

*The Magazine*

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JULY 2006

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# Rediscovering Fitz Henry Lane's *View of Coffin's Beach*



**F**itz Henry Lane<sup>1</sup> was born in Gloucester, Massachusetts, on Cape Ann but did not settle there permanently until 1848, “with a reputation fully established,” as the early historian of Gloucester John James Babson (1809–1886) put it.<sup>2</sup> In the interim he had learned his trade at Pendleton’s Lithography in Boston, where he drew vignettes for sheet music covers, trade cards, and advertisements, and produced careful topographical views.

Throughout the 1840s and 1850s Lane painted his hometown and its environs, and in the 1860s he painted views of Cape Ann more than any other subject. Among the lat-

ter is *View of Coffin’s Beach* (Figs. 1 and 3) of 1862, which has been the focus of a research project by the conservators and curators at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.<sup>3</sup> Recent archival research and technical investigations of *View of Coffin’s Beach* have shed light on Lane’s working methods and helped provide a new context for the painting.

An inscription in Lane’s hand on the back of the painting (Fig. 4) identifies the view, the date, and the friend to whom he gave the picture. Coffin’s Beach extends from the Essex River on the west to the Annisquam River on the east (see Fig. 6). The rocks called Two Penny Loaf, where Lane positioned himself, lie



# Coffin's Beach on Cape Ann

By Karen E. Quinn with Sandra Kelberlau and Jean Woodward



at the Essex River end of the beach.

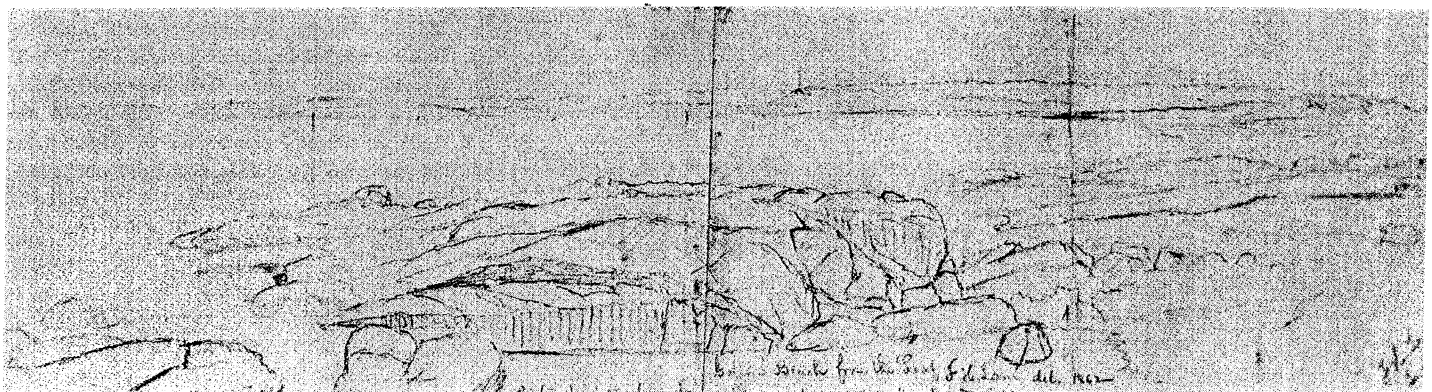
The recipient of the painting, Herman E. Davidson, was a distinguished physician in Gloucester. How he and Lane became friends has not been established, but the relationship did exist, for in the summer of 1862 Lane

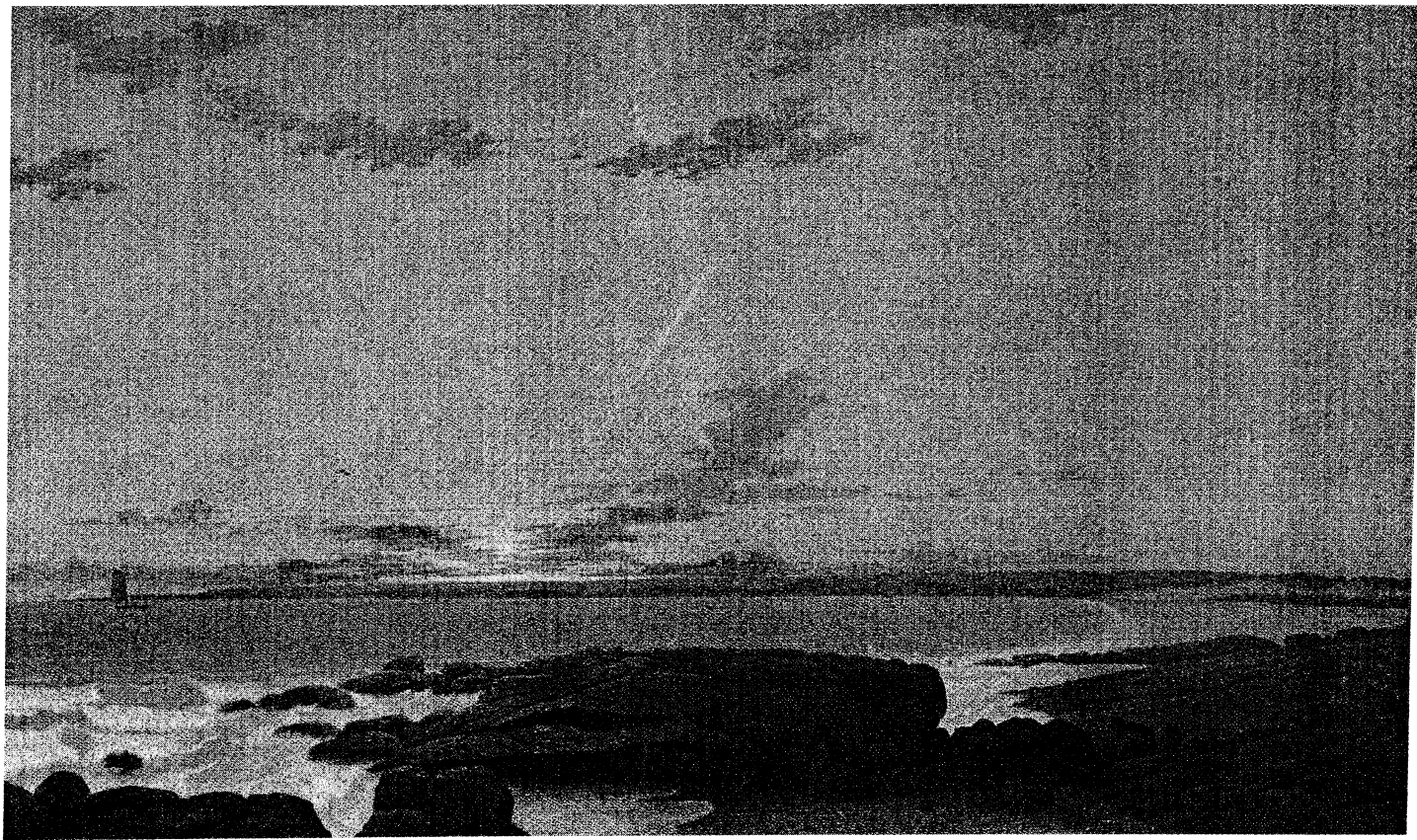
stayed with the doctor and his wife Sarah. He had moved out of his house, which he shared with his sister, also Sarah, and her husband Ignatius Winter, with whom he had had a misunderstanding.<sup>4</sup>

Lane often chose to paint sites of historical

Fig. 1. Detail of the painting in Fig. 3.

Fig. 2. *Coffin's Beach from the Loaf*, by Fitz Henry Lane (1804–1865), 1862. Inscribed "Coffin's Beach from the Loaf F.H. Lane del. 1862/Picture painted from this sketch and presented to Mrs. Dr. Davidson." at lower center and initialed "F.H.L./J.L.S." at lower right. Graphite on paper, 7 ¼ by 17 ¼ inches. *Cape Ann Historical Association, Gloucester, Massachusetts.*





significance in Gloucester. Coffin's Beach, for example, was named for the landowners who established a farm there in the seventeenth century. In 1775 Peter Coffin (c. 1724–1796), an ardent patriot, and a handful of friends held off Captain John Linzee (or Lindsay), a loyalist, and his crew from the *Falcon* when they attempted to land and make off with sheep from the farm.<sup>5</sup> However, the farm was abandoned in Lane's time, and it was probably the presence of John Charles Frémont (1813–1890) encamped on Coffin's Beach in August 1862 that drew the artist to the site. A renowned explorer, Frémont had recently been relieved of his command as a general in the Union Army for exceeding his authority and had set up camp at Two Penny Loaf.<sup>6</sup> Lane made a drawing of the camp, which he used as the basis for an oil painting for Frémont's wife, Jessie (nee Benton; 1824–1901).<sup>7</sup> It was probably at this time that Lane also made the drawing *Coffin's Beach from the Loaf* (Fig. 2), on which he based the painting in Figure 3.

During the 1850s and 1860s Lane used two distinct styles of drawing: spontaneous and fluid on the one hand and static and uniform on the other.<sup>8</sup> The drawing in Figure 2 illustrates both styles. The static and uniform style suggests that Lane used an optical device to make his topographical sketches, although there is no surviving documentation for this.<sup>9</sup> The most likely of a variety of available devices is the compact and portable camera lucida invented by William Hyde Wollaston (1766–1828) in England and patented in 1807. It consists of a prism attached to a flexible arm that can be clamped to a table or board



(see Fig. 8). The artist looks through the prism to see the scene in front of him reflected onto the paper below the lens, ready to be traced. Since horizontal elements are easier to follow than vertical ones, the camera lucida was particularly useful for landscapes.<sup>10</sup>

The majority of the lines in Lane's drawing *Coffin's Beach from the Loaf* have a mechanical quality that could be evidence of the tracings produced when working with a camera lucida. A comparison between Lane's drawing and a modern one made at the same site using a nineteenth-century camera lucida (Fig. 9) shows remarkable similarities: the two sketches are almost the same length and the outlines of the distant shoreline match. If either drawing had been produced freehand, it is unlikely that they would relate so closely.

Lane's drawing *Coffin's Beach from the Loaf* is inscribed "Picture painted from this sketch



and presented to Mrs. Dr. Davidson."<sup>11</sup> Thus it is directly tied to the oil painting in Figure 3. Lane carefully transferred the pencil composition from paper to canvas. When viewed with an infrared camera, an underdrawing is visible beneath the paint (Fig. 5). The outlines of the far shore in the underdrawing and in the sketch correspond precisely, as do those of the ledge in the foreground. However, the underdrawing is 33 1/2 inches wide and the sketch is 17 1/4 inches wide. Moreover, the proportions between the major contours have been condensed in the underdrawing: Both the distance across the water in the middle ground and the width of the rock ledge have been shortened.

Three evenly spaced vertical lines appear in both the drawing and the underdrawing and may have been used in transferring the drawing to the canvas. The method of transfer is

**Fig. 3. *View of Coffin's Beach*, by Lane, 1862. Inscribed "View of Coffin's beach, from the rocks at/ the Loaf, after a sketch taken, August, 1862./by Fitz H. Lane./Presented to Dr H. E. Davidson and Lady/ by the Artist" on the back. Oil on canvas, 20 by 33 1/2 inches. The view is from rocks known as Two Penny Loaf at the Essex River end of Coffin's Beach. On the far shore is Cape Ann stretching from Annisquam at the right toward Rockport in the distance on the left. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, gift of Mrs. Barclay Tilton in memory of Dr. Herman E. Davidson.**

**Fig. 4. Inscription on the back of the painting in Fig. 3.**

**Fig. 5. Underdrawing of Lane's *View of Coffin's Beach* (Fig. 3) as seen in an infrared reflectogram. The ship appears as just a speck in the distant center right.**



still under investigation, but the close correlation between the sketch and the underdrawing again suggests that Lane used mechanical means. While there were many methods available for transferring and enlarging drawings at the time, Lane most probably used the camera lucida for this as well.

In addition to explaining how to use the instrument to draw, the instructions included with the camera lucida in Figure 8 discuss how to make precise enlargements.<sup>12</sup> To double the size of a sketch on the canvas, for example, the distance between the canvas and the prism is double the distance between the sketch and the prism. Given the working distances required for enlargement, a canvas the width of Lane's *View of Coffin's Beach* could not be seen in its entirety through the prism of the camera lucida. The artist would have needed to transfer the sketch in sections. Most probably he had to shift the camera lucida twice during the transfer, and the three vertical lines showed him precisely where to pick up after each shift.

Although the relationship between the underdrawing and the finished painting is close, Lane made subtle but significant changes. He smoothed over details such as the tops of the trees in the background, and he nearly tripled the expanse of the sky, accentuating the horizontal format and emphasizing the expansiveness of the composition and the sense of emptiness in the finished oil.

The camera lucida captures only stationary elements. Neither the original sketch nor the transferred underdrawing include any of the transitory elements in the final work: the sailboat, waves, clouds, or light and its effect on

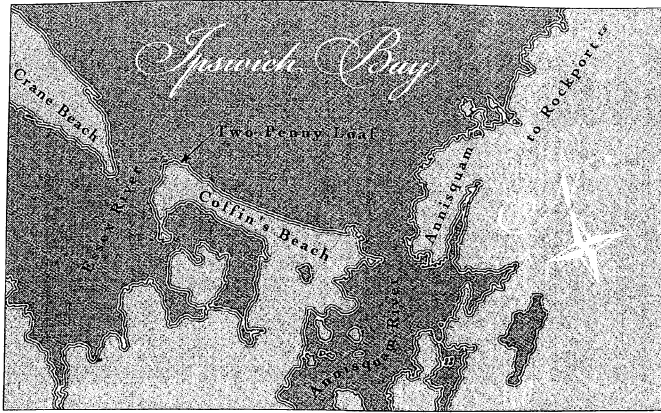


Fig. 6. Map showing the location that Lane painted and the surrounding area.

Fig. 7. View of Two Penny Loaf and Coffin's Beach in a contemporary photograph by Sandra Kelberlau.

Fig. 8. Top portion with prism of a camera lucida. Collection of Teri Hensick; photograph by Jean Woodward.

Fig. 9. Sketch made by Sandra Kelberlau using a camera lucida (see Fig. 8). Graphite on paper.

color. Lane painted these directly after laying in the ocean and sky. For the dawn light, he applied thin layers of paint and blended them on the canvas to create the imperceptible transitions from salmon pink to blue in the glowing color of the early morning sky. Along with the careful refinement of the composition, it is Lane's exploration of light and color that transforms his topographical study into a work of art.

<sup>1</sup> Lane was known as Fitz Hugh Lane until 2005, when Stephanie Buck, the librarian and archivist of the Cape Ann Historical Association in Gloucester, and Sarah Dunlap of the Gloucester Archives Committee found a letter from Lane to the Senate and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts dated December 26, 1831, asking to change his name from "Nathaniel Rogers Lane" to "Fitz Henry Lane." The request was granted on March 13, 1832. See Stephanie Buck and Sarah Dunlap, "Fitz Who?" in John Wilmerding, *Fitz Henry Lane* (Cape Ann Historical Association, Gloucester, with Bradford and Bigelow, Danvers, Massachusetts, 2005), appendix.

<sup>2</sup> John J. Babson, *History of the Town of Gloucester, Cape Ann: Including the Town of Rockport* (Gloucester, Massachusetts, 1860), p. 258.

<sup>3</sup> The Lane research project was initiated in 2000 with a grant from the Samuel L. Kress Foundation to conservator Elizabeth Leto Fulton. Supervised by Jim Wright, she completed an initial examination of nine of the twelve Lane paintings in the museum. The project has continued with Sandra Kelberlau and Jean Woodward, and the present article is the result of our recent findings. We are deeply grateful to Annette Mannick, a paper conservator at the museum, who examined the Lane drawings at the Cape Ann Historical Association with us. We would also like to thank James Craig, the associate curator of collections at the Cape Ann Historical Association, for generously sharing the museum's Lane drawings with us. We are also grateful to Marcia C. Steele, a conservator of paintings at the Cleveland Museum of Art, and H. Travers Newton Jr. who are investigating Lane's working methods, focusing on Cleveland's recent acquisition of one of Lane's Boston Harbor paintings.

<sup>4</sup> Wilmerding, *Fitz Henry Lane*, pp. 79–80; and a note made by Joseph L. Stevens Jr. at the bottom of a copy of a Lane letter, Authors and Artists Scrapbook, Cape Ann Historical Association.

<sup>5</sup> James R. Pringle, *History of the Town and City of Gloucester, Cape Ann, Massachusetts* (Gloucester, Massachusetts, 1892), p. 76.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph E. Garland, *Boston's North Shore... 1823–1890* (Little Brown, Boston, 1978), pp. 323–324.

<sup>7</sup> The drawing at the Cape Ann Historical Association is inscribed "Fremont's Encampment at the Loaf, West Gloucester./Sketched by F. Lane." A second inscription to the right states: "Lane made a painting from this sketch and presented it to Mrs. Fremont." An undated clipping in Authors and Artists Scrapbook in the Cape Ann Historical Association notes, "Mr. Fitz H. Lane has recently finished a very pretty painting representing the encampment of Col. Fremont at the 'Loaf.'" The whereabouts of the painting is unknown.

<sup>8</sup> See Lisa Fellows Andrus, "Measure and Design in American Painting, 1760–1860" (PhD diss., Columbia University, New York City, 1976; and Garland Publishing, New York, 1977), pp. 212–213; and Lisa Fellows Andrus, "Design and Measurement in Luminist Art," in *American Light: The Luminist Movement 1850–1875*, ed. John Wilmerding (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., 1980), p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> Andrus, "Measure and Design in American Painting," p. 210.

<sup>10</sup> See David Hockney, *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters* (Thames and Hudson, London, 2001), p. 28; Martin Kemp, *The Science of Art: Optical Themes in Western Art from Brunelleschi to Seurat* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1990), pp. 198–200; and John H. Hammond and Jill Austin, *The Camera Lucida in Art and Science* (Adam Hilger, Bristol, 1987), pp. 78–88.

<sup>11</sup> The inscription on the drawing is most likely in the hand of Joseph L. Stevens Jr., who accompanied Lane on many of his sketching trips and who is also known to have made notes on many of the drawings. See Wilmerding, *Fitz Henry Lane*, pp. 50–51.

<sup>12</sup> The two examples of a nineteenth-century camera lucida obtained for this project are in the collections of Martha Shaw, a conservation assistant in objects conservation at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Teri Hensick, a conservator of paintings at the Straus Center for Conservation, Harvard University Art Museums in Cambridge. The latter camera lucida came with directions that explained how to make enlargements, reductions, and one-to-one copies of drawings. Other transfer methods in use at this time included superimposing a grid on the drawing or employing a pantograph. The latter is a flexible parallelogram-shaped instrument in which a drawing is traced at one end of the instrument, while a pencil at the other end copies, reduces, or enlarges the drawing.

KAREN E. QUINN is the assistant curator of paintings in the Art of the Americas department of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

SANDRA KELBERLAU is an advanced level intern in paintings conservation at Harvard University Art Museums in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

JEAN WOODWARD is an associate conservator of paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

