The Adirondack wilderness of New York State was the northernmost outpost in a landscape itinerary that extended south along the narrow mountain valley course of the Hudson River to the more familiar and accessible New York touring and sketching grounds of the Catskills, the Highlands, and the Palisades. The Adirondack mountain range is bounded by Lake George to the south and east and Lake Champlain to the north and east and on the west by the Black River and the Tug Hill Plateau. This is the region in which Thomas Cole (1801 - 1848) found the "wildness" described in his 1835 "Essay on American Scenery" as "perhaps the most impressive characteristic of American scenery." (Fig. 1) Asher B. Durand (1796 - 1886) found his calling as a landscape painter in these mountains on an 1837 expedition with Cole to Schroon Lake. The rich language of Durand's "Letters on Landscape Painting," published in 1855 just as American landscape painter William Trost Richards (1833 - 1905) was planning his first Adirondack expedition, gives us insight into the powerful associations, always on the edge of
transcendence, invested in landscape experience. Durand also saw the whole artistic project of American landscape painting as uniquely expressive of both national and cultural identity. [3]

In 1873 The Aldine, a popular magazine devoted to art and literature, counted William Trost Richards among the important interpreters of Adirondack scenery: "For the past thirty years this region of country has been a favorite resort for artists. A. B. Durand, J. W. Casilear, and J. F. Kensett led the way, being followed in 1855, by J. M. Hart, and in 1863 by W. T. Richards, all of whom found plenty of material for many of their finest sketches."[4] Today, Richards is principally recognized as a painter of marine and coastal subjects, whose career flourished during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Less well known is the fact that during his early practice, from 1853 to 1870, his primary subject was the American landscape. Richards participated, at mid-century, in the collective artistic project to originate a landscape vision that might be acknowledged as national.

Richards's experience in the Adirondacks played a critical role in this development and much earlier, in actuality, than reported in The Aldine, for Richards had first explored New York State and the Adirondack Region in 1855. Over a dozen sheets and several pages in a pocket sketchbook document Richards's five-week-long expedition in 1855 from June 20, when he sketched at Fishkill, to July 29, with the last view dated in Pleasant Valley. His itinerary took him up the Hudson River to Lake George and Lake Champlain, with a stop at historic Fort Ticonderoga on June 19 before continuing west to Pleasant Valley and Elizabethtown for a month. He ranged over the valley, the plains of North Elba, the Indian Pass near the Hudson's source, and the Schroon River, one of its tributaries. His studies are meticulous pencil drawings carefully inscribed with site names and dates, constituting a vivid travel diary and an invaluable documentary record. Because one sketchbook contains both Adirondack and Italian subjects, it is tempting to speculate that Richards took these drawings to Europe.[5] Whether his physical baggage included this corpus of American images or not, it is clear that he carried them in his mind. We know that Richards saw the Adirondack tour as a prologue to European exercises, comparing North America to the mountain landscapes of other nations: "To everyone is not vouchsafed within a few months, a pedestrian excursion through the remote Adirondack mountains - a tramp through part of Switzerland, and a sketching trip for views afoot in the purple passes of the Appenines."[6] Not only was his national scenic allegiance intact -- "neither Tuscany or Switzerland has in any way lessened my love of American scenery" -- but Richards also concluded that no European
landscape artist was equal to New York's Frederic Church. [7]

A native of Philadelphia, Richards exhibited both European and American subjects at the Annual of the Pennsylvania Academy in spring 1857 including *Lake George, Opposite Caldwell*, (Fig. 2) Richards's single known painting of Lake George, the most popular site in the Adirondack region. The subject was a logical one to include as a prelude to his all-New York roster for the Academy in 1858; the great lake, some thirty-six miles long and four miles wide, was not only a major tourist destination but also a primary route for the more adventurous into the Adirondack region. Richards opted for the domesticated picturesque in his painting, conceiving an image that depicts a rolling but accessible foreground terrain and distant lake under a brilliant sky -- a pastoral vignette complete with fisherman and grazing cattle. A wedge of the lake completes the composition in the middle ground, while the distant mountains beyond operate as our only hint of the great size of this body of water.

The arresting beauty of Lake George was widely celebrated in eighteenth - and early nineteenth-century diaries, journals, and travel accounts. "Everybody who has heard of American scenery has heard of Lake George....the lake which of all others, I most desired to see," wrote English writer Harriet Martineau in 1835.[9] Seventeenth-century explorers aboard bateaux marveled at its virgin forests and pristine waters; eighteenth-century French, British, and American soldiers fought there; nineteenth-century travelers vacationed at the lake's elegant hotels as part of the American Grand Tour. Thomas Jefferson was so struck with the beauty of the scenery that he wrote his daughter Martha on May 31, 1791: "Lake George is, without comparison, the most beautiful water I ever saw...."[10]

Artists were attracted to Lake George because of this arresting physical beauty and the popular demand for images of it. Landscape painters created masterpieces in oil and watercolor. Printmakers William Henry Bartlett (1809 - 1854) and Harry Fenn (1845 - 1911) produced an enormous number of engravings while others produced lithographs after paintings. Still others documented the lake and its visitors for the popular press. Photographers produced photographs as works of art and for commercial purposes, all for a public eager to buy views of the picturesque lake. Indeed, the American public's appetite for pictures of American scenery was becoming inexhaustible by the 1850s.

Among amateur and professional artists, few found the lake as felicitous a subject as John Frederick Kensett (1816 - 1872). One of America's best-known and most successful...
landscape painters, he made at least a dozen formal compositions of the lake beginning in 1850. Kensett was strongly influenced by Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand, particularly their beliefs concerning the religious and moral content of the landscape. His paintings expressed transcendental faith in "that beautiful harmony which God has created the universe." Kensett's *Lake George* of 1856, (Fig. 3) with its classically balanced composition of mountains, shore, and serene lake, bathed in pink-gold light, conveys the sense of awe that natural perfection inspired in the artist. Kensett's paintings depict Nature at a particular time, place, and point of view, exactly observed and personally perceived. He celebrated a grand and majestically ordered Nature in paint: his light, delicate and serene; his mood, pensive and quiet.

Richards returned to the Adirondacks in 1857 and, possibly, again in 1859. We know that he was there in 1862, 1863, 1865, perhaps 1866, and in 1868. From studies made on these forays, Richards produced a series of paintings that figure among the most beautiful and significant records of the region produced at mid-century. Richards's encounters with the region came at critical moments in his own career and in national life. The Adirondack region provided a virtual laboratory in which he worked out various landscape agendas over more than a decade. These ranged from the mastery of the mainstream Hudson River School style in the 1850s to experimentation with an extreme realism that established him in the 1860s as a central figure in the short-lived and controversial American Pre-Raphaelite movement. His first Adirondack campaigns of the 1850s occurred at the highwater mark of the Hudson River, or New York, School's mission to define a national landscape. These Adirondack paintings effectively launched Richards's career.

A pair of accomplished Adirondack landscapes of 1857 depict a mountain vista looking west across Pleasant Valley near Elizabethtown, the county seat of Essex County where Richards and many other artists based their visits. Like Durand and Cole, Richards and his colleagues were particularly drawn to Essex County, bounded on the east by Lake Champlain and containing within its boundaries the highest Adirondack peaks as well as the source of the Hudson River. Essex County also contains some of the region's most dramatic geologic and glacial formations. The more hospitable terrain of Pleasant Valley and neighboring Keene Valley was also a favorite sketching ground of the period. *In the Adirondacks, 1857* (Fig. 4) and *A View in the Adirondacks*, ca. 1857 (Fig. 5) present the same view under different conditions, as if Richards had set himself the pedagogical task of rendering contrasting effects of weather, atmosphere, and light. Both topographical accuracy and poetic license inform the paintings of the first Adirondack campaign. Each composition deftly incorporated forms of homage to the landscape visions of Richards's
New York artist-heroes: Cole, Church, and Cropsey. By such means, Richards could lay claim to a role for himself in the campaign to define a national landscape.

Despite this early mastery, Richards's moment of wholehearted participation in the larger agenda would be brief. The mounting sectional tensions of the 1850s had already begun to undermine assumptions of widespread political and cultural unity implied in such landscape imagery. Richards did respond as an artist to these social and political tensions in subtle but profound ways over the next decade and beyond, by his choice of landscape subjects and styles. His early course as interpreter of a national landscape would be irrevocably altered by these changes in the cultural environment.

Once again, Richards's Adirondack experience would figure prominently in this passage. Almost every summer from 1862 to 1868, he returned to work in the region. Extant drawings, located paintings, and the titles of others indicate the continuing primacy for him of Essex County, especially Elizabethtown and Keene Valley. He was not alone. Letters, diaries, and the periodical press recorded the summertime artist excursions in the region. Alexander Lawrie, Richards's studio-mate and companion in Europe, recorded meeting him at Elizabethtown in 1863, 1865, and in 1868. The hamlet was a kind of crossroads for artists. While Lawrie and Richards were there in 1863, Sanford R. Gifford (1823 - 1880), Jervis McEntee (1828 - 1891), and Richard W. Hubbard (1816 - 1888) all passed through. In August 1865, Lawrie and his party returned there from an eight-day camp on the Upper and Lower Ausable Lakes. The group included Richards and his former students Fidelia Bridges (1835 - 1923) and Arthur Parton (1842 - 1914) as well as Homer D. Martin (1836 - 1897) and his wife. Such excursions and meetings must have been the occasion for comparison of sketches and exchange of ideas. The careful detail of Lawrie's own Village, Essex County, New York, ca. 1867 (Fig. 6) suggests that he was influenced by Richards's meticulous approach. We know the two sketched and painted out of doors together on more than one occasion.[11]

Works of art on paper are ephemeral survivals of artists' ventures in the wilderness. Jervis McEntee had first visited the Adirondacks in the early 1850s. His drawing Wood's Cabin on Rackett [sic] Lake, 1851 (Fig. 7) pictures the cabin of one of Raquette Lake's settlers at a time when few other people had found this spot. McEntee, aged twenty-three, recorded his impressions of his adventure in his diary, sketchbook, and for the newspaper Rondout Courier on July 18, 1851. In his diary, he described the cabin on July 6 as "comfortable" and "built of logs with a bark covered porch in front. It stands on a gentle elevation about fifty yards from the lake [and Wood] has a very good garden...."[12] Joel T. Headley, in
his 1849 account The Adirondacks, described the same huts as "looking like oases in the desert, occupied by two men, who dwell thus shut out from the civilized life."[13] This drawing pre-dates William Trost Richards's July 3, 1855 drawing Indian Pass, an equally lonely but more rugged site.

Sanford Robinson Gifford's A Twilight in the Adirondacks, 1864, (Fig. 8) is a masterful example of the persistent belief in the spiritual power of nature and the role of the artist to depict it. In 1881, John F. Weir, Yale School of Fine Arts Director, wrote that "Gifford loved the light. His finest impressions were those derived from the landscape, where the air is charged with an effulgence of irruptive and glowing light....He was unerringly profound in his insight into that which was most truly nature, into those potent truths that underlie the superficial aspects which engage the common mind or attract the common eye."[14] There are four known versions of Gifford's composition depicting a shoreline silhouetted between a radiant twilight sky and its reflection in a lake with a camping scene on the shore. The campers are likely to be the artist, his colleagues Jervis McEntee and Richard William Hubbard, and their guide. The Adirondack Museum's painting is the largest version. It was exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1864 and at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in 1876. At its first exhibition, the New York Evening Post exclaimed that "Gifford has never painted a picture of more exquisite gradations than this."[15]

Arthur Parton moved from his birthplace of Hudson, New York, in 1859 to Philadelphia where he studied landscape painting with William Trost Richards for several years. In 1864, he settled and worked out of various studios in Manhattan. He first visited the Adirondacks in 1866 and then made regular summer visits to Keene Valley and the Ausable Lakes until he bought a cottage in the Catskills around 1880. Parton was an experienced angler as described in a reminiscence: "the best fishing fellow you could wish to meet...and how he can paint!" One can imagine that he often saw this scene of mist rising off a lake from the perspective of a fishing boat. (Fig. 9) Homer Dodge Martin, from Albany, was sent to the region in 1864 by his teacher James M. Hart. His many Adirondack pictures include Mountain View on the Saranac, 1868. (Fig. 10) This painting was commissioned by the periodical Every Saturday which used the wood engraving after this painting to illustrate an article promoting William H. H. Murray's 1869 book Adventures in the Wilderness to lure tourists to the Adirondacks. While the print catalogued the topography, the painting is fraught with drama and the forbidding atmosphere shrouding the rugged scenery on the Saranac River. Richards's contemporaneous Adirondack subjects seemed to offer the artist an opportunity to
reconcile the atmospheric requirements of landscape painting and the Pre-Raphaelite

demand for detail. Like the works of the 1850s, the oil paintings of the second campaign
are grounded in a group of wonderful drawings charting itinerary as well as response when
he returned to the area in 1862 and, again, for a well-documented stay in 1863 that
included a wonderful sketchbook. Like the drawings of the 1855 campaign, these are an
independent body of work, never exhibited in the artist's lifetime but held in his
studio. Worthy of note on aesthetic and documentary terms, they constitute both a visual
diary and an artist's itinerary. They are compelling records of experience in a region
where many landmarks are still intact. A few open air studies also survive executed in oil
on paper. In his diary, Lawrie recorded painting out of doors with Richards during a nine-
week period in 1863. Probably representative of a larger corpus of plein air work now
lost, the open air studies are brilliant in palette and informal in composition. These little
records offer an even more vivid transcript of the hills and meadows surrounding the
hamlet of Elizabethtown as they appeared in the early 1860s.

While we now appreciate these on-site records very much for themselves, all of these
works served a primary function as studies and reference points for the oil paintings
Richards composed from them and executed later in the studio. The single exception is
the large drawing of Indian Pass, 1866 (Fig. 11) that belongs to the interesting category of
oversize elaborate exhibition drawings in graphite and charcoal produced between 1864
and 1867. Some of these, like Indian Pass, were reproduced as photographs and some are
directly related to oil paintings of similar scale. Richards referred to them as "cartoons"
suggesting that these works on paper were conceived as full-scale studies that might be
executed as oil paintings upon commissions.[16]

Indian Pass is also an exception to the body of known Adirondack images in its exercise
of the vertical sublime. The massive boulders, looming tower of Wallface Mountain, low
clouds, and soaring eagles strike a note of gloomy grandeur. On the other hand, the
dominant mood in the landscape paintings of the 1860s is a celebration of the mountain
valley pastoral that harks back to the pendant paintings of 1857. Elizabethtown and the
broad plain of Pleasant Valley drew Richards with its appealing blend of comfortable
inhabited foreground and middle distance in combination with the distant austere
mountain peaks. The Bouquet River, imagined as a lake-like body of water in 1857,
assumes its identity in these paintings as a winding watercourse over the valley
floor. Richards dispenses with the dark, stage-like foreground platforms used in the views
of 1857, adopting an open ended panoramic format also put to use by Gifford, William
Hart (1833 - 1894), David Johnson (1827 - 1908) and others in the 1860s.[17]
While based upon on site drawings, the paintings are compositions that seem to vary in topographical focus. *Adirondack Landscape*, 1864 (Fig. 12) is a very precise record of the Elizabethtown hamlet seen from Woods Hill. *Autumn in the Adirondacks* (Fig. 13) portrays Blueberry and Porter mountains in Keene Valley with Mt. Marcy in the background. Other paintings, like *The Bouquet Valley, Adirondacks*, 1866 (Fig. 14), arguably the masterwork of the 1860s campaign, are convincingly steeped in the topographical sense of the region but have so far defied efforts to identify their specific sites.

An exception is a complex allegory, *John Brown's Grave, A Study*, c. 1864, (Fig. 15) one of the few titles in Richards's oeuvre to reflect the impact of politics and current events. The little painting depicts the recently executed abolitionist's memorial plot on his farm at North Elba. Richards's contemporaneous response to the subject is oblique and coded in both landscape and harvest imagery, [18] rather than the figural narrative of history painting, expressing themes of loss and reconciliation associated with the Civil War era.

In 1904, Richards's final return to paint these mountains, long after his reputation and market had been confirmed as a marine painter, demonstrated the powerful associations the region continued to hold for him and his generation. (Fig. 16) He returned to Essex County for a summer holiday at Lake Placid in the company of his artist-daughter Anna and her husband William Tenney Brewster. Father and daughter recorded their lakeside sojourn in a series of small oil paintings. The Lake Placid plein air studies of light and atmosphere, grounded in the same empirical investigation of regional topography that inform the pencil drawings from his early forays, are among the freshest and most beautiful paintings of a remarkably vigorous old age.

William Trost Richards and his fellow artists in the 1850s and 60s have pictured on canvas and paper S. H. Hammond's words of 1860: "Their bare and rocky summits glistening in the sunlight, while near still the hills rise....Here and there a valley winds away among the highlands, along which mountain streams come bounding down...."[19] Although Richards's and his contemporaries regular sojourns preceded the tourist explosion of the 1870s, the Adirondack region was already established by 1855 as a destination for the hardy excursionist. As we see from the paintings of Cole and Durand, Adirondack subjects, enhanced by historical and literary associations, already operated as part of a national canon of American landscape images. Elizabethtown, the county seat where Richards was based on his visits, served as a regional crossroads during the years 1850 to
1870 for him and many other artists in search of a national landscape.

END NOTES


3. Asher B. Durand, "Letters on Landscape Painting," The Crayon, (1855). The nine articles, published between January and July, demonstrate in their earnest eloquence the highly charged state in which American scenery and landscape painting was approached by artists, critics, and audience at mid century. There can be little doubt that Richards knew these important documents.

4. "Elizabeth Valley," The Aldine, VI (October 1873), 198

5. The sketchbook is in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, accession no. 1975.15.2, Gift of Edith Ballinger Price.


7. Ibid. and William T. Richards to Thomas Webb Richards, Paris, 29 August 1855, typescript in Linda S. Ferber's collection.


In Search of a National Landscape: William Trost Richards and the Artists' Adirondacks 1850 - 1870 will be on view through October 14, 2002 at the Adirondack Museum, Routes 28 and 30, Blue Mountain Lake, New York 12812, 518-352-7311. The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated soft-cover catalogue available for $29.95 (shipping not included) at the Adirondack Museum Store or on-line at www.adkmuseum.org. This article is excerpted from essays by the authors in the exhibit catalogue of the same title.

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