



Edward Gay: Landscape Painter

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The gravestone of landscape painter Edward Gay is one of the more unusual monuments in the cemetery at St. Paul's Church National Historic Site. It is a marble bench measuring 5-feet across and 4-feet high. The size of a love seat, it was sculpted by Gay's son Duncan as a testament to the enduring love of his parents. Edward Gay died in March 1928, at age 92 and his wife Martha died the following month. The bench is inscribed with "to fresh woods and pastures new," a line from *Lycidas*, by the renowned English poet John Milton.

Born in Ireland in 1837, Gay immigrated to America with his parents in 1848, the time of the devastating potato famine. The family's departure was also caused by fears that Richard Gay, Edward's father, would be arrested because of his involvement with Irish nationalist political movements. Edward's artistic talents were discovered through his painting of landscapes in his spare time while working in a wine cellar in Albany, where the family initially settled.

Edward studied painting in America with brothers James and William Hart and in Germany in the early 1860s with historical landscape painters Johann Wilhelm Schirmer and Karl Friedrich Lessing. Returning from Europe with the mustache and goatee that characterized his face for the rest of his life, Edward married Martha Fearey on September 15, 1864. With three small children, including the ailing baby Vivian, the Gays were attracted to the semi-rural setting of the new village of Mt. Vernon, purchasing a home on South 2nd Avenue for \$862 in 1870.

Edward's work is broadly associated with the Hudson River school of landscape painting. Replacing portraiture, it was America's first native school of painting. Hudson River School artists painted the great expanse of untouched nature which many found amid the waterways and woods of upstate New York. Their pictures were large scenes depicted from a great distance. When present, human figures in the paintings were tiny compared to the magnitude of the wilderness in which they were placed. Though he created several extremely large landscapes (two of these, depicting the Acropolis and Mt. Etna, hang in the arched foyer of the Mount Vernon Public Library), most of his pictures were more literal, more close-up, and less dramatic and mysterious than those of Hudson River artists.

Gay received several prizes and honors throughout his career. In 1887 he won the Exhibition Prize of the American Art Association for *Broad Acres*, which depicts Eastchester salt meadows, right behind St. Paul's Church. He collected \$2,500. The

painting was presented to the Metropolitan Art Museum in New York City, where it can still be seen. It was probably the finest of his many depictions of the rivers, fields and shores around Mt. Vernon that defined his career. (Two of those paintings are on display in the St. Paul's N.H.S. museum.) In 1905, Edward was the George Inness Gold Medal, named for the most prestigious American landscape painter of the day, an artist much admired by Gay, who named his son, born in 1886, George Inness Gay. In 1907, at the age of 70, Gay was elected a full Member of the National Academy of Design.

A true working artist, Gay was prolific, and some of his paintings sold at a premium price, but many of his works barely covered expenses, and he was often strapped for money. The average price for one of his paintings was about \$150. Since gaslight distorted color, Gay could only work during the daylight hours. In order to make a decent living he needed to complete and sell three paintings a month. Frequently he settled debts by sending paintings instead of money. Gay even acquired his burial plot in the St. Paul's cemetery by giving a picture, *The Little Cherry Orchard*, to the family that had owned the large square space.