

ELIZA DILLON TALIAFERRO

PORTRAIT OF A FRONTIER WIFE



RENA N. COEN

On a day in November, 1828, a pretty, dark-haired young woman arrived at Fort Snelling to begin a sojourn of about ten years at that remote frontier outpost. She was Elizabeth Dillon Taliaferro (known as Eliza), the recent bride of Major Lawrence Taliaferro, Indian agent at the St. Peter's Agency at Fort Snelling from 1819, when it was established, to 1839. Little is known about Eliza Taliaferro's life, though a faint picture of her emerges from scattered references in her husband's journals and in the letters and journals of some of his friends. As is often the case for 19th-century women, we do not even know the exact date of her birth, though Lawrence Taliaferro's birth date is well recorded—February 28, 1794—in Whitehall, King's County, Virginia. We do know, however, that she was two or three years older than her husband and therefore was born in 1791 or 1792. We also know that on July 22, 1828, Eliza Dillon married Lawrence Taliaferro in her home in Bedford, Pennsylvania, where her parents, Humphrey and Martha Dillon, kept an inn that was prosperous enough to serve strawberries at Christmas dinner.¹

Eliza did not leave all her family behind when she traveled west with her new husband. Her brother, Horatio N. Dillon, at some time in the 1820s or 1830s took up residence in St. Louis, from which point he became a frequent visitor to Fort Snelling. Indeed, there seems to have been a good deal of visiting back and forth between brother and sister, which is a detail of some significance in the attribution of an anonymous portrait of Eliza Taliaferro, probably painted in St. Louis in the mid-1830s. It is a portrait that strengthens the indistinct image we have of her and, since it and a companion piece portraying Lawrence Taliaferro were given by family descendants to the Minnesota Historical Society in 1947, there is no doubt as to its subject. However, more about the portrait below.²

¹ The few facts about Eliza are from the *Bedford Gazette*, July 25, 1828, a copy of which is in the four-volume *Bedford County Pennsylvania Archives*, edited by James Whisker. See also Winona Garbrick, "The Tate House, A Period Piece," in *The Pioneer*, the quarterly newsletter of the Pioneer Historical Society of Bedford, April, 1978, p. 89–95; H. M. White, Memorandum to June [Holmquist], Oct. 8, 1965, in [Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), comp.], *Dillon-Taliaferro Family Data, 1852–1966*, MHS, St. Paul.

² Dillon compiled a Dakota-English dictionary of some 1,300 words; see H. N. Dillon, "Dictionary of the Sioux Language," May 30–Aug. 9, 1835, which is vol. 18 of the *Lawrence Taliaferro Papers*, MHS. The paintings were a bequest from the Taliaferros' grandniece and grandnephew, Virginia Pesch of Clayton, Mo., and John F. Bonner of St. Louis. For an attribution of the portrait of Lawrence Taliaferro see Rena N. Coen, "Taliaferro Portrait: Was it Painted by Catlin?" *Minnesota History* 42 (Winter, 1971): 295–300.



Painting of Lawrence Taliaferro, 1830s

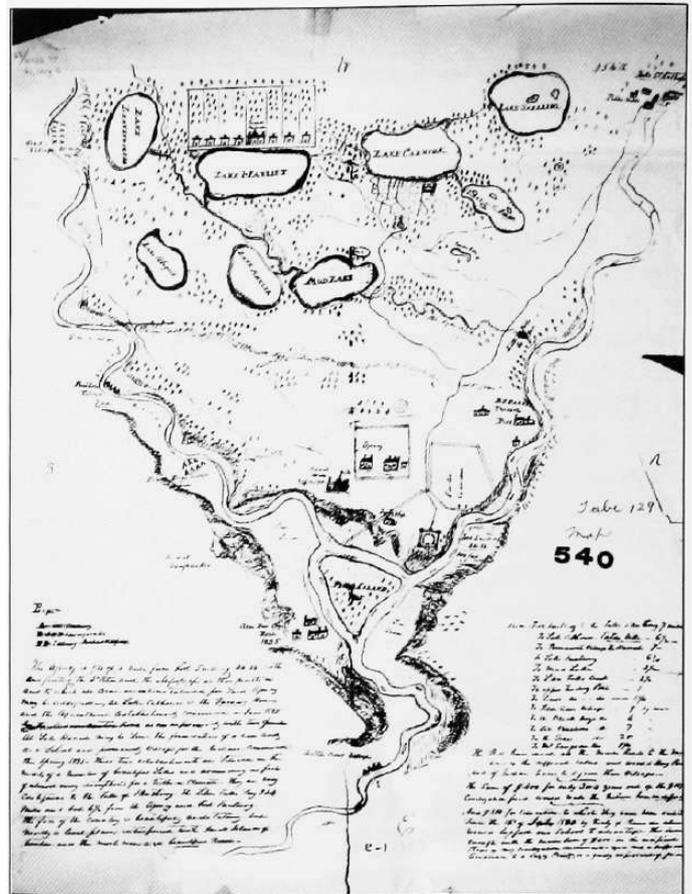
Eliza's new home at the St. Peter's Agency was a small house about half a mile from Fort Snelling. It had been built by troops at the fort but left unfinished until it came into Lawrence Taliaferro's possession in the spring of 1828. The agent described it in an annotated map he drew of Fort Snelling and the surrounding area in 1835. He said the house was built "entirely of stone—1½ stories high . . . 4 rooms on the lower floor and passage, and 2, above with a piazza . . . pannel doors, plaistered rooms, and neat mantlepices." By 1834, however, the stone house with the neat mantlepices was, like the other agency buildings, in urgent need of repairs. Taliaferro warned his superior in St. Louis, General William Clark, superintendent for Indian affairs in the West, that if funds for the repairs were not forthcoming, it would make it "impracticable for us to continue our residence here during the inclement seasons of the years. . . . Since the rainy season set in," he added, "both the hired men and myself have not had a spot in our houses that could be called dry, not even our

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beds." Eliza, who presumably shared his bed, must have been just as uncomfortable as the hired men and the major, though he did not think it necessary to mention his wife in his complaint to Clark. The house and the agency buildings were commodious enough, Taliaferro conceded, but "they were constructed at an early period, and of materials entirely unseasoned, and hastily put together." Things apparently did not improve much, for four years later he was again trying to get money for repairs, pointing out that previous improvements had "been formed from my own private funds." He insisted that "Means are really necessary to enable me to secure the public property from damage and to shelter me from the violent storms of rain, and snow," implying, furthermore, that he would no longer be, as earlier, "contented to live more like a Beast than an officer of the Government."³

Taliaferro's pleas for money to keep his house and the agency buildings in good repair may, possibly, have exaggerated their condition, but even in the best of circumstances life could not have been easy for Eliza under the harsh conditions of frontier life. It is true that the household burdens were lightened for her by the labor of a number of black slaves that Taliaferro had inherited and brought to Fort Snelling in 1825. He hired some of them out as servants to other officers at the garrison but kept some in his own house with Eliza as their mistress. One of them, their servant Harriet Robinson, was married in 1836 at the fort to Dred Scott, the plaintiff in the celebrated Supreme Court decision before the Civil War.⁴

But the poorly built house in the severe northern climate could not have been conducive to the good health of its tenants, especially "during the inclement seasons of the year." Indeed, on at least two occasions in his journals, which were devoted to the activities and accounts of the Indian agency and rarely noted anything of a personal nature, Taliaferro referred quite matter-of-factly to the indispositions of his wife: "Mrs. T. taken very sick at 3 o'clock this morning[.] Violent pain," he wrote on November 18, 1835, adding his own diagnosis of "a Plurelic affaction." And on March 23, 1836, after noting that another Fort Snelling cow had died and that the express from Prairie du Chien was overdue, he wrote again, "Mrs. T. with violent inflammatory sore throat medical aid but of little service." She eventually recovered from these illnesses, but like many other women who lived at frontier outposts, Eliza aged rapidly. A visitor of 1835, the sharp-penned, observant English-born geologist and adventurer, George William Featherstonhaugh, described her as "a Venus un peu passé," though he added that Mrs. Iron Cutter (using the English translation of the Italian name, Taliaferro), "must have been very handsome." He added that she showed him some "very handsome Indian



Taliaferro's map of the Fort Snelling area

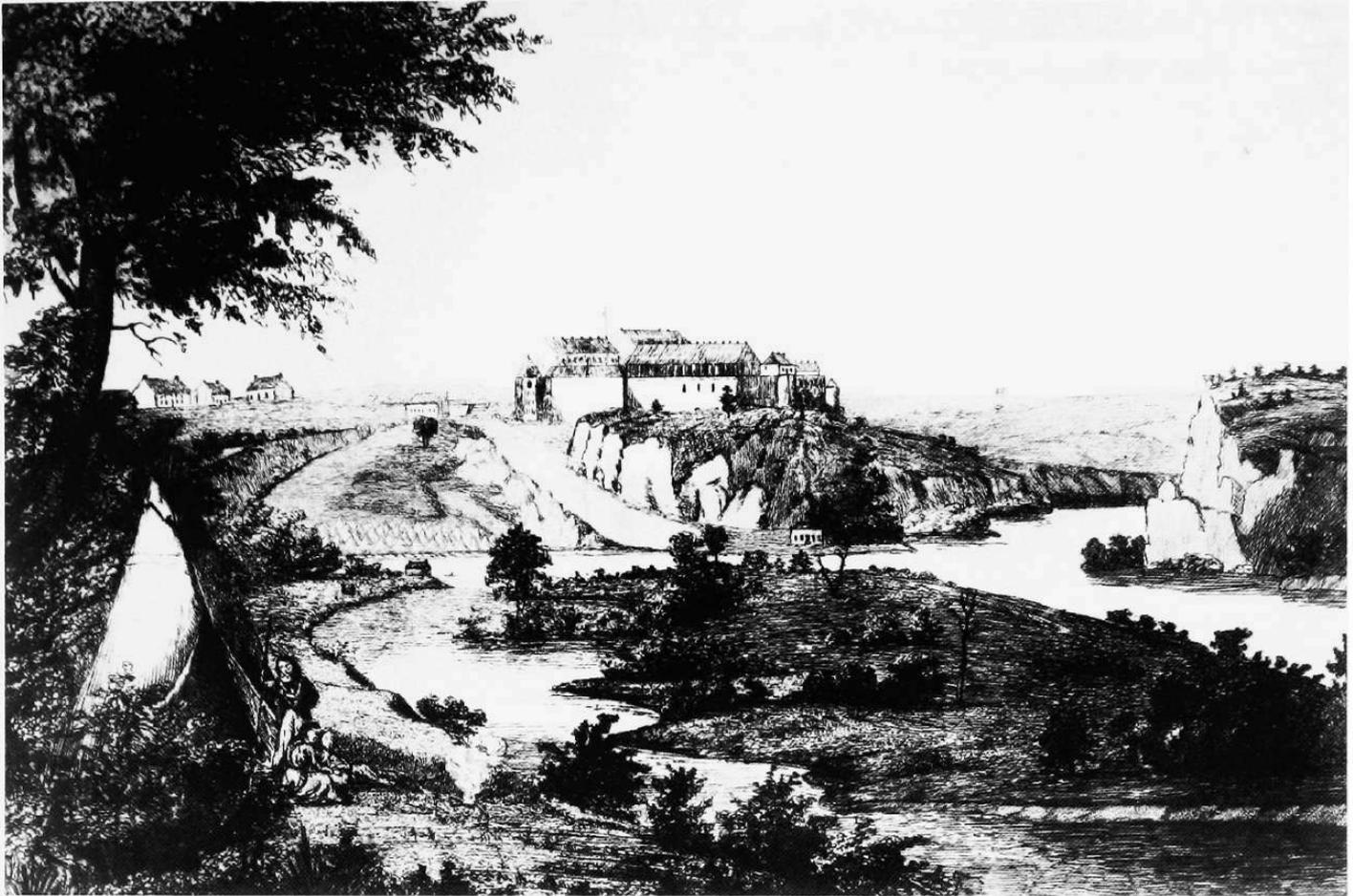
dresses made of doe skin by a half breed Sioux woman," surmising that "these dresses are embroidered so neatly that I imagine they have been taught the art by the French."⁵

THERE WERE, of course, good times as well as hardships. Besides the presence of interesting guests like Featherstonhaugh, whom the Taliaferros entertained more than once at dinner at their home, Eliza occa-

³ Map reproduced in James B. Rhoads, "The Fort Snelling Area in 1835," *Minnesota History* 35 (March, 1956): 25-27; the original is number 540 in the cartographic records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁴ James H. Baker, "Address at Fort Snelling in the Celebration of the Centennial Anniversary of the Treaty of Pike with the Sioux," *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society* (St. Paul, 1908), 12:297-298, hereafter *MHS Collections*.

⁵ Featherstonhaugh, *Journal*, vol. 6, p. 115, Sept. 16, [1835], George William Featherstonhaugh and Family Papers, microfilm copy, MHS, original in Albany (N.Y.) Institute of History and Art; Eliza's handsomeness was also mentioned by Col. John H. Bliss, "Reminiscences of Fort Snelling," *MHS Collections* (1894), 6:340. All of the major's journals cited here are in the Taliaferro Papers.



Scenic view of Fort Snelling. This 1880 etching by Charles W. Post portrays an earlier era, as it was taken from Henry Lewis's 1848 painting.

sionally accompanied her husband on pleasant visits in the surrounding countryside to check on the Indians in his charge. On Sunday, June 21, 1835, for example, the couple “rode out to Lake Calhoun . . . on horse back 7 miles” to see the Indians at the agricultural establishment there. “They have much corn & potatoes planted,” the Taliaferro journals tell us. And again, a few months later, on September 4 Taliaferro noted that “I visited Lakes Harriet and Calhoun with Mrs. T—o, Mr. Dillon and Lt Wood” to see the unfinished mission school for Dakota at Lake Harriet, a place he describes as “a beautiful Lake . . . 6½ miles NW of Fort Snelling and the Sioux Agency. . . . a thick and beautiful wood skirts this location” to make it “indeed a rural spot.” Taliaferro’s obvious enjoyment of the natural scene around Fort Snelling, an enjoyment Eliza apparently shared, is recorded again in a journal entry for October 10, 1835. “Fine Scenery,” he observed, “beautiful country, excelling water, incomparable climate for general

health and an open field for sports men—who have good Dogs.” Moreover, the “beautiful lakes” were “abounding in fish of almost every description for a Northern climate.”⁶ He was even enthusiastic about the “salubrity of this climate for 6 or 7 months of the year [which] may be said not to be surpassed on the face of the habitable Globe . . . either for health or as an object of enterprise.” (A few weeks later, however, on October 29, when the Minnesota winter had blown its first icy blasts, he changed his mind about the salubrious climate and complained that it made him ill.)

But even in the winter there were pleasant evenings at home. Eliza had a piano, perhaps the first one in the Minnesota country, and she was known as an accomplished player. Another visitor, the Frenchman Joseph N. Nicollet, mathematician, explorer, map maker, astronomer, and talented musician, wrote of Eliza’s proficiency on the piano as well as of the Taliaferros’ warm hospitality. During the long winter nights of 1836 that Nicollet spent as a lodger in their house, he would play the violin while Eliza accompanied him on the piano. Indeed, they formed a lasting friendship. Taliaferro recorded a later visit when Eliza even acted as the

⁶ Rhoads, quoting Taliaferro, in “Fort Snelling Area,” 24.

⁷ Taliaferro journal, Oct. 10, 1835.

Frenchman's faithful nurse: "Mr. N when low spirited did not forget his sister as he called her—Mrs. Taliaferro—as he found her at Bedford [Pennsylvania] and passed the winter with us; and it was well he did, for he had to be carefully nursed and had the best medical attendance, Mrs. T dressing his blisters and acting faithfully the good Samaritan."⁸

The Taliaferros felt close enough to this man of many talents to tease him about his dedication to exploring and mapping the upper Mississippi valley, much as they encouraged him to do so. Taliaferro later recalled one conversation with Nicollet particularly well: "Could he," Nicollet asked, "go to the source of the Mississippi[?] Yes sir . . . Well, said he with a pleasant smile, You Americans beat da dev. Suppose I say can I go to h—ell. You say yes[?] Here his friend Mrs. T— remarked, None of us will send you that route if we can prevent it. Well, then, Madam, change my route to the upper Mississippi." Shortly thereafter Nicollet explored Lake Itasca, identified only four years earlier by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft as the source of the Mississippi River. Later, as an expression of friendship and esteem, Nicollet gave Eliza a small map he had drawn of the area, which he requested back temporarily to serve as a guide in completing his large, accurately detailed chart of the region. He neglected, however, to return the small keepsake to Eliza and, after his death, this treasured memento of her Minnesota years was lost.⁹

IT IS POSSIBLE that Eliza's household at the St. Peter's Agency also included, at some time, Lawrence Taliaferro's mixed-blood daughter, Mary. During the 1820s Taliaferro had formed a liaison with a Dakota woman, whose name has not come down to us, the daughter of the Mdewakanton chief, Cloud Man. Taliaferro's only child was born at the St. Peter's Agency on August 17, 1828, a few weeks after Taliaferro married Eliza in Pennsylvania. The records are vague on the subject but seem to suggest that the girl grew up at the agency and that, in time, Taliaferro sent her to the Indian mission school at Lake Harriet, which he helped establish with the missionary brothers Samuel W. and Gideon H. Pond. The agent represented Mary's claim as a "half-breed" for land and annuities under the Indian treaty of 1837. When he left the agency, he arranged for 11-year-old Mary to live in the home of Samuel Pond at the Lake Harriet mission, writing "if you can prevail upon Mary (& she seems some willing) to remain with you and Mrs. Pond, it would afford me consolation, and pleasure. I should be willing to pay you . . . her *board*[,] *clothing*, and *tuition*. In time she may from habit and instruction in household matters be able to assist Mrs. P—." Eventually, Mary Taliaferro married Warren Woodbury, a soldier at Fort Snelling, who fought at Vicksburg and died of yellow fever dur-



Joseph N. Nicollet, from a painting on ivory

ing the Civil War, leaving her with small children to care for. It appears that Taliaferro kept in touch with his daughter and was concerned for her welfare, but whether she ever lived in the house with him and Eliza is unclear. Equally unclear is Eliza's relationship with her husband's acknowledged daughter, whose existence was certainly no secret at the agency.¹⁰

At some time in the spring or summer of 1838 Eliza returned to her home in Pennsylvania. It seems she did not come back during the next year to Fort Snelling. Perhaps life at the frontier finally proved too much for her and she decided to wait for her husband in the East. A little over a year later, Lawrence Taliaferro

⁸ Taliaferro, *Autobiography*, 71, 72, vol. 19, Taliaferro Papers.

⁹ Taliaferro *Autobiography*, 70. Taliaferro even covered the losses Nicollet suffered when he was robbed of his canoes and provisions while bivouacked at the Falls of St. Anthony on July 26, 1836; see J[acob] V. Brower, "The Mississippi River and its Source," *MHS Collections* (1893), 7:157.

¹⁰ Taliaferro to Samuel W. Pond, Aug. 26, 1839, Pond Family Papers, MHS. Mary Taliaferro was a first cousin to several other mixed-blood children at Fort Snelling, including Nancy Eastman, the daughter of Captain Seth Eastman, who was stationed at Fort Snelling in the 1830s and in the 1840s was commandant of the post. Taliaferro had the charge of several additional mixed-blood children including Jane Lamont and Elizabeth Williams, also cousins of Mary Taliaferro.



Samuel W. Pond



Portrait of the young Eliza Dillon

resigned his commission as Indian agent at Fort Snelling and, after stopping in St. Louis on the way, he rejoined his wife on August 12, 1839, in Bedford, where the couple spent the rest of their days.

Eliza's home in Bedford was very different from the small stone dwelling at the St. Peter's Agency. One of the handsomest buildings in town, it was designed like the elegant houses of Major Taliaferro's Virginia boyhood. It featured the tall, double chimneys characteristic of the Virginia mansions he remembered and boasted an elaborate railed cornice on the exterior and a magnificent curved staircase inside. There is a story that the timber for the house was cut from trees at his boyhood home, sawed into various lengths, brought to Bedford, and stacked on the lot to air dry for several years before the carpenters' work began. The builders' labors were probably supervised by Eliza's parents, who gave the land to the couple. In addition to the main house, the Taliaferros' Bedford place also boasted several "dependencies" considered essential to a gentle-

man's residence. These included a stable, two outdoor privies, a smokehouse, and servants' quarters.¹¹ A fire at the main house in March, 1865, was confined to the second floor; though the house itself and most of the furniture was saved, the library, containing many of Taliaferro's private papers and journals, was lost. After a brief illness, Major Taliaferro died in the Bedford house on January 20, 1871. In ill health, Eliza continued to live there until her own death on March 29, 1875. Both she and her husband lie in the graveyard of the Bedford Presbyterian church in a small brick crypt topped by a marble slab. It is inscribed with one name—Taliaferro.

THE IMAGE of Eliza Taliaferro that emerges from these scanty records is a pale and shadowy one. It would remain so were it not for the three-quarter-length portrait of her in the art collection of the Minnesota Historical Society, a portrait that adds a strong visual presence to the faint written one (see cover). The painting represents Eliza standing in a landscape and pulling on a glove in an elegant gesture. Dressed formally and with her hair carefully arranged in the current fashion, she confronts the viewer almost directly with a candid and straightforward glance. This portrait is quite different from an earlier one of Eliza, now in the New Britain Museum of American Art in Con-

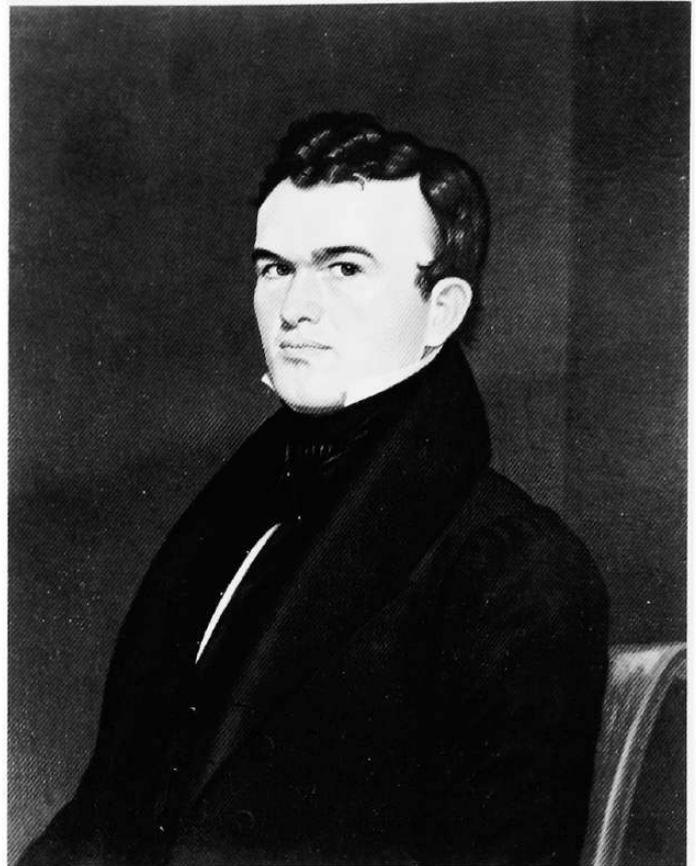
¹¹ Garbrick, "Tate House," 89-95; see also the *Bedford Democratic Inquirer*, Mar. 17, 1865, typed transcript in Dillon-Taliaferro Family Data. The house was also described by LeGrand Perce of Bedford, who lived in it for many years before it was torn down in the 1950s to make room for a motel; telephone conversation with the author, Nov. 5, 1989. (Perce is not a descendant of the Taliaferros.)

necticut, which was possibly painted on the occasion of her marriage. It depicts a younger woman and is painted with a much looser brush. Smiling happily at the viewer, she is seated in a chair whose curved arm gracefully opposes the curve of the shawl thrown over her left shoulder. Here too the artist is unknown. Both paintings are unsigned, and no attempt at attributing the earlier one will be made here. The later picture, however, bears such close stylistic similarities to the early work of the Missouri artist George Caleb Bingham (1811–79) that an attribution to him ought to be considered. Though no documentary evidence has been found linking Eliza Taliaferro with Bingham, she visited St. Louis, where he worked off and on, frequently enough to make such a connection tenable.

Aside from opportunity, the portrait of Eliza Taliaferro is very characteristic of Bingham's early paintings, especially during the mid-1830s when she would have been most likely to have visited St. Louis. In striving to capture the reality of the sitter's personality, a skill that contemporaries admired even in the young Bingham, there is a precise definition of planes and the firm, clear draughtsmanship that bears his stamp. Indeed, in 1835, a local admirer noted that Bingham was sometimes too faithful a draughtsman to please the conceit of the sitter.¹² The hard modeling and exact delineation of form also speak of a young artist not yet completely sure of himself. Nevertheless, the painting exhibits a certain self-confidence, an assurance that is also apparent in the artist's self-portrait of 1835, painted when Bingham was only 24 years old. Here, too, is a crystalline quality of drawing and the same solid definition of form that appears in the portrait of Eliza Taliaferro. Beyond that, however, particularly in the self-portrait, there is a depth of psychological probing that points to an artist of major talent.

The sharpness of execution and the rather harsh color contrast also reveal the hand of a self-taught artist, as indeed Bingham was at this time. Another perceptive but not unsympathetic contemporary critic, commenting on Bingham's work in the *Jeffersonian Republican* of January 2, 1836, wrote that the artist's success in portrait painting "is all the result of perseverance and his own genius, no master's hand directed his pencil, no wise head pointed out his faults—he alone designed and executed. His portraits are invariably good," he went on, "yet there is a want of skill in coloring evinced, which does not disclose a want of genius but of instruction."¹³

The young painter was well aware of his own deficiencies, writing in a letter to his fiancée, Elizabeth Hutchison, in 1835 that "though I generally succeed in pleasing others, it is but seldom I can please myself—in fact no work has yet gone from my hands with which I have been perfectly satisfied . . . I have yet," he added,



George Caleb Bingham, self-portrait

"scarcely learned to paint the human face, after having accomplished which, I shall have ascended but one step toward that eminence to which the art of painting may be carried."¹⁴

That he was trying hard indeed to paint the human face is evident in the portrait of Eliza Taliaferro as well as in a number of his other portraits depicting women from the second half of the 1830s. Unavailable for reproduction here since they are in private collections are the significantly similar portraits of Mrs. William Franklin Dunnica (Martha Jane Shackelford), about 1838–39, one of the very few of this period that, like the portrait of Eliza Taliaferro, is placed in a landscape setting; of Mrs. Lewis Baumgardner (Hetty Ann Halstead), 1839; and, closest of all to the picture of Eliza, the 1837 portrait of Mrs. David Steele Lamme (Sophia

¹² Albert Christ-Janer, *George Caleb Bingham of Missouri: The Story of An Artist* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1940), 18.

¹³ Quoted in Christ-Janer, *Bingham*, 18.

¹⁴ Quoted in E. Maurice Bloch, *The Paintings of George Caleb Bingham: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), 9.

Woodson Hickman) and her son, William Wirt.¹⁵ This too includes a landscape, though seen through a window (in the manner of the early American limners), rather than surrounding the sitters. The firmness of drawing here, the solid structure of face and form, the solemn concentration of gaze, and even such details of costume as the treatment of Sophia's fringed shawl are unmistakably the work of the same hand that portrayed Eliza Taliaferro.

Stylistic similarities to Bingham's work also appear in the landscape setting of the Taliaferro portrait, especially when compared with the artist's later scenes of raftsmen on the Missouri River. There is not only the "layering" of the landscape planes but the very characteristic detail of the silhouetted stump of a tree branch that appears to the left, above Eliza's head. Contrasting with the lush foliage, this stump points downward toward the subject of the composition, echoing the design of Eliza's tidy ringlets. And even though the landscape background may have been just a studio drop, this detail constitutes the type of grace note that is typical of Bingham's special touch.

By the time Bingham painted the portrait of Mrs. John Fletcher Darby (Mary Wilkinson) in 1839, he had had the benefit of studying art briefly in Philadelphia and, possibly, of having visited in New York where he could observe—and learn from—the work of other artists. Such opportunities were hardly available to him on the Missouri frontier where his own untutored work was probably the best he had ever seen. The 1839 portrait of Mrs. Darby reveals a noticeable advance in Bingham's ability to achieve a smoother, less abrupt, transition in tone and value in the portrayal of the human form and, therefore, a more naturalistic effect. The picture retains, however, the firmness and simplicity of his earlier portraits.

When compared with the increased sophistication of the portrait of Mrs. Darby, Eliza Taliaferro's picture, its strength and monumentality notwithstanding, displays a certain primitive provincialism. The combination of these qualities of pictorial power and naive imagery indicates that the portrait was probably painted at some time before Bingham's art lessons in 1838.



Portrait of Mrs. John Fletcher Darby

Since the artist was painting in St. Louis in 1836 for the longest continuous period in the decade of the 1830s, one can legitimately surmise that that year is the date of the Eliza Taliaferro portrait. She could easily have visited her brother in St. Louis during 1836, and it may, indeed, have been Horatio Dillon who introduced Eliza to George Caleb Bingham. Dillon occasionally liked to draw himself and may have been likely to know other St. Louis artists.¹⁶ Whoever furnished the introduction, the result was a portrait of both artistic merit and historical significance. We are much indebted to the artist's brush for bringing to life this image of a long-vanished lady of the Minnesota frontier.

¹⁵ For reproductions of these paintings, see Bloch, *George Caleb Bingham*, numbers 68, 78, and 37, respectively.

¹⁶ Dillon drew a pictorial sketch of Fort Snelling, which Lawrence Taliaferro enclosed in a letter to President James Buchanan in 1857; introductory page to vol. 18 of Taliaferro Papers.

The illustration on p. 151, right, is from the collections of the New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut, gift of Jeffrey Brown; that on p. 152 is from The St. Louis Art Museum; the one on p. 153 is neg. D-38, courtesy the Missouri Historical Society. All other illustrations are in the MHS collections.



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