



# Newport Historical Society

## **Guide to the Arthur Commerford and Edith Wetmore Papers on Stuart's Washington Portrait at Newport's Colony House, 1939 – 1940**

Newport Historical Society  
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### Descriptive Summary

<i>Collection Identifier</i>	MS.FIC.2013.6
<i>Title</i>	Arthur Commerford and Edith Wetmore Papers on Stuart's Washington Portrait at Newport's Colony House
<i>Creator</i>	Commerford, Arthur B., 1865-1942 Wetmore, Edith Malvina Keteltas, 1870-1966
<i>Date</i>	1939 – 1940
<i>Extent</i>	approximately 25 items
<i>Abstract</i>	The bulk of this collection comprises of correspondence between Arthur B. Commerford and Edith Wetmore as they make efforts to reclaim the George Washington portrait by Gilbert Stuart back into the Colony House after its relocation to the Newport County Courthouse.

## Scope and Content

The bulk of this collection comprises of correspondence between Arthur B. Commerford and Edith Wetmore as they make efforts to reclaim the George Washington portrait by Gilbert Stuart back into the Colony House after its relocation to the Newport County Courthouse.

Commerford composed a petition to rally support from the Old State House in Newport Inc. and presented it at their annual meeting. That document outlines the history of the portrait:

Two paintings were commissioned by the State to Gilbert Stuart, who was paid \$1200 for both. The finished painting was put in the care of Joseph Anthony and Co. while it was framed in Philadelphia. It was shipped to Rhode Island aboard the Gibbs and Channing's sloop 'Eagle' in 1801. It was hung in the Colony House. In 1905, it was restored, a process in which one newspaper noted, the painting "lost much of its former beauty."

In 1926/27, when the new Newport County Courthouse was built, and the CH was no longer used as a courthouse, the Newport County Courthouse Commission asked that "all books, records, and papers, and such furnishings and furniture of the building now occupied as a court house as may be deemed advisable by said commission...and court...and sheriff of Newport County to be removed to said new courthouse." On Constitution Day, September 17, 1927, a group of unknown persons snatched the painting from the Colony House and hung it in the new Newport County Courthouse. Obviously fearing a possible hostile takeover, the custodian of the Colony House, James Anthony, and his deputy had taken extra precautions that day to secure the painting, by placing an extra Yale lock on the door of the Senate Chamber. Yet, the painting was taken, despite there having been no request of official surrender.

Editorials in the paper called the removal "clandestine," and "a disgusting, disreputable and contemptible piece of business." The President of Rhode Island Bar Association said, "Washington belonged to the historic and the political rather than to the legal life of the people."

Wanting to protect their new acquisition, the Newport County Courthouse Commission proposed a bill appropriating \$2,000 for the painting's restoration and to have it officially be moved to the new building - which the General Assembly passed on March 23, 1928. The Daily News noted, "Thursday's action of the General Assembly designates the Court House for the hanging of the portrait, and it will be difficult for those who desire the Stuart masterpiece in the State House to have it returned there."

That same year the Courthouse Commission had the painting was restored by Mr. Thompson at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

In 1939, Arthur Commerford and Edith Wetmore started a campaign to try reclaim the portrait from the Courthouse. The correspondence between Commerford in Newport, and Wetmore in New York,

comprises the bulk of the collection. They learn that the painting is in the safe of the Clerk of the Superior Court. It was resting on the ground, not on stretchers, which has broken off pieces of the frame, including a part of the eagle and an arrow. By January 1940, they are desperate to know more about the condition of the painting. They fear that the painting has been “hermetically sealed” in a metal encasement against glass and that the lack of air has deteriorated the painting; perhaps the canvas has adhered to the glass. After physically examining the painting, Commerford assures Wetmore that the painting has not adhered to the glass and is in good shape.

In February 1940, they hire Fredrick Rhineland King to draw up a plan on how the painting can be hung in the CH. In April, King delivers a blueprint (which we have in the collection, and it’s horribly light sensitive) showing new recesses in the Senate Chamber with fireproof doors for the portrait. In May, the builder James N. Gibson quotes \$1,600 for the work.

The scope of work needed to achieve their goal seems to exceed their resources. Wetmore replies after seeing the builder’s quote and understanding all that would be involved, “it seems to me that though our members have wanted to get the portrait back, it really would not be possible, apart from the fact that I also do not believe we would be given permission to do so.”

## Organization

This collection is arranged by type and then chronologically in one series:

I. George Washington portrait papers

## Subject Access

<i>People</i>	Commerford, Arthur B., 1865-1942 Gibson, James King, Frederick Rhineland, 1887-1972 Stuart, Gilbert, 1755-1828 Wetmore, Edith Malvina Keteltas, 1870-1966
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<i>Subjects</i>	Presidents--United States--Portraits
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*Form/Genre* blueprints (reprographic copies)  
correspondence

## Access and Use

*Citation* Arthur Commerford and Edith Wetmore Papers on Stuart's Washington Portrait at Newport's Colony House, MS.FIC.2013.6, Newport Historical Society, Newport, Rhode Island

## Administrative Information

*Processor* Processed by Stacie Parillo, April 2 2013.

*Descriptive Rules* Finding aid based on *Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS)*

## Inventory

Series 01: George Washington portrait papers, 1939 – 1940