

522 SAINT-MÉMIN, CHARLES BALTHAZAR JULIEN FÉVRET DE

Engraver

Alexandria, Norfolk, Richmond

Portrait engraver in Alexandria, Norfolk, and Richmond between 1803 and 1808.

Charles Balthazar Julien Févret de Saint-Mémin holds a unique place in the history of the American print trade. He was a lone artist who traveled the country for nearly twenty years producing highly-detailed engraved portraits of the new republic's foremost public figures, some of which remain the best-known images of those people today.

Saint-Mémin was not born to such a life as a journeyman. Rather, he was born into a well-established aristocratic family (Févret) in Dijon, France; his father was a representative in the local assembly (*parlement*), while his mother was "a St. Domingan creole of remarkable beauty." That connection to the Caribbean would prove a fateful one for his family.

The son was educated in Paris at a military academy and served as a junior officer in the Royal Army of Louis XVI until it was disbanded by the National Assembly in 1790. Shortly thereafter, the ever-growing persecution of French aristocrats induced the entire Saint-Mémin family to seek safety in Switzerland. There he joined the "Army of the Princes" and served until that group was folded into the larger (and more famous) Armée des Émigrés – the counter-revolutionary army led the Prince of Condé, Louis Joseph de Bourbon – in 1792.

Those aristocrats who fled France during the Revolution were soon dispossessed of their landed estates. As Saint-Mémin's mother brought significant holdings in St. Domingue into her marriage, concerns about that property now became a central consideration in securing the family's future. Accordingly, Saint-Mémin and his father set out for St. Domingue from Switzerland in March 1793 to reaffirm the family's ownership of those colonial lands. The pair eventually landed in New York City as a way-point on their "circuitous" journey; there they encountered a flood of refugees from the French colony, white *citoyens* who had fled the island in consequence of the slave revolt now led by Toussaint L'Ouverture. Recognizing the chaotic situation that loomed for them there, the Saint-Mémins – *père et frère* – were forced to wait out events in New York.

It was the rapid depletion of their limited resources while delayed that turned the younger Saint-Mémin to engraving, out of necessity. His training had included drawing, which gave serving officers an ability to produce reasonably-accurate maps and landscapes; he now set out to teach himself copper plate engraving, learning that technical process via trial-and-error from an article in Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie*. With this trade skill in hand, he began printing landscapes and street plans in the New York City area between 1793 and 1796. Sometime in 1795, he made the acquaintance of Thomas Bluget de Valdenuit (1763-1846), another French military veteran, who brought with him the training needed to produce portraits in crayon on paper using an optical device called a physiognotrace; developed in Paris by Gilles-Louis Chrétien (1754-1811) before the Revolution, it was used most often to create precise silhouettes of people. In America, Saint-Mémin and Valdenuit learned how to apply that device to the engraving process and went into business together precise life-size profile portraits on commission. When Valdenuit returned to Europe in 1797, Saint-Mémin

carried on the business alone until 1810, eventually building a custom pantograph capable of reducing his full-scale images to a two-inch circular plate.

Over the ensuing years, Saint-Mémin moved from place to place, staying generally for a season or two, before moving to a new locale, after having sated the demand for this pricey process in that particular setting. Still, this practice resulted in the production of more than 900 portraits, apparently more than one-quarter of them depicting Virginia subjects, with about three-quarters of those completed in Virginia.

Saint-Mémin's first relocation came in 1798 when he set up shop in Philadelphia, then the national capital. At the same time, his mother and sister emigrated from Switzerland, and the son and father established them in a new family homestead in nearby Burlington, New Jersey. His father did make another attempt to claim the family's properties in St. Domingue once the regime of Napoleon had regained control of the island of Hispaniola; but he died of a tropical fever shortly after arriving there in 1802. Consequently, the family remained in America until 1815, when Saint-Mémin took them back to Dijon.

The portraitist's peregrinations thereafter are somewhat clouded as it seems that he made trips away from an established base, so appearing in multiple locations in the same year. The chronology of his imprints suggests that he moved to Baltimore in 1803 and then on to Richmond in 1807, with excursions to Washington during the meetings of Congress (1803-08), and to Charleston during the winter social season (1805-09), as well as brief visitations to Alexandria (1805) and Norfolk (1808). A 1901 account of Saint-Mémin's Virginia days insists that most of his work there was completed between December 1805 and December 1808, the term of the administration of Gov. William H. Cabell, "to whom St. Memin was indebted for many courtesies." But many items were likely made in the Commonwealth when he transited the state between 1802 and 1810, given the portability of his tools. Indeed, Saint-Mémin later claimed that he had made the last portrait from life of George Washington in 1798 at his family's New Jersey homestead; that image was the source of the flood of mourning-rings and breast-pins he produced after Washington's death in 1799.

Wherever Saint-Mémin took his tools, he offered the same terms as he had in his latter days in Philadelphia:

"The original portrait, plate and twelve impressions, shall be delivered for the moderate price of twenty five dollars for gentlemen, and thirty five dollars for ladies; the portrait without engraving may be had for 8 dollars."

The price difference, according to one art historian, resulted from the more intricate line work required in engraving women's dresses.

Saint-Mémin returned to New York City in early 1810, presumably following his last visit to Charleston, South Carolina. Over the preceding few years, Napoleon Bonaparte had pursued a course domestically designed to encourage Royalist émigrés to return to France, thereby weakening the counter-revolutionary forces aligned with the British. Evidently, Saint-Mémin found that new situation enticing, and so sailed for Paris before year's end. He returned to North America in early 1812, apparently intent on bringing his family back to Dijon; but the outbreak of war between the United States and Great Britain intervened, and Saint-Mémin

returned to his former pursuits in New York until the end of the war in 1815. The engraver actually did little copper-plate work during the war, having discovered that his eyesight no longer enabled the accuracy he demanded of himself. Instead, Saint-Mémin began painting landscapes and panorama with the aid of a *camera obscura*.

With Napoleon's fall, and the restoration of the monarchy in France, Saint-Mémin at last deemed it was time for his family to return to France. Family lore holds that in leaving the country, he destroyed his well-used physiognotrace, "as though to blot all remembrance of his troubles," so ending his career as a portrait engraver. In July 1817, Saint-Mémin was appointed as the director (*conservateur*) of the Museum of Dijon. It was a position that he held, despite a brief interruption in 1848, until his death in the summer of 1852.

Personal Data

Born: Mar. 12 1770 Dijon, France

Died: June 23 1852 Dijon, France

None of the biographies of Saint-Mémin mention a wife or children.

Sources: MESDA Index nos. 51934, 63084, 51932, 51937, 51938, 51934, 51936, & 51935; Weitenkampf, *Sketch of the Life of Saint-Mémin* (1899); Miles, *Saint-Mémin and the Neoclassical Profile Portrait in America*; and "The St. Memin Collection of Portraits," *William and Mary Quarterly* (Jan. 1901).

All of the biographical accounts consulted in drafting this entry were drawn (both directly and indirectly) from a laudatory lecture given on the occasion of his forced retirement in 1848 (later rescinded), which was published after his death; see: Philippe Guignard. *Notice historique sur la vie et les travaux de m. Fevret de Saint-Mémin* (Dijon: 1853).