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Fitz H. Lane's Enduring Legacy along the New England Coastline

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Fitz Henry Lane's painting of the Annisquam (or Squam) River at the Yale University Art Gallery (fig. 1) depicts a small cove approximately five miles north of Gloucester Harbor, in Massachusetts.¹ This location, where the river curves, is inaccessible to large ships; smaller vessels could be pulled ashore after muddling through the marsh, and the spot is referred to as Done Fudging.² In the nineteenth century, the land here, only half a mile from Lane's childhood home, was shaped by small local farms. In the foreground of the painting, a tree towers over a pasture and marsh, backlit by soft light that filters through its leaves. Three oxen graze and rest on the shoreline, and a figure, identified as the artist himself, sketches at the far left. Bands of peach and lavender clouds reflect on the water, illuminating veils of shifting color on the horizon. In the background at the left, a train speeds across a bridge.

As the art historian Margaretta M. Lovell argues, "What emerges from a close look at Lane's New England is a picture not only of

a land *not* lacking human history (that is, not a 'virgin wilderness') but of a land deeply resonant of former uses and history."³ Indeed, the subject of Lane's painting is the artist's unique connection to the Squam River cultural landscape. While he incorporated specific details of Done Fudging, he also added some elements to create a work that can be read as self-referential. An examination of Lane's redesigning of the coastline, painterly techniques, and strategies for engaging the viewer, as well as an analysis of the location's ecological history, offers a new perspective on Lane's work and an understanding of the changing landscape. Newly identified environmental features within the painting expand the discussion of the geopolitics of the area in 1848 and link it to the current climate crisis.

Lane was born Nathaniel Rogers Lane on December 19, 1804, in Gloucester, a village known for its fishing industry. His father, Jonathan Dennison Lane, was a sailmaker, and the family lived among the town's prominent sea captains. Nathaniel struggled with poor health as a child, experiencing neurological issues and loss of mobility. The historian John J. Babson hypothesized that these symptoms were caused by his eating the poisonous "apple-peru" (apple of Peru, or jimsonweed) in the family's garden when he was eighteen months old.⁴ Nathaniel explored his

Fig. 1. Fitz Henry Lane, *New England Inlet with Self-Portrait*, 1848. Oil on canvas, 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 25 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (45.1 × 65.7 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Kenneth A. Householder, B.A.R.C.H. 1947, in memory of Royal A. Basich, and partially purchased with the Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, and John Hill Morgan, B.A. 1893, Funds, 1992.107.1



Fig. 2. Fitz Henry Lane, *Westward View from Near East End of Railroad Bridge*, ca. 1848. Graphite on paper, 10 x 16 in. (25.4 x 40.6 cm). Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester, Mass., Gift of Samuel H. Mansfield, 1927, 485.61

environs through sketching—closely studying flora, fauna, rocks, and sailing vessels in the harbor—and even navigated the waters himself. At a young age, he received drawing instruction in his father's sail loft.⁵ In 1831 Nathaniel petitioned the General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to change his name to Fitz Henry Lane, to begin his career as a professional artist.⁶ By 1832 he had begun an apprenticeship with William S. Pendleton at Pendleton's Lithography, the leading printshop in Boston, and his early meticulous study of the nautical arts translated to a mastery of lithography. In 1847 or 1848, Lane returned to Gloucester as a professional painter and purchased property on Duncan's Point, overlooking Gloucester Harbor.⁷

The protected natural harbor known today as Gloucester Harbor had been

inhabited by Indigenous peoples for over ten thousand years. Under the Wampanoag Confederacy, the ancestral ground, known as Wôpanâank, was marked by footpaths and religious sites.⁸ European traders navigated the surrounding tidal estuaries for nearly two centuries prior to the establishment of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1628. The natural granite and trade network of the area became the bedrock of the colony. Gloucester bore witness to some of the most violent battles of the American Revolution. After the Revolution, ambitious American merchants, including Lane's patrons Sydney Mason and Robert Bennet Forbes, were no longer restricted by British maritime law and began trading with markets around the world, amassing implausibly large fortunes. Destruction from the War of 1812, followed by a decline of the shipping industry, led to rapid expansion during the Industrial Revolution in the mid-nineteenth century, which transformed not only the community of Gloucester but also the natural landscape.



Fig. 3. Fitz Henry Lane, *Looking Up Squam River from Done Fudging*, ca. 1848. Oil on canvas, 12½ x 20¾ in. (31.8 x 52.7 cm). Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester, Mass., Gift of Mrs. Preston Disc (Mrs. Jean Stanley Disc), 1964, 2019.01

Throughout his life, Lane assiduously documented the Gloucester coastline in graphite sketches, printed materials, and oil paintings. The art historian John Wilmerding has described Lane's drawings as "the primary source for telling us about Lane's working methods," adding that "the detailed information on many of them is critical in identifying the subjects and dates of many of his finished paintings."⁹ *Westward View from Near East End of Railroad Bridge* (fig. 2) is an expeditious sketch of Done Fudging that captures an expansive salt marsh and the rocky hills of Wolf Island. A gaff-rigged sailboat and the bow of a slab-sided skiff have been pulled onshore in anticipation of the tide. Stone markers commonly used by farmers to distinguish ownership boundaries appear in the upland field, where shrubs suggest new seasonal growth. Later in the studio, Lane used this sketch to complete two oil paintings: *Looking Up Squam River from Done Fudging* (fig. 3) replicates the details of the drawing, while the Gallery's painting, *New England Inlet with Self-Portrait* (see

fig. 1), includes alternate topographical details as well as autobiographical references. As Margareta Lovell argues, "Lane's paintings also include nonverbal references to the identities of his patrons, their ships, and himself, deliberately triggering recognition and 'decoding' in the well-informed contemporaneous viewer."¹⁰ A close examination of the myriad details in *New England Inlet with Self-Portrait* elucidates both the history of Done Fudging and Lane's connection to it.

The painting dates to 1848, the year that the famed landscape artist Thomas Cole died.¹¹ Having witnessed extreme environmental degradation throughout his life, Cole championed painting the American wilderness to capture and preserve its sacred spaces. In his 1836 "Essay on American Scenery,"

Cole stated that water was the natural feature that could transform an American location into a picturesque landscape defined by the sublime, declaring, "Like the eye in the human countenance, it is a most expressive feature."¹² Expressions of tranquility and peace fill the background of Lane's *New England Inlet with Self-Portrait*, with the twilight sky reflected on the river. Following in Cole's footsteps, Lane strove to capture elements of the sublime in what can be described as an American cultural landscape—a site that evolved and accrued meaning through land management and exploitation.

Lane designed the composition in the manner of his most successful lithographs: he organized it into parallel planes with no movement between foreground and background. The scene is an imagined arcadian paradise with specific natural features of the river, framed by a large granite boulder at the left and a tall tree at the right. Lane painted the boulder with an underlayer of textured light gray impasto. After applying glazes of various shades of brown, he reworked the area with his brush to remove the ridges of impasto on the rock to suggest a weathered, possibly even glacial or centuries-old, history. This process of application and extraction is repeated in a latticework of brushstrokes across the canvas.

Lane transformed the marsh into a lush pasture for the oxen to graze, and he widened the shoreline of the river. Salt-marsh ecology was highly debated in the nineteenth century, as settler farmers sought ways to profit from the marshes. While the rocky soil in Gloucester was difficult to cultivate, new parcels of land could be sold and sown by harnessing the oxen's power. Marshes were drained, and the marsh grass was harvested to create a space for and to feed the animals. The settlers used violence to take control of the coastline, and draining the marsh led to pooling water, causing the spread of mosquitoes.¹³ The Wampanoag Nation connected the marsh ecosystem to the divine and reacted strongly against salt-marsh destruction. As

the historian Ned Blackhawk explains, "Post-contact settlement patterns diverged from centuries of pre-contact residential practices in which villages developed almost entirely around coastline or watersheds."¹⁴ Death and disease devastated Wōpanānk. In paintings and lithographs of Gloucester in the 1840s and 1850s, oxen therefore represent not only commercial development and land ownership but also the colonial project and devastation of the Indigenous community.

The entwining branches and shimmering leaves of the tree at the right form a canopy that dominates the composition. Marlyse Duguid, the Thomas J. Sicama Senior Lecturer in Field Ecology and Director of Research, Yale Forests, recently identified this tree as a black cherry tree, native to the area.¹⁵ Growth at the base of the trunk resembles naturally occurring water sprouts, and the sun-drenched location along the water would have been ideal for black cherry trees. Indeed, the hardwood species has been described as salt tolerant because it can thrive along saltwater coastlines. The black cherry tree produces leaves that can be poisonous if ingested, similar to the "apple-peru" plant that Lane encountered as a child. All of these characteristics suggest the species could be decoded as a metaphor for Lane. The artist depicted himself nearby, with his drawing pad on his left leg.

At the far left in the background, an Eastern Railroad Company locomotive train crosses the Annisquam River Bridge. In 1846 the company constructed a branch connecting Gloucester to Boston, transforming how goods and people traveled to the area as well as the economy of the region. Lane depicted the train speeding over the wooden bridge; the outline of the billowing steam from the engine echoes the shape of the clouds above, as if it, too, were part of the natural world. Lane accentuated the steam with faint highlights of white paint in a technique that would become his signature style when panting natural effects on the water.¹⁶

Lane also included three small vessels navigating the river.¹⁷ Rowing toward the bridge is a man in a typical wherry yawl or skiff, a lightweight boat that could maneuver the shallow water to haul large quantities of fish, shellfish, gear, or goods between larger ships in the harbor. As the railroad established new avenues of commerce, these vessels were no longer needed, and within a few decades they were no longer in use. To the far right is a gaff-rigged sailboat, a new type of pleasure vessel. Here, the sail is caught with no wind, hanging motionless. Lane intricately rendered the stitches of the canvas with the acute precision of a sailmaker. At the center, in the distance, a large sailboat is shown under sail, in the middle of the river as it approaches the horizon.

This landscape, including the rocky granite coastline and emerald eelgrass, would have teemed with wildlife in 1848. The nutrient-rich sediment stabilized a barrier while removing pollutants and sequestering carbon, creating an environment that fostered a unique ecosystem with a variety of creatures, such as migrating shorebirds, waterfowl, and shellfish. Today, this site—now between the Gloucester Railroad Drawbridge and the Gant Circle traffic rotary on Massachusetts Route 128—is almost unrecognizable. Due to coastal housing developments, the construction of a large marina, and the placement of Route 128, chemical contaminants enter the marsh daily. Across the present-day boundaries of the city of Gloucester, approximately 950 acres of saltwater marsh survive—only a small portion of the vast expanse Lane studied in 1848.

Gloucester recently collaborated with the University of Massachusetts Amherst to start the North Shore Blue Economy initiative, with the goal to innovate maritime industries that foster the sustainable use of oceanic resources in order to address the livelihoods of the community and combat water pollution.¹⁸ A report published in 2020 by the Boston-based nonprofit conservation group Trustees of Reservations concludes

that, by 2050, about 394 acres (41 percent) of Gloucester could be flooded and become open water.¹⁹ To combat this, the group proposed strategies to expand current political structures to help fortify habitats, restore lost sediment or foliage, develop adaptive regulations, and continue long-term monitoring, in hopes that a more resilient salt marsh will emerge.

The most difficult conditions for restoring a salt-marsh ecosystem are in areas that were previously cleared for agricultural fields and pastures. The oxen in the foreground of *New England Inlet with Self-Portrait* now symbolize the centuries-old colonial project that redefined the coastline. While Lane's painting gives us an idea of the ways in which he defined his own identity in relation to the natural world, it also reveals the violent colonial effort to claim ownership of the coastline and repurpose the marshland to serve the village of Gloucester, without any consideration of the ecosystem. Through his representation of Done Fudging, a personally important site on Gloucester Harbor, Lane developed a new way of presenting a cultural landscape. A reconsideration of Lane's conceptual, painterly, and topographic strategies, as well as the ecological history of Done Fudging, disrupts the colonial framework through which his art has often been viewed. *New England Inlet with Self-Portrait* can offer insights into the history of land management as well as techniques for describing a lost ecosystem.

1. John Wilmerding assigned the painting the title *New England Inlet with Self-Portrait* in 1988, when it was part of the collection of Royal A. Basich; see John Wilmerding, *Paintings by Fitz Hugh Lane*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1988), 8, 161, no. 1. Basich's estate listed the title as *Looking Up Squam River from Done Fudging* when the painting was appraised by the North Point Gallery, in San Francisco, before April 1992; see curatorial file, inv. no. 1992.107.1, Department of American Paintings and Sculpture, Yale University Art Gallery.

2. It is also referred to as "Done Fudgin" or "Dunfudgin." "Fudging" is a term used locally to describe the task of guiding a vessel through the

marsh with a pole when there is no wind or the tide is too low.

3. Margaretta M. Lovell, *Painting the Inhabited Landscape: Fitz H. Lane and the Global Reach of Antebellum America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2023), 4.

4. John J. Babson, *History of the Town of Gloucester, Cape Ann, Including the Town of Rockport* (Gloucester, Mass.: Procter Brothers, 1860), 258. Edward Lane, the artist's nephew, described the family's account that his uncle had eaten "some of its leaves," which led to his paralysis; see Edward Lane, "Early Recollections of Artist Fitz H. Lane," n.d., Cape Ann Historical Association, Mass.; and James A. Craig, *Fitz H. Lane: An Artist's Voyage through Nineteenth-Century America* (Charleston, S.C.: History Press, 2006) 17–18.

5. Sarah Dunlap and Stephanie Buck, *Fitz Henry Lane Family and Friends* (Gloucester, Mass.: Church and Mason, 2007), 36–37; see also Craig, *Fitz H. Lane*, 26.

6. Sarah Dunlap and Stephanie Buck, "Fitz Who? The Artist Latterly Known as Fitz Henry Lane," *Essex Genealogist* 25, no. 1 (February 2005): 11–15.

7. Dunlap and Buck, *Fitz Henry Lane Family and Friends*, 59–74.

8. Ned Blackhawk, *The Rediscovery of America: Native Peoples and the Unmaking of U.S. History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2023), 48–73.

9. John Wilmerding, quoted in Elliot Bostwick Davis, *Training the Eye and the Hand: Fitz Hugh Lane and Nineteenth-Century Drawing Books*, exh. cat. (Gloucester, Mass.: Cape Ann Historical Association, 1993), 4.

10. Lovell, *Painting the Inhabited Landscape*, 105.

11. I am grateful to Mark D. Mitchell, the Holcombe T. Green Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture, Yale University Art Gallery, for bringing this to my attention.

12. Thomas Cole, "Essay on American Scenery," *American Monthly Magazine*, n.s., 1 (January 1836), reprinted in John Davis and Michael Leja, *Art of the United States, 1750–2000: Primary Sources* (Chicago: Terra Foundation, 2020), 79.

13. See David C. Smith et al., "Salt Marshes as a Factor in the Agriculture of Northeastern North America," *Agricultural History* 63, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 279.

14. Blackhawk, *Rediscovery of America*, 62.

15. Marlyse Duguid, conversations with author and Mark D. Mitchell, October 2022 and February 2023.

16. With age, the pigments of the thin layers have become more transparent, exposing Lane's technique. I am grateful to Kelsey Wingel, Associate Conservator of Paintings, Yale University Art Gallery, for our conversation about the painting in February 2023.

17. John R. Stilgoe, *Alongshore* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), 132–205.

18. For more on the initiative, see "Blue Economy Initiative—Gloucester Marine Station," University of Massachusetts Amherst School of Earth and Sustainability, accessed April 11, 2023, <https://www.umass.edu/ses/gloucester-marine-station/north-shore-blue-economy>.

19. Barbara Erickson and Tom O'Shea, *State of the Coast: North Shore* (Boston: Trustees of Reservations, 2020), accessed August 4, 2023, <https://thetrustees.org/coast-sustainability/north-shore-state-of-the-coast-report/>.