

# Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin County Historian



Mrs. Eunice Spafford

Portrait photography by John Miller Documents

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## Face To Face 3-20-89

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This week's article deals with an exhibition of folk art paintings entitled "Face to Face" which is currently on display at the Strong Museum in Rochester through April 10. The exhibit includes more than 40 portraits by folk artists Milton William Hopkins (1789-1844) and Noah North (1809-1880), both of whom lived and painted in Albion in the early nineteenth century. "Face to Face" looks at the paintings from a historical and cultural viewpoint; its primary significance lies in its exploration of the unexpected socio-political connections between the artists, their contemporaries, and other models. Also on view is ornamental furniture, decorated objects, and daguerotypes by the artists.

Noah North became well known to folk art collectors in the late 1970s when research about his work was published in "The Magazine Antiques." Subsequently, paintings attributed to North were included in nearly every major folk art exhibition. However, in 1982, as plans for a comprehensive exhibition of North's work were being put into motion at the Museum of Our National Heritage in Lexington, Mass., a portrait nearly identical in style to the works of North but signed M.W. Hopkins was found. Additional research proved that at least half of the paintings recognized as being painted by North were actually painted by Hopkins.

Other evidence has led researchers to believe that North served an apprenticeship with Hopkins, therefore explaining their pronounced similarity of style. For instance, North's earliest dated portraits coincide with Hopkin's advertisement as a teacher of portrait painting at Albion in 1833. In addition, a male aged 20 to 30 is missing from the North family census in 1830, the same year that Hopkins household shows an additional male of the same age living with them.

Further investigation showed that in addition to creating two aesthetically and culturally important bodies of work, Hopkins and North were both directly involved with anti-Freemasonry, the temperance movement, and abolitionism in New York

state in the 1820s and 1830s. Sitters' biographies reveal that the subjects of North's and Hopkin's works were often active in those movements as well.

M.W. Hopkins was born in Litchfield County, Conn. and moved to New York in 1802. He later returned to Connecticut as a young man and served an apprenticeship as a decorative painter. Following the death of his first wife, he married again in 1817 and moved to Watertown. In 1823 he relocated in Newport (later named Albion) where he made and decorated chairs and worked as a portrait artist. An advertisement for his portraiture work appeared in an 1833 Albion newspaper.

Noah North was born in Alexander, N.Y. and evidently became acquainted with Hopkins because the latter advertised as a teacher of portrait painting. During the late 1830s both men moved to Ohio where Hopkins died. Later North returned to western New York where he worked as a photographer.

The exhibit "Face to Face" includes a six-minute slide presentation which shows pictures of the Albion area and gives biographical information on both artists. There are several portraits of individuals from Albion, Holley and Medina. The painting represented here is inscribed "No. 40 by N. North, Mrs. Eunice Spafford, age 55 years, Holley 1834." She was Eunice Eggleston, born near Albany in 1778. In 1798 she became the third wife of John Darrow. After his death she moved with their seven children to Holley. In 1815 Eunice married her neighbor Bradstreet Spafford, a widower. Their two children were among the first born in Holley.

This portrait of Mrs. Spafford is now 155 years old. Notice the decorated chair in which she is seated. It suggests that the artist certainly had training as a decorator of furniture. This particular portrait is on loan to the "Face to Face" exhibit from the Shelburne Museum in Shelburne, Vermont. This exhibition is well worth seeing while at the Strong Museum as it includes so much local history relating to folk painting by two Orleans County artists.