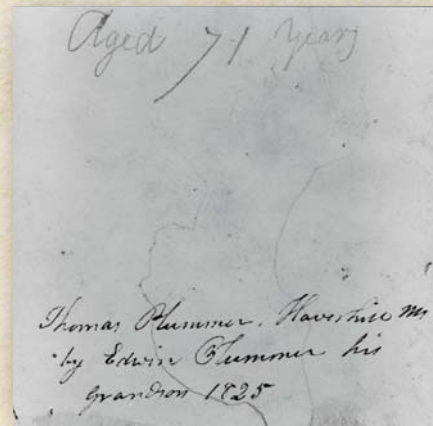


Edwin Plummer

and his “Portrait Likenesses”

by Deborah M. Child



According to author Alice Van Leer Carrick, who wrote about portraitist Edwin Plummer (1802–1880) nearly ninety years ago, he was an artist who worked in Essex County, Massachusetts, in the 1820s, and painted tight little figures sitting on rigid mahogany sofas.¹ In today’s world of American folk art, Plummer is among the more recognizable portraitists of the genre. Until now, however, very little was known about his career as a portrait artist. Recent investigation reveals there was a good reason for this: Plummer was a true Renaissance man — a writer, lecturer, and astute business man who was never wholly dependent on portrait painting for his livelihood. Instead, this was a talent he mostly employed for his friends or his own personal gratification. Other than the occasional newspaper notice offering his portrait likenesses for perusal and a single entry in an 1837 exhibition held at the Boston Athenaeum, his portraits were seldom on public display.

Born in Haverhill, Massachusetts, Edwin was the eldest son of Daniel Farnham Plummer (1780–1857), a wheelwright and a gifted mechanic, whose invention of a machine that cut teeth

for hair combs in a single operation may explain the prominence given to hair combs in Edwin’s portraits. The Plummer family clearly had an abundance of artistic talent. Edwin’s cousin, Harrison Lorenzo

Plummer (1814–1894), with whom Edwin is sometimes confused, was a successful portrait painter in Europe for over twenty years before returning to his place of birth in Haverhill in the 1850s. Edwin’s aunt Elizabeth White Plummer (1789–1830) offered instruction in painting and drawing at her School for Young Ladies in Haverhill. His nephew Harold Fletcher (1843–1902), the son of his sister Elizabeth, is cited as a portrait painter in the 1870 federal census for Chelsea, Massachusetts. And, his uncle John Chandler Plummer (1783–1873) and first cousin James Henry Plummer (1821–1883) were decorative carriage painters.

The Plummer family also eagerly sat for their portraits. Of the thirty-plus miniature portraits attributed to Edwin, ten have been identified as family members. Among the family gallery, three watercolor portraits are inscribed with sufficient information to make it possible to assess



left **Fig. 1:** Attributed to Edwin Plummer (1802–1880)
Elizabeth Chandler, wife of Thomas Plummer (1760–1839), 1825
 Watercolor, pencil and gouache on wove paper, 4¹/₁₆ x 3³/₈ inches
 Collection of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum,
 Colonial Williamsburg, Williamsburg, Va.



right **Fig. 2a:** Edwin Plummer (1802–1880), *Thomas Plummer, 1825*
 Watercolor, pencil, and cut wove paper, 4¹/₁₆ x 3³/₈ inches
 Collection of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum,
 Colonial Williamsburg, Williamsburg, Va.

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Fig. 2b: Detail of verso: in penciled script “age 71”; in inked script at bottom:
 “Thomas Plummer, Haverhill MS/by Edwin Plummer his/grandson 1825.”

how his style evolved over time. The earliest signed portraits are of the artist’s paternal grandparents. His grandmother Elizabeth Chandler (Fig. 1) is identified by the initials on the handkerchief she is holding. His grandfather Thomas Plummer (Fig. 2a–b) was a wheelwright and a property owner in Haverhill. His portrait, which is inscribed with the artist’s name and relationship and dated 1825, displays many of the features that have

come to be associated with Edwin’s hand—the profile is precisely defined, the hair and face delicately rendered, and the background includes a column, drapery, and a stylized upholstered sofa. Two later miniatures, one of his sister dated 1830 (Fig. 7a–b) and one of his mother dated 1831 (Fig. 8), attest to his move away from a primitive and fanciful approach to painting to a more classical and sophisticated style of portraiture.

In 1806, Edwin and his family lived in Beverly, Massachusetts; moving inland to Lancaster, Massachusetts, in 1813, to avoid the threat of attack from British warships blockading the eastern seaboard at that time. Here, his father operated a dry goods store and Edwin attended the Latin Grammar School, also known as the Lancaster School, until 1816. What vocation Edwin pursued after graduation is not clear. In an 1819 letter to Edwin’s grandparents Thomas and Elizabeth Plummer in Haverhill, his father mentioned that Edwin was going to another position where he would earn over a \$100 per year, a generous sum of money at the time.² As the 1821 tax list of Boston cites an Edwin Plummer in Ward 3 with personal property of \$100, it seems plausible that Edwin’s next place of employment was Boston.

By the mid-1820s, portrait painting had clearly captured Edwin’s interest and



he had begun to travel in order to solicit patrons. His miniature of Mary Chace Anthony (Fig. 3), who married merchant Luther Carpenter in Providence in 1824, suggests the artist may have first plied his trade in Rhode Island.

From there he moved on to Worcester, Massachusetts, perhaps in hopes of tapping into the economic boom that was developing there as a result of the newly constructed Blackstone Canal that linked Providence, Rhode Island, with Worcester. On March 26, 1828, the following notice appeared in the *Massachusetts Spy & Worcester County Advertiser*: “PORTRAITS: E. Plummer, Portrait Painter, respectfully informs the public that he has four or five Pictures in the Room situated at the second door below the office of Isaac Davis, Esq. where he invites those who may wish to examine them. Worcester.” On July 11 of the same year, he again advertised as a portrait painter, this time in the *Salem Gazette*, offering eight or

left **Fig. 3:** Attributed to Edwin Plummer
Mary Chace Anthony, 1826

Watercolor and gouache, 4 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches (sight)

Labeled on back: “Mary Chace Anthony Carpenter/my father’s eldest sister, who lived [torn]/ this was painted in about the year 1826 soon after her marriage to Luther Carpenter.”

Collection of Ted and Alvina Breckel

Observe the half-moon ornamentation in the upper right hand corner. Painted spandrels are a hallmark of Edwin’s hand.

right **Fig. 4:** Attributed to Edwin Plummer (1802–1880)

Unknown boy seated on fancy chair, ca. 1828

Watercolor, pencil and gouache, 4 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 3 $\frac{3}{16}$ inches

Private collection

This is one of four miniatures of children of an unidentified family purchased at a northern Massachusetts auction about seventeen years ago as part of a box lot of ephemera. The ornamentation on the sitter’s chair is an excellent example of the artist’s emerging interest in decorative detailing.

ten Portrait Likenesses for examination. Both notices stipulate portrait likenesses rather than miniatures or profiles.

During this phase of his career, it is clear the artist was becoming increasingly more adept at his craft. Observe in figure 4 how the fine herringbone detailing of the chair back enhances the elegant pose of the sitter, and helps to animate the portrait.

Miss Steven’s portrait (Fig. 5) is a fine example of a series of engaging likenesses of young girls shown in profile, for which the artist is best known today: with hair adorned with flaring combs, boldly colored costumes, and backgrounds bracketed within painted spandrels. In Miss Steven’s portrait, the unusual juxtaposition of blue and orange in the background may hark

back to Plummer's formative years spent in Lancaster, since contemporary portraits of Lancaster residents Captain Andrew Fuller (Collection Fruitlands Museum, Harvard, MA) and his wife (Thayer Memorial Library, Lancaster, MA) are painted in the same unusual palette.

The portrait of Charles William Marsh (Fig. 6) is one of five known miniatures Plummer painted of his Aunt Mary's children that incorporates an age appropriate prop for each child. In this case, the prop is a baby rattle. Like the chair in figure 4, the rattle draws the eye toward the baby who is sitting so steadfast in his crib. The freely painted detailing on his crib adds a much needed note of whimsy to the portrait.

Alas, like so many American artists at this time, Edwin's preoccupation with the visual arts soon had to give way to the more practical concern of earning a living. By December of 1829, Edwin had moved to Portland, Maine, where he established a

shoe business in partnership with Moses N. Carr.³ The following summer he married Anna Penfield (1805–1876) of Gorham, Maine. A second inscribed miniature (figs. 7a–b) attests to his abilities at this stage of his career. It is a portrait of his sister Elizabeth Chandler Plummer.

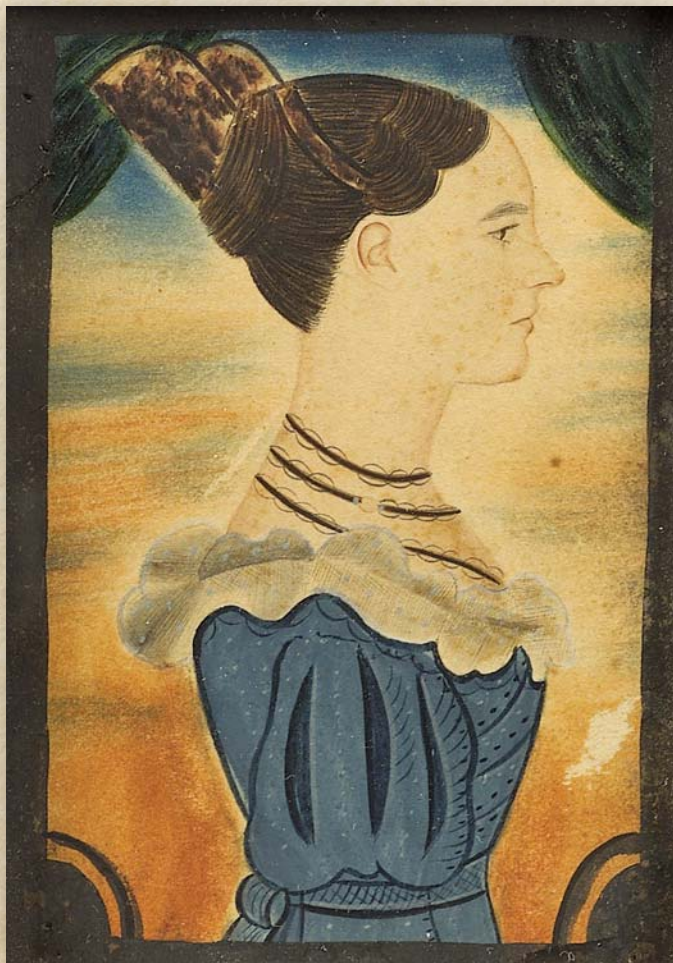
Although somewhat awkward in terms of the positioning of her head resting on her arm, it is apparent Edwin was closely studying his sister in order to accurately convey not just her physical attributes but also her mood. As the portrait is inscribed, "September 12, 1830, Lancaster," it was

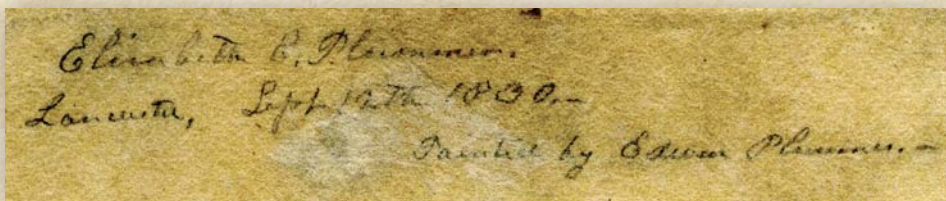
left **Fig. 5:** Attributed to Edwin Plummer (1802–1880)
Miss Stevens, Andover, MA, ca. 1828. Watercolor on paper, 5 x 3½ inches (sight)
Inscribed in pencil on reverse: "Stevens, lace, purple"
Private collection, Concord, Mass. Photograph courtesy of Skinner, Inc.

This is one of a series of engaging likenesses of young girls for which the artist is best known today: shown in profile with hair adorned with flaring combs, boldly colored costumes, and backgrounds bracketed within painted spandrels. This miniature has two other features also associated with this artist's hand: its dramatic use of background color and notations specifying the color palette on the reverse.

right **Fig. 6:** Attributed to Edwin Plummer (1802–1880)
Charles William Marsh (1827–1829). Watercolor and ink, 4½ x 3½ inches
Courtesy, Jane Katcher Collection of Americana. Photograph courtesy David A. Schorsch and Eileen M. Smiles American Antiques, Woodbury, Conn.

This is a miniature of Edwin's first cousin. It is inscribed on the back "The Rockport baby." It is one of five known miniatures of the children of Mary Plummer, wife of John Marsh, that have been attributed to Edwin. The tale of how the portraits of the children came to be reunited may be found in the May 1995 issue of *Maine Antique Digest* (p. 25-B): the "Rockport Baby" by Ray Egan.





above **Fig. 7a:** Edwin Plummer (1802–1880)
Elizabeth Chandler Plummer, 1830
 Watercolor on paper, 10 x 8 inches
 Private collection. Photograph courtesy David A. Schorsch
 and Eileen M. Smiles American Antiques, Woodbury, Conn.

below **Fig. 7b:** Detail of inscription on back of painting, inscribed in pencil
 in the sitter's hand on verso: "Elizabeth C. Chandler/Lancaster, September 12th 1830/
 Painted by Edwin Plummer."

likely one of many portraits he did while home that fall with his family for the marriages of his sisters Caroline and Hannah.

Edwin's involvement in the shoe business proved to be short-lived. By 1831, the

business had folded and the couple had left Portland. Later that year, Edwin was back in Lancaster. Although unfinished, his deathbed portrait of his mother (fig. 8) shows his abilities as a portrait artist were

now evolving quickly perhaps under the encouragement of a yet-to-be-identified gifted instructor. Here he delineates his mother's profile with a quick and sure hand. The painstaking quality seen in his earlier watercolor of his sister Elizabeth (fig. 7), has now given way to a confident touch in which his modeling of her face, hair and bonnet is convincing and elegant.

Close comparison of these portraits with pendant paintings of Mary Kendall and her spouse Charles Colburn (Figs. 9, 10) suggest they too may have been painted by Edwin. According to an entry in a now missing diary, the couple sat for their portraits on the occasion of their honeymoon in 1832.⁴ Mary is painted in the same palette Edwin used for his 1830 portrait of his sister Elizabeth. She is wearing similar apparel and jewelry, and her face has the same attention paid to affect shown in Elizabeth's earlier portrait. As the couple were from Leominster, seven miles from where Edwin spent his formative years, they could easily have been acquainted with the artist.

In 1833, Edwin was in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, trying to attract patronage. On September 1, *The Portsmouth Journal* printed the following anonymous insert: "We took occasion to call into the room of Portrait Paintings, in No. 6, Exchange Buildings. We had frequently heard of Mr. Plummer's productions, and on examination are highly pleased with the accuracy of expression delineated in such of his Portraits as were taken for our acquaintances. Ladies and Gentlemen who have a taste for the Fine Arts, could not feel otherwise than gratified with visiting Mr. Plummer's Room."

On February 19, 1834, the following notice appeared in the *Rhode-Island Republican*, published in Newport, Rhode Island: "Mr. Plummer respectfully informs those who wish to examine his work, that they can have an opportunity by calling at his room, No. 89 Thames St., where a few specimens may be seen."⁵ To date, only two portraits have been

linked to Plummer at this location. One is a portrait of Gilbert Chace Dean, from nearby Freetown, Massachusetts (Fig. 11). According to the family tradition, it was painted by a “Plummer of Boston.”⁶ As the portrait shows the sitter in a distinctly elegant setting and pose, it is not surprising Plummer’s portraits were attracting favorable reviews including special praise for his highly developed phrenological bump of coloring.⁷ The second portrait is of Rowse Babcock (1803–1872), a prominent manufacturer and banker of Westerly, Rhode Island. This portrait is not signed and is now in the collection of the Westerly Public Library, Rhode Island. In 1936, it was shown in an exhibit there as a portrait by Edwin’s painter cousin Harrison Lorenzo Plummer.

In 1837, Edwin seems to have reached a high point in his career. In the Boston directory he is cited as a portrait artist residing at 34 School Street, within easy proximity of Chester Harding’s Portrait Gallery at 22 School Street and Cornhill Square, the commercial heart of the city. That same year, he exhibited *Portrait of a Gentleman* (sitter’s names and current whereabouts not known) at the Boston Athenaeum. This would be his first and only time to exhibit there. The Athenaeum’s records state the painting belonged to “Adrian Plumer” of 31 School Street. As 1837 was the first year Edwin listed himself as a portrait artist in Boston, he was the only Plummer cited on School Street that year, and there is no record of an artist by the name of Adrian Plummer active at this time in New England, there can be no doubt the portrait was by Edwin. All subsequent references to “Adrian” Plummer seem to have been based on this transcription error in the printed Boston Athenaeum exhibition record. Around this time Edwin was also giving public lectures. A broadside (Fig. 12) printed in Boston describes Mr. Plummer giving a lecture on the History of Babylon which was to be illustrated by forty splendid paintings.⁸



Fig. 8: Edwin Plummer (1802–1880)

Nancy Sawyer, 1831

Watercolor and pencil on paper, 7 x 4 inches

Accompanying leaf inscribed: “This book [The Pentateuch], my mother requested me to give to my brother Edwin, only a few days before she died. He painted the picture on the foregoing page, which certainly does resemble our mother. Perhaps there is no picture more like her, though only a rough sketch. Today, Edwin died—and this book comes back to me. July 27, 1880. Elizabeth C. [Chandler] Fletcher, 79 Eberle Ave., Chelsea, Mass.” Courtesy of American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.



The financial panic of 1837, which resulted in a five-year depression, quelled enthusiasm for the arts. By 1845, Edwin moved to Carver Street, near the Boston Common and engaged in a series of Boston real estate transactions; in 1846, he took up residence at 196 Harrison Avenue. He is not listed in the 1849 Boston directory. On the 1850 Boston census, Edwin's occupation is listed as "none." Like many other portrait artists in that era, Edwin undoubtedly found he could not compete with the new photographic studios.

By 1859, Edwin was in Chelsea, Massachusetts, continuing to give lectures.⁹ He died at his home there on July 27, 1880, from complications from a fall he had taken in Boston two weeks earlier. His obituary in the *Chelsea Telegraph and Pioneer* on July 31, 1880, noted that "his talents were manifest and of no mean order; he was a writer of some note,"¹⁰ a

left **Fig. 9:** Attributed to Edwin Plummer (1802–1880)

Mary P. Kendall, 1832

Oil on board, 14 x 11 inches

Collection Leominster Public Library, Leominster, Mass.

Painted on the occasion of their honeymoon in 1832, Mary died of consumption the following year.

right **Fig. 10:** Attributed to Edwin Plummer (1802–1880)

Charles Henry Colburn, 1832

Oil on board, 14 x 11 inches

Collection Leominster Public Library, Leominster, Mass.

lecturer on astronomy and history, a painter of no mean ability, which talent he employed for his own gratification and that of his personal friends." In addition to a large portfolio of railroad stocks and real estate, his estate inventory cited sundry paintings and works of art valued at \$553.50, painting supplies as well as a telescope and three sets of lecturing apparatus. Proceeds were divided amongst his four surviving siblings.¹¹

Although many questions may still

linger about Edwin's *oeuvre*, especially his portraits painted in large, the body of work Edwin has left behind clearly attests to his delicate touch, his love of color, and his ability to capture a likeness with elegance and sensitivity. AFA

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is an author, lecturer, and independent curator. Her expertise in genealogy has proved critical for authenticating and attributing early New England portraits.



left **Fig. 11** Attributed to Edwin Plummer (1802–1880)

Gilbert Chace Dean, ca. 1834

Oil on canvas, 33 ½ x 28 ½ inches

Lent by Mrs. F. Guy Rutan. Exhibited in *American Art Treasures Discovered* exhibition, Morris Museum of Arts and Science, Morristown, NJ, in 1977.

According to family tradition, it was painted by “Plummer of Boston.” Present whereabouts unknown.

right **Fig. 12:** Broadside advertising “Babylon. A Lecture on the History of Babylon illustrated by 40 splendid paintings will be given by Mr. Plummer,” ca. 1837. Published by S. R. Hart, Exchange Street, Boston, Mass. Courtesy of American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

Although it is not clear who painted the forty splendid paintings being shown, as each one occupied a surface of sixty to seventy square feet, the venue in which his lectures were being held must have been quite substantial.

BABYLON

A Lecture on the HISTORY of BABYLON, illustrated by 40 SPLENDID PAINTINGS,

Will be given by Mr. PLUMMER, at

Tickets 25 cents each.

Each Painting will occupy a surface of
from 60 to 70 square feet.

The first painting gives a full view of Babylon. Its walls were 350 feet high, 87 feet thick, and 60 miles in circumference.

- 2d. Shows a part of the wall on a large scale, with its moat, and towers.
- 3d. A gate shut, chariots holding from 4 to 100 men pass'd through them.
- 4th. Is a gate open, through which, is a view of some of the buildings of the City.
- 5th. Is a view of a gate and draw bridge, showing their connexion.
- 6th. One of the most beautiful streets in Babylon.
- 7th. Shows a street in perspective, 150 feet wide, and 15 miles in length.
- 8th. Discloses some of the internal scenery of the city on a large scale.
- 9th. Gives a view of some of the rudest and strongest works, immense rocks piled to a great height.
- 10th. Is a view of the river Euphrates passing through the city.
- 11th. Is a second view of the river at its inlet, shewing the gate that was let down with sockets, made in stone that lay in the bed of the river.
- 12th. The old palace at the east end of the stately bridge, which was about one mile square.
- 13th A view of the new palace which was 6 or 9 miles in circumference.
- 14th The subterraneous passage under the bed of the river, uniting by a secret passage, the old and new palaces.
- 15th. The temple, the riches of which amounted to more than 21,000,000L. sterling.
- 16th. Is a view of one apartment in the temple.
- 17th. Represents some of the most elegant works of the ancients.
- 18th. The tower of Belus, said to be ancient Babel.
- 19th. The Idol of the above temple, which was 30 feet high.
- 20th. The stupendous hanging gardens, which were four hundred feet square, and three hundred fifty feet high.
- 21st. A Map showing the position and distances of the places.
- 22d. Shews an arch in the hanging garden.
- 23d. The daughters of Jerusalem weeping near Babylon, with their harps on the willows.
- 24th. Belshazzar's feast, a door view.
- 25th. The Feast interrupted, by the Hand, writing on the wall.
- 26th. Jerusalem's captivity in Babylon.
- 27th. View of the artificial lake, fifty miles square.
- 28th-29th. The entrance of the Persian army into Babylon. 100 Figures.
- 30th. The King Slain.
- 31st-32d. The Jews escape bearing the vessels of the temple. 270 Figures in procession.
- 33d. Babylon on Fire.
- 34th. The present state of Babylon, and its famous tree.
- 35th. Represents a street of Babylon in ruins.
- 36th. Is an opening in the Wall of Babylon.
- 37th. The fulfilment of the prophecy, Babylon shall become a Wilderness.
- 38th. Is a view of the ruins of Babylon, taken on the spot.
- 39th. Ruins of Persepolis, a Persian city, founded when Babylon was in her glory.
- 40th. Palmyra a city of the same date.

S. R. HART, pr. 37 Exchange st. Boston.

[1836-37]

1. Alice Van Leer Carrick, *Shades of Our Ancestors; American profiles and profilists* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1928), 31.
2. Farnham Plummer papers, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.
3. On March 30, 1829, Edwin Plummer took over the store assignment of James Kendall in Middle Street, Portland, Maine, and on April 9, 1829, advertised in the *Eastern Argus*, for creditors to contact him. Notices for the Plummer & Carr boot and shoe making business first appeared in the *Eastern Argus* on November 18, 1829, and Jan. 1, 1830.
4. Charles Colburn's third wife, Hannah Sophia Perry (1820–1903), gave the portraits to Leominster Public Museum, where the portraits are currently housed. I thank David Wilson for alerting me to these portraits and the diary entry. Its author and

current location are not known.

5. His last advertisement at this location appeared on April 23, 1834, in the *Rhode-Island Republican*.
6. This portrait was illustrated in *American Art Treasures Discovered. A Community Adventure* (Morristown, NJ: Morris Museum of Arts and Sciences, 1977), where it was attributed to Adrian Plummer of Boston, circa 1833. The attribution to Adrian was based on the 1837 Boston Athenaeum exhibition record.
7. *Rhode-Island Republican* (March 5, 1834).
8. This broadside was published by Samuel Rowland Hart on Exchange Street in Boston, MA. A copy in the collection of the American Antiquarian Society is catalogued as probably by Harrison Lorenzo Plummer. As Harrison was overseas at this time,

this must have been Edwin's broadside. Edwin is listed on the census and in his obituary as a lecturer.

9. On the 1860 federal census, Edwin, at age 55, is described as a gentleman, with a yearly income of \$13,500 and \$18,500 in personal property, residing with his wife and a maid in Chelsea. On the 1870 federal census, he is listed as a lecturer with an income of \$7,500 and property to the value of \$8,800.
10. The only published work I could find by Edwin Plummer was “To a Young Lady,” a poem published in *Arthur's Ladies' Magazine*, Philadelphia, 1845. It was common practice at the time to publish under an assumed name.
11. Edwin Plummer Probate Record No. 64573, Mass. State Archives, Dorchester, Mass.