



Face of Philanthropy: What did Stephen Girard look like?

– by Jon Newton –
©All Rights Reserved

That Stephen Girard is the least acknowledged figure of American history in proportion to his contribution is well known and long lamented. There is virtually no mention of Girard in textbooks and only a handful of biographies have been written. But why are there also so few likenesses of him? You know, portraits. Essentially, there is but one: the 1832 oil by Bass Otis. But even that was painted a year after Girard died; Otis worked from a death mask. How is it the nation's wealthiest man never sat for a portrait? Girard lived at a time when portraiture was immensely popular and paintings of other prominent, and many far less prominent, citizens of his day are numerous. Why are paintings of him so glaringly absent?

Girard, himself, is responsible. With no shortage of people who wanted to write his story and paint his portrait, he steadfastly allowed neither. Why? He had to have realized if by virtue of one deed alone — subsidizing the War of 1812 — that Stephen Girard would claim a special place in our country's history. Nevertheless, he shunned any attempts to memorialize him or his accomplishments, repeatedly turning aside requests from portraitists and biographers alike.

Strange behavior, this self-induced obscurity. Was Girard so indifferent to fame? So sensitive about his appearance? So suspicious? A case could be made for all three, but more likely Girard's carefully managed mystification was driven not by idiosyncrasy but rather the awareness that the greatest contribution of his life could not be revealed until

his death. In fact, he said as much.

When pursued by would-be biographer Stephen Simpson, son of his long-time bank cashier George Simpson, Girard replied, "Mr. Simpson, wait until I am dead, then you will see what I am." He followed that admonishment with the now famous "My deeds must be my life; when I am dead my actions must speak for me." Such meaty stuff could only have left the pushy young Simpson eager for the old man's expiration. Indeed, his *Biography of Stephen Girard* was published just months after it happened.

With respect to pictures rather than words, Girard may have been, in fact, too aware of his looks to entertain having them put on canvas. Consider his response to artist Joseph Delaplaine's request that he sit for a portrait: "Convinced as I am that at the approach of death I will be anxious to depart this world with tranquility, I do not wish to leave behind any marks which may cause regret. Therefore I must decline granting what I have

uniformly refused to others." There is a basis for the notion of self-consciousness.

Girard, by most accounts, was not a comely man. His appearance might be considered arresting at best, but even that only as a young man. George Wilson, in *The Life and Times of America's First Tycoon*, put it this way: "Girard... was a bundle of energy. He had spunk...with a deformed eye and hair that was flaming red, he had stood out in the crowds around New York's busy wharves." Harry Emerson Wildes, in *Lonely Midas — The Story of Stephen Girard*, was less enthusiastic and decidedly less kind: "His short,



Stephen Girard
by Bass Otis

ungainly figure did not lend itself to gracefulness; his thin-lipped face, marred by its swarthinness and the blankness of a blind eye, gave no favorable impression.”

Frank Gerace, in *Stephen Girard, His Life and Legacy*, embellishes Wilde’s description: “Girard (in his early twenties) stood about five feet, six inches tall with broad square shoulders and a stocky body. Already balding, his thin hair was copper colored and he had a swarthy complexion; his good left eye was of a grayish hue, while the right eye was a yellowish, scarred and shrunken globe. His nose was



Stephen Girard by J. Massey Rhind

aquiline, his lips thin and his chin sturdy and strong. He had large feet turned outward and an ungainly walk.”

In this regard one is reminded of another great man in American history, Abraham Lincoln, who is frequently described as homely. Lincoln was well aware of the

shortcomings of his physical features and even had a sense of humor about it. At one political debate he wittily, if self-deprecatingly, rebutted: “My worthy opponent accuses me of being two-faced. If I had two faces would I be wearing this one?” By contrast, there is no evidence Girard had much of a sense of humor — about his looks or anything else.

The consensus of those who chronicled Stephen Girard, from the earliest (Simpson) to the latest (Wilson), seems to be that this man so remarkable in his accomplishments was singularly unremarkable in his appearance. Here is yet another passage in support of that from Cornell University’s *Making of America* web site, probably attributable to Simpson: “His aspect was rather insignificant and quite unprepossessing. His dress was old-fashioned and shabby; he wore the pig-tail, the white neck cloth, the wide-brimmed hat, and the large-skirted coat of the last century. He was blind of one eye; and though his bushy eyebrows gave some character to his countenance, it was curiously devoid of expression.”

On approaching middle age (1795) Mr. Girard’s looks improved somewhat according to Wilson. On page 156 of his book he quotes another Girard biographer, Henry Atlee Ingram, who based this description on conversations with Girard’s acquaintances: “Girard was heavily built and square-shouldered, of middle stature, with strongly marked, rather handsome features, and gray eyes, of which the right was blind.” Moving along, we find an account of Stephen Girard’s appearance improving even more in his old age. In the biography Simpson published six months after Girard’s death he described the philanthropist in his later years as having “the impressive appearance of a Roman emperor in repose.”

Elsewhere, Simpson describes Girard in, 1823, at the age of seventy-two, as having a countenance “perfectly pallid, totally devoid of animation, and the very picture of abstraction itself; being square, full, muscular, and deeply indented with the lines of thought.” Paradoxically, Simpson goes on from this rather uncomplimentary account to a description that is near reverent: “When he spoke...a smile played around his mouth, which gave to his face a very agreeable expression and indicated a strong original propensity to harmony and fellowship...there shone in his remaining eye a peculiar luster, which told of deep passion,

sagacious observation and quick perception...the twinkling and sparkling of that eye, I shall never forget — sometimes playful, and even sarcastic in its glance — always cunning; but at most times, and most generally, stern, fixed, and thoughtful...”

These self-appointed biographers give us an interesting metamorphosis to contemplate: a Stephen Girard face that “gave no favorable impression” in his twenties, to one that was “rather handsome” at middle age, to one reminiscent of “a Roman emperor” in later life. Quite a journey. But one recorded, alas, in words alone.

The first attempt at capturing Girard’s face on canvas occurred, as we have said, the year after he died. This is the much-lauded Bass Otis oil portrait now hanging in the Stephen Girard Collection, Founder’s Hall, Girard College. Otis’s work reflects the austerity one would expect from a death mask reference. There are no embellishments to relieve the stark interpretation except for a small corner of the backdrop pulled aside to reveal sailing ships in the distance — presumably some of Girard’s vessels on the Delaware River.

A year later another attempt to capture a likeness of Girard, this time in marble, was made by French sculptor Nicolas Gevelot, through a commission from the City Councils of Philadelphia. This is the sculpture, fourteen years in the making, that now stands in front of the sarcophagus in Founder’s Hall at Girard College. Gevelot also worked from the death mask but to a decidedly different result, which in turn evoked decidedly different assessments as to its accuracy. According to Wildes in *Lonely Midas*, at least one respected artist of the day, Thomas Scully, proclaimed Gevelot’s work a good likeness. The author (anonymous) of *Memoirs and Autobiographies of Some of the Wealthy Citizens of Philadelphia* was of another opinion: “All good likenesses are flattered but this one is more than flattered. An everlasting smile is placed upon the countenance of the morose old man who seldom, if ever, smiled.” Claiming a thirty-year intimate acquaintance with Girard, the critic went on to observe: “...his fat cheeks and somewhat Roman nose are rather unlike the original.”

There have been a number of other attempts over the years at depicting how Girard may have looked but all are either variations of Otis’s seminal work or revisionist

excursions away from it. Artists Bouvier, Chappel, Lang, and J. R. Lamdin painted portraits in the style of Otis with no additional distinguishing features. E. D. Brown created a print based on the Otis portrait that was exhibited at the San Francisco Exposition as a fine example of early American lithography.

Other sculptors, too, have had a run at casting likenesses of the great man. Twenty-five sculptors vied for the opportunity to execute a statue of Girard to be placed in Philadelphia’s City Hall Plaza in 1897. J. Massey Rhind won the competition and his excellent work now stands behind the Philadelphia Museum of Art. There is another statue of Girard at the site of his South Philadelphia farmhouse commissioned by the Stephen Girard Memorial Committee of the Girard College Alumni Association. It is a bronze casting from a mold of the Gevelot statue. Two plaster casts were also made from this mold in 1990: one is at the Girard Estate Building and the other at the Stephen Girard public school in South Philadelphia. Another Gevelot reproduction, a fine bronze bust, is also at the Estate offices. They are all flattered likenesses if Otis’s work is the benchmark.

Some measure of flattery accepted, a few artists crossed the line in their compulsion to create a physiognomy for Stephen Girard. They either grossly overlooked or blatantly ignored what few facts about his appearance we do know. The heroic 1885 portrait by Frederick James, now hanging in the Masonic Temple across from Philadelphia City Hall, shows Girard a bit too tall, a bit too slim, a bit too nattily dressed, and with both eyes wide open. An artist by the name of Gasford also painted Girard with two good eyes, and another artist named Grant painted Girard with a good right eye and a bad left instead of the other way ‘round. Perhaps it all comes under the heading of artistic license.

And this brings us to the most recent and most controversial attempt to capture the philanthropist: Bruno Lucchesi’s nobly intended sculpture *The Spirit of Girard*, unveiled at his namesake orphanage in 2000. Let’s avoid more debate about what this sculpture represents and where it is placed (two hot buttons with many Girard College alumni) and examine instead how Lucchesi chose to represent Girard’s face. It is shown with two features biographers unanimously agree he did not possess. One is a normal right eye. The

other is a smile. Why did Lucchesi find it necessary to sanitize Girard in this manner? Perhaps it was the only way he could achieve the almost blissful countenance he gave the old man — and in this Lucchesi may have been more astute than others. Remember, his work is entitled *The Spirit of Girard*. It imagines the benefactor among the beneficiaries; Stephen Girard mingling with students of Girard College — his children, if you will. Now consider this from biographer Simpson in context with the face Lucchesi gave to Girard: “To little children, and to them only, he was gracious and affectionate in manner. He was never so happy as when he had a child to caress and play with.”

For whatever the reasons, Girard allowed no likenesses of himself. As we have seen, a number of artists made the attempt but as all their efforts came after he died we can have no confidence in how close anyone came to the original. His biographers, on the other hand, left us fairly reliable word pictures, unflattering though they may be. In 1910, Elbert Hubbard, feisty author of a series entitled *Little Journeys to the Homes of Great Business Men*, summed up the issue of Girard’s deeds versus his looks this way: “A very little observation will show that physical defects, when backed up by mental worth, transform themselves into beauty spots. To be sure, no one was ever so bold as to speak of Girard’s blemishes as beauty spots, but the fact is that his homely face and ungraceful body were strong factors in making him a favorite of fortune.” Enough said.



No discussion about creating a likeness of Stephen Girard can be closed, however, without acknowledging Norm Ressler, a 1939 graduate of Girard College. Because in many respects no one has done it better. Ressler’s charcoal and pencil portraits of Girard have been featured in numerous issues of the Girard College alumni magazine, *Steel & Garnet*, over the years and many hang proudly on walls of the school and in various alumni homes. Ressler’s talent was considerable but it was not necessarily superior to any of the other artists named in this story. The advantage he brought to bear was his unique perspective. When Ressler drew the face of Stephen Girard he was rendering a likeness of the man he considered to be, as most graduates of the school do, a second father.

About the Author: From 1998 to 2010, Jon Newton was editor of *Steel & Garnet*, the venerable periodical of the Girard College Alumni Association (GCAA) continuously published for over a century. During his tenure he transformed it from a newsletter into a colorful feature-story format magazine with topical take-a-stand editorials, contributed columns, and a lively letters-to-the-editor department.



Newton is also co-founder and the committee chair of Founder’s Keepers, an initiative for the restoration and preservation of Founder’s Hall at Girard College, a National Historic Landmark. Additionally, he chairs the Stephen Girard Awareness Committee and wrote and directed this website, ForgottenPatriot.com. He won the GCAA Award of Merit in 2001, and the Stephen Girard Medal, the alumni association’s highest award, in 2012.

Newton’s writing career began while a student at Girard College as a columnist for *Girard News* and an editor for the *Corinthian* yearbook. After graduation he served as a journalist in the U.S. Navy on assignment in Antarctica during the International Geophysical Year. He then began a long career in marketing communications, subsequently founding his own advertising agency where he served as CEO and creative director, winning numerous national and regional awards for creative excellence in television, radio, and print ad campaigns.

Newton is currently a board member and the historian/journalist for the Navy Icebreaker USS Edisto Association. He is married to KT, a criminal prosecutor with the U.S. Department of Justice. They live in Bryn Mawr, PA.