Every American knows the art of John Trumbull, even if his name is unfamiliar. His historical paintings of scenes from the American Revolution, like the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Battle of Bunker Hill, the surrender of the British at Yorktown, and portraits of Revolutionary heroes, such as George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, are so famous they're iconic.
FOUR OF HIS PAINTINGS GRACE

the rotunda of the Capitol building in Washington. Yale University has nearly 90 in its art gallery, which was the nation's first university art museum. His portraits of Washington belong to city halls in New York City and Charleston, S.C.; others are housed in the New York Historical Society and the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Conn.

Or you could just pull out a $10 bill to see an engraving of Trumbull's portrait of Alexander Hamilton, which has appeared on the bill since 1933. The $2 bill shows his painting "Declaration of Independence." And a postage stamp issued for the 1976 Bicentennial featured a detail from his painting "The Death of Gen. Warren at the Battle of Bunker Hill."

Not bad for an artist who became blind in one eye as a child.

His birthplace, the Governor Jonathan Trumbull House in Lebanon, Conn., has been designated a National Historic Landmark because John Trumbull was a major artist of the American Revolution, as well as a Patriot who served in the war. His father, Governor Jonathan Trumbull, helped rally men to the Patriot cause and converted his former store to a war office where he conducted strategy meetings with the Council of Safety. He also mobilized supplies—ranging from weapons and gunpowder to cattle, sheep and flour—for the Continental Army.

"A long and well spent life in the service of his country places Governor Trumbull among the first of patriots," Washington wrote in a letter after the governor's death in 1785. The only Colonial governor who remained in office both during and after the Revolutionary War, he had four sons who served in the war, including his oldest, Joseph, Commissary General of the Army, and Jonathan Jr., who was military secretary to Washington and a future governor of Connecticut. (He and his wife, Faith, had four other children: Faith, Mary, David and John.)

Built in 1740, the Governor Jonathan Trumbull House has been owned and managed by the Connecticut State Society, NSDAR, since 1935. The house, which features period furnishings and antique textiles donated by Trumbull family descendants and DAR members, preserves the legacy of one of Connecticut's most illustrious families, which produced four Revolutionary War veterans—including the artist who immortalized our early history—and three Connecticut governors in the 18th and 19th centuries.

THE FATHER

Patriot and Statesman

A local minister named the town of Lebanon after the biblical cedars of Lebanon to refer to the white cedar forests that used to grow in nearby swamps. The Colony's lawmakers confirmed the name in 1697. By the mid-18th century, it was bustling as one of the biggest, wealthiest towns in the Connecticut Colony, thanks to Jonathan Trumbull, a merchant who traded extensively overseas.

Trumbull was also the largest meat-packer in the Colony and owned a ship-
OPENING SPREAD: Self-portrait of John Trumbull, ca. 1802. Oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery. OPPOSITE PAGE: A copy of the portrait of Governor Jonathan Trumbull painted by his son, John, hangs in the back parlor of the Trumbull Home. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE: The governor's office displays many historical documents, memorabilia and a family chart that shows a "John Trumble" who emigrated from England in 1639. Built in 1740, the Federal-style clapboard house was enlarged in 1755. In the "keeping room," a fireplace used for cooking displays nine pewter plates on the mantel, including two from the Trumbull family. The room also holds a large wool walking wheel and a small flax wheel for spinning fine linen thread.

THE HOUSE

"Fortune Favors the Bold"

The white Federal-style clapboard house with a central chimney and hall was built by Governor Jonathan Trumbull's father, Joseph, but was enlarged for the governor's family of six children after he inherited it upon his father's death in 1755. The classical doorway and molded, pediment window cornices were added during his remodeling. In the front parlor, which probably also housed the governor's library, sits a mahogany case clock from 1787 and an 18th-century embroidery of the coat of arms of Aaron Buckland, who served in a regiment under General Jedediah Huntington, the husband of the governor's daughter, Faith.

In the back parlor, which features one of the house's eight fireplaces, hangs a copy of the portrait of Governor Jonathan Trumbull in a ruffled shirt, painted by his son, John. (The original portrait is at Yale.) A sixth-generation descendant, the late Dr. Robert Monroe, donated a Queen Anne chair that belonged to the governor.

The governor's office on the second floor displays many historical documents, memorabilia and a family genealogy chart. The chart shows a "John Trumble" who emigrated from Newcastle-on-Tyne, England, in 1639 to Roxbury, Mass., and moved to Connecticut in 1670. (The original spelling of the family name was "Trumble").

A medal engraved with an eagle worn by members of the Society of the Cincinnati is visible, with the motto "he gave up everything to serve the republic." The room also displays documents sealed with wax that were signed by "Jonathan Trumble," plus the family coat of arms of four bulls' heads and the motto "Fortune Favors the Bold."

A small 18th-century bed covered with a blue-and-white spread—made in 1778 by

yard in East Haddam on the Connecticut River. Lebanon's mile-long green, one of New England's biggest, is lined with historic 18th-century buildings, including the Governor Trumbull House and the War Office. The First Congregational Church, built between 1804 and 1809 on the south end of the green, was designed by John Trumbull and is the only surviving example of his architectural work. Revolutionary soldiers once trained on Lebanon's green, and French allies baked bread there during the nearly eight-month encampment of the cavalry from Lauzun's Legion in 1780 to 1781.

Since Trumbull, first elected to Connecticut's General Assembly in 1733 and elected governor in 1769, was a vocal critic of British rule of the Colonies, his home in Lebanon became a hotbed of Revolutionary activity. As commander-in-chief of the state's militia and small navy, he attracted dozens of political and military leaders to town to confer with him.
Charity La Fever, whose husband served in the Revolution—sits in the day room off the governor’s office. A copy of his obituary from the American Mercury—declaring “his memory will be immortal”—hangs on the wall, as well as a receipt for two engravings sold by John Trumbull.

In a guest bedroom, a beautiful silk textile hand-painted by the governor’s wife, Faith, with a figure of a shepherdess and her flock, edged in wheat, adorns the wall. A heavy wool “bed rug” woven by Connecticut Patriot Nathan Hale’s niece, Sally Kate Clapp, is also here.

Faith Trumbull’s bedroom displays a wooden chair given to her upon her marriage in 1735 and a wool “bed rug” in a floral blue and brown pattern, woven in 1764. Off the boys’ bedroom is the staircase John tumbled down, an accident that caused him to lose the sight in his left eye when he was 5 years old.

**THE SON**

‘Art... Will Be of No Use to Him’

From the time he was a child, John Trumbull loved drawing and used to scribble on the sand-strewn floors of his home. He yearned to study painting with John Singleton Copley, the noted portrait painter, in Boston. But his father wanted him to have a career in law or the ministry and insisted he attend Harvard University, as he had done. The elder Trumbull complained that painting was “an art I have frequently told him, will be of no use to him.”

John Trumbull went to Harvard, but felt the “tranquility of the arts seemed better suited to me.” When the Revolutionary War began, he joined the First Regiment of Connecticut in May 1775, serving at Roxbury, Mass. Here his skill in drawing maps led to a brief appointment as an aide on General George Washington’s staff at Cambridge. He then served as a colonel with General Horatio Gates at Fort Ticonderoga. He resigned from his commission in 1777 at age 21.

While war was still raging, he went to study art in London in 1780 with Benjamin West, a Philadelphia artist at the court of King George III. However, he was soon arrested for treason. After being imprisoned for eight months under suspicion of spying, he was released.

After the war ended, he went to England again to resume studying art with West in 1784, successfully resisting his father’s pressure to enter the legal profession, for which he had only distaste. The “law was rendered necessary by the vices of mankind,” and a career would “keep me perpetually involved, either in the defense of innocence against fraud and injustice or... to the protection of guilt against just and merited punishment,” he told his father.

“You appear to forget, sir, that Connecticut is not Athens,” Governor Trumbull said tartly. But seeing his son was adamant, he relented—while grudgingly observing his son’s skill in argumentation meant he would make a good lawyer—and he even wrote a letter of introduction to the Earl of Dartmouth.

**COMMEMORATING THE REVOLUTION**

In 1786, Thomas Jefferson, then U.S. minister to France, invited John Trumbull to Paris. Here he began the painting of the “Declaration of Independence” from Jefferson’s account and a sketch of Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Like most of his historical paintings, Trumbull was not present at the event, but he traveled up and down the East Coast collecting portraits of the signers during 1790 to 1794. The painting features portraits of 42 of the 56 signers and the committee who drafted it—consisting of John Adams, Jefferson, who is holding the document, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston and Benjamin Franklin—presenting it to John Hancock, president of the Continental Congress. (The painting is at Yale, with a larger version in the Capitol Rotunda.)

Trumbull strove for accuracy in details of likeness, costume, weapons and events themselves. His best paintings possess a “powerful dramatic intensity” and sometimes celebrate moral virtues, such as generosity and kindness, notes Helen Cooper, curator of American paintings and sculpture at the Yale Art Gallery and author of *John Trumbull: The Hand and Spirit of a Painter* (Yale University Press, 1982).

In his painting of the Battle of Bunker Hill, for example, British officer Colonel Small grabs the musket of a British grenadier to prevent him from bayonetting the dying General Joseph Warren. A young American wounded in the chest and in the hand hesitates—seemingly wondering if he should try to help his general despite his own grave injuries—as a loyal servant stands behind him.
In "The Surrender of General Burgoyne," General Horatio Gates refuses to take the sword of surrender from the British general after a 1777 battle that marked a turning point in the Revolutionary War, but instead invites him as a gentleman into his tent. "The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown," Trumbull's painting about the victory at Yorktown, Va., on October 19, 1781, shows General Benjamin Lincoln, astride a white horse, accepting the sword of surrender from the British General Charles O'Hara, as French officers stand to one side and American officers to the other. Lord Cornwallis, the British commander, does not appear in the painting because, pleading illness, he sent an aide in his place. (Both paintings are in the Capitol Rotunda and at Yale.)

Trumbull declined an offer to become Jefferson's secretary in 1789. In a letter, he described his fervent "wish of commemorating the great events of our country's revolution," and his drive to preserve the "memory of the noblest series of actions which have ever presented themselves in the history of war."

CAPITOL COMMISSION AND YALE BEQUEST

In his long life, Trumbull, who died at age 87 in 1843, doggedly pursued his career as an artist in New York, landing important government commissions, such as the portraits of Washington, Hamilton and John Jay in New York's city hall and a Washington portrait for Charleston's city hall. But he felt the crowning achievement of his career was his commission from Congress to do four historical paintings for the Capitol, two of which were copies of the originals at Yale—"The Declaration of Independence" and "Resignation of Washington." He hoped the commission would set an example in "employing the Arts, in the Service of Religion, Morality and Freedom." Completed in 1824, the Capitol paintings, while made famous by engravings, are not considered his best work.

Though Trumbull became president of the American Academy of Fine Arts from 1816 to 1825 and wrote his autobiography (the first by an American artist, published in 1841), he suffered from severe financial problems in later life. He once wrote cynically, "the profession, as it is generally practiced, is frivolous, little useful to society, and unworthy of a man who has talents for more serious pursuits." He offered to donate his artwork to Yale, under the conditions that he receive an annual annuity of $1,000, a building be constructed that he would design to display his paintings, and the art never leave Yale. He also asked to be buried beneath his paintings, which the childless artist called his "children," and that proceeds from the gallery be used to educate poor students at Yale.

The Trumbull Gallery, a Greek Revival-style structure and the first university art gallery in the country, opened in 1832. "This gallery must be considered the most interesting collection of pictures in the country. They are American," wrote a Connecticut Journal reviewer.

Why Yale for this Harvard graduate? Harvard was rich; Yale was poor, he explained. Though the original gallery was demolished in 1901, Trumbull and his wife, Sarah, are buried in the basement of the current Yale Art Gallery.

CELEBRATING A MASTER

The family sold the Trumbull house in 1803. By the mid-1800s, it served as a semi-boarding house. A later owner, Mary Dutton, bequeathed the house to the Connecticut State Society, which took possession in 1935. Dedicated DAR volunteers rounded up Trumbull family possessions and period-style furnishings since so few originals could be located, and the chapter conducted its last house preservation in the 1960s. Cynthia Griswold, a former chairman of the Governor Jonathan Trumbull House Museum and current museum board member, is compiling a complete genealogy of the Trumbull family.

To mark the 250th anniversary of artist John Trumbull's birth, the Connecticut State Society will host an official birthday party with members of the Children of the American Revolution at the Trumbull Home on May 27, close to his actual birthday of June 6. Re-enactors in authentic cavalry uniforms from Sheldon's Light Dragoons will be on hand, and Revolutionary-style art from local public school students, with an emphasis on Trumbull's work, will be displayed.

For more information, contact the Governor Jonathan Trumbull House Museum at (860) 642-7558.

Sharon McDonnell wrote about California's wine history for the September/October 2005 issue.