunities to earn a living painting.¹⁴ Newcombe did indeed travel to America, but as fate would have it, this visit became a permanent move. Records show that he, his young bride Jane and his stepson Frederick were among 25 passengers who arrived from London to New York on January 16, 1829, having sailed aboard a

NEWCOMBE, G.		Miniature Painter.	
		8, <i>Soho Square</i> .	
1825.	696	Portrait of an officer.	
1826.	703	do. a lady.	
		322, <i>Oxford Street</i> .	
1827.	738	Miss Brooke of Norwood.	
		68, <i>Cheapside</i> .	
1828.	805	Lady in an old costume.	
	823	Mrs. Cotterill.	

Figure 2:

*Excerpt from Algernon Graves 1905 work, outlining Newcombe's exhibition record at the Royal Academy of Arts.**

[* Graves. Algernon (1905). *The Royal Academy of Arts; a Complete Dictionary of Contributors and Their Work from its Foundation in 1769 to 1904*, H. Graves & Co., London, England, page 351.]

It is noteworthy that Newcombe only exhibited one or two miniatures in each of the four years – in contrast to many other miniature painters of the period who exhibited multiple works each year, and in contrast to his own later exhibition record in New York (see Addendum).

small ship named *Columbia*.¹⁵

A review of the 1829 New York city directory reveals that the Newcombes settled in the commercial district of southernmost Manhattan, initially setting up home at 175 Broadway, and that George Newcombe immediately promoted himself as being a miniature painter.¹⁶ The family remained on Broadway for many years, moving from 175 Broadway to 251 Broadway in early 1830, and then to 297½ Broadway in the fall of 1830, where they would remain for the next 11 years.¹⁷



Figure 3:

A view of Broadway, New York, as it would have appeared during the time the Newcombes lived and worked there.

("Broadway, New-York. Shewing [sic.] Each Building from the Hygeian [sic.] Depot Corner of Canal Street to beyond Niblo's Garden" (engraved print colored with aquatint). Drawn and etched by Thomas Horner, aquatinted by John William Hill, published in 1836 by Joseph Stanley & Co., New York, New York.)

Newcombe wasted no time in connecting with other artists in New York and exhibiting his work. Records show that, in May 1829, he exhibited several miniature portraits at the 1829 exhibition of the National Academy of Design, a practice he continued annually thereafter.¹⁸ (See Addendum.) He was admitted as an Associate Member of the Academy in 1832,¹⁹ and was an active participant in Academy affairs for the remainder of his life.

Artists were not able to apply for membership to the Academy. Rather, they had to be elected by their peers on the basis of recognized excellence. It is wondered if Newcombe might have been nominated for membership by Thomas Seir Cummings, a fellow miniature portrait painter and a senior member of the Academy since 1826.²⁰ Newcombe and Cummings (he too having been an English immigrant to America) are known to have shared a close association, as evidenced by numerous references. The two were active together on various committees of the National Academy of Design; Cummings served as a character witness when Newcombe was naturalized as a U.S. citizen; and in his Last Will and Testament, Newcombe referred to Cummings as his friend and asked him to serve as a guardian of his step-son Frederick, should he have passed before Frederick reached the age of 21. The two even served together for a period in the volunteer New York State militia, specifically the Second Regiment (Washington Guards) of the New York State Light Infantry, in which Newcombe rose to the rank of major in 1837,²¹ and Cummings rose to the rank of brigadier general in 1838.²²

While Newcombe set about seeking painting commissions from wealthy New Yorkers, his wife Jane set up shop as a tobacconist, just as she had done in London. She advertised in November 1830 that she had opened a store at their home of 297½ Broadway.²³ (See fig. 5.) (It is assumed that the ground floor served as both Jane's tobacco store and Newcombe's painting studio, while their living quarters were upstairs, as would have been typical in early nineteenth century New York.) Jane continued in this profession for the remaining 29 years of her life.

George Newcombe, meanwhile, remained active in both art and social circles of New York,²⁴ advertised regularly in New York City newspapers and exhibited a total of 40 works at the National Academy of Design over a period of 15 years.²⁵ One imagines that he fully intended to participate in the exhibition of 1845, held from April 17th of that year, but Newcombe's time on earth was cut short two months prior.

In numerous obituaries and tributes, it was reported

REMOVAL.—GEORGE NEWCOMBE, Miniature Painter, respectfully informs his friends and the public he has removed to No. 297½ Broadway, he hopes from the excellence of his likenesses and fine style of painting, to merit a continuance of public support. n12

Figure 4:

An example of Newcombe's advertisements during his early years in New York City. He published this particular ad in 1830 and 1831, informing potential customers of his location at 297½ Broadway.

[Removal – George Newcombe (newspaper advertisement), published in the *Mourning Courier and New-York Enquirer*, New York, New York, May 26, 1831 edition, Vol. VII, No 1251, page 1.]

MRS. GEORGE NEWCOMBE begs respectfully to inform the public, she has opened the Store 297½ Broadway, (between Reid and Duane streets,) for the sale of Foreign Fancy Snuffs and Cigars. She hopes from her experience of the business in London, and having for sale none but the best articles imported, to merit a liberal share of public support. She solicits the public to make trial of her Tabar de etriune, French Carrot, Beuro, Latéka, Violet Strsburg, Princes Mixture, and other Snuffs, so justly held in high estimation in Europe. Fine plain Snuffs, Tobaccos, &c. &c. for sale. n11

Figure 5:

Newspaper advertisement announcing Jane Charlotte Newcombe's newly opened tobacco and snuff store in New York City.

[Mrs. George Newcombe (newspaper advertisement), published in the *Mourning Courier and New-York Enquirer*, New York, New York, November 26, 1831 edition, Vol. VII, No 1101, page 1.]

GEORGE W. NEWCOMBE,
MINIATURE PAINTER,
381 BROADWAY,
NORTH WEST CORNER OF WHITE STREET.
Strangers visiting the city are respectfully invited to call and examine the specimens at the subscriber's rooms. a22 1m*r

Figure 6:

An example of Newcombe's later advertisements, this having been published in 1843. During this period, he maintained a studio outside his home, located at 381 Broadway.

[George W. Newcombe Miniature Painter (newspaper advertisement), published April through May, 1843 in the *New York Daily Herald*, New York, New York, April 22, 1843 edition, Vol. IX, No 109, page 3.]

that he died on February 9, 1845, at the age of 46, having suffered a sudden and catastrophic stroke (commonly referred to as apoplexy at the time). It is said that, by all appearances, he had been in great health and cheerful spirits. Early on the day of his death, he visited the homes of artist friends Thomas Seir Cummings, Charles Cromwell Ingham and John Gadsby Chapman. Later in the day, at about 5:00 in the evening, while enjoying a pleasant conversation with his wife at home, he fell suddenly from his chair. As was reported in the *Anglo-American*, “he scarcely lived two minutes from the commencement of the attack to its fatal termination, and uttered not a syllable to those who anxiously called on him for a last lingering word.”²⁶

News of Newcombe’s death was reported by Thomas Seir Cummings to the membership of the National Academy of Design. The Academy passed resolutions of condolences to the Newcombe family and fellow academicians wore in his honor mourning badges of black crape on their left arms for 30 days.²⁷

DEATH OF AN ARTIST.—George W. Newcombe, of New York, a miniature painter of considerable merit, died very suddenly on the 9th inst. from a stroke of apoplexy. He was sitting in his house and conversing cheerfully with his wife, when he stopped, fell from his chair, and in three minutes was a corpse. He was in his forty-seventh year, a native of England, and highly esteemed by a large circle of friends.—How true is it that “in the midst of life we are in death.”

The Academy of Design will pay the usual honors to his memory.

Figure 7:

1845 newspaper obituary reporting the death of George W. Newcombe.

[*Death of an Artist* (newspaper obituary), published in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, New York, New York, February 11, 1845 edition, Vol. 3, No. 39, page 2.]

Newcombe was buried at St. John’s Burial Ground, a cemetery connected with St. John’s Chapel (Episcopal; long since demolished), located at Hudson and Leroy Streets, in New York’s Greenwich Village.²⁸ Sadly, his gravesite has been lost to time, as the old burial grounds no longer exist. After a century of use and shadowed by a city encroaching from all sides, the cemetery fell into disrepair and was converted into a public park in 1897 (it is today known as the James J. Walker Park). Of the approximately 10,000 gravesites that existed in the cemetery, only about 250 were relocated elsewhere. The rest have faded into anonymity, covered under a layer of grass and gardens.

Eight years prior to his death, Newcombe executed a Last Will and Testament (witnessed by his friend Thomas Seir Cummings), through which he provided handsomely for his family. He named his wife Jane as his executrix and to her he left all his physical and financial assets, including an estate and farmland in the hamlet of Balmville, located about 68 miles north of Manhattan, as well as his interest in the estates of an Elizabeth Gill and Sarah Birdseye (presumably aunts) of Islington, back in London. To his stepson, Frederick Hayward Manby Newcombe, who was 26 years old at the time of his stepfather’s death, he left his watch, wearing apparel, books, musical instruments and paintings.²⁹

Entries in New York city directories reveal that, after Newcombe’s death, his wife Jane remained active in the business of selling tobacco, cigars, snuff and other tobacco-related products. In 1854, her son Frederick joined her in the business, and they operated under the name Jane C. Newcombe & Son until her death in 1859 (some 14 years after her late husband’s death). Newspaper obituaries reveal that she died on June 7, 1859, at the age of 61, having suffered a lingering illness.³⁰ She was buried at Green-Wood Cemetery, in Brooklyn, in a family plot purchased by her son, where he and other family members were also ultimately buried.

Artist George W. Newcombe had no biological children of his own. Having given his adopted stepson the Newcombe name, however, his spirit of generosity lives on in the many Newcombes who have descended from Frederick Hayward Manby Newcombe, who himself lived until 1889, having passed away in Morristown, New Jersey on March 13, 1889, at the age of 70.³¹

ADDENDUM: RECORD OF WORKS BY GEORGE W. NEWCOMBE EXHIBITED AT
THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF DESIGN, NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Extracts from the *National Academy of Design Exhibition Record, 1826-1869* [deemed public domain].

(*National Academy of Design Exhibition Record, 1826-1860*, published in 1943 by the New York Historical Society, New York, New York, Vol II (M-Z), pages 48-50.)

NEWCOMBE, George W. (1799-1845)

Associate Member of the Academy, 1832-1845.

1829 *Address:* 175 Broadway.

152. Miniature Portrait of Capt. John Cook, an Eccentric Character in Exeter, England.

158. The Industrious, a Miniature Sketch.

159. Miniature Portrait of a Lady, a Study.

171. Miniature Portrait of Mrs. Bower.

180. Miniature of a Lady, Very Small.

1830 *Address:* 175 Broadway.

80. One of the Stanley's, a Noted Tribe of Gipsies in England. Drawn on Stone.

90. Portrait of Master Harlow Hewett.

141. Frame with Two Miniature Portraits.

184. Drawing.

1831 *Address:* Broadway.

76. Studies.

83. Miniature of Mrs. Simpson, of London.

84. Lady in an English Hunting Dress, Old Costume.

110. Portrait of Mrs. Fox Bower.

1832 *Address:* 251 Broadway.

142. Portrait of a Young Mountaineer.*

153. Miniature Portrait.

154. Costume of 1750.

1833 *Address:* 251 Broadway.

168. Miniature of a Lady.

183. Miniature Portrait of an Officer.

185. Miniature Portrait of a Lady.

1834 *Address:* Not given.

148. Portrait of Mrs. Newcombe.

160. Frame of Miniatures.

165. Portrait of a Youth.

- 1835 *Address: 297½ Broadway.*
 104. Full Length Miniature Portrait of Miss St. Luke, as Apollo
 in Midas, song "Pray Goody, please to moderate."
 130. Miniature of a Gentleman.
 131. Miniature of a Lady.
- 1836 *Address: 297½ Broadway.*
 25. Portrait of a Lady.
- 1837 *Address: 297½ Broadway.*
 135. Miniature, Half Length of a Lady.
- 1838 *Address: 297½ Broadway.*
 127. Miniature of a Lady.
 152. S. P. Taylor, Organist of St. Paul's.
- 1839 *Address: 297½ Broadway.*
 147. Frame of Min[iature] Portraits,
 1. A Lady.
 2. Gustavus Schroeder, Esq., in an Old French Costume,
 16th Century.
 156. Full Length Min[iature] Portrait of Pierre O. Beebee, Esq.
- 1840 Member of the Committee of Arrangements. *Address: 297½ Broadway.*
 34. Frame of Miniatures.
 1. Portrait of a Foreign Missionary.
 2. Fred. M. Newcombe.
- 1841 *Address: 200 Broadway.*
 323. Portrait of S. B. Worth, Esq.
- 1842 *Address: at the store 297½ Broadway.*
 323. Portrait of Henry Getty.
 324. Portrait of a Lady. *S. A. Beckman.*
- 1844 *Address: No. 4 Wall Street.*
 297. Miniature of Thomas Gurnee, Esq.
 397. Miniature of a Lady.

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¹ Smithsonian American Art Museum webpage: <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/george-w-newcombe-3524>; accessed online, February 5, 2025.

² *George W. Newcombe* (biographical article), published in the *Department of the Fine Arts* section of the *Anglo-American* journal, published in New York, New York by E. L. Garvin & Co., February 22, 1845 edition, Vol. 4, No. 18, pages 427, 428. (The *Anglo-American* was a journal published weekly in New York City about politics, literature, theater and fine arts.)

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Graves. Algernon (1905). *The Royal Academy of Arts; a Complete Dictionary of Contributors and Their Work from its Foundation in 1769 to 1904*, H. Graves & Co., London, England, page 351.

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¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Baptisms Solemnized in the Parish of St. Andrew, Holborn, London, 1818-1820*, as found in *London, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813-1923*, page 100; published online in 2010 by Ancestry.com Operations, Lehi, Utah.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ *Anglo-American* journal, pages 427, 428.

¹⁵ *Passenger Manifest, District of New-York, Port of New-York, Ship Columbia, January 16, 1829*, as found in the *New York, U.S., Arriving Passenger and Crew Lists (including Castle Garden and Ellis Island), 1820-1957*, published online in 2010 by Ancestry.com Operations, Lehi, Utah.

¹⁶ *Longworth's American Almanac, New-York Register and City Directory*, published by Thomas Longworth, New York, New York, 1829, page 424.

¹⁷ As evidenced by entries in New York city directories for the years 1830 through 1845.

¹⁸ *National Academy of Design Exhibition Record, 1826-1860*, published in 1943 by the New York Historical Society, New York, New York, Vol II, pages 48-50.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., pages 104-108.

²¹ *Military* (newspaper article), as published in the *New-York Commercial Advertiser*, New York, New York, January 25, 1837 edition, Vol. XIX, page 2.

²² Bolton, Theodore (1921). *Early American Portrait Painters in Miniature*, Frederic Fairchild Sherman, New York, New York, page 31.

²³ *Mrs. George Newcombe begs respectfully to inform the public* (newspaper advertisement), published in the *Mourning Courier and New-York Enquirer*, New York, New York, November 26, 1830 edition, Vol. VII, No. 1101, page 1.

²⁴ Per the *Anglo-American* journal, in addition to having been a miniature portrait painter, George Newcombe was an accomplished musician, vocalist and composer. He is also known to have, for seven years, been a tenor singer in the choir of St. Paul's Chapel (Episcopal) on Broadway.

²⁵ *National Academy of Design Exhibition Record, 1826-1860*, published in 1943 by the New York Historical Society, New York, New York, Vol II, pages 48-50.

²⁶ *Anglo-American* journal, pages 427, 428.

²⁷ Cummings, Thomas Seir (1865). *Historic Annals of the National Academy of Design, New-York Drawing Association, etc., with Occasional Dottings by the Way-Side, from 1825 to the Present Time*, George W. Childs, New York, New York, page 185.

²⁸ *Anglo-American* journal, pages 427, 428.

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