By Eliza Goodpasture '18

Destined by the accident of birth to live through the American Revolution during the early years of his adulthood, James Bowdoin was born into one world and matured in another. This transition from a political and intellectual order initially governed by aristocratic ideals to one favoring democratic principles, as exemplified by Bowdoin's remarkable decision to bequeath his substantial art collection to the institution with which he had endowed his family fortune and his family name, raises complex questions. Important work by Susan Wegner and Richard Saunders has already explored the influence on Bowdoin of his residence in post-revolutionary France during his tenure as Minister Plenipotentiary to Spain in 1805. However, little attention has yet been focused on Bowdoin's formative exposure to British social and intellectual culture and its importance in shaping his values and practices as a collector of fine art.

This essay, then, will explore the impact of time spent by Bowdoin during his youth in England. While at university and on his Grand Tour, he spent time in circles that were grounded in the culture of aristocracy and country house living in Britain, and he was influenced by their attitudes towards art and collecting. His collection reflects this influence, and set an early precedent for American collectors. I argue that understanding Bowdoin's exposure to hereditary British systems of wealth and status offers valuable insights into the culture that undergirded his decision to bequeath his collection to the College upon his death. Though given before the idea

¹ Katharine Watson, comp., *The Legacy of James Bowdoin III* (Brunswick, ME: Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 1994).

of the public or academic museum was fully formed in the public consciousness, it would become the nucleus of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art. But Bowdoin's decision to bequeath his collection to the College that bore his family name also represented a performance of his elite status and a way to cement his legacy as a member of one of New England's most affluent families. Bowdoin's generous bequest to Bowdoin College reinforced, even as it sought to expand, the culture of privilege that it represented, setting into play important questions about access and serving the "common good" that continue to resonate today.

James Bowdoin III was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1752 to a prominent political family (FIGURE 1). His father, James Bowdoin II, would go on to be a leader in the American Revolution, the governor of Massachusetts, and a founder of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, among many other accomplishments and offices. Young James Bowdoin III would live a life seemingly more inclined toward pleasure than toward serious study. He was raised in a grand house in Boston furnished in a "princely manner." He abandoned his studies at Harvard after two years in 1769, due to poor health. He sailed to London and began to study law at Christ Church, Oxford, in June 1771, but by November had left Oxford for the King's Riding School. He wrote to his father of the shift, "I have just begun to learn French, likewise Dancing and Fencing, all which I expect to be perfect master of before my return." His father was not altogether pleased with his choice of an aristocratic education, and brought him home in April 1772. The next year, Bowdoin departed for his Grand Tour, accompanied by Ward Nicholas Boylston. This trip placed him squarely in the company of wealthy, educated young men across

² Charles C. Calhoun, *A Small College in Maine: Two Hundred Years of Bowdoin College* (Brunswick, ME: Bowdoin College, 1993), 15.

³ Richard Saunders, "James Bowdoin III (1752-1811)," in *The Legacy of James Bowdoin III*, comp. Katharine Watson (Brunswick, ME: Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 1994).

⁴ JB3 to JB2. Found in Saunders, "James Bowdoin III (1752-1811), original in the Winthrop Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Letter dated 6 November 1771.

Europe, and distinguished him from many of his American peers. In her essay on James Bowdoin's drawings, Sarah Cantor parses through Bowdoin's journey in detail. As she explains, over the course of his two year journey, Bowdoin visited Naples, Pompeii, Herculaneum, Rome, Florence, Bologna, Lyons, England, and likely other towns and cities along the way. While in Naples, Bowdoin became acquainted with Sir William Hamilton, the British ambassador to Naples and one of the most widely known and celebrated British collectors of antiquities (FIGURE 2).⁵ This relationship suggests that Bowdoin would have likely interacted with many of the most prominent British collectors and traveling aristocrats of his time.

After his Grand Tour, Bowdoin spent nearly a year, from the late fall of 1774 through the late summer of 1775, in England. His sister, Lady Elizabeth Temple, lived there with her husband Sir John Temple, though they moved to New York not long after (FIGURE 3). The Temples were minor aristocrats, connected with Stowe House in Buckinghamshire, England. The house was a major crossroads of royalty and aristocracy from across Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. Though the Temple family no longer lived in Stowe following the death of the Sir Richard Temple, 4th baronet of Stowe, without an heir in 1749, Elizabeth's husband Sir John claimed the title of 8th baronet of Stowe in 1786.⁶ This claim is disputed by some, but indicates that the Temple family maintained a connection with at least some branches of the Temple-Grenville family, which had inherited control over the estate of Stowe.⁷ Though it is unclear exactly how James Bowdoin spent his some ten months in England, it is known that he chose to

⁵ Sarah Cantor, "James Bowdoin III and America's Earliest Collection of Drawings," in *Art Treasures, Gracefully Drawn: James Bowdoin III and America's Earliest Drawing Collection* (Brunswick, ME: Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 2015).

⁶John Burke (1832). *Burke's Peerage*. II (fourth ed.) London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley. P. 530

⁷ Temple Prime, *Some Account of the Temple Family* (New York: The De Vynne Press, 1899).

leave many of the paintings he had purchased on his Grand Tour with his sister in England, on the instructions that she send them on to him in Boston. This decision is important both because it confirms that Bowdoin did buy a significant number of paintings on this trip and because it confirms the Temples' residence in England during the duration of Bowdoin's sojourn there, and that he spent time with them at their place of residence. Bowdoin's connections with the Temples, as well as relationships he would have made at Oxford, the King's Riding School, and in British social circles in Italy, exposed him to a definitively aristocratic and European way of life and understanding of culture. He certainly encountered various art collections in the homes he would have visited, and understood these collections as integral parts of a gentleman's lifestyle. In the painting of the painting

Before the eighteenth century, aristocrats used art as a way to record their genealogy through portraits, as a display of wealth, and as a way to express their style and taste. These purposes continued into the eighteenth century, and were joined by the influence of Grand Tour culture and the rise of Enlightenment values. As intellect and reason became central attributes of value, aristocrats began to privilege intellectual pursuits like collecting, and the study and connoisseurship that went along with it. High culture and high society went hand in hand for a

⁸ Letter from Elizabeth Temple to James Bowdoin III, March 24, 1784, Reel 49, Winthrop Papers Microfilm, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. From Cantor, "James Bowdoin."

⁹ Elizabeth Temple was also involved in the arts, and knew artists and collectors while she lived in London, New York, and Boston. Her influence on her brother James' collecting and bequest to the College has yet to be fully explored, and was likely significant.

¹⁰ While in France, James and Sarah Bowdoin also had access to aristocratic or royal collections. In her diary, Sarah Bowdoin writes about their visit to Versailles: "we were shown as a very great favor the pictures of their late majesties, & their children…requested that we not mention that we had seen [illegible] as they are very seldom shown – the Palace, though destitute of furniture, evinces great works of magnificence …& must, I think, have been very far superior to the Palace of the Tuileries." October 1, 1806. This visit further confirms the Bowdoin's access to high society in Europe, and their interest in taking in the art collections of the homes they visited.

few decades, and created a true golden age of collecting, particularly of antiquities purchased (or stolen) from the Mediterranean region. This golden age created an intellectual community among the elite, but did not trickle down into the masses. ¹¹ As Iain Pears writes of British aristocrats or oligarchs at this moment, "they increasingly saw themselves as the cultural, social, and political core of the nation, 'citizens' in the Greek sense with the other ranks of society scarcely figuring in their understanding of the 'nation.'"¹²

At the same time, elite society also experienced a shift in discourse and understanding of a sense of the public. Jürgen Habermas proposes the introduction of the concept of the "public sphere" in the eighteenth century, particularly in England. Habermas conceives of the public sphere as characteristic of a historical epoch in which a public discourse began to broadly exist. In it, class and identity distinctions are set aside and educated individuals are able to converse on universally concerning topics, specifically through a focus on literature. This sphere exists within capitalist and democratic or democratizing states, and is a construction that was utilized by the "educated strata" as a tool of control of the state. This social development is painted by Habermas as inclusive, but as Nancy Fraser has pointed out, this was in many ways an appearance more than a reality. She writes that "... this network of clubs and associations – philanthropic, civic, professional, and cultural – was anything but accessible to everyone. On the contrary, it was the arena, the training ground and eventually the power base of a stratum of bourgeois men who were coming to see themselves as a 'universal class' and preparing to assert

¹¹ See Gervase Jackson-Stops, ed., *The Treasure Houses of Britain: Five Hundred Years of Private Patronage and Art Collecting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

¹² Iain Pears, *The Discovery of Painting: The Growth of Interest in the Arts in England, 1680-1768* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1988) p. 3.

¹³Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Boston: MIT Press, 1989), xxviii, 11-27.

their fitness to govern." She also points out that the public sphere was a space in which men engaged in dialogue with one another "as if" they were equal, not actually on terms of social equality. Fraser's critiques are aimed at moving the idea of the public sphere into modern capitalist societies, but they point to important ways Habermas' argument reveals the reality of a narrow strata of society, of which James Bowdoin was part. While the increasing social mobility of white men was indeed a democratizing force, it only went so far. Specifically in the world of British country houses, members of the elite enjoyed open access to one another's homes, but that privilege was not extended to members of the larger public (FIGURE 4). Carol Duncan writes that in England, "art galleries were thus "public" spaces in that they could equivocally frame the only "public" that was admissible: well-born, educated, men of taste, and, more marginally (if at all), well-born women."

Across Europe in the years around the turn of the nineteenth century, this new public sphere along with dawning republicanism raised the possibility and desire for public museums. The Louvre was the first of its kind in Europe, established in 1793, and as a manifestation of the French Revolution, it became a symbol of a new form of government. "The concept of high art was being rethought. Rather than a rare attainment, it was coming to be seen as a necessary component of every society, an organic expression of one or another particular national spirit." In England, when Bowdoin visited, the situation was much different. The most impressive royal collection ever assembled in England was amassed by Charles I, and dispersed upon his

¹⁴ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig C. Calhoun (Boston: MIT Press, 1992), 114.

¹⁵ Fraser, "Rethinking the Public," 120.

¹⁶ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 36.

¹⁷ Duncan, Civilizing Rituals, 25.

decapitation in 1649. Aristocrats, as a class, maintained their power and art collections through the political turmoil of the monarchy through the centuries. The National Gallery in London, the first national art gallery in Britain, was not founded until 1824, and even then it did not have a royal collection as its founding collection. Aristocrats ruled England and its private art collections in the eighteenth century, and they had little interest in republican values or a central national identity. For them, "art collections were prominent artifacts in a ritual that marked the boundary between polite and vulgar society, which is to say, the boundary of legitimated power." Thus the culture surrounding art collecting among the British landed classes was as much if not more performative than it was educational or for personal pleasure. Thus the uncertain distinction between these high brow collections and emerging public collections became more pronounced through the nineteenth century.

In the American colonies and early United States, the concept of a public museum as we think of it today was in its infancy, when it was articulated at all. Wealthy men, like James Bowdoin, or more famously, Thomas Jefferson, amassed impressive collections of art in their estates, and artists displayed their own work to the public, but these rarely translated into museums. Around the country in the second half of the eighteenth century, there were many spaces that were called museums, but these functioned mostly as sensations and entertainment spaces, often hosting performances as well as featuring art and natural history objects. ¹⁹ One early museum, the Philadelphia Museum, was started by Charles Willson Peale in 1786. It began as a space for Peale to display his own paintings of military and political leaders, in the tradition of a hall of worthies, and evolved into a space of entertainment and spectacle that focused on

¹⁸ Duncan, Civilizing Rituals, 38.

¹⁹ Edward P. Alexander, *Museum Masters: Their Museums and Their Influence* (Nashville, TN: The American Association for State and Local History, 1983), 65-65.

natural history displays and included musical entertainment and items of sensation, like Martha Washington's thimble and the finger of a murderer. ²⁰ Peale himself hoped to keep the museum in the realm of education and above lowbrow consumerism. He sought government funding for it, but was never successful. ²¹ The museum closed in 1849, after an expensive expansion to New York and Baltimore. This example reveals the age-old tension between the use of museums as spaces of education or of entertainment, and underlines the divide between the art world of the elite, both in Europe and the United States, and the entertainment that was accessible to the larger public. Peale's museum was remarkable for its desire to engage with this tension and do both, but his mission was unsustainable.

The influence of the elite culture of Europe on James Bowdoin's own collecting practices is clear, particularly when considering his drawing collection. The collection contains 142 drawings total. Fifty-four of those works are by Italian artists, twenty-seven by Dutch, Flemish, or Netherlandish artists, four by German artists, two by French artists, one by a Portuguese artist, and another fifty-four are not categorized. The high number of Italian drawings follows

European patterns of collecting, though it is slightly lower, proportionally, than older collections of drawings – these would likely have had a majority of works by Italian artists. The Royal Collection of drawings, the Italian section largely collected by George III, as well as the

²⁰ http://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/peales-philadelphia-museum/

²¹ Thomas Jefferson thought it would be ideal to have a National Museum, but told Peale that it was beyond the power of the federal government to fund such an institution. See Edward P. Alexander, *Museum Masters: Their Museums and Their Influence* (Nashville, TN: The American Association for State and Local History, 1983).

collection at Chatsworth are excellent examples of the remarkable collections of Italian drawings being amassed in the eighteenth century.²²

At least four works in the collection are closely related to or copies of works in British country house collections, and are worth examining as points of comparison. The first of these is A Pope in Michelangelo's Studio, by Pietro Antonio de Pietri (1811.22) (FIGURE 5). This work corresponds with an almost identical sketch located at Holkham Hall. ²³ These drawings are thought to be related to a painting, but according Holkham, no such painting is known. The Bowdoin drawing is less finished than that at Holkham, and features a verso image that is a design for ceiling decoration. The recto image depicts Michelangelo kneeling before Pope Julius II, with his own statue of *Moses* in the background.²⁴ This statue was intended for the pope's tomb, and creates an interesting reflection on mortality. Despite the sketchiness of the drawing, the figures are recognizable and distinct, and carefully placed. The Museum and Holkham both date these drawings to between 1663 and 1716. Another Bowdoin drawing is also related to a work at Holkham, though this time to a painting. Landscape with Washwomen, a copy of a Jan Frans van Bloemen work executed between 1662-1749, is likely a preliminary sketch for a painting at Holkham (FIGURE 6). No catalogue currently exists of the paintings at Holkham, but it is known that there are six by van Bloemen.²⁵

²² See the *Catalogue of Italian Drawings at Windsor Castle* by AE Popham and Johannes Wilde and *Drawings by Leonardo Da Vinci at Windsor Castle* by Kenneth Clarke; see also Michael Jaffé's four volume catalogue of the *Devonshire Collection of Italian Drawings*.

²³ Number 200 in A.E. Popham, *Old Master Drawings at Holkham Hall*, ed. Christopher Lloyd (n.p.: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 89. (*Michelangelo Kneeling before Pope Julius II*, by Pietro de'Pietri)

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Object file, 1811.66, Bowdoin College Museum of Art. Art Collections of Holkham Hall, Wikipedia, see bibliography.

Bowdoin's most famous drawing, to this day, remains *Alpine Landscape (View of Waltensburg)*, formerly attributed to Pieter Bruegel the Elder, and since 1991 attributed to the Master of the Mountain Landscapes (FIGURE 7). This drawing is considered part of the "alpine suite." Other drawings from this suite are in the Louvre, and several are at Chatsworth, including *Mountain Near a Lake* (Chatsworth 1094). Though it is no longer attributed to Bruegel, it remains one of, if not the, first real masterpiece of European drawing to reach the United States. This fact, along with the parallels between Bowdoin's drawing and those in the collections of the Duke of Devonshire and French nation, demonstrate the unique nature of Bowdoin's collection and priorities. Bowdoin's knowledge of art and collecting was formidable enough that he was able and savvy enough to collect an object on par with world-class collections. Though his collection has far less depth than a collection like those at Chatsworth or Holkham, these examples demonstrate the similar forces acting on all three collectors. ²⁶ These three examples are only a few of the possible direct and contextual parallels that can be drawn between works in the Bowdoin collection and country house collections.

Bowdoin's painting collection also demonstrates the influence of country houses in two distinct ways. First, Bowdoin owned a series of copies of old master works, which are thought to have been owned (and possibly painted) by John Smibert. The most notable of these is *The Continence of Scipio*, which is now attributed by the Museum to Smibert (FIGURE 8). This painting is a copy of a Nicholas Poussin painting of the same name, which was owned by Sir

²⁶ Katharine Watson argues that James Bowdoin III's drawing collection was originally John Smibert's, and that it was purchased intact by Bowdoin, likely after he returned from France. If this is true, the parallels between the collection and those of country houses remain equally viable. Smibert would have had similar access to country houses, and even more cultural understanding of the British aristocratic system. If Smibert amassed the collection, he did so with the intention of creating a teaching collection for the college he and Bishop Berkeley meant to found in Bermuda. Thus his motives would have been less aristocratically-minded and more in pursuit of an educational ideal.

Robert Walpole and hung at Houghton Hall, and then at Strawberry Hill.²⁷ Bowdoin's many copies echo the original masterpieces located in country houses across England.²⁸ Bowdoin also owned several still lives in the Dutch style, featuring scenes of hunted game (FIGURE 9). These, though very different from the grand paintings of the old masters, also evoke the culture of the country house and the prioritization of hunting and other sporting activities. These patterns in the painting collection, combined with the aforementioned examples of works in the drawings collection, demonstrate the clear impact country houses had on James Bowdoin, which influenced his perception of the college he helped to endow and the values with which he lived his life.

Bowdoin's immersion in European culture and his passion for the arts shaped his interaction with the college that bears his father's name. James Bowdoin III never visited the campus or site of Bowdoin College (FIGURE 10). He was uninvolved in its administration or construction. As Charles C. Calhoun writes in his history of the college, "Bowdoin College is not the lengthy shadow of one man; its founder was not an individual but a group, one might even say a social class." It was members of this social class that reached out to their fellow, James Bowdoin III, about honoring James Bowdoin II by naming the college after him and in turn having access to some of his financial assets. In light of these circumstances, it is remarkable that Bowdoin chose to exceed expectations and leave some of his ostensibly most prized and valuable possessions to the college. Thinking about the college in terms of European, specifically British, structures of power and legacy offers one way of understanding Bowdoin's

²⁷ Object file, 1813.10, Bowdoin College Museum of Art.

²⁸ Another of Walpole's paintings, *A Fish Market*, by signed F. Snyders fecit, is closely related to James Bowdoin's *Fish Shambles*, artist unknown.

²⁹ Calhoun, A Small, 19.

³⁰ Calhoun, A Small, 11.

choice. James Bowdoin III was a New World aristocrat without issue who had spent his life in environments defined by semi-private, semi-public hereditary institutions. The country houses and ancient families with whom he fraternized in Europe lived within an ancient system of inheritance and legacy. Within this aristocratic world, belongings existed in a grey area of ownership that I will call stewardship. The young lords of Bowdoin's circle were taught to preserve, protect, and grow their family's estates and holdings for the next generation, rather than to treat them as personal prizes. Not everyone lived according to this ideal, but those who did not were usually understood to have squandered their family's legacy. In light of this reality, Bowdoin's decision to leave his library and art collection, intact, to an institution of gentlemanly learning is far less surprising. Bowdoin College is in many ways a similar institution to a large country estate. At the college, like in a country house, an elite public could see the collection. In a private home in Boston, it would be seen only by invited visitors. Furthermore, the performative nature of this decision echoed the public-facing collecting of the British nobility and cemented Bowdoin's legacy as a member of the New England elite.

Another precedent for Bowdoin's decision is the bequest of General John Guise's collection to Christ Church, Oxford, in 1765. Bowdoin studied at Christ Church just six years after this remarkable bequest of two hundred paintings and over two thousand drawings, which remains one of the best private collections of old master paintings in the world.³² No other

³¹ As Susan Wegner explains in her essay in *The Legacy of James Bowdoin III*, the Bowdoin paintings were hung in Massachusetts Hall, which anyone could visit. However, there is little record of visitors or of an administrative desire for visitors until 1850, when the paintings were cleaned and rehung in the chapel. See Susan Wegner, "Copies and Education: James Bowdoin's Painting Collection in the Life of Bowdoin College," in *The Legacy of James Bowdoin III*, comp. Katharine Watson (Brunswick, ME: Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 1994).

³² "Christ Church Picture Gallery." https://www.chch.ox.ac.uk/picture-gallery/christ-church-picture-gallery. Accessed May 8, 2018.

Oxford college had a picture collection at this time, and Bowdoin's exposure to this excellent collection likely demonstrated to him the possibilities of an art collection in an educational institution. When Bowdoin left his collection to the college, he created a legacy of wealth and culture for himself, and he helped create an environment for cultivating the future leaders of a republic. As an institution founded to educate the young elite of Maine as a ruling class, Bowdoin College, like Christ Church, was more than a performance of wealth, though still an institution that catered to men of privilege. Bowdoin's decision to bequeath his collection and library to the college set a precedent for American institutions of higher education, and also set a precedent for the gentlemanly or upper class values and behaviors that became expected at elite institutions like Bowdoin College. As the 1817 laws of Bowdoin College stated, "it is incumbent on every Student to be not only a *Christian* and a *scholar*, but a *gentleman*." 33

Steeped through his education as well as through bonds of family and friendship in the aristocratic culture of Europe, particularly Britain, James Bowdoin III operated within a social and intellectual sphere premised upon inherited wealth, intellectual ideals, and traditions. He acquired works that reflected these values, forming the corpus of work he would bequeath to the College that bears his family name. What might the implication of this backdrop to the formation of his collection be today? While the importance of positioning fine art in a liberal arts education is rightly celebrated, the class-based structure that defined James Bowdoin's own upbringing and education and, hence, his proclivity for collecting art, has been under-examined. Without diminishing the generosity reflected by his bequest of his holdings to Bowdoin, it is worth considering how this body of art may embody questions concerning the relationship between privilege and pursuit of knowledge that remain as relevant today as they were in the eighteenth

³³ Laws of Bowdoin College, 1817, p. 19. George J. Mitchell Special Collections.

century. How might further engagement with this collection, informed by the circumstances behind its development, enable us to develop even more effective tools and critical frameworks for examining persistent concerns regarding status and access? Perhaps it is precisely questions such as these that will continue to ensure the collection remains as meaningful today and in the future as it was over two centuries ago for Bowdoin himself, who, by donating these works to an institution of higher learning, ensured that they would stimulate lively and engaged discussion for many generations to come.

FIGURES

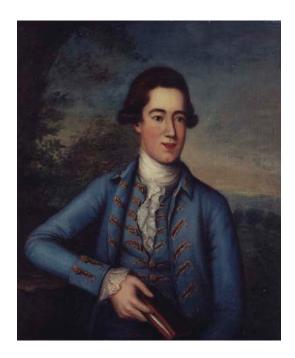


Figure 1. Unknown Artist. Portrait of James Bowdoin III. Oil on canvas, ca. 1770-75.



Figure 2. David Allan. Sir William Hamilton. Oil on canvas, 1775. National Gallery, London.



Figure 3. Gilbert Stuart. Portrait of Elizabeth Bowdoin, Lady Temple. Oil on panel, ca. 1806.



Figure 4. Drawn by J.P. Neale, engraved by T. Matthews. *Stowe House: General View*. Engraving in *View of the Seats of Noblemen and Gentlemen in England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland*. London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones. 1822.



Figure 5. Pietro Antonio de Pietri. *A Pope in Michelangelo's Studio*. Red chalk on paper, 1663-1712.



Figure 6. Copy after Jan Frans van Bloemen. *Landscape with Washwomen*. Black chalk and pen and brown ink on paper, 1662-1749.



Figure 7. Master of the Mountain Landscapes. *Alpine Landscape (View of Waltensburg)*. Pen and brown ink on paper, 1580-1630.



Figure 8. Attributed to John Smibert. *The Continence of Scipio*. Oil on canvas, ca. 1719-1722.



Figure 9. Possibly John G. Brown. Bowdoin College Campus. Oil on canvas, ca. 1823.