

# CAPE ANN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

July 2004

Special Edition

## The Year of Fitz Hugh Lane

1804 2004

The Cape Ann Historical Association is celebrating the 200th anniversary of Fitz Hugh Lane's birth with a yearlong schedule of special events and programs. As part of this observance, Erik A. R. Ronnberg, Jr. – maritime historian and world class ship model maker – will share some of his recent research on Lane and Gloucester. This is the second of three installments.

### VIEWS OF FORT POINT: PART TWO Fitz Hugh Lane's Images of a Gloucester Landmark By Erik A. R. Ronnberg, Jr.

#### **Fort Point Transformed, 1850**

In 1849, Fitz Hugh Lane built his seven-gabled stone house on the rise of land overlooking Duncan's Point, sharing the building with his sister, Sarah Ann and his brother-in-law, Ignatius Winter.<sup>12</sup> For this reason, the house was identified as "Winter & Lane" on an 1851 map of Gloucester (Figure 5). This location gave him an already familiar view of Fort Point,

although from a higher elevation than he preferred for his pictures of that scene. In 1850, he painted yet another picture of the Fort and Ten Pound Island, which differed markedly in visual content from its predecessors.

While Lane's house was going up, on the opposite shore George H. Rogers was building his new wharf and store houses on the previously deserted east side of Fort

Point.<sup>13</sup> The large dormered building adjacent to Fort Defiance hid most of the latter's remains from view, while the sprawling pier and its sheds gave the shore line a completely different character. Only Ten Pound Island in the background stayed the same amidst the onslaught of progress.

Vessel traffic in Gloucester Harbor had increased as well. New schooners were added to the fishing fleet<sup>14</sup> and vessels in the coasting trade made more visits than ever to meet a growing local demand for salt, lumber, firewood, hay and a multitude of foodstuffs and bulk goods. These "coasters," rigged as sloops, schooners, and brigs, still offered bulk shipping at lower costs than rail shipment.<sup>15</sup>

Looking out over this activity, Lane must have found these changes affecting, if not dismaying. His 1850 depiction of this scene (Figure 6) is much the busiest and may have been his last. No later versions have so far come to light and there are no notes on his drawing to indicate that he used this composition for subsequent paintings.

In addition to the progress it documents, the painting is notable for the qualities of light and the atmospheric effects, by which it conveys the tranquility of a late

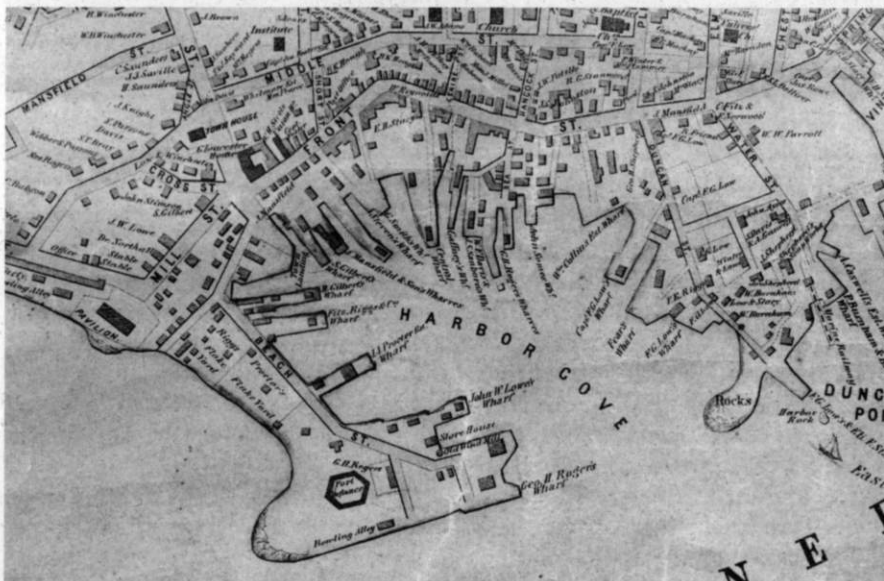


Figure 5. Detail from "View of Gloucester Harbor Village," in H.F. Walling and John Hanson, Map of the Towns of Gloucester and Rockport, Essex County, Massachusetts (Philadelphia: 1851). Collection of the Cape Ann Historical Association.



Figure 6. Fitz Hugh Lane, *Gloucester Inner Harbor*, 1850, oil on canvas, 24" x 36". The Mariners' Museum, Newport News, VA.

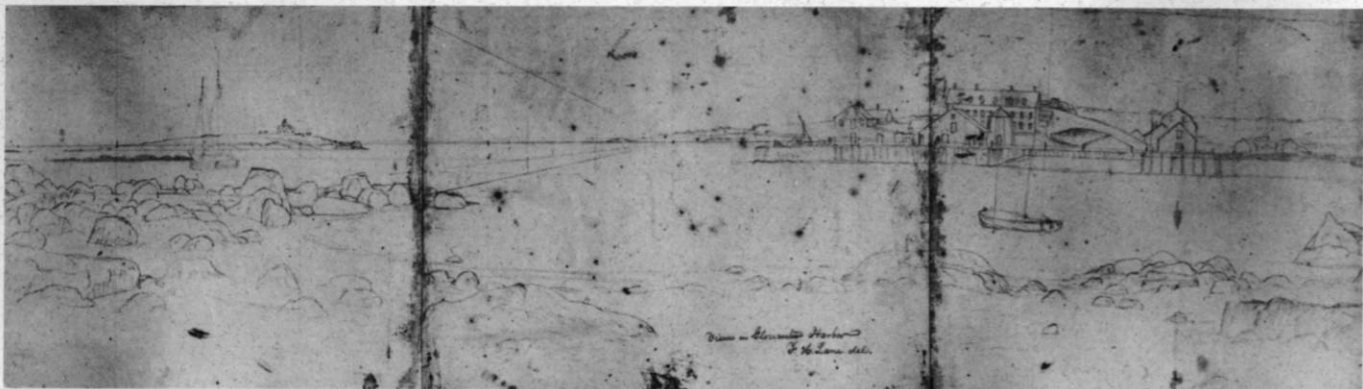


Figure 7. Fitz Hugh Lane, *View of Gloucester Harbor*, n.d. (attr. 1850), pencil on paper. 9 1/2" x 34 3/4". Collection of the Cape Ann Historical Association.

summer afternoon. A hazy yellow sun shines through broken clouds over the horizon at far right, while wisps of clouds aloft reflect touches of yellow sunlight against the reddening sky. These colors tint the reflections of rocks, buildings, and the nearly still water surface.

These aspects held promise for what might have been an important example of Luminist painting – perhaps Lane's most successful effort to depict this particular scene.<sup>16</sup> That promise was seriously compromised by the presence of so many vessels which break up the receding plane of the water surface and the sense of spatial depth it

could have created. The tranquility is disturbed by the perceived motion of vessels under sail and by the human activity in the foreground. The composition itself is overwhelmed by too much detail.

For whom, and why, Lane painted this picture is as much a puzzle for maritime historians as it is for art historians. If it is not a prime example of Lane's artistic achievement, it is undeniably one of the finest visual documents of merchant shipping in a mid-19th century New England harbor. Did Lane paint it for Rogers, whose wharf is featured so prominently? If so, why is a bark, the only likely

Surinam Trade ship present (Figure 8, Item 19), almost completely hidden from view? Or did Lane paint it on his own account, as a personal statement on Harbor Cove shipping in a time of great changes? For now, its provenance can only be traced back to 1946.

As interesting as the painting is Lane's drawing (Figure 7), which outlines the scene in detail before all of the vessels were added. Here, we can examine Rogers's Wharf without obstructions and find that the pier was not yet completed at its south-east end (at left), where a tripod hoist can be seen setting timber pilings against the stone bulk-

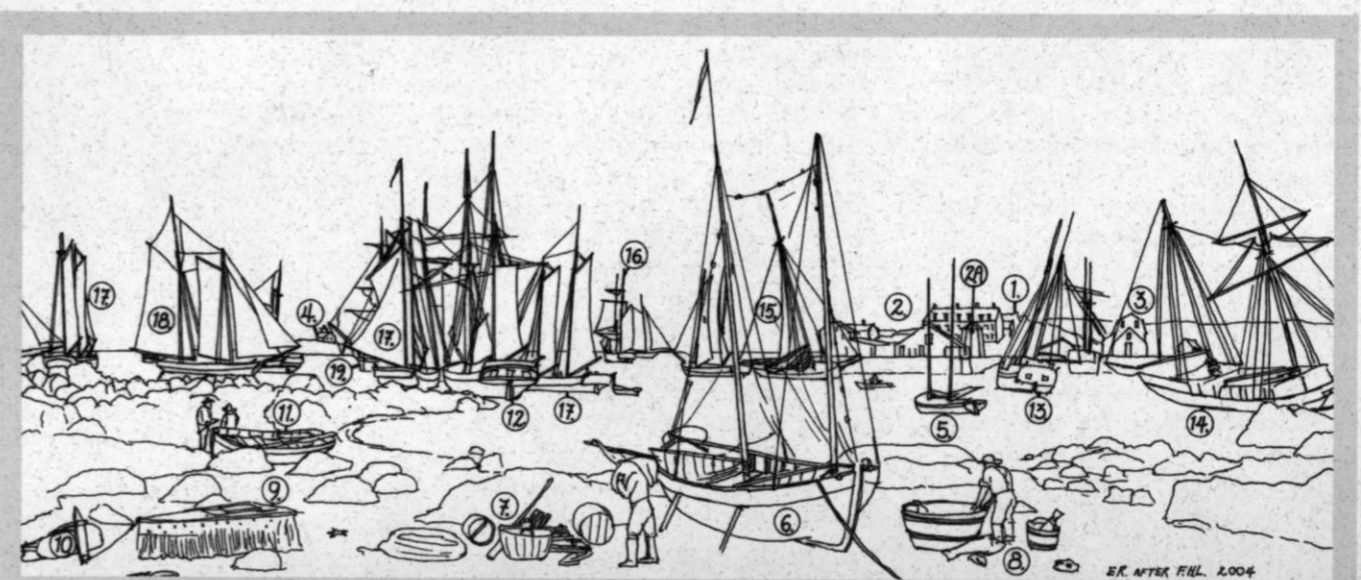


Figure 8. Key to vessels, landmarks, and human activity in Figure 6.

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| 1. Remains of Fort Defiance.   | 6. New England boat, double-ended type.  | 11. Yawl boat.                                     |
| 2. Wharf and buildings of George H. Rogers.  | 7. Gill nets and fishing gear being off-loaded from the double-ended New England boat. | 12. Merchant topsail schooner.                     |
| 2A. Ignatius Winter's windmill, removed from the site of the Pavilion Hotel in 1849. | 8. Gutting and washing fish.   | 13. Lumber schooner.                               |
| 3. Wharf and buildings of John W. Lowe.  | 9. Shellfish car, for keeping clams, crabs, and lobsters alive for market.             | 14. Lumber schooner with square topsail rig.       |
| 4. Ten Pound Island.   | 10. Stone anchor, or "killick," for mooring the shellfish car.                         | 15. Sloop.   |
| 5. New England boat, square-sterned type.  |  | 16. Hermaphrodite brig, or "half brig".            |
|  |  | 17. Fishing schooners.                             |
|  |  | 18. Fishing schooner, see Figure 9.                |
|  |  | 19. Merchant bark, type used in the Surinam Trade. |

head. Two vessels are in this drawing: a coasting schooner (left panel) and a square-sterned New England boat (right panel). Lane included the schooner as a necessary reference for the proportioning of other vessels in perspective. The boat appears in two previous paintings and may have had some personal significance to the artist.

Of great importance is the set of perspective lines which converge at a vanishing point just to the left of Rogers's Wharf. From these diagonals, isometric lines are projected horizontally so they intersect the schooner at its waterline, rail, and main mast head. The spaces between these lines will define these proportions for vessels placed elsewhere on the same vertical plane. Similar isometric lines can be constructed from the diagonals to find the proportions of vessels of other dimensions, or of vessels at other distances.<sup>17</sup> This is the only one of Lane's known drawings which shows this exercise, implying strongly that he had planned from

the outset to include a large number of watercraft, and that extra care would be needed to place them and to gauge their proportions.

Such planning and disciplined layout work presupposes a collection of vessel images on file for inclusion in the finished painting. Given Lane's experience in ship portraiture and his practice of painting vessels over the backgrounds, it seems certain that he kept a folio of his drawings of ships and boats, together with sketches and notes on aspects of hull form, rigging, and fine details. Only a few of these drawings have survived.

For much of his nautical source material, Lane drew from life, but his knowledge of naval architecture implies that he had access to text books on the subject and was allowed in shipyards and sail lofts to study hull designs and sail plans.<sup>18</sup> As the son of a sailmaker,<sup>19</sup> he must have known some of his father's fellow artisans and had access to their sailmaking drawings, as a recent discovery in the

archives of the Cape Ann Historical Association seems to bear out.

A book of sail plans, compiled by William F. Davis and dated 1845,<sup>20</sup> contains numerous plans for fishing schooners, all of them drawn in a very simplified way. The single exception is a conventional plan over which a hull has been beautifully rendered in pencil (Figure 9). The drafting is free-hand, but the graceful curves of the rail and sheer are so smooth that they seem to have been drawn with ship curves. The hull is shaded to show realistically its shape, particularly at the bow and stern. The beakhead is fitted with trailboards and a billet (scroll) head which show a delicate tracery of carvings. The hull is depicted as floating in water whose ripple patterns closely resemble those in the painting.

The fine drawing technique alone points to Lane as the likely draftsman, particularly when the date of the sail plan book is considered. The argument is further strengthened when this drawing is compared

with a fishing schooner in the painting (See Figure 8, Item 18). For the latter image, Lane added three more sails, but the similarity of the hull to that in the drawing seems more than coincidental.

If we can accept the embellishments to the Davis sail plan as Lane's work, we have a rare surviving example of the artist's use of a vessel's design drawing for a subject in his painting. Coupling this find with Lane's drawing of the harbor setting, we can better appreciate his methods of composition through a lengthy and exacting process of drawing a scene, the

individual ships and boats, and combining the two when the painting is well along.

But we should also appreciate Lane's control over the process. His approach to a composition may at times have been more calculated and less intuitive. His depiction of Gloucester's Harbor Cove in 1850 may have sacrificed some of those qualities we attribute to Luminism, to the disappointment of art historians, but historians of Gloucester's shipping and maritime commerce could hardly ask for a more revealing and informative visual record of

that activity at that period.

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## ENDNOTES

12. Wilmerding, Fitz Hugh Lane, pp. 39, 40.
13. Brooks, Gloucester Recollected, p. 62.
14. Babson, History of the Town of Gloucester, pp. 573, 574.
15. John F. Leavitt, Wake of the Coasters (Middletown, CT: 1970). A first-hand description of the early 20th century New England coastal trade which had hardly changed since Lane's time.
16. See Barbara Novak's essay, "On Defining Luminism," in John Wilmerding (ed.), American Light: The Luminist Movement, 1850-1875 (Washington, DC: 1980), pp. 23-29.
17. Elliot Bostwick Davis, Training the Eye and the Hand: Fitz Hugh Lane and Nineteenth Century American Drawing Books (Gloucester: 1993), pp. 24, 25.
18. Erik A. R. Ronnberg, Jr., "Imagery and Types of Vessels," in Wilmerding, American Light, pp. 67, 68. FITZ HUGH LANE (WASH. DC. 1988) *PAINTINGS BY*
19. Wilmerding, Fitz Hugh Lane, p. 17.
20. Hand-titled William F. Davis, Gloucester, 1845, the cloth-bound cover contains two unsewn, unpaginated signatures. Most of the plans are undated.

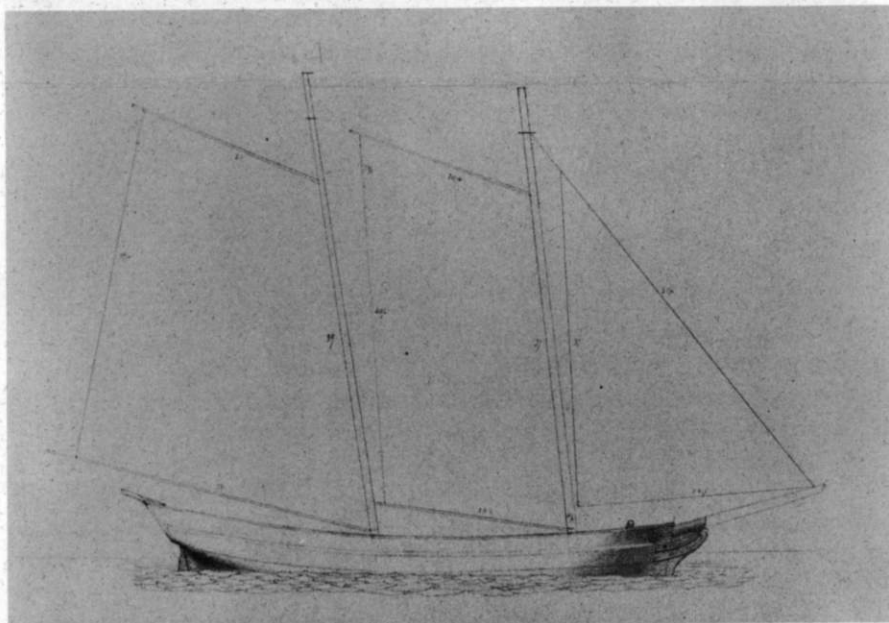


Figure 9. Sail plan of an unidentified fishing schooner, in a sail plan book titled William F. Davis, Gloucester, 1845, pencil on paper, page size 20" x 14", image size 9 1/2" x 14 1/2", scale 1/8" = 1'. Collection of the Cape Ann Historical Association.

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