Images of (In)dependence: William Murray’s Family Record Paintings, 1783-1822
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Marriage, Women, and Children

Early American marriages were defined by the concept of coverture, through which a woman became legally “covered” by her husband in political, economic, and legal venues. William Murray’s paintings illustrate this concept with the textual placement of a wife’s information literally below that of her husband’s, and in a much smaller font. Children were similarly of less importance legally and even socially – this is indicated by their presence in even smaller, more constricted spaces along the margins of Murray’s paintings.

Commemorating Military Service

The Revolutionary War became a way for Americans to bond and forge connections – military service on the part of a man or a member of his immediate family was celebrated. Murray captures the pride felt by new Americans by incorporating military figures on several of his paintings. These images of military figures appear on the records of the children of Revolutionary War veterans, illustrating the importance of commemorating a family’s involvement during the War for Independence. In the new nation, men of European descent were celebrated for their service.

Fraternal Organizations

Fraternal organizations such as the Freemasons allowed new American men to socialize, as well as become more involved in their community. While the Freemasons prided themselves on allegedly lax requirements for membership, the time required to serve in a lodge, as well membership dues, all but excluded men who were not of well-to-do means. Masonic lodges also provided men in an allegedly egalitarian society a means to arrange and order themselves within the varying degrees that one could attain in the Freemasonic system.

The twenty known family record paintings by New York artist William Murray provide artistic renderings of the social hierarchy that existed in the post-Revolutionary Mohawk Valley in central New York State. Superficially, the paintings give biographical information about one generation of a family that resided in or around the Mohawk Valley region. Men who may not have had a prestigious family background were able to gain high rank and visibility within their community through military service, successful marriage, and involvement in fraternal organizations such as the Freemasons.

This thesis examines twenty of William Murray’s family record paintings as illustrations of marriage practice and law, the importance of military memorialization, and the increased popularity of fraternal organizations in and around New York’s Mohawk Valley in the early republic.

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