

Interviewee: Charlotte Wharton
Interviewers: Hope Sutton and Jonathan Bisceglia
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Abstract:

Charlotte Wharton was born in Nowata, Oklahoma, in 1944. She later moved to New England following her marriage and became the local artist who painted Abby Kelley Foster's portrait in Worcester's Mechanics Hall. Charlotte earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Clark University and currently works out of a small studio in her home. She has earned dozens of major awards, including the Oil Painters of America Award for Excellence in Painting. In this interview Wharton discusses her process in approaching the portrait of Abby Kelley Foster and her journey throughout the creation of the piece. Originally she was not aware of who Foster was. She read many biographies, novels, and diary entries about Foster in order to capture her likeness and personality. The painting featured in Mechanics Hall has a significant meaning to her, as she later discovered she was related to Foster years after the painting was completed. Her spiritual journey is a touching one and Charlotte ties her strong sense of faith to the entire process. This interview with Charlotte Wharton depicts a woman with a deep tie to her faith, her community, and her history.

HS: So they gave us a guide...

JB: They like us to start with general questions.

CW: Yeah. Okay.

JB: So some of your background story.

CW: That's the way it was online when I read the stories because it's really a human interest in the story in addition to, in my case, a journey.

HS: Yeah.

CW: Yeah.

HS: Do you want to start us off?

JB: Sure. Actually, I'll let you do it. You're better at this than me.

HS: Alright. So, "General Family and Worcester." What is your full name including maiden name and married name if applicable?

CW: Alright, my name is Charlotte Marie Wharton, like the Edith School, the Edith School—Edith Wharton, the writer as well as the Wharton School of Business. Wharton. But, my married name—maiden name is Bredehoft. It's German.

HS: And where were you born?

CW: Oklahoma. Nowata, Oklahoma. If you blink your eyes while traveling, you'll miss it.

HS: Really? Small town?

CW: Small town. [laughs]

HS: Very small?

CW: Yeah.

HS: And what was the date?

CW: September 20th, 1944.

JB: And you mentioned your husband, what is his name?

CW: Thomas William Wharton. And he's from here.

JB: Oh, is he really?

CW: Uh-huh, yeah. He was at McConnell Air Force Base in Wichita, Kansas. When I left home, because I actually was born at my aunt's house. My mother went there for the help. And then they were actually living in Independence, Kansas. So I was raised in Independence, Kansas and when I graduated from Independence Community College, I went to Wichita, Kansas to go to the university there and major in art and met my husband, just outside of the base at a little pub

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where one of my girlfriends who I was living with worked. And we would go in early because there was three of us living in an apartment, and earning money to go to school, and one of them, only one of us had the car so us two would go in early and have some fun! With the guys off the base! Right, because it was a pub for drinking as well as food. The Hofbrauhaus and I have to tell you this because it's funny. No kidding, he'd kill me, but ...

JJ & HS: [laughs]

CW: ... my girlfriend and I are sitting there and drinking and dancing and having some fun and this guy came over to me and you could tell he was kind of inebriated, and he said, "You see that guy all the way over there?" And I said, "Yeah," and he said "He'd like to come over and sit with you and talk." I said, "If he doesn't have the guts to come himself..."

HS: Oooooohhhh.

JB: Wow.

[all three laugh]

CW: [laughs] So, pretty soon he did, he came over and that's how we met. And two weeks later he asked me to marry him.

H & JB: Oh wow.

CW: And I held him off for a year, and I actually finally accepted over the telephone and last year we were married for fifty years.

HS: Congratulations

CW: Thank you, we made our fiftieth and it's never been—it's not always that easy, marriage isn't easy.

HS: Yeah.

CW: It takes a lot of work on both sides, yeah fifty years.

HS: So you mentioned you had kids

CW: I have Shauna, she is my oldest, she is never married, she has tried to find a fella, but she has a job as a salesman and outside of work, she is the creator and developer of two bands, in fact she played at Beatkniks in Worcester, anyways she has gigs all over, more of central/middle Massachusetts but it's very fun to go watch her.

HS: Yeah.

CW: Go watch her play and she gets called in to fill in for other drummers when they can't make their gigs

HS: Pretty cool.

JB: That's really cool.

CW: But she was crazy for math.

HS: Really.

CW: She took every high school math, you know geometry, calculus all the way up and we have been told that somebody who is really great at math is inclined, I wouldn't say inclined but naturally good at music. I don't know the connection myself really.

HS: Did she do music in high school at all.

CW: No she was in theater.

HS: Oooooohhhhhh.

CW: She did a lot of theater in fact she worked at the Worcester Charter Communications writing programs for TV.

JB: Okay.

CW: And it was behind the camera—in front of the camera, and they were recruiting her to be in charge of the department but they were so dog eat dog.

HS: Oh, I see.

CW: She can't take that stress so she got out of it, so she's in sales for the blue book, I won't go into what that is but it's great benefits but low stress and low energy so she has time for her bands and our son is Derek. We actually had three kids but we lost one, when she was born there was an outbreak of meningitis, and that was a very, very hard time in our lives, many children were deceased because of that, it was horrific. She was the middle one and Derek is our baby. He is in his early forties. In fact, me and my husband were out the other day celebrating his birthday.

JB: When is his birthday, if you don't mind me asking?

CW: It's actually January twenty third, but he's actually in a huge Catholic family.

JB: Okay.

CW: You know their parties, so we finally got our stuff in. Yeah, he is the one who has three children, the light of our lives our grandchildren.

HS: How old are they now?

CW: Riley will be 15 next month and Katelyn will be 12 this year and Jack is eight and every single one of them, brilliant—it's like where did this come from?

J&HS: [Laughs]

CW: Well my husband is a genius, he actually has genius I.Q.

JB: Oh, wow.

CW: So I think it skipped a generation, well our children are intelligent too but these kids are off the charts.

HS: That's awesome.

JB: That's very impressive.

CW: Well it's a blessing you don't have to worry about them getting through, they love to study.

JB: Does art also run with them?

CW: The middle one, Katelyn, is very artistic and not so much in drawing, but in design and music and the girls have been in dance since they were two and three years old and they are in competitions now and all that. But everything she touches in the arts, she is just good, it's like it just comes naturally. When she was four years old she would make songs up out of her head to songs that would be to the music of other songs.

HS: Oh my gosh, I can't even do that right now.

[laughter]

CW: They are blessed, intelligent.

[in the background, Wharton's dog Chauncy makes a noise; he coughs up something he ate]

CW: What is wrong? Oh, yuck. You okay, baby? Alright, but that's—he lives in Shrewsbury and my daughter lives in Worcester and we are all very close. I come from a family of eight children and being raised on a farm we raised our own vegetables and sources of meat and we always say since all eight of us are still living and are all healthy, it's because we had that beginning of such good food.

HS: And then, okay, so-- that kind of leads us into what cultures and ethnicities do you identify with your family members?

CW: Okay, this is really interesting. My mother was adopted and she was actually sent out on an orphan train. That's what my novel is about. But she was six years old when she was adopted and remembered her original name and they actually changed her first name and middle name but as she grew older she took her first name back. But, she remembered her last name--

[Chauncy, her dog, gets sick once more]

CW: What is wrong?

[He proceeds to vomit.]

HS: Oh my.

CW: He must have got a hold of something. But anyway, we did—my husband did some, uh... Did that have blood in it? No.... It was whatever he swallowed, I guess.

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[There is a break as Wharton heads upstairs to wash her hands; after a bit, we pick right back up.]

JB: So tell us about your parents a little bit?

CW: So last year my husband did our—what's it called?

HS: Genealogy?

CW: Yes, genealogy! And since my mother knew her original name and her mother's mother name, he was able to go back all the way to the sixteenth century.

JB: Oh, wow.

CW: He found that my mother was Scottish and English and my father is as German as you can get, both of his sides are German, I don't know if I should save this for later or not since we are talking about genealogy but since I was born in the midwest most of our ancestors on both his and mine came over through New England.

JB: Oh, wow.

CW: And when I came up here because he was in McConnell Air Force Base in Kansas and we married there and moved up here it was almost like deja vu, I really took to New England and to find out all of my ancestors came through.

HS: The connections?

CW: There were some that came over on the Mayflower.

JB: Oh, wow.

CW: A couple of years later in fact he did too but we have this joke in our family that we might be intermarried, right?

H: Connected somehow

CW: Because from that area then they spread out and one of her relatives moved to New York, where her husband was from, and that's how she ended up in Midwest. She was shipped out in an orphan train. But as he was going through the New England relatives of mine that were ancestors he found that most of them were Quakers who arrived in Rhode Island and came to Uxbridge and another are in Worcester, Massachusetts, the same areas that Abby Kelley Foster had been and they were Quakers well that's what she was. So I said to my husband just take a look see if there is any connection, can you believe? I'm getting the shivers because after the whole journey I went through this many years later to find out that because of Phillip Sherman born in 1610, Abby is the seventh generation and I am the twelfth. Which makes us the difference of the seventh and twelfth generation, fifth cousins five times removed.

HS: Oh wow

H&JB: [Laugh]

CW: Yeah, so phew to me that whole thing where I have a sixth sense, I have always had a sixth sense like when I first meet people especially if they are open I know everything about them and sometimes I start shaking it's so powerful and coming to New England and feeling like I have been here before or you know taking to it so much and finding out that we are related makes the journey I went through so profound and that's what I want to share.

JB: Why did you take on the Abby Kelley Project?

CW: Well, the women's history project, the Worcester Women's History Project, before the turn of the century they wanted four women's portraits hanging in the Mechanics Hall, which is Worcester's most grand hall, instead of just men so they selected four women who not only had a great deal to do with Worcester and Massachusetts in general but also mankind, I wouldn't be able to tell you who they are. [Laughs]

HS: I feel like I should know this?

CW: Oh right here I have the information this is a thing from the newspaper because they had it in the paper constantly who was selected but let's see, the four women were Dorothea Dix Clara Barton and what's her name...

HS: Oh, Lucy Stone!

CW: Oh, that's it, oh yeah, there they are, and just hearing the names you can relate and remember what they are known for and Abby Kelley Foster well you asked how it came about so what they did was they went up six New England states not across the whole country, the six New England States and New York to find four artists. They didn't want to give all four portraits to one artist. Or even two for one artist but the criteria was that they wanted dark with the way they painted backgrounds with the traditional glazes and stuff like that. Well I had done some of that and without really knowing who I was they found, contacted me, or I had submitted, heard about it, through the paper and they chose me, and when they realized I was from Worcester because I wasn't known in Worcester I was known other places like New York and all of those other areas so they selected me to do Abby because Abby was in Worcester over here off of Mill Street in her home now and it is preserved as historical site. So they had me do it because Worcester has the [Amerixan] Antiquarian Society housing all of her letters and information about her. The [Worcester] Historical Society has many documents on her as well as two very small portraits of her there and the [Worcester] Art Museum has some information so many organizations had information since I was here and the other artists were from New York, New Hampshire, and I don't remember the other one. Might be Maine. But with me being here they chose me to do Abby because why would they chose someone far away? I'm here and all the information is here.

HS: Yeah. Far away, exactly.

CW: But I don't know whether you would say that it is bad but I knew of her, but I didn't really know her story, so before we get into it what are your other questions.

JB: Did you know about your history with Abby Kelley before you did the painting?

CW: Her history.

JB: Your relation to her?

CW: No, no I did her portrait in 1999 and all of my research—and they were hung in 2000—but I did not learn about my ancestral connection to her until last year.

JB: Did you feel a connection with her?

CW: Yes, that's what I have given speeches about and all the symbolism I've put in it because it is so profound.

JB: That's awesome, will you tell us a little bit about Abby Kelley Foster and what you focused on when you did her portrait?

CW: Yeah she was a, in fact she was an abolitionist and one of the people that headed abolition, abolitionism, hahahaha I can't say it.

All: [Laughs]

CW: The movement and very, very strong in it with women's suffragette, women's rights to vote and all of that didn't happen till what the 1920's or something, but she was right there. In fact the other three women, at least Lucy Stone was women's suffrage and was involved with that but she was at the national women's convention, women's rights convention and I may be wrong about this because it has been so many years but she was sitting with a number of high profile African American people and the men were outside. I think that the very very first one was in Worcester, the first women's rights convention and the second one I believe was in New York and I can't remember which one this happened at but if Lynn [McKenney Lydick] was here, the actress, she would tell you she has got it down but what happened was all the men's relations—dads, brothers, uncles, grandfathers, whatever were surrounding this convention outside they were so upset that this convention was going on for women's rights especially that African American women were in their sitting with white women, they burnt the facility down, but anyways Abby stood up and she was 5'6 which was tall for her age I mean that period and was talking and she was born in 1811 and she's probably in her late twenties early thirties when this happened but I could be wrong about that too I'm just trying to figure in my head she was so adamant. So strong in her beliefs that she stood up and she had red burgundy hair and she was very pretty you know green eyes, burgundy hair, maybe they were blue, it's been so long since I did her portrait, but I think they were blue, if you saw the portrait they are very, very striking, but she stood up and she had this gestural—well Andrew Lloyd, what was his first name?

JB: William Lloyd

CW: Yes William Lloyd Garrison, yeah Garrison who was also an abolitionist told her that if she didn't lecture god would strike her dead. You know being a very strict Quaker and whatever being religious she might thought that would happen and she did and she travelled alone and with men which back in those days you just didn't do and she traveled with African American men and when she would go into town halls and different places she would go to different places where she would try and get a group together and she had eggs thrown at her, tomatoes thrown at her, and was called jezebel, harlot, every horrible name you could think of at the time and even one day, you could see that she was wearing—she used to criss cross the scarf and she was so

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gestural as she spoke, that one day her hand caught it and pulled it out and instead of turning around to tuck it back in she kept talking and stuck it right back in and it was low enough that it *showed* and back then you just didn't do that, right? So the next morning in the paper it was like "Oh! Harlot! You're going to go to hell!"

HS: Oh no.

CW: But she even had a thirty pound tumor in her belly for years and kept—this is how strong her will... And she had a daughter, Alla, who her husband Stephen who was an abolitionist as well, stayed home and raised Alla who was sickly at times. And even with this tumor kept at it and kept at it and went as far as Arkansas and Ohio. Can you imagine? In wagon and horse...

HS: That's incredible.

CW: Yeah, it's just incredible. So, when we actually received the commission from the women's historical project, how they did it, I don't know. They actually found nineteenth century frames. Great big, filigree frames. Beautiful, beautiful frames.

JB: They're beautiful in Mechanic's Hall.

CW: Yes, so we were each told what the dimensions of our frames were and that's the dimensions our paintings had to be. And then we were given information as well as a little bit of information on the subject as well as photographs. Well Abby way back then, they had—what is it called? Early photographs you had to sit forever, She was so busy that she didn't want to ever sit for a portrait or photograph so all that I was given was an oval head and shoulders--not even, just her head. The other artists had full body and a number of photographs, right?

JB: Yeah.

CW: So, the committee knew very well that I had to find out. So, number one I did not know what she looked like, I did not know what she was like, I didn't know how she spoke, how she stood any of these things about her. I didn't know about her family or anything. So my first thing that I actually did because I did know that she was a Quaker. And up here, on Pleasant Street, not far from my house is the Quaker House so I went to a couple of meetings just to get a feel for what it's like and then they had a library there and so I checked out a couple books on being a Quaker and low and behold I found this book in their library and it's a book written by Dorothy Sterling and it's the only biography in existence of her written by Dorothy Sterling ahead of her time and it's really wonderful if you ever have the time to read it's really very historical,

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documentative, and beautiful, but it described that she was 5'6" and was considered very pretty, chestnut hair and she wore—she had been a Quaker and left the Quaker faith and as you know Quakers were not given to wearing pretty buttons or ribbons or ornamentation on their clothing and even though she left the Quaker faith and they weren't allowed—I shouldn't say allowed, they weren't given to wearing colors, like black and grey.

HS: Yeah.

CW: And when she left the Quaker faith she kept the same low key colors, no ribbons and ornamentation, but she designed her own outfit to be what you see here in the portrait with the crisscrossed scarf. And even though she, and this is in the book, even though she loved ribbons and colorful ribbons, she did not give in to them. But here's one thing she did: you know how heavy their petticoats were? Under their garbs? She wore *red* petticoats. No one would ever see it of course, but that's what she allowed herself. Right? So and I have told you how she travels and her husband Stephen and Alla—and I read this book and I went to this speech I was giving and I went to the historical society where Georgia Barnhill was working and she was instrumental in her community, she helped me find what I needed to find. I read a number of documents on her and there were two small portraits of her and I read the obituary on her, and I went to the Antiquarian Society, I think I got that wrong, yeah, Georgia Barnhill was at the Antiquarian Society and the reason I went there was because the color compositions and drawings that I submitted to the committee, I wanted to have her sitting and when I went to the Antiquarian Society, Georgia Barnhill helped me with letters, because I didn't even know they existed, and she brought out 1851 and 1852 and those folders were filled and now all of this is online, but before this they were all there and some in New York. And I was really struck because I read letters from William Lloyd Garrison back and forth between Abby and him and between her and her husband and her and her mother Patrice. And I was really struck with the dedication and love between her and her husband and he was kind of a romantic in that he would address the letter with a salutation of "my dear" and "my dearest" or whatever and end it with the same kind of—and I'm like, oh and my heart is melting right? And she never would just end—can you imagine being in those days way out in the midwest and there was no way that you could get home that night but you had been pelted and called names. Pelted with things and called names and actually thrown out of things and you want your husband to hold you and say everything is going to be ok—her letters were filled with this angst.

HS: Yeah.

CW: And I could see that her handwriting was pressed harder in the paper at those times and it was smaller and tighter and other days when she was writing a letter and it was better and she

had achieved something and that she actually left a certain town and had people who had volunteered to follow up on her work in that town and her handwriting was less heavy and it was bigger and more fluid and she would just let it all out and he would write back. And the Antiquarian Society was so good, they had the letters consecutively so that I could read a letter that he followed up that he was all out there for her, but he could feel her pain, but he was there for her and I was just stricken by the love between them and the support between them and also with the other patriots with how she never once thought about giving up. Once she actually wrote to Lloyd about when she felt like giving up, when that thought crossed her mind she would see that the African Americans—of course at that time they weren't called that—what they were going through, that she shouldn't even question herself physically and mentally, shouldn't even question it. She was just so profoundly stricken with this will to do this and she was one of the leaders of it and it was just incredible. The Historical Society, the Antiquarian Society, and when I submitted my color compositions and my drawings I wanted her sitting and writing these letters to Stephen [laughs]. So then they wrote back and they said no, she cannot be sitting because she was the only woman who gave lectures and they wanted her standing and giving a lecture so I went back to the drawing board and I thought oh I have to go back to the Antiquarian Society to talk to Georgia because back in that day there were such strict decorums on everything you could do right in our society and I felt that there had to be a way of giving a speech and there was. There was a book on oratory, the propriety of oratory written for Harvard University and indeed I found, and this is in the portrait, this is not a good photograph of it because the professional photographer who took it had the lights too close to her head and he wanted it and it washed out her face and this is grey, it's not green.

HS: Oh.

CW: But what I learned by reading the propriety of oratory was that when you gave a speech the dominant foot that you are standing on and that had to be the hand that you were gesturing with and like if I was standing on this foot but I was gesturing with this hand then I am speaking out against something right.

HS: Interesting.

CW: Right and it's not proper right? As well as the dominant foot and the dominant raised hand, the subordinate hand had to be mimicking what the dominant hand is doing like if I am pointing like this then if you are pointing out like this you are speaking against something then with this hand you had to then this hand had to be supporting that same gesture and then this foot had to be with this dominant hand and also my head had to be a certain way right? Not like speaking out against something but making your point. It was so strict well I learned in the biography as

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well as other things that I was reading that Abby was not schooled in the propriety of oratory in fact I am not clear in this moment what her leveling of schooling was I know back then that she went to school in Uxbridge maybe Rhode Island so she did have schooling definitely, but I don't think that that level like definitely not like a liar or a politician would have to have something like that something like a professional. Ok now if you look at the portrait her dominant hand is up, but she is looking at you not where her hand is pointing which means she is speaking out about something which she was right? And this hand is not supporting, mimicking that hand but now here, she has got a supine hand instead of a pointing hand and a supine hand means that I am asking for your help.

HS: Interesting.

CW: So I have her speaking out about something which is slavery and she is asking for your help which unbelievably and sadly in this day and age sadly is appropriate with what is going on in the country. That it is appropriate that she would be so sad she would be so saddened to see what is going on. But her colors are grey and her dress is black and the reason I wanted it black was because instead of her grey it was a symbol of the evil that she was fighting. So I painted everything according to the times with glazes so that I started the background with yellow ochre which is like a dull yellow and I let it dry and then a crimson which is transparent and let it dry and then put a glaze on, let it dry, and then I put a glaze of green on sap green which is transparent and let it dry as well so that in the background there are eight layers and on the dress there are 20.

JB: Oh, wow.

CW: So, that -

HS: So, that there is that depth to it.

CW: Yeah, well, I can actually show you on the computer, but what I started with was a scarf, a shawl that was much bigger and through the thing I thought that I didn't want it to be that strong in the portrait, I didn't want it to take away from the portrait so I shortened it. Well, the area that I had taken out I thought, "Well, this late in the game I'm just going to take a tube of black paint and fill it in." Her dress was so much darker black that—her dress was so much darker black than anything I had ever seen, or could even find, so I had to do the same process on her dress and so I had to do the same process. It was a symbol for the evil she was fighting and the process of the whole thing. I went to the Antiquarian Society to read the letters and the oratory a number of times and one day after reading her letters, one day I went to her cemetery. I went there twice

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and I went to the little office where they keep the ledger of way back—I mean from the beginning of time in this—it's the Hope Cemetery here in Worcester. And they not only took me to her grave site but they told me that her husband and her were buried side by side and that Abby was buried in the middle and that her feet were facing the stone so that I felt it was okay to sit on her feet, leaning back on her stone. One day after reading her letters I meditated and that's when the feelings started—I am going to cry—that's when I tapped into her. It's like her spirit joined me or something it was incredible. And during the process of the painting and when I was doing the head, I had a long shelf here and I had a large half gallon can there, you see it there. That's my can of mineral spirits and this was full of empty cans and other stuff that I used to have and this was empty. I had stayed up all night long and I had painted it and I had stepped back and everything was dead quiet you couldn't even hear traffic, nothing. And I said, “Abby Kelly Foster, you are coming to life,” and as those words left my mouth it sounded like something hit really hard on that paint can behind me.

JB & HS: Oh, god.

CW: I had goosebumps, and it being in the middle of the night!

HS: I would have run right upstairs.

CW: My son and husband were asleep upstairs, I felt like running! And my hairs were raised up and I said, “No, you’re here, with me, aren’t you?” and from that point on I really felt that she was with me.