

## ELMHURST HISTORY HIGHLIGHT: Portrait Artist G.P.A Healy

**George Peter Alexander Healy** was a prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century portrait painter who made his home in the Chicago area in the 1850s. He is best known for his portraits of several United States presidents, as well as celebrities and politicians in both America and Europe. While his travels and works were spread across the globe, Healy has a strong connection to Elmhurst, where he made his home during the Civil War years.

After a successful career in Europe under the patronage of the French King Louis-Phillipe, Healy moved to Chicago with his family in 1855, where he befriended the prominent lawyer and statesman [Thomas Barbour Bryan](#). Bryan had recently purchased more than a thousand acres of land in Cottage Hill, about an hour by train from the center of Chicago, and was waiting for the construction of his estate house, Bird's Nest, to be completed. While they waited, the Bryan family had purchased the [Hill Cottage](#) house, originally a stagecoach stop on St. Charles Road, to serve as their summer home to escape the bustle of the city. Healy visited the Bryans during this time and was so taken with the bucolic nature of Cottage Hill that he offered to purchase Bryan's summer cottage before the Bryan family had a chance to occupy it. Bryan agreed, and Healy and his family moved to Cottage Hill in 1857.



*Photograph of G.P.A. Healy, M2014.1.643*

G.P.A. Healy renamed the cottage "Clover Lawn," and was a frequent guest at the Bryan Estate during his years in Cottage Hill. He painted members of Bryan's family and neighbors, including several paintings of Bryan's wife, Jane. Thomas Bryan was heavily involved in state efforts to elect Abraham Lincoln to the presidency, and helped arrange a meeting between Healy and the future president in 1860, leading to Bryan commissioning the artist to create the last known portrait of Lincoln without a beard. Healy remained prolific during his Cottage Hill years, relying on Bryan's patronage to finish his series of paintings of U.S. presidents that he began in France in the 1840s.

Looking back on his time in Cottage Hill, Healy wrote of his time spent with the Bryan family: "Among my most successful portraits painted at this time, I can mention that of Mrs. Thomas B. Bryan whose hospitable home was always open to me and mine. Mr. Bryan and I agreed on many points."

Healy sold Clover Lawn in 1864 to move back to Chicago, and then relocated to Europe in 1869 where he continued his storied career in Paris and Rome. He returned to Chicago in 1892, just two years before his death. His most famous paintings are held at the Newberry Library in Chicago and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

*By Daniel Lund, Elmhurst History Museum Staff, Updated October 2021*