

Portsmouth woman finds great-grandmother's long-lost painting at Franklin City Hall

By SUSAN DOUCET / Monitor staff

A portrait of an elderly couple with their heads together over a cup of tea hangs on a wall in Mara Khavari's Portsmouth home. Beyond their names, the figures in the painting are strangers to Khavari. The artwork hangs for her love of the artist, not for the subjects.

Belle Lougee Butler Dresser, Khavari's great-grandmother, is the artist behind the portrait. Despite her knowledge of many paintings by her great-grandmother, Khavari possesses only one other piece of her art, a pastoral scene depicting a lake, forest and farm animals.

Locating any of the other paintings was something of a dream for the New Hampshire native, but not one she actively pursued for most of her life. Details are scarce, and the commissioned portraits may lie forgotten and collecting dust in New England attics. Two paintings, however, Khavari had names of – “The Spirit of 1776” and “The American Drummer Boy” – and a possible location: Franklin.

By way of some luck, connections and historical knowledge, “The Spirit of 1776” was found this past year. The painting hangs in the Grand Army of the Republic Hall in Franklin City Hall, the same place it likely has been for more than a century.

“It was something I always wanted to discover,” Khavari said.

Next week, Khavari will visit Franklin to see the painting that she has only heard about through family stories, an obituary and her great-grandmother's notes.

Civil War ties

The Grand Army of the Republic Hall is on the city hall's second floor, just upstairs from where modern city business is conducted during the week. But when the old wooden door with “Soldiers' Memorial Hall” written on it is opened, entrants may forget what year it is.

“Can't you just feel the history in this room? There's an ambiance,” said Leigh Webb, president of the Franklin Historical Society.

Framed photographs, certificates, artifacts and paintings fill the room of city hall, which was constructed at the end of the 19th century. The furniture – leather benches, chairs and wooden tables – and detailed woodwork are original to the hall.

“The fact is that it was a memorial hall first,” Webb said. Later, it was converted to use as a town hall (when Franklin was still a town) before becoming city hall. The building “started as a collection of money to build a civil war monument,” he said.

On the wall facing the main door hangs “The Spirit of 1776,” Butler Dresser’s replica of the “The Spirit of ’76” by Archibald Willard. Willard’s painting, a Civil War scene, remains in New England as well; it hangs in the selectmen’s room in Abbot Hall in Marblehead, Mass.

An obituary for Butler Dresser, who died in May 1930 at the age of 62, named the Grand Army hall as the painting’s location.

“She graduated from Tilton Seminary and was well known as a very talented artist, having studied art in Boston and New York under some famous artists,” the obituary reads. “She was skilled as a painter in water colors, on china and in crayon, but made a specialty of portrait paintings in oil.”

“I have written down from earlier days that ‘The Spirit of 1776’ was hung January 9, 1912, in the (GAR) hall,” Khavari said.

Another one of Dresser Butler’s works likely accompanied the “Spirit” painting at one time.

“She painted a companion picture ‘The American Drummer Boy’ which she presented to the American Legion,” the obituary reads.

Its whereabouts, however, are unknown.

Webb recently located an inventory of the hall from the 1980s. “The Spirit of 1776” was on it. “The American Drummer Boy” was not.

“It’s really difficult to determine if it was ever there,” Webb said. “Unfortunately, we all know that things have disappeared from the GAR Hall.”

Khavari heard stories about these paintings and other works, and about her great-grandmother, from her mother, who was about 11 years old when Dresser Butler died.

“Her memories are what a young girl would remember,” Khavari said.

Although young when her grandmother passed, Khavari’s mother recalled these two historic works.

“She mentioned many times that she remembered seeing the two paintings, ‘The Spirit of 1776’ and ‘The Drummer Boy,’ ” she said. “Life-size, my mother used to say (of the drummer boy).”

Over the years, Khavari has thought about tracking down some of her great-grandmother's art. Once, she wrote a letter to the Manchester Historical Society, but she said nothing came of it.

It was not until she mentioned her grandmother's art to an acquaintance, a Franklin resident, that Khavari had hopes of actually seeing another piece of Dresser Butler's artwork.

'Serendipitous connection'

Just over the New Hampshire border, Khavari was attending a workshop at Green Acre Baha'i School, Retreat and Conference Center in Eliot, Maine, last year, where she struck up a conversation with Karen Darling.

A Franklin resident, Darling connected with Khavari over her great-grandmother's residence in Franklin. Dresser Butler lived in Franklin for years – likely on Maple Square – and taught art classes in the city, as well as in other New Hampshire communities.

"I don't know why I brought this up," Khavari said. "I said to her, 'My grandmother lived in Franklin for many, many years.'"

That mention, which Khavari called a "serendipitous connection," started the process of locating the painting.

"Her eyes got huge when I mentioned that we were active in the Franklin Historical Society," Darling wrote in an email. "Mara asked if we could help her find two of her great-grandmother's long-lost full-size paintings, which she had been told were in some public place in Franklin."

Darling turned to Webb, who has been actively involved with the historical society since he moved to Franklin in 2004.

"If there wasn't a historical society, there just wouldn't be a way," Darling said.

Webb was the one who identified the large painting in city hall as the one sought after by Khavari.

"I never expected that he would find it," she said. "And I'm delighted."

The painting – which is still in its original frame – is in good condition but is less pristine than when it was painted more than 100 years ago. "You know that the colors were much more bright at one time," Webb said.

Khavari has yet to see the painting in person, but next week she will meet Webb, Darling and possibly a few city officials at city hall.

“I’m happy that I can be at least of some service to reunite them,” Webb said.

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