

The Identities of Mr.

A painting of a small boat with two people on a body of water at sunset or sunrise. The sky is filled with horizontal bands of color, and the water reflects the light.

Nathaniel Rogers

How the young Nathaniel Rogers became the artist Fitz Henry Lane, who mistakenly became Fitz Hugh Lane, and now has been rehabilitated as Fitz Henry Lane.

BY JOHN WILMERDING

ONE OF THE CENTRAL PARADOXES about Fitz Henry Lane (1804-1865) is that over more than half a century of modern scholarship we have learned a great deal about his art but, until recently, relatively little about his life. The startling exception was the discovery in 2005 that, despite having been known for almost a century as Fitz Hugh, his real name was in fact Fitz Henry. This realization was thanks to Gloucester archivists, Stephanie Buck, Sarah Dunlap, and Jane Walsh, who researched his name change in the published Massachusetts court records to find the definitive information.

We had long known that his name had been changed from Nathaniel Rogers, which is recorded on his baptismal records, but had assumed that this alteration was his family's doing while Lane was still young. In the first place we do not know why he wanted to give up his given name. One possible factor is that he learned of the well-established New York artist Nathaniel Rogers.

*Ten Pound Island at Sunset, 1851. Oil on panel, 9 x 13".
Cape Ann Historical Museum, gift of Mrs. George B. Stevens.*



Salt Island, 1859. *Oil on canvas, 28 x 47¼".*
Cape Ann Historical Museum,
gift of Samuel H. Mansfield.

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Changing one's name as a signal of artistic persona is perhaps most identified with Walt Whitman, who took his informal first name in 1855 with the publication of *Leaves of Grass*. He noted: "Names are the turning point of who shall be master....Names are a test of the esthetic and of spirituality.— A delicate subtle something there is in the right name—an undemonstrable nourishment that exhilarates the soul." The art historian Ruth L. Bohan has called this an act of self redefinition and self mastery.

Buck, Dunlap, and Walsh discovered that in 1831 Lane himself wrote a letter "To the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in General Court assembled," petitioning to take the new name. His request was granted the following year. He was 27 years old. No one as yet knows the reason for this decision: why at that time, or why this particular name, although these questions invite some speculation. The local



ments, and music sheet illustrations, with several bearing captions noting “Drawn by” or “On stone by F. H. Lane.” That he formally changed his name in this exact period does not seem a coincidence, and we can surmise that he may have wanted to take on a new artistic identity at the moment he began producing his first works of art.

What still remains opaque is why this name and what its possible inspiration was: some admired Gloucester personage or some other obscure artisan? Virtually every reference thereafter to the artist in his lifetime identifies him regularly as “F. H. Lane” or occasionally as “Fitz H. Lane,” and when he did sign his paintings, these were consistently the signatures he inscribed. The fuller name he usually reserved for large canvases or important commissions.

Historians have generally considered Lane out of the mainstream of Hudson River School painting as practiced by the numerous and closely connected group of artists centered in New York about mid-century. Andrew Wilton and Tim Barringer are the most recent to argue his place in a distinctively New England tradition, with few personal or stylistic ties to New York contemporaries such as Martin Johnson Heade and Frederic Edwin Church.

In fact, we need to consider more fully how much Lane belongs within the intellectual and spiritual context of Boston’s culture as shaped by such figures as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Still, having successfully established a solid reputation for himself in both Gloucester and Boston, Lane must have felt early in his maturity as a painter that making a mark and securing patronage in the more national market of New York would be desirable. New England newspapers had remarked on his art, and his paintings were shown at the Boston Athenaeum and the Boston Mechanics’ Association as early as 1841. At the same time, he was also sending works to New York for sale or exhibition. Four of his paintings went on view at the American Art-Union in 1849, including the now celebrated *Twilight on the Kennebec* (1849, private collection), thought to be his first use of the hot red cadmium pigments to cap-

Gloucester historian John J. Babson recorded that, early on, Lane “showed in boyhood a talent for drawing and painting; but received no instruction in the rules till he went to Boston.”

Evidently, the youth began sketching scenes and details around the environs of his native Gloucester. Word of a storm and shipwreck at sea of a vessel under command of a Gloucester captain prompted Lane’s first recorded work in 1830. This was a somewhat naive but highly animated watercolor of *The Burning of the Packet Ship “Boston”* (Cape Ann Historical Museum). In 1832, after a couple of years of local employment, the aspiring artist went to Boston to apprentice with William S. Pendleton, who ran the city’s foremost printing shop. Lane went on to receive more formal instruction from Pendleton.

Pendleton gave him work assisting in the production of lithographed music sheet covers. By the early 1830s, Lane was illustrating his own views, advertise-



Dolliver's Neck and the Western Shore from Field Beach, ca. 1857. Oil on masonite, 18½ x 32¾". Cape Ann Historical Museum.

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ture the intense evening colors of a northern summer sunset.

But like most artists of his generation, including the major luminists and members of the Hudson River School (Frederic Church being the most notable), Lane's art and reputation went into obscurity during the later nine-

teenth century. Taste turned to variations of impressionism or the sturdy figural realism of Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins. With the early twentieth century, the new revolutions in abstraction practiced by the emerging modernists further obscured the delicate, romantic, even sentimental naturalism of pre-Civil War



A Smart Blow
(Rough Sea, Schooners),
1856. Oil on Canvas,
11¾ x 19".
Cape Ann Historical Museum,
Gift of Caroline W. Trask.

landscape painting. Throughout this time, when Lane's name occasionally came up, he was still known correctly as Fitz Henry as late as 1915. However, in the same period appeared possibly the first occurrence of the incorrect middle name. Collectors were just then beginning to acquire nineteenth-century American marine paintings for India House in lower Manhattan, New York. Correspondence in 1914 and an invoice for the purchase in 1915 of a canvas depicting the clipper *Northern Light* refer to the artist as Fitz Hugh Lane.

Lane's art began to be rediscovered in the late 1930s by dealers such as Charles Childs and collectors of marine painting such as Pierrepont Johnson and in the next decade Maxim Karolik. The revival of realism by the regionalist and American Scene painters of the thirties and the rise of a nationalist consciousness during the period of World War II now made possible a reexamination of the art from Lane's era.

By the forties, Karolik's collection was growing to fruition, culminating in 1949 with his massive gift to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and accompanied by a monumental catalogue authored by John Baur. Karolik had acquired more than a dozen of Lane's finest paintings, and Baur celebrated them along with an even larger gathering of Martin Johnson Heade's work under the new rubric of luminism. Thus the name of Fitz Hugh Lane was enshrined in the canon of modern American art history—until the correction of 2005.



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