

7: Asahel Lynde Powers *Portrait of a Dark-haired Man Reading the "Genesee Farmer"* (ca. 1839)

Jessica Marlen

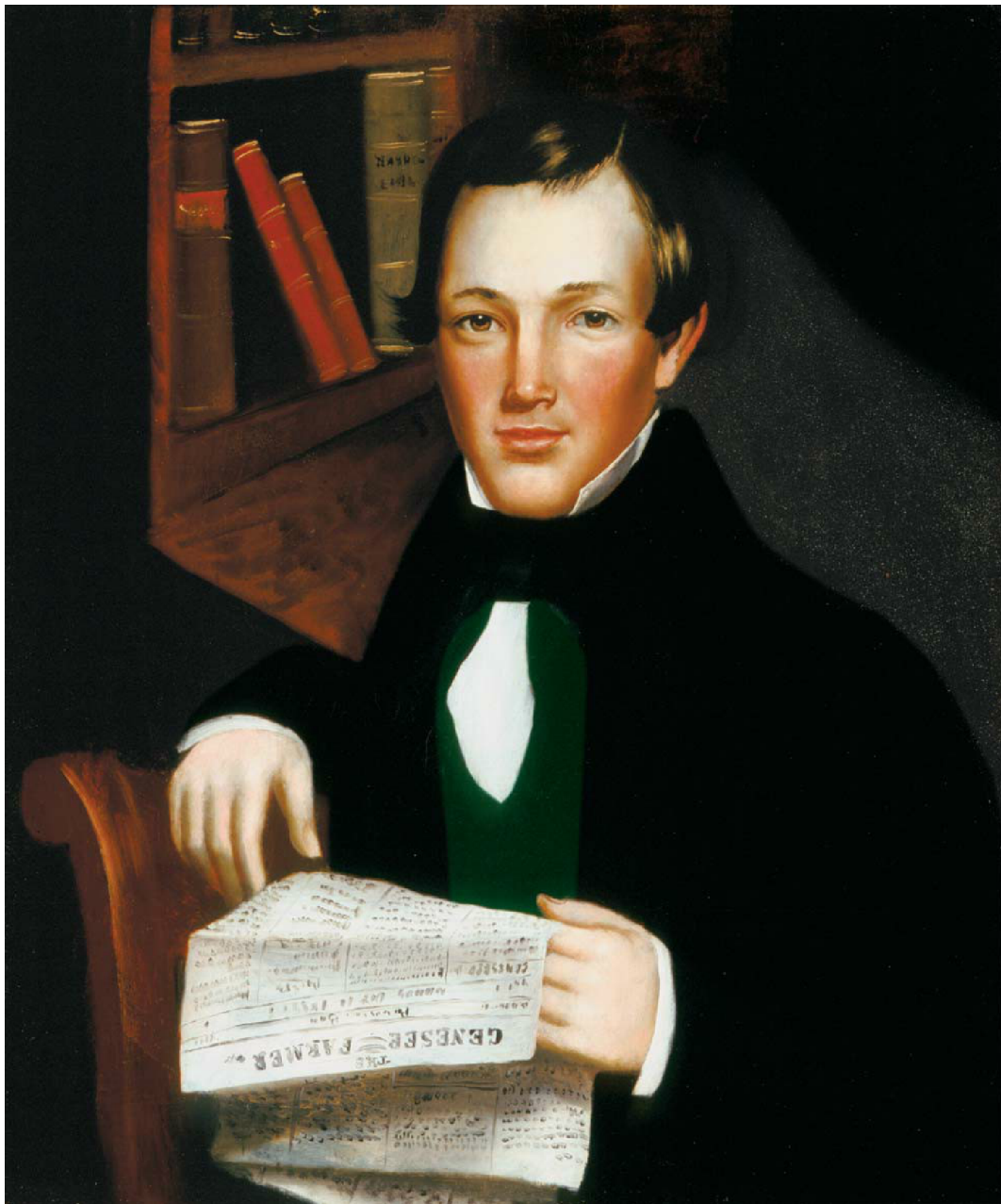
The New England itinerant portrait painter Asahel Lynde Powers rarely recorded the names of his sitters. As is common with many American folk portraits, the identity of the man in *Portrait of a Dark-haired Man Reading "The Genesee Farmer"* remains a mystery. A handsome young man appears to be sitting in his study on an Empire settee. Large, amiable brown eyes gaze out at the viewer. The meticulous depiction of his delicately proportioned nose and lips contrasts with the rudimentary treatment of his hands and ear. His face contains a range of tones; gray-green underpainting is visible below the pale flesh where the light strikes his forehead, ruddy reds flush his cheeks, bright white highlights flash on the tip of his nose and along the line of his upper lip. His fashionable suit speaks of prosperity—a black frock coat with a high, generous collar and black cravat, a crisp white shirt and green vest with black embroidery. Fine, brown hair ends in curving wisps that frame his face. In the background, a curtain swag on the right echoes the shape of his collar and shoulder; on the left, a drop-front secretary with an opened bookshelf displays a number of fine, leather-bound books. The newspaper in the sitter's hands, the most conspicuous element of the portrait, is an issue of the early Rochester publication *The Genesee Farmer*, dated October 12, 1839.

The Genesee Farmer was a weekly agricultural journal published in Rochester from 1831 to 1839 by Luther Tucker (1802–1873), editor of the *Rochester Daily Advertiser*.¹ Intended to spread the collective wisdom of the region gained through the experience of “cultivating Scientifically the soil...so lately reclaimed from the wilderness & prepared for the highest state of Agriculture,” the first issue proclaimed, “No part of the world is more richly blessed with soil and climate...than the western part of the state of New York—that part called OLD GENESEE.”² Indeed, early settlers to western New York were drawn to the promise of Rochester's geographic amenities: the agricultural abundance of the Genesee River Valley, the shipping potential of the Genesee River, and the High Falls destiny as a milling center. With the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, Rochester became a major agricultural and trade center in western New York.

Five years prior to the inception of *The Genesee Farmer* in 1831, a visitor described the vitality of the city:

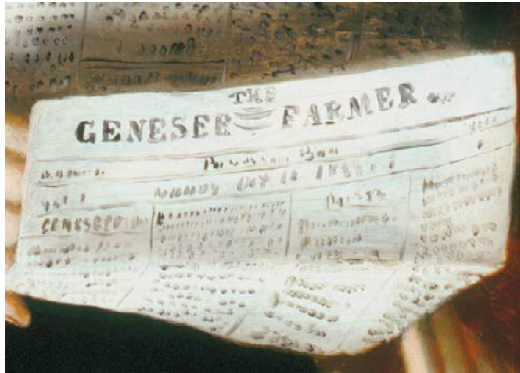
*It is difficult to begin a sketch of such a place as Rochester. The place is in such motion....It may be referred to as standing proof that the wilderness may be made to vanish almost at a stroke, and give place in as little time to a city! It is like a hive; and the apertures every where around it, are full of bees, pressing into it....The country round about is fertile beyond any idea you can form of it....Who has not heard of the Genesee country? And of its proverbial fertility?*³

Rochester's agricultural prowess had come to define the city. By the 1820s Rochester earned the nickname “Flour City” due to the quality and quantity of its flour production. By mid-century, the city's nickname changed to “Flower City” to reflect the booming nursery and seed businesses of Ellwanger & Barry and James Vick.



It was in the fecund climate of this young, spirited city that *The Genesee Farmer* was conceived. Despite its regional title, *The Genesee Farmer* became a national publication, spreading its progres-

sive and scientific agricultural spirit throughout the country. Its popularity was based on the diverse array of technical and practical information provided for all facets of agrarian life. Some of the topics in the October 12, 1839 issue (the issue in this portrait) include tips on how to free land of wire worms and field mice, the proper time to harvest wheat and dig potatoes, the best method for propagating apples, and the superior quality of ground bones as crop fertilizer (including a chemical analysis of different bone compositions).



Asahel Lynde Powers,
1813–1843

*Portrait of a Dark-haired Man
Reading the “Genesee Farmer”*
(detail, inverted), ca. 1839
Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in.
Virginia Jeffrey Smith Fund,
2001.1

Letters to the editor were frequently published in response to particular articles so that *The Genesee Farmer* came to serve as a sounding board for shared experiences, failures, and successes among American farmers. An excerpt from the October 12th issue proclaims, “The man who takes an agricultural journal, profits by the experience of hundreds; while he who takes none, can profit alone from his own, and from that of perhaps a few neighbors. The adage teaches, that two heads are better than one, the world over.”⁴ This communal spirit fostered responsible, scientific agricultural practices. A man who read *The Genesee Farmer* allied himself with the progressive future of American farming. Hence, this gentleman’s reading material helps to illuminate, if not his name, then certainly a clear sense of the image this man wished to embody.

Asahel Lynde Powers was particularly adept at including in his portraits specific accessories of personal or public importance to his sitters—a watch fob, painter’s palette, bank notes, texts on botany and geometry, and even an ear trumpet for one hard-of-hearing young lady. As the eldest of seven in a farming family, Powers would have been familiar with the status of *The Genesee Farmer* as the premier publication for the progressive-minded gentleman farmer. Surely expected to take over the family farm, Powers chose instead to follow a dramatically different path, and by the age of eighteen was making a living painting portraits in and around his hometown of Springfield, Vermont.⁵

Powers’s early portraits are known for their intensity, due in part to the crisp, lively delineation of facial features, crude handling of anatomy, and lack of perspective and modeling. These characteristics are common in the work of self-taught itinerant portrait painters in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America. What is exceptional

about Powers is the striking development in his technical abilities midway through his brief career (ca. 1831–41). Whether his shift in style was due to an apprenticeship with another artist or to self-education, it is apparent that Powers was studying the European academic style and incorporating it into his portraits.⁶



Asahel Lynde Powers, 1813–1843

Dr. Joel Green, 1831
Oil on canvas, 50 x 36½ in.
framed
Springfield Art & Historical
Society, Springfield, Vermont

(Facing page)
Asahel Lynde Powers,
1813–1843
*Portrait of a Dark-haired Man
Reading the “Genesee Farmer,”*
ca. 1839
Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in.
Virginia Jeffrey Smith Fund,
2001.1

In *Portrait of a Dark-haired Man* Powers's evolving style is evident. The artist delights in capturing the subtleties of light falling across a face by carefully modeling this man's delicate features—a self-conscious rejection of his earlier linear style. Sketches found on the verso of the canvas are illustrative of an artist energized by new technique and eager to practice his skills.⁷ In addition to a couple of loosely drawn profiles, two evocative sketches of the same face from different angles are sensitive studies in chiaroscuro, point-of-view, and anatomy. Yet the portrait of the dark-haired man on the recto of the canvas remains essentially “folk” in Powers's ongoing naïveté in handling perspective and anatomy. An incomplete understanding of perspective results in the awkward positioning of the furniture in the background. Anatomical inconsistencies include a crudely painted ear and hands and the physical impossibility of a missing shoulder.

During this transitional time, sometime between 1839 and 1840, the artist moved from Vermont to live and paint in Franklin and Livingston Counties in upstate New York. Accompanying his simply worded advertisement, “A. L. Power, Portrait Painter. Room at John Nichols’ Hotel,” in the November 7, 1840, issue of the *Plattsburgh Republican* are the encouraging words of the editor: “If you want your Portrait taken, call on Mr. Power... We have seen some of his work; and were particularly struck with his skill in transferring the ‘human face divine’ to canvass....[E]xamine his work, and patronize him if you can—he deserves it.”⁸ Powers's academically influenced portraits clearly appealed to the aesthetic and practical sensibilities of his prospective clients in Plattsburgh.⁹



In the last years of his career (ca. 1839–1841), Powers's success as a portraitist lay in his ability to capture his clients in a fashion connoting health and prosperity. His mature style was reflective of the larger trend in portraiture away from the linear, humble, folk style embraced by earlier Americans and towards the more realistic, yet idealizing style of European academic portraits. The impulse to flatter a sitter's appearance is evident in Powers's late portraits, in which softened lines and pleasantly rounded features combine to create flush, healthy-looking individuals. Well-appointed interiors complement these hale and hardy figures. *Portrait of a Dark-haired Man Reading “The Genesee Farmer”* is a fascinating document of a provincial artist's determined attempt to move away from the naïveté of his early style towards a more worldly academic style. The result is this charming portrait of a young, educated, successful American farmer of his time.

Asahel Lynde Powers,
1813–1843
Portrait of a Dark-haired Man
Reading the “Genesee Farmer,”
(verso), ca. 1839
Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in.
Virginia Jeffrey Smith Fund,
2001.1

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