



Smithsonian American Art Museum

January 2012



Newspaper Boy

1869

Edward Mitchell Bannister

Born: St. Andrews, New Brunswick, Canada

Died: Providence, Rhode Island, 1901

Oil on canvas

30 1/8 x 25 1/8"

Smithsonian American Art Museum

Gift of Jack Hafif and Frederick

Weingeroff

1983.95.85

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

Researcher Ann began by looking carefully at a reproduction of the image before she was able to see the original painting in storage. She also searched the Smithsonian and other libraries for books, articles and primary source materials by or about the artist that would give background information.

Bannister is a major figure among nineteenth-century African-American artists, so I also gathered books on African-American art such as Bearden and Henderson's *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present* (1993). I also searched the internet to find archival sources on the artist, including a [scrapbook on Bannister at the Archives of American Art](#) and documents at [the Providence Art Club](#), which the artist helped to found. I also searched for books

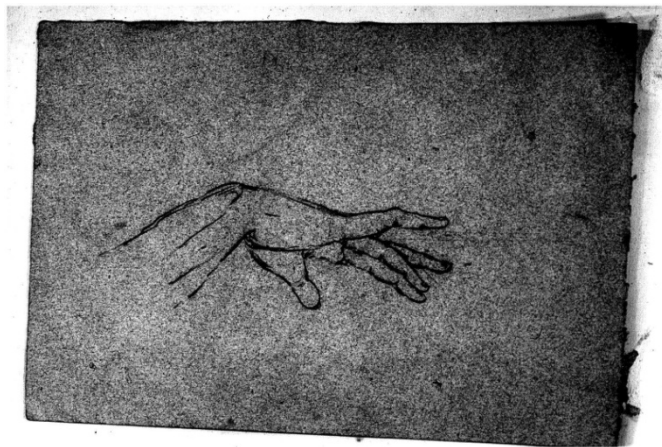
and articles about newsboys and child labor laws. While there is a lot of documentation on newsboys from 1900 on, there is less information about mid-nineteenth-century newsboys.

My initial questions about this painting include:

- **Where does this painting fit into Bannister's life and career? Why did he paint this subject?**
- **What was the life of a newsboy like in the 1860s and 1870s and how did this change later?**

Newspaper Boy is an unusual painting for Bannister, who was mostly active as a landscape artist. Bannister was trained to draw and paint the human figure convincingly, but large figures are rare in his mature art. When Bannister painted *Newspaper Boy* in 1869 he was living in Boston, where he studied with artist and anatomist William Rimmer (Bearden and Henderson, 1993).

[The Bannister scrapbook at the Archives of American Art](#) includes these drawings of an idealized human figure and a hand:



Early in his career Bannister painted portraits as well as Biblical and historical subjects, but few of these survive. One example is a portrait Bannister painted of his wife, the business woman Christiana Carteaux Bannister (at the Bannister Nursing Care Center, Providence, RI), a hair-dresser who helped to support her husband as he made the difficult transition from barber to painter. Bannister dated *Newspaper Boy* 1869 and soon after it was completed he showed the work. It received its first known review (an article I ordered online after learning of it from Holland's book) on October 26, 1869, in the *Providence Press*. The *Press* termed *Newspaper Boy* "very sketchy and free, though a little wanting in color." By that date, the Providence City Directory records Bannister lived in that city in Rhode Island (cited by Holland, 1992, also in Merl Moore Papers, Library of the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Portrait Gallery).

Bannister's subject is clearly a newsboy because of the stack of newspapers under his arm and the pocket where the boy is evidently putting away or reaching for change. In the United States, beginning in the 1830s, the inexpensive newspapers known as the "penny press" employed newsboys who hawked newspapers on city street corners. The boys bought the papers each day and made a tiny profit on each paper they sold. Because the newspapers themselves did not employ the boys, it was very difficult to regulate them and thus to make sure they attended school and had decent homes. Many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century newsboys were orphans or came from such poor families that they had to make their own livings on the street (Hindman, 2002). Social documentary photographers like Jacob Riis ([see one of his photographs of newsboys at the Library of Congress](#)) and Lewis Hine recorded the terrible conditions under which newsboys still lived and worked decades after Bannister's painting (Riis, 1901).

Why did Bannister paint a newsboy? Since I haven't found any documentation of a commission for this work, I need other kinds of evidence. The first letters of the name on the folded front page in the stack of newspapers are hidden, but enough is visible to identify the paper as the *Boston Evening Transcript*. Holland's notes that this paper published about Bannister's art (Holland, 1992). I looked up pictures of the *Transcript* on the web to make sure that the typography of the newspaper's front page in this period matched that in Bannister's painting. So perhaps Bannister made this painting for someone connected with the *Transcript*, or hoped to show the work to such a person? I don't yet have any proof.

This painting could also reflect the interest Bannister and his wife took in social causes. For instance, they helped to raise money to make up for the lower amount that black soldiers in the Civil War were paid in comparison with white soldiers (Holland, 1992). Perhaps the Bannisters also were compassionate toward the growing population of poor street children. Efforts by social reformers to help newsboys and other poor children are recounted in a 1999 article I found via the online article database Jstor, Clay Gish's "Rescuing the 'Waifs and Strays' of the City: The Western Emigration Program of the Children's Aid Society." Publications from the early 1900s document the problems of newsboys and laws passed to help the boys. An example is Grace F. Ward's "Weaknesses of the Massachusetts Child Labor Laws," in a 1911 book on labor law.

I am careful when reading newspaper articles from the 1860s and 1870s about newsboys: these articles could be as much propaganda as documentation. A *New York Times* article from March 1868, describes the regulation of Boston newsboys starting in the year before Bannister's painting:

The bootblacks and newsboys are now being licensed by the city... No license is issued to any boy who does not attend school during some portion of the day, and those who do not attend public schools are required to attend the newsboys' school at least two hours each day...Each boy receives a leather badge, to be worn on the hat or cap. This contains the

word “Licensed,” and also the number of his license ...The applications for newsboys’ licenses are very numerous, and probably 300 will be issued before all are supplied.

In the reproduction of *Newspaper Boy* I could not see any badge on the cap or on the boy’s lapel. When I went to see the painting in storage, I noticed a small area on the boy’s lapel which is of a different color and texture than the rest of the jacket. This could be a badge, but if so the artist did not make it clear at all. We must always remember that paintings are not photographs- painters include and exclude information for their own reasons. While the *Times* article makes it sound like all the Boston news boys’ problems have been solved, Ward’s 1911 article reveals how boys, parents, and newspaper distributors often evaded these regulations. This enabled the boys to make some money in the short run, but the lack of schooling greatly reduced their chances of well-paid employment in the long run (Hindman, 2002).

This research led me to new questions, including the following:

- **How did the lives of newsboys, and the child labor laws regulating them, change between the 1860s and the 1910s?**
- **How do other paintings and prints of mid-nineteenth-century newsboys compare with Bannister’s, and what do these images tell us about how people felt about newsboys?**

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