

Alexander Gordon & An Artistic Jewel

Before photography, people's images were captured by artists mainly with sketches or paintings. It is no accident that most of these images are of famous people who could afford, or were of sufficient public interest, to have their likenesses preserved by artists.

George Washington, the first president of the United States, was one such person. The best-known images of him were created by Gilbert Stuart from in-person sessions in Philadelphia from 1795 to 1796. Stuart's full-length portrait of Washington is known as the "Lansdowne" because its original owner was former British Prime Minister Marquise of Lansdowne. Stuart's original Washington portrait is now owned by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.¹



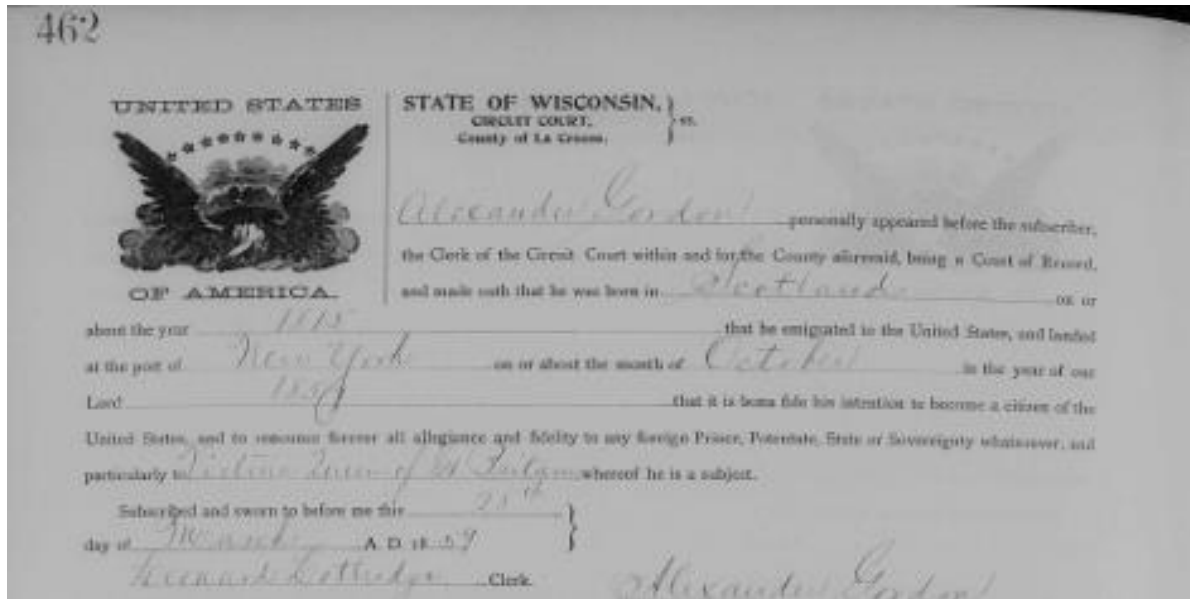
George Washington by Gilbert Stuart

(Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts)

What is not as well-known is that a La Crosse artist painted a copy of this iconic George Washington painting, and it hangs in a downtown La Crosse building because of the generosity of an early La Crosse businessman.

Alexander Gordon was born in London in 1815. From 1832 to 1857, he operated a drug business in Aberdeen, Scotland. Emigrating to La Crosse, Wisconsin, in the spring of 1858,

Gordon went into the grocery business. Later that year, Gordon and a partner would start a liquor business that would grow to \$100,000 (over \$3 million in 2024 dollars) in sales by 1881.²



Alexander Gordon's naturalization declaration, 1859 March 28

(Courtesy of Familysearch.org)

In 1866, Alexander Gordon, part of the firm Morse & Co., was living at the northwest corner of Badger and 11th Streets.³ The specific address was 509 N. 11th Street.⁴ Gordon's partner, Milton M. Morse, lived on the northwest corner of 7th and Pine Streets. Morse & Co., a wholesaler of wines and liquors, was located on Front Street between Main and Pearl Streets.⁵



Looking south down Front Street from Main Street, about 1904

Morse & Co., and later Gordon & Langdon, and Gordon & Manville after that, would have been in one of the buildings in the foreground in the late 1800s. The buildings on the right were later demolished to make way for Harborview Plaza.

(Courtesy of the La Crosse Public Library Archives, PC020-01-14-004)

By 1870, Gordon's business partner was James Langdon,⁶ and their liquor business, Gordon & Langdon, was in the heart of the gritty riverfront on South Front Street.⁷

Alexander Gordon was 53 years old at the time of the 1870 Census. Barbara Gordon, a 72-year-old woman who was described as a "retired lady," lived with him. She may have been his mother. Margaret Gordon, 38 years old, also lived with him.⁸ Margaret was his sister.⁹

Gordon & Langdon were in the wholesale liquor business, according to the 1873 city directory.¹⁰ They probably did good business with the numerous taverns and brothels along Front and Pearl Streets.

Alexander Gordon had a new business partner by 1876. Gordon & Manville were listed in the city directory as wholesale dealers of bourbon, wheat and rye whiskies, and importers of cognac, brandies, gins, etc.¹¹ Marvin M. Manville was his partner in the business.¹²

Two years later, the 1878 city directory showed Gordon & Manville as wholesale dealers in wines, liquors, and cigars with an office and warehouse at 9 S. Front Street.¹³ This address would later be 109 S. Front Street.¹⁴

By 1885, Gordon & Manville, importers and wholesale dealers in wines, liquors, and cigars, had relocated to 112 N. Front Street.¹⁵



Front Street looking north, about 1900

Gordon & Manville was located here in the mid-1880s

The buildings on the left were later demolished to make way for Harborview Plaza

(Courtesy of the La Crosse Public Library Archives, PC020-01-14-005)

On October 23, 1852, six years before Alexander Gordon came to La Crosse from Scotland, the La Crosse Lodge of Freemasons held its first meeting in the home of Ebenezer Childs. Over the next 50 years, the Freemasons had many different homes until building the Masonic Temple at 8th and Main Streets in 1902. Many of La Crosse's prominent early citizens were Masons and/or members of the La Crosse Freemasons: Nathan Myrick, T. B. Stoddard,

John M. Levy, F. H. Rublee, C. L. Colman, John Paul, Cadwallader Washburn, Mark M. (Brick) Pomeroy, W. R. Finch, George W. Peck, and Angus Cameron, to name a few. By the late 1920s, the La Crosse Masonic Lodge had over 700 members.¹⁶

In 1859, Alexander Gordon's brother, J. Gordon, painted a portrait of George Washington, who was one of the country's most well-known Freemasons, that copied the famous Stuart "Lansdowne" original.¹⁷

And who was "J. Gordon?" There was a 65-year-old James Gordon living in La Crosse at the time of the 1860 United States Census. He was born in Scotland about 1795, and this would have made him 20 years older than Alexander Gordon. James Gordon had a wife named Barbara, a 30-year-old son named Alexander, a 29-year-old daughter named Margaret, and a 19-year-old daughter named Barbara.¹⁸ The overlap in names is intriguing. It is possible that James Gordon named one of his sons, Alexander, after his younger brother; named one of his daughters, Margaret, after his sister Margaret; and one of his other daughters, Barbara, after both his mother and his wife.

James and Barbara Gordon are not listed in the first available (1866) La Crosse city directory. They are not listed in La Crosse at the time of the 1870 United States Census.

The June 19, 1875, La Crosse newspaper, *Republican & Leader*, has a death notice for "Mrs. James Gordon."¹⁹

We cannot be certain that this is the "J. Gordon" who created the painting in question.

Few rooms in the city were large enough to accommodate Gordon's huge painting of George Washington. Alexander Gordon offered his brother's painting to the Masonic Lodge, which formally accepted it in January 1879.²⁰

Alexander Gordon insisted that the seven-feet by 10-feet painting be framed. Masons Fred Ring and W. A. Roosevelt investigated and determined that the painting could be framed for \$27.80 (\$880 in 2024 dollars).²¹



Masonic Temple, built in 1902 at 724 Main Street
Now a branch office of the Ho-Chunk Nation

(Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society)

The George Washington painting, one of the most prized possessions of the La Crosse Masonic Lodge, has hung in their building ever since. When a famous artist passed through La Crosse in 1908 and saw the Washington painting, he told some local Masons that it was just as good as Stuart's original.²²

H. C. Stevens, a member of the local Masonic Lodge, gave a presentation about the history of the painting on December 27, 1912. He said, "And, my brothers, I have wondered at times as we meet here night after night in the presence of the portrait of the first and greatest man and Mason of our country, if we realize we are possessors of one of the great art treasures that has few, if any, superiors in this country."²³

Alexander Gordon died on July 2, 1887, in La Crosse, eight years after his gift of the George Washington painting to the Masonic Lodge.²⁴

Another Citizen Dies Suddenly.

Mr. Alexander Gordon died suddenly this afternoon near the hour of going to press, at the age of seventy-two years. Mr. Gordon was born in Scotland in 1815, emigrating to this country in 1858. He arrived in La Crosse the following year, and has been in business here ever since.

Republican & Leader (La Crosse, Wisconsin), 1887 July 2, p. 1, c. 2

Alexander Gordon's business in La Crosse sold products that provided temporary pleasure, at best, for some people. His gift of an art masterpiece to a local organization still endures almost 140 years after his death.



Current Masonic Center, 8th and Main Streets

(Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society)

Jeff Rand
 La Crosse Public Library, Retired
 2024 August 31

Sources & notes:

¹ “George Washington (The Lansdowne Portrait),” Museum, *Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts*, accessed 2024 August 28, <https://www.pafa.org/museum/collection/item/george-washington-lansdowne-portrait>.

² *History of La Crosse County, Wisconsin* (Chicago: Western Historical Company, 1881), 756.

³ A. Bailey and J. M. Wolfe, compilers, *A. Bailey’s La Crosse Directory For 1866-67 Comprising A Complete List of all Residents in the City . . .* (La Crosse, Wisconsin: A. Bailey, 1866) 42, for “Gordon Alexander.”

⁴ *Jan. 15, 1884 Bunn & Philippi’s La Crosse City Directory Comprising An Alphabetical List of Names. . .* (Winona, Minnesota: Jones & Kroeger, 1884) 97, for “Gordon Alex.”

⁵ A. Bailey and J. M. Wolfe, compilers, *A. Bailey’s La Crosse Directory For 1866-67 Comprising A Complete List of all Residents in the City . . .* (La Crosse, Wisconsin: A. Bailey, 1866) 71, for “Morse & Co.”

⁶ A. Brainerd, compiler and publisher, *La Crosse City Directory and Business Advertiser for 1870-71, Containing the Name and Residence of every Male Citizen, a Business Directory and Sketch of the City. . .* (La Crosse, Wisconsin: A. Brainerd, 1870) 70, for “Langdon James.”

⁷ A. Brainerd, compiler and publisher, *La Crosse City Directory and Business Advertiser for 1870-71, Containing the Name and Residence of every Male Citizen, a Business Directory and Sketch of the City. . .* (La Crosse, Wisconsin: A. Brainerd, 1870) 56, for “Gordon & Langdon.”

⁸ 1870 U.S. census, La Crosse County, Wisconsin, population schedule, La Crosse city, p. 479B, dwelling 327, family 348, Alexander Gordon; image, *AncestryHeritageQuest.com* (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 2024 August 30); citing NARA microfilm publication T9, roll 1432.

⁹ 1880 U.S. census, La Crosse County, Wisconsin, population schedule, La Crosse city, p. 140B, dwelling 351, family 390, Alex Gordon; image, *AncestryHeritageQuest.com* (<http://www.ancestryheritagequest.com> : accessed 2024 August 27); citing NARA microfilm publication M593, roll 1721.

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- ¹⁰ *La Crosse City Directory For 1873—74. Comprising a Complete List of the Citizens . . .* (La Crosse, Wisconsin: Campbell & Davison, 1873) 78, for “Gordon & Langdon.”
- ¹¹ *Pryor & Co.’s La Crosse City Directory 1876-7 Comprising An Alphabetical List of Citizens . . .* (La Crosse, Wisconsin: Pryor & Co., 1876) 76, for “Gordon & Manville.”
- ¹² *L. C. Bold’s La Crosse Directory for 1881-82 Comprising An Alphabetically Arranged List of Business Firms and Private Citizens; . . .* (La Crosse, Wisconsin: Louis C. Bold, 1881) 61, for “Gordon & Manville.”
- ¹³ *Pryor & Co.’s La Crosse City Directory 1878-9 Comprising An Alphabetical List of Citizens . . .* (La Crosse, Wisconsin: Pryor & Co., 1878) 78, for “Gordon & Manville.” The 1880 city directory shows the same.
- ¹⁴ *Jan. 15, 1884 Bunn & Philippi’s La Crosse City Directory Comprising An Alphabetical List of Names. . .* (Winona, Minnesota: Jones & Kroeger, 1884) 98, for “Gordon & Manville.”
- ¹⁵ *Urban Publishing Company’s La Crosse City Directory for the Years 1885-1886, Comprising An Alphabetical List of Names. . .* (La Crosse, Wisconsin: A. B. Lamborn, 1885) 175, for “Gordon & Manville.”
- ¹⁶ “Frontier Lodge Founded in 1852,” *La Crosse (Wisconsin) Tribune and Leader-Press*, 1928 May 27, p. 12.
- ¹⁷ “Historic Trowel and Washington Painting Treasured By Lodge,” *La Crosse (Wisconsin) Tribune and Leader-Press*, 1928 May 27, p. 12.
- ¹⁸ 1860 U.S. census, La Crosse County, Wisconsin, population schedule, La Crosse city, p. 246, dwelling 180, family 157, James Gordon; image, *AncestryHeritageQuest.com* (<http://www.ancestryheritagequest.com> : accessed 2024 August 27); citing NARA microfilm publication M653, roll 1417.
- ¹⁹ *Republican & Leader* (La Crosse, Wisconsin), 1875 June 19, p. 4, c. 4.
- ²⁰ “Historic Trowel and Washington Painting Treasured By Lodge,” *La Crosse (Wisconsin) Tribune and Leader-Press*, 1928 May 27, p. 12.
- ²¹ “Mason’s Will Observe Washington’s Birthday With Fitting Program,” *La Crosse (Wisconsin) Tribune and Leader-Press*, 1932 February 21, p. 4.
- ²² *La Crosse (Wisconsin) Tribune and Leader-Press*, 1928 May 27, p. 12. The name of the famous artist who offered his assessment had been forgotten twenty years later when this article was written.
- ²³ *La Crosse (Wisconsin) Tribune and Leader-Press*, 1928 May 27, p. 12.
- ²⁴ “Another Citizen Dies Suddenly,” *Republican & Leader* (La Crosse, Wisconsin), 1887 July 2, p. 1, c.2.