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## ***Rare Healy Portrait Comes Home to Elmhurst***

**The Elmhurst History Museum recovers and restores a historically significant painting by famous artist G.P.A. Healy**

ELMHURST, IL — Usually, history museums acquire objects that are meaningful to their mission and collections from items handed down through generations or donations from community resources. Occasionally, curators come across a diamond in the rough, a find that is both rare and significant to history. This is one of those stories.

Elmhurst History Museum’s Curator of Collections, Daniel Lund, got the feeling that something exciting was about to unfold when he randomly checked his work e-mail on a weekend afternoon in 2020. He received a note from a patron who shared a link to an auction item that might interest the museum: a painting of Jennie “Jane” Byrd Bryan, the wife of Thomas Barbour Bryan, a distinguished figure in Chicago and Elmhurst history. The Bryans were early Elmhurst residents who built one of the town’s gracious estates, and Bryan was a widely respected community leader, businessman, and international statesman best known for his leadership role in bringing the 1893 Columbian Exposition to Chicago.

The historical significance caught the curator’s attention immediately, but the larger story was not so much the subject of the portrait but the artist who painted it: George Peter Alexander (G.P.A.) Healy. Healy was one of the most prolific and popular portrait artists of his time, and he lived in Elmhurst (known then as Cottage Hill) during the Civil War years under the patronage of the Bryan family. Healy is

best known for his portraits of several U.S. Presidents as well as other politicians and celebrities in America and Europe. After a successful career in France in service to King Louis-Phillipe, Healy moved to Chicago in 1855 where he befriended Thomas Barbour Bryan and his family. Healy set up his studio and home in the Bryan's original house known as Hill Cottage Tavern, one of the oldest residences in Elmhurst that still stands to this day. It was Bryan who made the connection for one of Healy's most famous commissions: the last known portrait of President Abraham Lincoln without a beard (National Gallery of Art).

After learning more about the artist and the painting, Lund was certain that the portrait needed to be saved from obscurity and that it belonged in the Elmhurst History Museum's collection. Unfortunately, there were two major obstacles in the way. First, the painting was in terrible condition with visible tears and damage from years of improper care, and Lund was unsure it could be salvaged. Secondly, the painting was costly, and funds would need to be raised to procure it.

The museum was not deterred, and a three-year journey began with the purchase of the painting through the support of the Elmhurst Heritage Foundation and donations for the restoration from Elmhurst residents Peggy and Michael LoCicero and Julie and Patrick Sheehan. Art experts were consulted to determine an appropriate restoration plan, and the painting was painstakingly repaired and brought back to its original luster by Parma Conservation in Chicago. Additionally, a custom frame was created by MCM Fine Framing to match the era and importance of the painting.

"The confluence of events and resources that helped us to bring the Healy painting home to Elmhurst is a long story with a happy ending," said Lund. "The addition of this painting to our collection provides a tangible connection to the story of 19<sup>th</sup> century American cultural heritage and local history. Now that it is restored and in its proper place in the museum, the painting will serve as a living link between past and present to educate future generations. I am proud to have been a part of this experience, and that the museum could play a role in saving this important piece of history. And I am certainly glad that I checked my email that day."

The restored painting of Jane Byrd Bryan will now be on display in the museum's core exhibit, "By All Accounts: The Story of Elmhurst," accompanied by a short documentary and historical information. To officially welcome the portrait to the Elmhurst History Museum, Lund and his fellow staff member, Curator of Collections Sarah Cox, will co-present a lecture about the artist and the significance of the painting to Elmhurst history on **Sunday, April 30 at 2 p.m.** The program is free to members and \$5 for

non-members, and reservations are requested at [www.elmhursthistory.org](http://www.elmhursthistory.org) (in the Programs section). Starting on April 28th, the public may view the painting during regular visitation hours in the second-floor gallery.

To find out more about G.P.A. Healy and Thomas Barbour Bryan, visit the History Highlights section of the Elmhurst History Museum's website at [www.elmhursthistory.org/387/History-Highlights](http://www.elmhursthistory.org/387/History-Highlights).

For the latest information on the museum's exhibits and programs, please visit [www.elmhursthistory.org](http://www.elmhursthistory.org) or call 630-833-1457.

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*The Elmhurst History Museum is a department of the City of Elmhurst supported by the Elmhurst Heritage Foundation, a 501c3 non-profit organization. The Museum is located at 120 E. Park Ave. in downtown Elmhurst. General admission is free. For more information, call 630-833-1457 or visit our web site at [elmhursthistory.org](http://elmhursthistory.org).*