
Joseph Gales, Jr.

(1786–1860)

For a half century before the Civil War, Joseph Gales, Jr., played a significant role in recording the debates of the U.S. Senate. Gales was born in England and immigrated to the United States as a child with his parents. He learned the printing trade and stenographic skills, and in 1807 Gales moved to Washington, D.C., where he joined the *National Intelligencer* newspaper and began reporting congressional proceedings. When the *Intelligencer's* founder, Samuel H. Smith, retired in 1810, Gales took over as owner and editor of the paper, in partnership with his brother-in-law, William W. Seaton.

At first, Gales was the Senate's sole reporter, and Seaton reported on the House of Representatives. The *Intelligencer* supported the Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe administrations, and Gales and Seaton were selected as the official printers of Congress from 1819 to 1829. In addition to printing government documents, they began compiling their reports of floor debates and publishing them in the *Register of Debates*, a forerunner of the *Congressional Record*. Gales also served as mayor of Washington, D.C., from 1827 to 1830. Gales and Seaton flourished during the "Era of Good Feelings," a period of relative political complacency, but after Congress was split between the Whigs and Democrats, the partners lost their official patronage. The *National Intelligencer* continued to be published until 1868; Gales died in 1860 and Seaton retired in 1864.

Shortly after the retirement of Joseph Gales from the *National Intelligencer*, an admirer wrote, "As an editor, Mr. Gales has few equals in the United States, and no superior." The source, one Oliver H. Smith, further volunteered that Henry Clay had considered Gales, after John Quincy Adams, to be the man who "knew the most of our country, and its prominent men." Smith offered a description of Gales that accords well with the Senate's portrait by George P.A. Healy. In physique, he wrote, "Mr. Gales is about the common hight [sic], well made, broad face, remarkably large head, prominent, square forehead, heavy coat of hair. . . ."¹

This handsome, assured portrait commemorates Gales's role in the famous Senate debate between Robert Young Hayne and Daniel Webster in 1830. South Carolina's nullification doctrine, formulated by Vice President John C. Calhoun and put forward in a Senate speech by Senator Hayne, posed an important test for the Union. Webster, having decided to answer Hayne, asked Gales to report his speech. Gales's shorthand notes, as copied by his wife and revised by Webster, became the historical source for the instantly famous address. Gales soon thereafter adopted the stirring closing words of Webster's reply to Hayne—"Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable!"—and printed them above his editorial column from that time forward.

George P.A. Healy was already a successful and prolific portraitist when he created this likeness of Gales. The artist had shown evidence of talent at an early age and was encouraged by the prominent painter Thomas Sully. Healy later moved to Paris and established himself as an internationally known portraitist patronized by royalty and the upper class. He returned to the United States in 1842 and spent much of his time in Washington, D.C., on numerous portrait commissions.

A related historical painting by Healy, *Webster's Reply to Hayne*, was originally commissioned by King Louis Philippe of France. Healy had suggested the subject to the king in the summer or fall of 1843. Louis Philippe envisioned a museum in the former royal palace at Versailles that would be dedicated to the ideals and individuals of modern republicanism in Europe and America. To that end, he had already sent Healy back to America in 1842 to paint portraits or copy existing portraits of American statesmen for his museum. *Webster's Reply to Hayne* was destined for the same site. But with the fall of Louis Philippe in 1848, that project was suspended. In 1852 the painting was exhibited

Joseph Gales

George Peter Alexander Healy (1813-1894)

Oil on canvas, ca. 1844

35 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 28 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches (90.5 x 73 cm)

Unsigned

Purchased by the U.S. Senate Commission on Art, 1984

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This 1854 lithograph of Joseph Gales by Leopold Grozelier was based on the Senate's portrait of the famous journalist.
(National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution)

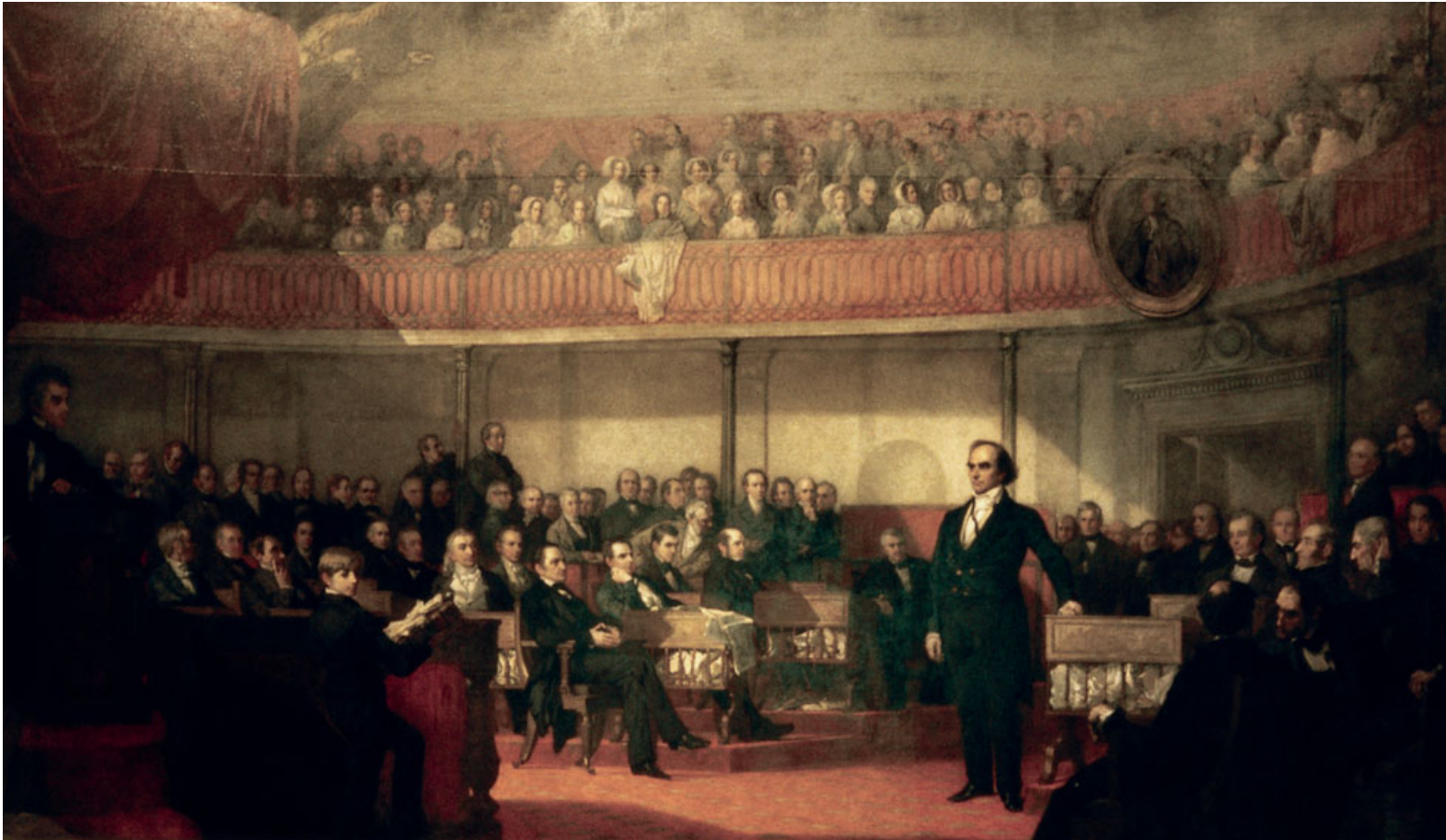


at Faneuil Hall in Boston, where it has remained. In his monumental canvas, painted some 20 years after the event, Healy included not only the members who witnessed the debates, but also individuals he knew or admired who were never present. He situated Joseph Gales, recorder of the historic event, fairly prominently in the center background.

Gales's portrait is not a study for the large history painting, but a carefully finished independent portrait derived from such a study. Artists engaged on paintings that contained likenesses of many notable individuals were frequently able to increase their earnings by painting separate finished portraits commissioned by each sitter. *Webster's Reply to Hayne* resulted in 135 such portraits. Marie de Mare, granddaughter and biographer of the artist, wrote, "As Healy hoped, many of the sitters ordered their portraits as painted in the picture, and many ladies appeared at his studio dressed in becoming 1830 costumes resurrected from their attic trunks."² A number of the life studies were painted during the

spring and summer of 1844, and the Senate's portrait of Joseph Gales is presumed to have been made then. Gales later acquired the portrait, which became a favorite likeness and remained in the family until the Senate purchased it.

Gales is pictured behind a balustrade, his forearm resting on the rail. The head is set high on the canvas, which helps to reinforce the appearance that Gales is standing, although he is shown only half-length. The notebook and pen he holds allude generally to his profession as a recorder and reporter of congressional debates, and circumstantially to his role in the Webster-Hayne debate. Yet the setting created by Healy is more decorative than specific to the Senate Chamber, where the debate took place. A maroon drapery is behind Gales, pulled back to reveal an abbreviated landscape of sky and trees. Against this dark background, Gales's silver-gray hair and warm flesh tones stand out strongly, and the expressive, intelligent head is offset by the white and lilac cravat with a striking zigzag stripe.



For the next 50 years, Healy worked on both sides of the Atlantic. His painting *Franklin Urging the Claims of the American Colonies before Louis XVI* won a gold medal at the Paris International Exposition of 1855, and he was the first American artist invited to contribute a self-portrait to the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. In failing health, Healy moved back to America in 1892. He died two years later in Chicago.

In 1851 George P.A. Healy completed his monumental painting *Webster's Reply to Hayne*. Joseph Gales can be seen in the center background.

(Courtesy Boston Art Commission 1999)