

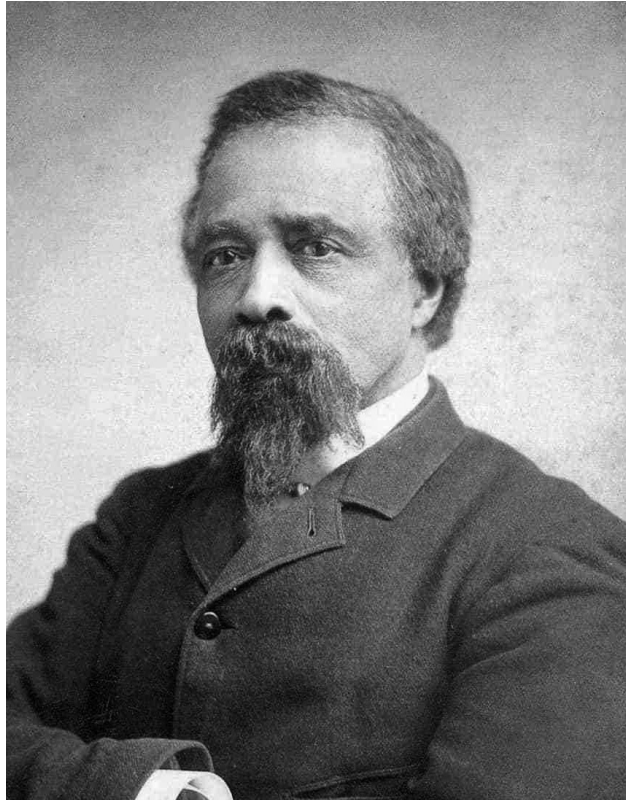
Edward Bannister

Painter

ONE OF ST. Andrews' most famous exports was Edward Bannister, a black painter who made a name for himself in Boston and Providence in the latter part of the 19th century and whose fame continues undiminished today. Anyone interested in the details of Bannister's professional life – his work as a barber in the early days, the chronology of his numerous paintings and commissions; his advocacy of abolitionist causes in concert with his wife, Christina Carteaux, support of black culture, and public recognition generally, could not do better than to consult the *Bannister Project*, a branch of the work of the *Providence Art Club*, of which Bannister was a founding member in 1870, and in particular the researches of Michael McGuigan, who has collected an impressive bibliography of articles and books on Bannister, and provided a summary account of his artistic career.

Bannister shipped out of St. Andrews with his younger brother William in the late 1840s. A Boston city directory has them working as barbers in 1850 but beyond a few statistical facts, just about nothing is known of Bannister's life before that. We know that his father, also Edward Bannister, married Hannah Alexander in 1826; that Edward was born in 1828 and William in 1830. And we know with virtual certainty that his mother was the "Hannah, daughter of Black Jeffrey" who Rev. Samuel Andrews recorded in his daybook as having christened on Sept. 10, 1809. We can see, also, in Andrews' daybook and in All Saints Church records of births, marriages and burials, that Hannah belonged to a fairly large family of Alexanders which included Rueben Alexander, very likely the brother or other close relative of Jeffrey, and his wife Violet Tucker, who was probably the slave, or former slave, called Black Violet, who Grace Helen Mowat understood came to St. Andrews with Col. Christopher Hatch in 1788. We know that Edward Bannister Senior died aged 49 in 1832, but what happened to Hannah, and what kind of life

**Edward
Mitchell
Bannister.
1828 - 1901**



the Bannister boys had in St. Andrews after that we do not know. The black Boston journalist, T. Thomas Fortune, in a well-known retrospective on Bannister, painted a rather romantic picture of the early part of Bannister's life in St. Andrews, where racism was unknown and the embryonic painter, what time he was not tending his father's cows, gloried in the beauties of nature and dreamed of becoming an artist. Mr. McGuigan notes that "very little published information about the Bannisters should be considered definitive. There are contradictions, inconsistencies, and myths galore in the literature about the Bannisters."

To the author's knowledge, Bannister was mentioned only twice in the local papers – once in a reprint of Fortune's account above mentioned, toward the end of Bannister's life, and once in an obituary. ~



Grave of
Edward
Bannister.
North Burial
Ground,
Providence,
Rhode Island

Beacon

Nov. 19, 1896

A Colored Artist Who First Breathed the Air of Heaven under St. Andrew Skies

T. Thomas Fortune has an interesting two-column sketch of artist Bannister in the *New York Sun* from which we make the following extracts:

"Edward M. Bannister of Providence who has grown old as an artist, was born in St. Andrews, New Brunswick, about sixty-three years ago. His parents were of French, Indian and African origin. He attended the village school, and while there laid the foundation of a practical education. Before his tenth year he had gained a local reputation for cleverness in making pictures of his schoolmates and his father's neighbors. He was apprenticed to a most successful cobbler in St. Andrews, but all his relatives and friends expected

him to become a great artist. At that early day there were not many colored people in St. Andrews, and so thoroughly free from race prejudice were the inhabitants that 'colored' was rarely heard among them. It was not until he became ambitious to develop his artistic powers, and consequently left his native town, that he was made to feel the distinction between a white and a brown skin.

"While at home in St. Andrews, he lived in an atmosphere of British fair play, where character and not race made the man; consequently his individuality was that of an enterprising 'Down Easter.' The presence of African blood in his veins had no power to make him accept a prescribed course, or be other than what his environment made him. . . .

"Mr. Bannister had been but a short while from St. Andrews before he began to deal directly with attempts to estimate his manhood by the appreciation of his complexion. Naturally this aroused his British ire and led to many vigorous protests which rarely ended short of fistic exploits. Had his love for art been less determined, he would have given up in despair and settled down to shipbuilding or some other mechanical calling in his native village. He was ever sensitive to the beauties of nature. As a boy trudging after his father's cows he has stood in open-mouthed wonder at the gorgeous sunsets and followed with breathless suspense the tipping of trees and flowers with gold. In total forgetfulness of everything save the wonderful color combinations, he has laid for hours stretched flat on the grassy plain, or perched, gnome-like, on some great, bare rock watching the colors die away into soft translucency, then into night. Many a time he has gone supperless to his garret bed because he was so late returning with the cows. It is told of him that he really loved the black darkness because it made the colors the next day newer to him. And a visit to his well-filled studio indirectly gives a semblance of truth to the story. Among a great number of landscape studies only an occasional moonlight is to be seen. His fancy seems to run entirely in sunny studies.

"When he left St. Andrews his brain was fired with the ambition to reproduce on canvas the glowing pictures of wild coast life and sylvan loveliness that had filled his childhood hours with never ceasing wonder. But contact with narrow, prejudiced minds threw

a pall over these bright hopes and turned his mind from nature to the contemplation of man. He became absorbed in his hope to paint the human figure. After considerable wandering, embittered by many hardships and incidents calculated to dishearten a less rugged nature, he settled down to the study of art in Boston. He studied under Dr. Rimmer and showed such indications of genius that he soon attracted the attention of all the professors labouring with Dr. Rimmer. In this way he became associated with some very choice spirits. His first experience as an art student made him very slow in the formation of friendships outside of the realm of art, and the majority of his associates of today resulted from the old student contact in Dr. Rimmer's classes. He finished his studies at Boston and went to Providence in 1871, where he has since resided. Before leaving Boston he became a regular exhibitor at the annual exposition of the Boston Art Club. The members of the Providence Art League met him very cordially and in the studies that he regularly presented they recognized a decided addition to the class of painters located there devoted to the French school illustrated by Bouguereau.

"Having found a greater demand for landscapes than figure pieces, he attended the Narragansett coast indefatigably, meeting with most flattering success, if a ready market can be deemed such. His most noted effort was "Under the Oaks," which received the first award medal at the Centennial, Philadelphia, 1876. It was with many misgivings that he sent it to the Art Committee, like hundreds of other ambitious artists, with nothing but his simple signature attached. For many days he waited in feverish anxiety as to the result. As it was not rejected, his spirits rose appreciably. 'No news is good news,' he argued, and so time passed until the opening of the Art Gallery. Trembling he secured a catalogue, and soon found 'Bannister - "Under the Oaks" (54).' He was so glad that he sat down and thought of his boyhood dreams and wished that he might see again the well-remembered sunsets. Like one in a dream he threaded his way through the thronging crowds, and stood before his effort, his head bounding with joy. It was hung in the most favorable place. In his own modest way he tells an interesting incident as to how the Jury of Awards discovered that he was an Afro-American.

'I learned from the newspapers,' said he 'that "54" had received a first-prize gold medal, so I hurried to the committee room to make sure that the report was true. There was a great crowd there ahead of me. As I jostled among them, many resented my presence, some actually commenting within my hearing, in a most petulant manner, "What is that colored person in here for?" and similar discourteous remarks. Finally, when I succeeded in reaching the desk where inquiries were made, I endeavoured to gain the attention of the official in charge. He was very insolent. Without raising his eyes, he demanded in the most exasperating tone of voice, "Well, what do you want here anyway? Speak lively."

"I want to inquire concerning '54.' Is it a prize winner?"

"What's that to you?"

In an instant my blood was up; the deprecatory looks that passed between him and others in the room were unmistakeable. I was not an artist to them; I was simply an inquisitive colored man. His manner suggested a nature so small and petty that I could not bring myself to his level. Besides the thought flashed through my mind, "Why give this man a change to express his prejudice?" So, controlling myself, I said deliberately: "I am interested in the report that 'Under the Oaks' has received a prize; I painted the picture." An explosion could not have made a more marked impression. Without hesitation he apologized, and soon everyone in the room was bowing and scraping to me. Mr. Duff of Boston purchased the picture for \$1,500.'

"Since that time Mr. Bannister has labored very industriously, exhibiting each year in Boston and Providence, making a comfortable income. A few years ago he purchased a fine sailing yacht, and all his leisure hours were spent sailing around Newport and adjacent points for pleasure. He is naturally fond of the sea, and is as thoroughly at home when on water as on land. A recent attack of the grippe makes the enjoyment a doubtful benefit, much to his regret.

"Up to the present time his figure pieces have been almost entirely Scriptural. Four of his best compositions in this line have been purchased by one of the Roman Catholic churches of Providence. At odd intervals he has devoted considerable time to an original

conception of the invitation, 'Come unto Me all that ye that are weary and heavy laden.' He hopes to make it the crowning work of his life.

"Mr. Bannister's studio is very pleasantly situated in a large building, almost entirely occupied by artists. There is nothing about it to suggest the Afro-American except the painter himself and a portrait of his wife."

(Old residents of St. Andrews recollect the Bannisters very well. There were two young men in the family, one known as "Ed" and the other as "Bill." They were smart, athletic young fellows, and left here between forty and fifty years ago. One of them established himself as a barber on Haymarket Square, Boston.)

Beacon

Jan. 17, 1901

A New Brunswick Artist

Providence, R. I. Jan. 10

Edward M. Bannister, a native of St. Andrews, New Brunswick, a famous negro artist, died suddenly of heart disease today. He ranked with the foremost American artists, his work being on exhibition in the leading galleries, and won prizes at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition. He was born of West Indian parentage. (Though many years have elapsed since the Bannister family left St. Andrews, there are some of the older residents who still remember the famous artist.)