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*Photo courtesy Milwaukee Art Museum*

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*Some information regarding the portrait:*

In the mid-1700s, quite a few portraits of Robert “King” Hooper’s extensive family were painted by John Singleton Copley, the most prominent American artist of that time. Most are now in leading art museums around the country.

Portraits of other people in Marblehead were painted as well — all related to the Hoopers. Those include Colonel Jacob Fowle (c.1761), future father-in-law of Hooper’s middle daughter, Alice, as well as Colonel Jeremiah Lee (c.1768) and his wife, Martha Swett Lee, who was the half-sister of Robert Hooper’s second wife of 28 years, Ruth Swett, the mother of all eleven of his children.

(Ruth was actually Hooper’s second wife, as a first, also named Ruth (Burrill, of Lynn), had died in or soon after childbirth, along with their newborn daughter. The graves of both, mother and child, are up on the Burying Hill.)

A potential mystery surrounds one of the portraits (*pictured*), which was painted by Copley in 1763.

It has long been said to portray the Hoopers’ middle daughter Alice at age 17, two years before her marriage to Captain Jacob Fowle, Jr., one of the sons of Colonel Jacob Fowle.

For decades, it has been written and assumed that the portrait was painted on the occasion of Alice’s betrothal to Col. Fowle’s son. (Their marriage is recorded as November 7, 1765.)

No portrait of Capt. Fowle is known, nor is a portrait for either Alice or Jacob Jr. referenced in any documentation from their time.

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**Attribution:** The possibility exists that the portrait of Alice Hooper might instead actually represent her mother — her father’s wife, Ruth, who died at age 44 the same year that portrait was painted — perhaps commissioned in her honor or memory.

Although the portrait descended through Alice’s family, the story that it represents Alice, rather than her mother, may be more of an assumption, as often happened in families over time.

The Hoopers’ eleventh child had been born just ten months before Ruth died, when their tenth child was seven. As the eldest daughter still at home, Alice would likely have helped to care for her mother and new baby brother during and after the birth, and perhaps also during what may have been a long ten-month illness afterward.

(Alice’s two younger sisters were ages seven and eleven when their youngest new sibling was born, and her older sister, the Hoopers’ eldest daughter, also named Ruth, had already been married four years earlier, and lived in Newburyport. A period reference to an anticipated portrait of that eldest daughter has been documented, but no portrait has ever been known, nor is it certain that one was actually painted.)

Alice may well have had a special affection for her mother, whom she had likely cared for during months that had likely been difficult, one way or the other. And she might conceivably have wanted to keep a portrait of her mother as a special memento — especially after her father’s very necessary re-marriage (with a toddler and several children still at home) a year before her own. In 1775, after five children of her own, Alice and her husband relocated, first to New Hampshire and then to Newburyport, where several of her older married siblings lived. After her husband’s death, Alice would remarry and bear three more children (five boys and three girls in total).

Because a pair of portraits of Hooper and his subsequent (third) wife, Hannah White Cowell, a twice-widowed 37-year-old, were painted in 1767, three years after their marriage, later Copley biographers may have assumed that portrait was “the” Mrs. Robert Hooper — not realizing that a previous wife had even existed, and had been the mother of all of his children.

After the Revolution began, it is likely that no portraits remained in the family home in Marblehead, as Hooper and his third wife, along with his youngest son (her step-son, whom she had raised from the time he was a year and a half old) relocated to his country home for much of the war, due to Hooper’s Loyalist sympathies in an overwhelmingly rebel Patriot town. (In 1774, when the Massachusetts provincial government relocated from volatile Boston to nearby Salem, Hooper had offered that house for the military governor’s use.)

If indeed the portrait represented Ruth rather than Alice, it is open to conjecture as to whether or not it remained in King Hooper’s home for a few years after he remarried in 1764 — at least until the pendant portraits were created in 1767, but perhaps even for several years afterward as well, as an homage to his very likely beloved spouse, who had not only been married to him for so long, from the time she was sixteen, but had born all of his children.

Because portraits seldom appear on probate inventories (since they were possessions that were considered to be especially personal, so were not itemized as property of an estate), no portraits are noted on the probate inventory for Robert “King” Hooper’s two houses and property after his death in 1790 at the age of eighty-one.

Alice, too, lived a long life, dying at age 81, just as her father had. She apparently had the portrait in her home for many years. And, generations later, as sometimes happened, later family members may have identified the portrait as Alice herself.

Copley’s other portraits of young women show much more freshness and fewer physiological mature characteristics than this woman’s face and appearance express — though perhaps, at 17, Alice was more mature than her years.

The case may never be solved. But it does deserve some further consideration.