

John Winthrop the Younger, The unlikely founder of Saybrook (Part I)

(By Lamar LeMonte, OSHS February, 2022)

The Old Saybrook Historical Society has perhaps the finest portrait of the town's founder, John Winthrop the Younger (1606-1676, 70 yrs.). He was an unlikely founder because he had no intention of ever founding the town. The accepted legend is that he named what became the Saye-Brooke settlement in honor of his two employers, Viscount Saye and Sele and Baron Brooke, sometime around 1635-36.



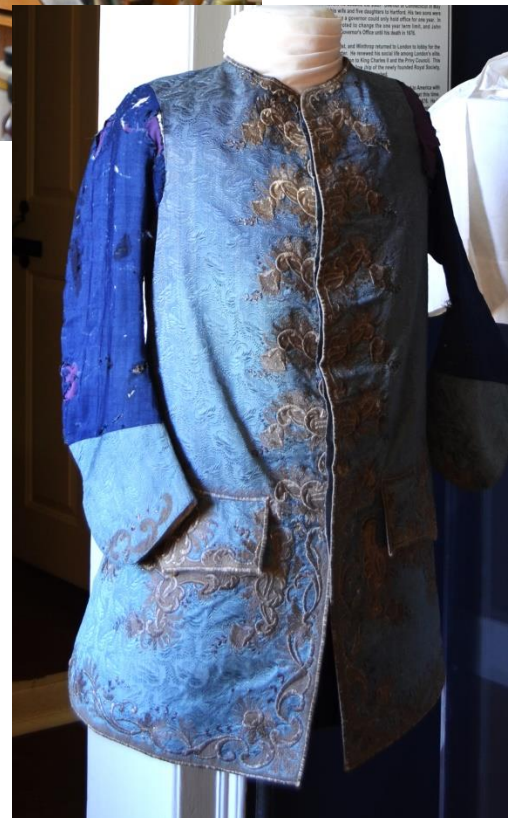
The portrait by Marek Sarba

Marek Sarba, Old Saybrook resident, Historical Society member, noted marine artist and consummate portrait painter, completed the Winthrop portrait about 345 years after Winthrop's death. It is not unusual for portraits of notable historical figures to be painted long after they died but 345 years might seem like a long time to wait. Marek, however, wanted to more accurately repaint John Winthrop the Younger, and only recently had he discovered a priceless Winthrop artifact in the possession of the Old Saybrook Historical Society.



The priceless artifact was a waistcoat owned by John Winthrop the Younger, donated to the Society by a relative of the Winthrop family.

Tedd Levy, noted Old Saybrook historian and writer, points out that Winthrop likely wore this waistcoat from the mid-1660s, a garment more commonly known here as a vest. "King Charles II is commonly credited with launching the new fashion piece among the English in 1666 in response to the dominance of the French fashions at the time."

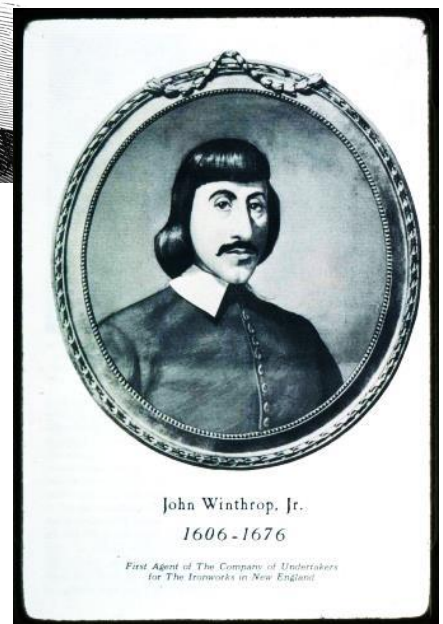


Marek Sarba only paints subjects he knows and with which he is familiar, whether a seascape, a ship, or a person. For the younger Winthrop, Marek did his homework to get to know him. He studied his history and the fashions of his time. In his portrait he not only added the waistcoat but also a tricorne hat, which was a fashion-forward statement by Marek, and quite appropriate for Winthrop's personality. The tricorne hat became a common colonial American style throughout the 1700s but it started in France with fashion trend-setter, King Louis XIV, in the mid-1600s. English King Charles II may well have emulated his French peer with this hat style. Early American Colonists did as well.

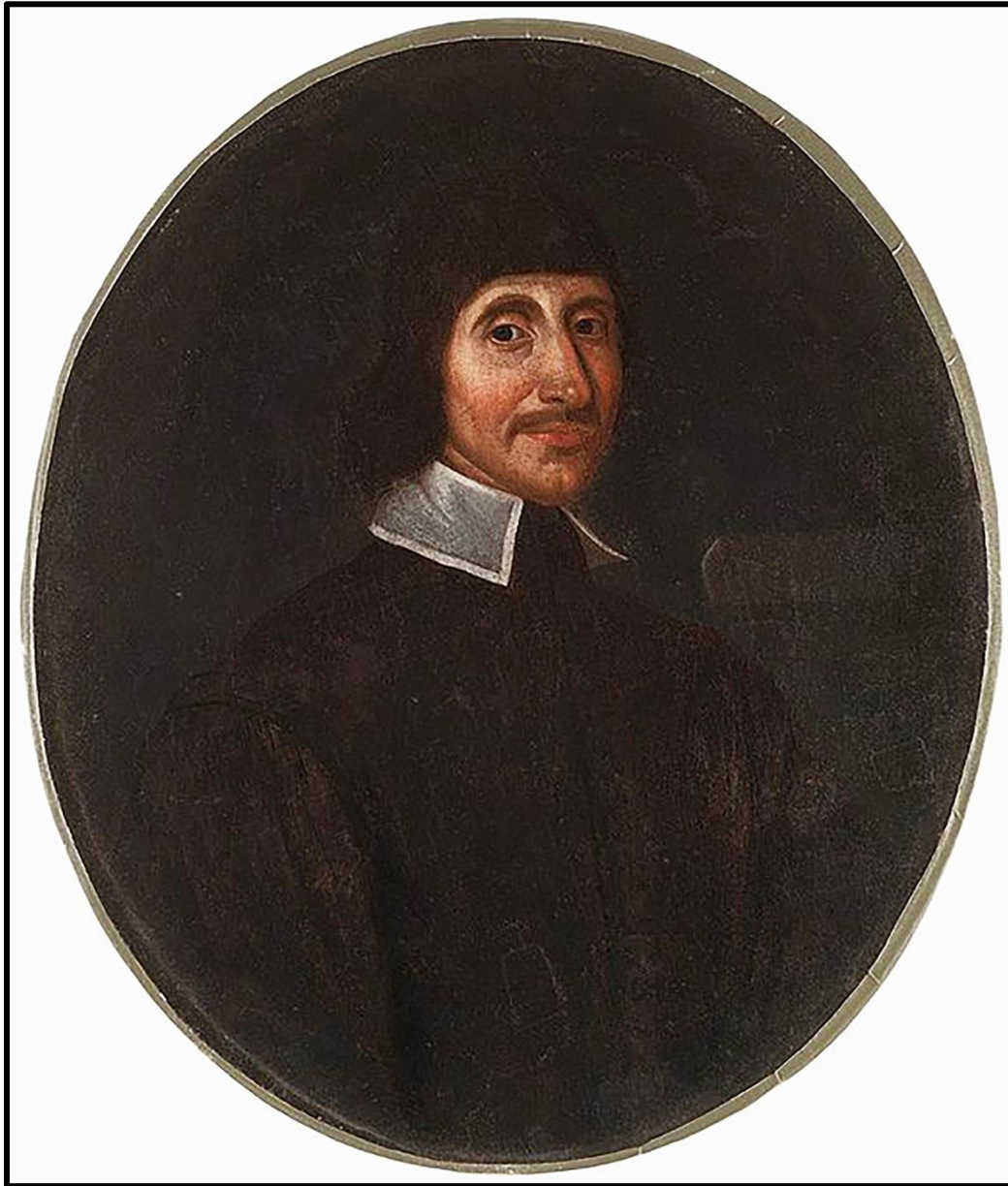
For Winthrop's face, Marek studied existing paintings and etchings in various New England museums and historical societies. Most have attributions, and all were created or painted after Winthrop's death.



Tricorn hat, French Baroque costume circa 1643



Marek's search for authenticity led him to the Harvard Art Museum where he discovered a portrait painted in England for which Winthrop actually sat. It was a gift of a relative, Robert Winthrop, who in 1964 donated the painting to Harvard.



Marek says of the painting, "He is presented almost in the austere style of a 'Puritan,' like his father, John Winthrop the Elder. But from reading his biography and looking at his waistcoat, I concluded he was a very progressive and modern person in his time. I tried to preserve his face as close to the original as possible. I decided to build the painting around the waistcoat. It was very elegant."

Marek says, "Painting a contemporary portrait using a 17th century artwork, painted in a very simple style, was a bit difficult because many sections of the original were dark, and not clear to recreate exactly."

The Harvard Art Museum does not know who painted the portrait, nor the exact year it was painted. But they have authenticated it as English and original. How and when it was shipped back to New England is also unknown. John Winthrop made several trans-Atlantic crossings in the 1600s, and he could have personally brought it back on any of those voyages, either to his Massachusetts homes, or to his home in New London or New Haven or Hartford or Fishers Island. He never had a home in Saybrook and only visited the settlement for five months in 1636. He is known as the founder of Saybrook yet he was an unlikely founder because he had no intention of ever founding the town. **Read more about him and how he became involved with the settlement of the town in Part II, (March 2022).**



Winthrop portrait in the Harvard Art Museum



Winthrop portrait in the Old Saybrook Historical Society

Both the portrait and the waistcoat are on display in the Old Saybrook Historical Society's Hart House, in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, 350 Main Street.

Footnote:

Tedd Levy, historian and author, interviewed Marek Sarba at time the portrait was donated to the Old Saybrook Historical Society. The quotes of Marek Sarba are from Tedd's interview with Marek from several years ago.

Tedd wrote at that time, "After two years of research (by Marek), studying, reading and several months of painting, Marek created a new, sensitive, expressive, thoughtful portrait of John Winthrop the Younger."

History Articles: *The Unlikely Founder of Saybrook, Part II***Read Part II, about the life of John Winthrop the Younger. (March 2022)**

Why did he have no intention of founding Saybrook? How did he get involved with Viscount Saye and Sele and Lord Brooke? Why does New London have a statue of him and Old Saybrook have a statue of Lion Gardiner? How did this Englishman from the Massachusetts Bay Colony who founded Saybrook then become colonial Connecticut's most influential statesman?