

ABOLITIONISM, MEMORY AND THE CIVIL WAR IN WILLIAM LOUIS
SONNTAG'S VIRGINIA LANDSCAPES

by

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(Under the Direction of Dr. Janice Simon)

ABSTRACT

The Virginia paintings of American landscape painter William Louis Sonntag (1822-1900) have gone unexplored in present scholarship devoted to the artist. Examining Sonntag's relationship with radical abolitionist patron Elias Lyman Magoon exposes latent abolitionist tenets within Sonntag's Virginia landscapes. Sonntag's Virginia paintings also embody the artist's revisions of American memory in response to the Civil War. The exhibition history of these works places them further within the context of American cultural reform. Sonntag's Virginia landscapes will be subsequently read as the artist's perceptions of a changing America.

INDEX WORDS: William Louis Sonntag, Virginia landscape, Civil War art, Nineteenth-century American art, Elias Lyman Magoon

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DEDICATION

For my family: Mary, Cindy, Michael and Kenneth.

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INTRODUCTION

The critical reception of the art of American landscape painter William Louis Sonntag (1822-1900) has been inconsistent since its nineteenth-century origins. In 1853, when Sonntag was scarcely thirty years old and working in his home town of Cincinnati, an article in an arts and literature periodical called *Pen and Pencil* proclaimed that, “some of Sonntag’s late pictures far surpass any landscape paintings ever produced,” and that “Mr. Sonntag’s pictures are as good as those of any artist now living.”¹ Only two decades later, a Cincinnati art critic named Heinrich Rattermann remembered that the “Sonntag rage” had since evaporated, resulting in the artist’s poverty.²

After falling from acclaim in his hometown, Sonntag traveled to Europe and moved to New York City, where his work once again ascended into critical favor. From the late 1850s onward, updates on Sonntag’s commissions and plans for his new paintings were regularly printed in *Cosmopolitan Art Journal* and “Art Notes” in *The New York Times*.³ Sonntag’s career is said to have reached its crescendo in New York in

¹ *Pen and Pencil* (v. 1, 19 March 1853), 375-376.

² Rattermann’s assessment appears to have been largely based on the fact that Sonntag had responded to the interest in his work by producing paintings at a high volume, which in turn oversaturated the market for his work. Rattermann wrote that “Everybody wanted to have a ‘Sonntag’... Soon, however, it was ascertained that Sonntag’s pictures were not at all scarce, but as plenty as blackberries.” Comments on Sonntag’s career from Rattermann’s 1875 essay on art in Cincinnati were extensively quoted in Charles Frederic Goss, *Cincinnati, The Queen City, 1788-1912*, vol. 2 (Chicago : S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1912), 445-446.

³ Nancy Dustin Wall Moure, *William Louis Sonntag: Artist of the Ideal* (Los Angeles : Goldfield Galleries, 1980), 21.

the early 1860s, when the artist was elected into the National Academy of Design.⁴ This honor brought Sonntag into the highest echelon of American painters, which included Asher Brown Durand (1796-1886) and founding member Thomas Cole (1801-1848). In 1867, Sonntag was included in critic Henry Tuckerman's *Book of the Artists*, albeit with a misspelled name.⁵

Scholarship devoted to the study of Sonntag's art has been sparse since the artist's death in 1900. Art historian Nancy Dustin Wall Moure completed the only existing monograph devoted to Sonntag's life and work in 1980. *William Louis Sonntag: Artist of the Ideal* couples biography with an overview of Sonntag's most popular paintings, providing a larger understanding of the artist's career. This comprehensive analysis has illuminated several distinctions between Sonntag's art and that of many of his counterparts in American landscape painting, but few have been explored at length.⁶

Nineteenth-century texts provide the earliest indicators of what viewers regarded as distinctive in Sonntag's art. In the short entry Henry Tuckerman devoted to Sonntag in his *Book of the Artists*, the author wrote that some of the artist's "best landscapes illustrate the picturesque scenery of Western Virginia." Tuckerman added that Sonntag's work was "differing [sic] from many of our landscape-artists." While Sonntag's use of

⁴ Sonntag was elected into the National Academy of Design as an associate member in 1862. Moure, *William Louis Sonntag: Artist of the Ideal*, 23.

⁵ Tuckerman referred to Sonntag with a single "n." This common misnomer unfortunately occurred throughout the artist's career, including in the announcement of Sonntag's own death in 1900. See Henry Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists: American Artist Life, Comprising Biographical and Critical Sketches of American Artists: Preceded by an Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of Art in America* (New York : G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1867), 566; --"Deaths Reported Jan 23, Manhattan and Bronx," *The New York Times* (24 January 1900).

⁶ Sonntag's close personal relationship with African-American painter Robert Scott Duncanson (1821-1872) was uncommon and persistently enables both artists to stand out among their peers in landscape painting. This relationship was noted in Joseph J. Ketner, *The Emergence of the African-American Artist: Robert S. Duncanson, 1821-1872* (Columbia, MO : University of Missouri Press, 1994); Wendy Jean Katz, *Regionalism and Reform: Art and Class Formation in Antebellum Cincinnati* (Columbus, OH : Ohio State University Press, 2002).

color was also recognized, his many paintings of the Virginia landscape appear to have marked his artistic individuality.⁷

At least fifty of some eight hundred known works by Sonntag depict the Virginia landscape. Sonntag appears to have been preoccupied with Virginia between the mid 1850s and 1870, a period that poignantly frames the events of the Civil War. Except for the famed scenery of the Natural Bridge, few of Sonntag's Union-supporting peers at the National Academy of Design painted the southern state during the same period, if ever. The unprecedented volume of Sonntag's Virginia paintings suggests that the Virginia landscape held complex cultural meaning for him that remains undefined in present scholarship.

This thesis proposes that Sonntag's paintings of the Virginia landscape are reflections of the artist's own abolitionist perspectives toward the Civil War and southern identity. These new readings of Sonntag's Virginia paintings will be added to present discourse devoted to cultural and political emblems in Civil War art. In essence, this project seeks to include Sonntag's art to established scholarship that has historically focused on seminal American painters like Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900), Martin Johnson Heade (1819-1904) and Sanford Robinson Gifford (1823-1880).

The first chapter examines the impact of the spirituality and abolitionist ideas of patron Elias Lyman Magoon on Sonntag's interest in Virginia scenery. Reverend Magoon is known to have provided Sonntag with his first major commission in the late 1840s. The commission introduced Sonntag to the latent abolitionist tenets of Reverend Magoon's text, *Westward Empire: Or, The Great Drama of Human Progress*, which

⁷ Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists*, 566.

laced an account of human success and failure with criticism of contemporary American society.

Sonntag's *View of Harper's Ferry, Virginia* from 1864 receives a rigorous analysis in chapter two. *View of Harper's Ferry, Virginia* exists as the most specifically titled work of Sonntag's ten Virginia paintings, implicating intentionality on his part. The second chapter explores the potent cultural associations Sonntag evoked by painting Harpers Ferry in 1864. Signs of the catalytic 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry remain conspicuously absent in Sonntag's painting, which was not made until the war's end. This second chapter examines how Sonntag employed the Harpers Ferry landscape to reflect on the Civil War and its place in American history.

The third and final chapter explores the reception of Sonntag's landscape paintings, including the images of the Virginia landscape. The chapter examines the presence of Sonntag's paintings at Sanitary Fairs, which were organized in local communities across the North to raise funds to support the Union military forces during the Civil War. Sanitary Fair exhibitions often competed with traditional exhibitions in volume and attendance at wartime, therefore promising participants exposure during a time of great cultural strain. While the third chapter extensively analyzes the context and historical necessity of the Sanitary Fairs, it also examines the collective meaning of the works assembled at each exhibition. This chapter asserts that the reception of Sonntag's landscapes highlighted seminal themes of Civil War art within them.

Sonntag's work is interrogated through varied points of view across the three chapters that make up this thesis. The personal and professional foundation for Sonntag's interest in Virginia as a subject is described in the first part. The second tells the

historical narrative of a single painting, illustrating the individual complexities of Sonntag's Virginia landscapes. Finally, the third part reinserts Sonntag's paintings into their tumultuous, Civil War context, further developing their meaning. Like the landscape paintings, the following chapters may be read as autonomous studies of fragments of Sonntag's career. Each seeks to patch existing holes in Sonntag's art history. As a sum of its parts, though, this thesis is devoted to a larger study of art in Civil War America.

CHAPTER 1

TO TRUST IN PROVIDENCE: ELIAS LYMAN MAGOON, ABOLITIONISM AND GOD IN WILLIAM LOUIS SONNTAG'S VIRGINIA LANDSCAPES

The art of William Louis Sonntag is saliently aligned with the ideologies of his patron, a Baptist minister, art collector and orator named Elias Lyman Magoon. In an unpublished letter Magoon wrote in 1864, the Reverend disclosed that upon taking up collecting in the 1840s, he had “set about gathering a collection that should illustrate human progress under and along the divine purpose—Christianity Illustrated by its Monuments.” Given the well-defined nature of his inspiration to collect art, the many works that Magoon commissioned Sonntag to paint contained reflections of the patron’s spirituality and social priorities in addition to functioning as instruments of his larger calling.

Sonntag folded Magoon’s ideas into his art even after developing a career in New York in the 1860s, which suggests the enduring importance of their artist-patron relationship. The vast majority of Sonntag’s papers are housed in private collections or have been lost, which leaves the extent to which Magoon influenced his art within the compositions of the Virginia paintings themselves also to be determined. While archival evidence of Sonntag’s spiritual or political beliefs is unavailable, his personal and professional affiliations with Magoon provide valuable insight.

Reverend Magoon was a highly literate individual who expressed his personal philosophies toward politics, Christianity, the practice of oration and the path of humanity in the six books that he began authoring in 1847, the year that he commissioned Sonntag to paint a lost series called *Progress of Civilization*.⁸ In the decade between the publication of his first and last books, Magoon would have requested that Sonntag include many of these seminal ideas in the works he commissioned. Many of these concepts were published in Magoon's last book, an 1856 text, *Westward Empire: Or, The Great Drama of Human Progress*.⁹ Aside from retelling human history as he saw it split across four distinguished parts—the Age of Pericles, the Age of Augustus, the Age of Pope Leo X and the Age of Washington—Magoon also used his last book as an opportunity to steep the chronicle in the language of abolitionism, which existed within its own subculture in antebellum Cincinnati.¹⁰

As an artist who spent several years producing art to work within the parameters of Magoon's patronage, Sonntag would not only have been privy to the ideas embedded in Magoon's writing but would have also applied them to the depictions of the landscapes in which modern events transpired, including those that led to the outbreak of the American Civil War. While Americans were able to remain apprised of the major events of the war in news periodicals, Sonntag responded differently: an index of his works

⁸ The complete list of published writing by Reverend Elias Lyman Magoon is as follows: E.L. Magoon, *Eloquence of the Colonial Times* (Cincinnati, OH : Derby & Co. Publishers, 1847); E.L. Magoon, *Orators of the American Revolution* (New York : Baker and Scribner Press, 1848); E.L. Magoon, *Proverbs for the People* (Boston : Gould, Kendall and Lincoln Press, 1848); E.L. Magoon, *Living Orators in America* (New York : Baker and Scribner, 1849); E.L. Magoon, *Republican Christianity* (Boston : Gould, Kendall and Lincoln Press, 1849); E.L. Magoon, *Westward Empire: Or, The Great Drama of Human Progress* (New York : Harper & Brothers, 1856).

⁹ E.L. Magoon, *Westward Empire: Or, The Great Drama of Human Progress* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1856).

¹⁰ An invaluable source in interpreting the presence of abolitionism in antebellum Cincinnati for this chapter has been: Wendy Jean Katz, *Regionalism and Reform: Art and Class Formation in Antebellum Cincinnati* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press 2002).

indicates that between the Civil War years of 1860 and 1865, Sonntag probably completed more than ten landscape paintings whose titles indicate that they depict the Confederate state of Virginia.¹¹ While the full number of these paintings and the exact locations they depict are currently impossible to ascertain, Sonntag was devoted to Virginia as a subject, particularly after spending years under the abolitionist direction of Magoon.¹²

While the 1847 commission that William Louis Sonntag received from Reverend Magoon to paint *Progress of Civilization* may have marked the beginning of their artist-patron relationship, it signifies neither its crescendo nor its conclusion. Current literature on Sonntag's art and life implicates Magoon as an influence, but to date, the extent to which Magoon's ideas—particularly abolitionism—were filtered into Sonntag's Antebellum and Civil War art has yet to be explored. This chapter examines the correlation between Sonntag's interest in Antebellum and Civil War Virginia and the inclusion of the ideas of Elias Lyman Magoon in the artist's landscape paintings made between the years of 1855 and 1865. Reverend Magoon's personal entanglements with the politics of antebellum Virginia will be implicated as a cause for Sonntag's preoccupation with projecting abolitionist ideas onto the region in these works. Additionally, Magoon's perspectives on the spirituality of natural scenery and his unrelenting abolitionism, as evidenced in his 1856 text *Westward Empire*, will be applied to readings of selected Sonntag paintings.

Prior to moving to Cincinnati in 1846, Reverend Elias Lyman Magoon developed his ministerial method by traveling and briefly working in congregations across his native

¹¹ Moure, *William Louis Sonntag: Artist of the Ideal*, 133-146.

¹² In her monograph on Sonntag, Moure explains that the artist possessed a known tendency to compose landscapes using elements from multiple sites or perspectives, allowing her to dub him "artist of the ideal."

northeast.¹³ Born in 1810 in Lebanon, New Hampshire, Magoon developed a desire to heed the family calling to the pastorate early in his life.¹⁴ His grandfather was a Baptist minister in New England throughout the late eighteenth century, which inspired him to raise the money to enroll in Newton Theological Seminary in 1836. Paying for his education through bricklaying, Magoon managed to complete seminary school and become ordained in 1839.¹⁵ He began preaching to congregations in New Hampshire, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts in lieu of permanent tenure in a Baptist congregation, but shortly thereafter found one in a culturally distant destination: the American South.

According to a history of Second Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia, Magoon relocated to Richmond in September of 1839 and became a member of the church by letter from his most recent congregation, First Baptist Church of Lowell, Massachusetts. That same month, Magoon succeeded the pastorate at Second Baptist Church and immediately undertook several large projects for the congregation. By January of 1842, an entirely new building had been commissioned and constructed for the church, but additionally, Magoon had controversially assisted in developing an autonomous church for black members of Second Baptist Church, many of whom felt that their needs and numbers had outgrown the mixed race congregation. A church census taken in 1841 revealed that the congregation of Second Baptist Church alone had 341 white members

¹³ John S. Moore, *The History of Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia, 1820-1995* (Chesterfield, VA : The American Book Company, 1998), 34.

¹⁴ Moore, *The History of Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia, 1820-1995*, 34.

¹⁵ George Ripley and Charles A. Dana (eds.), *The New American Cyclopaedia: A Popular Dictionary of General Knowledge*, vol. 11. (New York : D. Appleton & Co., 1861), 75; Charles Rufus Brown and Winfred Nichols Donovan (eds.), *The Newton Theological Institution General Catalogue*, 11th ed. (Newton, MA : Published by the Newton Theological Institution, 1912), 42.

and 219 black members, suggesting that the seating assigned to blacks in the rear balcony of the church was insufficient at best.¹⁶

Although the state of Virginia had instituted a set of strict laws against black assembly following the 1831 Nat Turner Rebellion, the African Baptist Church of Richmond was approved in 1841 by the leadership of the city's three Baptist churches. As former members of Second Baptist Church where white members worshipped, new members of the African Baptist Church elected deacons from their own numbers, but were banned from participation in church business meetings where most critical decisions were made. Consequently, a committee of twenty-four white clergymen annually elected by the three Baptist churches was required to govern the liturgy selected for the African Church in a larger attempt to prevent abolitionist sedition in the new congregation. Despite the fact that black ministers were also prohibited from presiding over the African Baptist Church in accordance to state law, the dedication of the African Baptist Church in 1842 inspired polarized opinions; the development of the African church remained a progressive step for black Baptists in Richmond but was also contested by many of the city's white residents.¹⁷

In a church business meeting held on 25 June 1846, the controversy surrounding Baptist leadership in Richmond hit a crest, marked by the Second Baptist Church leadership's suggestion that Reverend Magoon's tenure as pastor of Second Baptist Church had run its course. In the meeting, other Baptist church leaders noted that Reverend Magoon had publicly expressed abolitionist attitudes shortly after the 1846

¹⁶ The results of this census were published in Moore, *The History of Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia, 1820-1995*, 36.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Southern Baptist Convention in Richmond.¹⁸ Many of the white members of Second Baptist Church were outraged by Magoon's outspokenness, particularly due to its effect on the reputation of the congregation in the whole of the Southern Baptist community. Conversely, other congregation members lamented his departure from the pastorate and vocalized respect for his convictions. On 27 July 1846, Second Baptist Church member Elizabeth Thorowgood Munford wrote to a friend that,

Mr. Magoon's resignation surprised me considerably though not the leading members of the church—they having send (sic) a committee to request him not to be so open in his remarks on the subject of slavery—to this request he replied that he would not be trammled and preferred resigning his case of the church to concealing sentiments which he conscientiously believed to be approved of by God. I have stated simply the facts knowing that you will admire his rigid adherence to duty at such a sacrifice, for indeed it was a great sacrifice for himself and his wife too to leave Richmond.¹⁹

After spending nearly seven years developing rapport with church members like Elizabeth Thorowgood Munford, Reverend Magoon received a formal request for his resignation from the Second Baptist Church leadership.

From Richmond, Reverend Magoon and his wife immediately moved on to Cincinnati, which possessed a cultural climate that was much more tolerant toward

¹⁸ These remarks were printed in both the *Christian Index* and the *Baptist Recorder*, two periodicals that were circulated among Southern Baptists in Virginia. Moore, *The History of Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia, 1820-1995*, 34.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Thorowgood Munford, *Elizabeth Thorowgood Munford to Mrs. Frances Hughes, July 27, 1846*. Letter. From Virginia Historical Society, *Montague Family Papers, 1808-1939*. Accessed at Virginia Historical Society Archive (12 May 2010).

subjecting the issue of slavery to a line of moral questioning.²⁰ Magoon began ministering to the pastorate of Ninth Street Baptist Church, which was then the largest Baptist congregation in Cincinnati.²¹ After securing a career in his new hometown, the reverend began associating with some of the most significant members of its burgeoning art community. Magoon was fond of the art of Cincinnati painter Worthington Whittredge (1820-1910), as well as works by African-American artist Robert Scott Duncanson (1821-1872) and by William Louis Sonntag, who worked in adjoining studio spaces in the inner area of the city; the reverend also commissioned works by each artist.²² From the late 1840s, when Magoon commissioned Sonntag to paint the *Progress of Civilization* series, into the 1850s, the Reverend's interest in Cincinnati as a haven for the arts as well as an origin of abolitionism were intrinsically linked.

The language Magoon uses in *Westward Empire* is brightly colored by his negative opinions of slavery, the propagation of states' rights, and the quickly-expanding

²⁰ Not unlike the experiences of blacks who lived under Virginia's legislation following the Nat Turner Rebellion, blacks in Antebellum Cincinnati were subjected to social and legislative discrimination under a series of codes called the Black Laws. Cincinnati offered blacks comparatively better economic opportunities than were contemporaneously allowed in southern cities. White attitudes toward mulatto and black employment in middle class Cincinnati were less critical than in Richmond, allowing the careers of blacks to develop on similar courses as those of their white counterparts. As a result, a strong African-American community began to develop in the late 1830s and was well established by the time of Magoon's arrival. See Katz, *Regionalism and Reform: Art and Class Formation in Antebellum Cincinnati*, 20.

²¹ According to a chart called "Recapitulation of the Baptist churches in Cincinnati," which illustrates an 1848 census of Cincinnati Baptist churches in David Benedict's 1848 text, Magoon's Ninth Street Baptist Church congregation reported four hundred members; Union Baptist Church, Cincinnati's second most populated church, was a black congregation of three hundred and sixty members. None of the other five Baptist churches reported more than two hundred members. David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World* (New York : Lewis Colby & Co., 1848), 879.

²² Upon visiting Cincinnati, landscape artist Frank Blackwell Mayer (1827-1899) recorded that, "The painters are mostly landscape Artists and the beautiful country by which they are surrounded supplies them with ample material for study & subject. The most eminent in landscape are Sonntag a native of Cincinnati... His landscapes are remarkably fine, distinct, characteristic and truthful. Whittredge, Duncanson (a negro), also paint good landscape." Bertha Heilbron (ed.), *With Pen and Pencil on the Frontier in 1851: The Diary and Sketches of Frank Blackwell Mayer* (St. Paul, MN : Minnesota Historical Society, 1932); printed in Joseph D. Ketner, *The Emergence of the African-American Artist: Robert S. Duncanson, 1821-1872* (Columbia, MO : University of Missouri Press, 1993), 36.

pressure of irresolvable conflict that would later lead to war. While describing America's founding fathers in a chapter entitled "Washington," Magoon explains that, "With sanctified indignation they repel the arrogant claims of antique bigotry... and ceased not revising the laws of property, the creeds of religion, the rights of the citizen."²³

Magoon's selective history was designed to inspire a revision of contemporary culture. Likening America's founding fathers to the governors of the Roman Empire at its height, Magoon excludes the fact that founding fathers were themselves slaveholders in order to remind his readers of the virtues of Enlightenment thought.

As the text continues, Magoon begs his nineteenth-century readers to, "greet the changes which wait upon each revolving year, and walk unperturbed in presence of the sublime destinies of this mighty Union."²⁴ Even more furtively, while discussing the fall of the Roman Empire, Magoon cannot resist drawing parallels between the ancient nation and his own. He demands that, "It is no longer pertinent for a little Northerner or a little Southerner to talk about dividing the Union... 'No, you shall not divide!'"²⁵ The tone of *Westward Empire* is telling of Magoon's ministerial method; here, five years prior to the beginning of the Civil War, using manipulated parables of world history, he implores Americans to prepare themselves to ride out the storms that await them in coming history while reminding them of his faith in the strength of the nation.

Written proof that Magoon's intentions in this text impacted or aligned with Sonntag's social or political beliefs does not exist, but it is certain that Sonntag at least felt compelled to appeal to the interests of his first major patron. Consequently, exposure

²³ Rev. Elias Lyman Magoon, *Westward Empire, or the Great Drama of Human Progress* (New York : Harper and Brothers, 1856), 438.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

to Magoon's published ideologies would have permeated Sonntag's artistic method. This moment in Sonntag's historiography is therefore highly consequential to the notion that Sonntag sympathized with Magoon's abolitionist ideas in his art. Acknowledging the artist's application of these sentiments to his Virginia landscapes helps to understand the more taciturn meanings embedded within them.

One of Sonntag's earliest Virginia paintings, *Sunset in Western Virginia* (fig. 1) and painted in 1859, articulates the significance of the first several years of the artist's relationship with Magoon. The atmospheric center of the composition is framed by evergreen and moss-covered deciduous trees on the left and craggy rock formations on the right, adding depth to this small picture. Several black birds escort the eye of the viewer through the painting as they punctuate the center of the canvas. The birds heighten the sense of sublimity, as they appear to evacuate the picture. The allusions to an undisturbed state of nature made by the foliage framing the center of the canvas and the birds that swoop inside its center are countered by Sonntag's addition of mist, which might also read as reminiscent of smoke. The inability to find the mist's source draws the viewer to consider the precipice in the middle ground.

Archival evidence suggests that the iconographic significance embedded in *Sunset in Western Virginia* suited Reverend Magoon's interests. An 1864 letter from Magoon to Matthew Vassar, then the Dean of Vassar College, included a list of oil paintings that the Reverend planned to bequeath to the institution from his own collection; the eighth work on this inventory was Sonntag's *Sunset in West Virginia*, which indicates that Magoon either purchased it or had commissioned it himself.²⁶ The tonality of the painting, which

²⁶ Elias Lyman Magoon to Matthew Vassar, "Letter to Matthew Vassar, Nov. 1, 1864" (Magoon Papers, Vassar College Library Special Collections), 5

is easily its most notable feature, displays Sonntag's rendering of the pink light of transition between day and night. The emphasis on time of day also brings Magoon's ideas even further to the fore. While laying the groundwork for a revision of human history in the introduction of his book *Westward Empire*, Magoon places special emphasis on transitional skies and their positive allegories. He muses:

As we contemplate the vast patrimony of knowledge, whence it came, and whither it leads, we watch the twilight on eastern hills as it brightens into midday, and then goes flooding over the broad expanse of the West. The consecutive series of events... are never absolutely separated, but in the presence of the great Father are intimately joined in a sublime association... [It is] one centralizing channel, wherein flows forward together the accumulating aggregate of human fortunes, under the divine control.²⁷

For Magoon, and for artists like Sonntag who were required to develop works of art tailored to their patrons, the movement of the sun not only appealed to the notion of the sublime but also signified ideological progress. More specifically, as the passage ends, Magoon implies that the single, "forward" motion of the sun over the earth is a sign of the presence of the hand of God over all human matters.

Considering Magoon's words in tandem with the circumstances surrounding the date Sonntag painted *Sunset in Western Virginia* creates a shift in its implications. The mist now seems an ominous, intrusive presence like smoke and its unseen source in the middle ground likely refers to social unrest in antebellum America; poignantly, a

²⁷ Elias Lyman Magoon, *Westward Empire: Or, The Great Drama of Human Progress*, viii.

significant amount of political tension between slave states and abolitionist states was placed on the western territories and whether or not slavery would spread westward with Manifest Destiny. The light of a sun that has already dipped past view also leads the gaze of the viewer to the west, but in Magoon's terms, the political conflict associated with the West in antebellum America would be covered beneath the allegory of continuity between days and nights, or the notion of divine providence.

Dated to around 1860, Sonntag's *Shenandoah Valley* (fig. 2) purports to depict a scene from a similar region in the western part of Virginia. The painting's realism is heightened by its specific title, although it is still not named for an existing mountain or point. Unlike in *Sunset in Western Virginia*, Sonntag admits the viewer into the picture of *Shenandoah Valley* with ease; the blockages in the foreground of *Sunset in Western Virginia* are not represented in this example. The composition of *Shenandoah Valley* allows the viewer to easily examine multiple topographic features of the landscape, whereas *Sunset in Western Virginia* exhibits a much closer perspective. While the river is the central compositional element in *Shenandoah Valley*, it does not flow over rocks at any point and it appears to have shrunken away, exposing sandy patches and boulders where water was once abundant. *Shenandoah Valley* features no figures in its frame, but like *Sunset in Western Virginia*, it alludes to human presence in otherwise unbridled nature: a dilapidated barn is perched on the left bank of the river.

In this example, Sonntag again draws the eye of the viewer deeper into the painting with a trail of smoke from an unseen source that suggests a taciturn human presence. Sonntag illuminates *Shenandoah Valley* brightly from above rather than using the dramatically colored light of sunset to create atmosphere. Two small trees frame

either side of the abandoned barn with red and gold leaves and act as an atmospheric device not unlike the more compositionally dominant mist or sunset in *Sunset in Western Virginia*. The leaves are reflected in the glassy river in the middle ground and signify the earliest traces of autumnal effects. Like the use of sunset, the North American autumn harbored a number of meanings in the iconographic tradition of American landscape painting.

The recurring theme of autumn was also an allegory reinterpreted by Reverend Magoon in 1856: “In nature, nothing actually perishes. Death is birth, and the dissolution of every organization is but the development and visible advancement of a fresher type of being.”²⁸ Likening the cyclical process of decay and rebirth to nature as well as to the successes and failures of humanity, Magoon suggested that autumn “...constitutes a perpetual struggle, identical life rising through multifarious death toward the supreme in freedom and power.”²⁹ In the context of *Westward Empire* and its many allusions to slavery as a human abomination, the association of autumn scenery to a reminder of forthcoming liberation from the death of winter also correlates to a hopeful push toward the abolition of slavery.

An examination of Sonntag's *In the Blue Ridge Mountains, River View*, painted around 1860, serves to illustrate Sonntag's continued iconographic treatment of the Virginia landscape.³⁰ The painting features a group of trees framing the composition on the left side of the canvas, a section of river as the central focus and sharp, sloping mountain flanking the river to the right. Here, the foreground of *In the Blue Ridge*

²⁸ Magoon, *Westward Empire: Or, the Great Drama of Human Progress*, ix

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ *In the Blue Ridge Mountains, River View* is currently held by the Diplomatic Reception Rooms of the United States Department of State in Washington, D.C.

Mountains is again blocked by natural elements; there are craggy, blasted stumps, rocks and a sharp boulder embedded deep in the earth that deny the viewer easy entry into the canvas. After examining all that prevents a pathway into the scene, the eye of the viewer is pulled by the curve of the river to the background of the painting, moving up over the distant, sloping mountaintops and out toward the sky.

In the Blue Ridge Mountains is devoid of allusions to autumn and does not include transitional light. Instead, the trees and shrubbery included in the painting are covered with marks of subdued, deep greens and dark brown tones. The composition is detailed by dead, branchless trees, several of which resemble crosses. Like in *Shenandoah Valley*, the upper portion of *In the Blue Ridge Mountains* is dominated by a wide strip of clear, blue sky that balances the picture. *In the Blue Ridge Mountains* and *Shenandoah Valley* both feature perspectives that allow the viewer to easily survey the geographic elements. Sonntag did not include figures or manmade structures in the frame of *In the Blue Ridge Mountains*, creating a scene much truer to the notion of unbridled wilderness than its counterparts. A group of small, black birds flee the scene, evoking death that Sonntag included in the majority of his Virginia landscapes.

From a first impression of Sonntag's *Valley River, Virginia*, the majority of the compositional elements seem to follow the popularized suggestions of his predecessor, Thomas Cole, rather than the influence of Reverend Magoon.³¹ Sonntag again denies the viewer access into the foreground, blocking entry with boulders and dense shrubbery. The eye of the viewer is led from the scrubby, ornate foliage on the left side of the composition to glide across the perfectly smooth, deep portion of the river included in the

³¹ See Thomas Cole, "On American Scenery," *American Monthly Magazine*, vol. 1 (January, 1836), 242.

middle ground of the painting. A steep portion of mountainside attracts attention next, directing the viewer to examine it and again sweep across, pausing to witness two figures occupying a rowboat. The presence of these figures on the glassy, placid surface of the seemingly still river simultaneously connotes both calmness and romantic notions of human occupation of nature.

Sonntag highlights the background of the painting with water from the unseen source of the river tumbling over a row of boulders, probably in an attempt to recall one of Cole's more popular assertions on the essential components of landscape painting.³² The small waterfall is as beautiful as it is benign; unlike waterfalls exhibited as elements of sublime terror in the landscapes of Sonntag's predecessors, including many painted by Cole, no dramatic plume of opaque mist rises from the waterfall's intersection with the larger body of water. The oscillating line drawn by the path of the eye over the composition elegantly echoes the soft shape of the mountains themselves, an effect concluded by the presence of the water. The size of the painting, which is hardly the width of a human forearm, also adds to its underwhelming nature.

Although the large, glassy portion of river, the benign presence of the figures and the smoothness of the mountains subscribe mostly to a notion of serenity, other elements of the painting contrast this feeling.³³ The Virginia landscape is presented as an exquisitely balanced picture, but the pictorial normalities of *Valley River, Virginia* end here. The mountains that engage the eye of the viewer to move across the composition are blanketed by deciduous trees that are stippled with flecks of orange, deep maroon,

³² In an oft-referenced passage from Thomas Cole's "On American Scenery," the author demands that, "another component without which every landscape is defective—it is water." Cole, "On American Scenery," 242.

³³ Cole declares that, "in the unrippled lake, which mirrors all surrounding objects, we have the expression of tranquility and peace," an idea that Sonntag was certainly exposed to. Ibid.

rich brown and rare bits of bright yellow, which indicate the onset of another celebrated North American autumn. The undertones of creating yet another autumnal landscape cannot be ignored; here, in the final full year of the American Civil War, Sonntag has employed the most brilliantly-colored, dying leaves of any of his Virginia landscapes to convey the allegory of the onset of winter and its associations with death.

Rather than choosing only one atmospheric compositional element, the sky of *Valley River, Virginia* is rendered in early sunset in addition to the autumnal foliage.³⁴ Sonntag constructed several clouds with blots of pink that grow more mauve toward the edge of the canvas, all illuminated by the diminished glow of the sun below the mountaintops. Behind the hills that frame the background, the sun is no longer visible; the sunset that marks the end of the day echoes the sublimity expressed by the autumn leaves. In the upper left corner of the painting, a dozen black birds evacuate the space. Although this element was probably employed to create additional depth, it also provokes the viewer to question the birds' motivations for deserting the scene, particularly when considered in conjunction with the foreboding autumn and sunset. By blending the dark connotations of sunset and autumnal landscape with the favorable qualities of the composition in *Valley River, Virginia*, Sonntag created an image of sublime repose.

The title of *Valley River, Virginia* is an intentionally ambiguous one, as Sonntag may have constructed the scene either from sketches or his own memory of the Appalachian landscape. More importantly, it points to the heightened significance of the idea of painting Virginia during the Civil War. Several of Sonntag's antebellum Virginia paintings refer to its western region, but in order to eliminate confusion given the new,

³⁴ In "On America Scenery," one of Cole's boldest remarks are in the interest of discussing the power of the sky in landscapes: he refers to the sky as "the soul of all scenery." Cole, "On American Scenery," 242.

Union state of West Virginia, the title of *Valley River, Virginia* more specifically represents the Confederate state. Aside from an obvious interest in tying the sublimity of autumn and natural death to a war stricken American state in *Valley River, Virginia*, Sonntag also evokes Magoon's cautious, religious optimism with its sunset, implying that despite the human disturbance of the Civil War, God and nature remain the most prevalent forces.

The title and other formal qualities of *Valley River, Virginia* also connote a religious significance that lent itself to Magoon's patronage. The composition puts the viewer in a scene of serenity and repose while at the same time denoting that this scene was contrived of Virginia, which had been more severely geologically and culturally marred by the Civil War than any state in the Union or Confederacy. The element running through the picture, and less specifically, the vast majority of Sonntag's images of Virginia, is water, which constructs the idea of rebirth and salvation in the Christian narrative. Two figures are present in most of Sonntag's paintings of Virginia, usually dressed in identical clothing to those found in the rowboat in the middle ground of *Valley River, Virginia*; here they are positioned down river from the calm waterfall that conjures more repose than sublimity.

While one would have envisioned mortality in Virginia's valley based on coverage of the Civil War found in *The New York Times* and *Harper's Weekly*, the soft, quiet water in the center of a landscape that was anything but calm in 1864 implicates the idea of rebirth, or of baptism, an idea that would not have been lost on Reverend Magoon. In *Valley River, Virginia*, Sonntag transformed the Virginia landscape into an unlikely setting for the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Based on the presence of divine

providence implied by the twilight sky and the soothing river, the painting dissuaded fear of human evil, like the atrocities of the Civil War.

While the aforementioned works are of varying size, even the smallest and loosest of the group, *Valley River, Virginia*, was not produced as a sketch for a future work.³⁵ Sonntag seems not to have been litigious about claiming authorship of his work given that he only signed and dated about half of his known canvases. *Valley River, Virginia* is smaller and decidedly more liberal in paint application than the majority of Sonntag's larger, finished landscapes. Curiously, though, in the lower right corner of the painting, Sonntag both signed and dated the canvas in red paint of a nearly vermillion hue, marking this image of Virginia in 1864 with a sense of stasis that counters its seemingly informal, gestural application of paint with the permanence of blood.

The notion of time associated with Sonntag's Virginia paintings, most explicitly by those like *Valley River, Virginia* that were dated, embeds biographical themes within them. By dating *Valley River, Virginia*, Sonntag also assigned a date to his own lived experience as an artist during the Civil War. The date of the painting also poignantly closes the period during which Magoon published his books, each containing abolitionist tenets that Sonntag was exposed to. The content of Sonntag's Virginia landscapes most clearly suggests the artist's use of Magoon's ideas. Time and again in his images of Virginia, Sonntag pointed to the hopeful nature of a future spring and reminded his viewer that despite darkness, the sun would rise, positively pressing toward revitalization of society in the American South.

³⁵ Moure, *William Louis Sonntag: Artist of the Ideal*, 144-147.

CHAPTER 2

PICTURING MEMORY: WILLIAM LOUIS SONNTAG'S

VIEW OF HARPERS FERRY, VIRGINIA

In September of 2009, William Louis Sonntag's 1864 painting *View of Harpers Ferry, Virginia* (fig. 3) resurfaced in an auction of American drawings, paintings and sculpture at Sotheby's in New York. Its brilliant sunset, glassy stretch of river, softly rendered autumn foliage and small genre elements subscribe to the conventions of the picturesque, which were popularized in American landscape painting decades prior.³⁶ While the effect of *Harpers Ferry* is traditional, the content of the painting begs further exploration. The location named in the title of the painting provocatively alludes to the theme of Virginia in American visual culture around the Civil War.³⁷

Despite the fact that Sonntag's *Harpers Ferry* depicts wilderness, it also quietly recalls the widely publicized events of John Brown's raid, Jacksonian traditions in

³⁶ In September of 2009, Sonntag's 1864 *View of Harpers Ferry, Virginia* resurfaced in an auction of American drawings, paintings and sculpture at Sotheby's in New York. Given its evident subscription to academic conventions of the picturesque, it is not surprising that the picture easily passed into a private collection for double its suggested value. The amount of time for which Sonntag's painting was in an undisclosed location is unknown. The painting was listed in the monograph devoted to Sonntag by Nancy Dustin Wall Moure in 1980, but at the time, information on the painting's size, date and location was unavailable. According to the 2009 auction catalog, it was sold from one private collection to another. Sonntag's painting was titled as *Harper's Ferry* and was listed as Lot 51 in a Sotheby's auction, "American Drawings, Paintings and Sculpture," held on 30 September 2009. See: *American Drawings, Paintings and Sculpture, 30 September 2009*, (ex. cat., New York: Sotheby's), 1-24. For details of the sale of Sonntag's *Harper's Ferry*, refer to its archived page through the Sotheby's web site. See: "Auction Results: American Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture, Lot 51," <www.sothebys.com/app/live/lot/LotDetail.jsp?sale_number=N08570> (accessed 12 January 2011).

³⁷ The town referred to in this paper as "Harpers Ferry" was originally chartered as the town of Shenandoah Falls at Mr. Harper's Ferry, Virginia and currently exists as Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, sans apostrophe. When Sonntag's painting was originally titled in 1864, the spelling of the town included an apostrophe. This thesis uses the town name's current spelling.

American landscape painting and, more obliquely, signs of progress. Nestled within a valley at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers, the small, picturesque town of Harpers Ferry had been the scene of John Brown's bloody raid of a federal Armory in 1859. Recollection of the political event and its significance to Union publicity efforts would have been pervasive to viewers of Sonntag's picture in 1864, but the sense of place contrived on the canvas also suggests the site's earlier historical significance.³⁸

Painting Harpers Ferry gave Sonntag an opportunity to express his ability to depict notably picturesque American scenery, consequently aligning him with famed landscape painters such as Thomas Doughty, who painted the site in 1825 (fig. 4). Harpers Ferry would have also symbolized expansion and development in 1864, as the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad had made the small town the final stop of its original westward route in 1852. Sonntag had been one of the first artists hired by the railroad to sketch and paint along the route, making him familiar with the environs.³⁹

Sonntag's *Harpers Ferry* assumes a complicated position within the artist's oeuvre, particularly because it is the most specifically titled painting of Virginia that Sonntag made during the Civil War.⁴⁰ Although a list of Sonntag's known works

³⁸ For a comprehensive discussion of Harpers Ferry and its complete history, see: James A. Beckman, *Harpers Ferry* (Chicago : Arcadia Publishing, 2006).

³⁹ Sonntag was assigned to sketch and paint along one of the first completed segments of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, which connected Baltimore with Cumberland, Maryland and wove across the border between Maryland and present-day West Virginia. Sonntag is believed to have first encountered the Virginia landscape around 1846 but did not begin using it as a subject until around 1850. Nancy Dustin Wall Moure suggested that sometime between 1846 and 1851, Sonntag spent summers sketching in Kentucky, and in present-day West Virginia at Kanawha and Hawk's Nest. Unlike the 1852 passes Sonntag made through Virginia on bequest of the B&O Railroad, none of these earlier summer trips appear to have been spurred by any specific commission. Moure, *William Louis Sonntag: Artist of the Ideal*, 144.

⁴⁰ Sonntag is known to have made around fifty paintings of Virginia between 1848 and 1872. The vast majority of these works were painting between 1859, the year of John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, and

indicates an avid repetition of subjects and conventions, he is only known to have made two images of Harpers Ferry. It is also curious that Sonntag chose to paint Harpers Ferry more than ten years after he originally passed through it. No information survives to suggest that the work was painted to suit the requests of a patron. Sonntag's decision to depict Harpers Ferry retrospectively suggests that its meaning drew on the significance of Brown's raid as a genesis of the Civil War during the final year of the conflict. Consequently, the painting represents the inception and close of the Civil war in a single image. This chapter will further examine Sonntag's *View of Harpers Ferry, Virginia* as an emblem of historical and personal reflections on Virginia and the American Civil War.

In order to more definitively justify *View of Harpers Ferry, Virginia* as an outlier in Sonntag's body of work, its properties must be compared to those found in the artist's extant Virginia paintings. Several of the compositional elements of *Harpers Ferry* resemble other paintings of Virginia that Sonntag made around the same time.⁴¹

Harpers Ferry subscribes to the formulaic, academic tradition of dividing the landscape into thirds of land, water, and sky. Sonntag's sky conveys twilight with its pervasive orange hues and touches of dark rose, even more so than in his earlier Virginia landscapes. The impossibly smooth surface of the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers is also highly characteristic of Sonntag's Virginia paintings. The reflection of the uneven, aged Blue Ridge Mountains is painted in Sonntag's signature combination of observation and idealism. Touches of deep red in the foreground foliage

1864, the final year of the Civil War. For more information, see the appendix of Sonntag's paintings of Virginia.

⁴¹ Sonntag's *Sunset in Western Virginia* (1859), *Shenandoah Valley* (c. 1860). *In the Blue Ridge Mountains, River View* (1860) and *Valley River, Virginia* (1864) provide the most resonant content-based comparisons to *View of Harpers Ferry, Virginia*. Each of the aforementioned works is described at length in the preceding chapter of this thesis.

signify the beginnings of autumn to the viewer, a season common to Sonntag's Virginia landscapes.

Even if Sonntag had not signed and dated the canvas on its lower right corner, the genre elements included on the canvas would implicate his hand. Two figures appear in the center-right of the canvas, nearly dwarfed by hulking rocks that punctuate the foreground and middle ground of the canvas (fig. 5). Both figures appear to be male, donning wide-brimmed hats, white shirts, vests and long, loose-fitting trousers. Upon close inspection, a red bandana drapes across the back of the vest of one of the two figures, flagging the attention of the viewer. The red of the fabric plays on the deeper red tones of the autumnal leaves in the foreground. One figure, in light colored clothes, sits turned away from the other, who faces the calm river in profile. Sonntag depicted the two in the act of fishing with rustic, handmade poles that intersect, forming the shape of a cross.

Sonntag also included manmade structures in *Harpers Ferry* (fig. 6). One wooden construction is long and rectangular with a subtly slanted roof. A second wooden structure is connected to the first, but has a much higher pointed roof. Gaps between its plank boards make the building appear dilapidated. The stream of smoke snaking into the air from the primary building's small chimney suggests a human presence. The two buildings sit on a grassy patch along an otherwise sandy riverbank, mere yards from the waterline. Sonntag characteristically painted rivers in his Virginia paintings at waning levels, making this picture no exception. Several hulking boulders loom on either side of the structures in the foreground, introducing a sense of danger in

the idea of inhabiting the wild space. Like many of Sonntag's other paintings of the Virginia landscape, *Harpers Ferry* compares diminutive man to omnipotent nature.

A few critical factors differentiate *Harpers Ferry* from the majority of Sonntag's Virginia paintings. At thirty-four by fifty-four inches, few of Sonntag's surviving works from the same period are of a comparably large size. The deliberate date and signature in the lower right corner is also atypical to Sonntag's style. The only other Virginia landscape to exhibit both a date and signature was *Valley River, Virginia*, which Sonntag painted in 1864 as well.⁴² By attaching the painting to this culturally significant date, Sonntag undoubtedly embedded special significance into this interpretation of the Harpers Ferry landscape. Most importantly, none of Sonntag's Virginia landscapes before or since *View of Harpers Ferry, Virginia* implicate so specific a location. The titles of the majority of Sonntag's Virginia landscapes disclose regional locations rather than the names of specific towns or views.⁴³ Unlike the majority of his previous works, Sonntag's *Harpers Ferry* depicts a landscape that would have been recognizable to those who had passed through it or parties interested in seeking it out themselves.

Sonntag's choice to paint an occupied landscape like Harpers Ferry also acknowledged the area's significance within early American history, which was a common practice for American artists. In the nineteenth century, American landscape painters like Sonntag were especially instrumental in preserving and monumentalizing

⁴² Sonntag's *Valley River, Virginia*, which now resides within the permanent collection of the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, boasts an expressive tactility of paint and small size that are at odds with the deliberate date and signature. Paintings of comparable size (under a foot wide) and texture from the same time period are often assumed to be sketches, but the date, signature and provenance of the painting suggests otherwise. For more information, see the preceding chapter of this thesis.

⁴³ The idea that Sonntag rarely portrayed exact locations is one that inspired Nancy Dustin Wall Moure, the writer of his monograph, to dub Sonntag "Artist of the Ideal." Surviving sketchbooks and primary information suggests that Sonntag painted landscapes as assemblages of natural features from different areas. See Moure, *William Louis Sonntag: Artist of the Ideal*, 5.

colonial memory in the national narrative. Consequently, many landscape painters were aware of the fact that Harpers Ferry originally assumed its place in American history when George Washington began admiring the strategic value of its geographic features in the late eighteenth century.⁴⁴ As president, Washington established the federal Armory at Harpers Ferry in 1796.⁴⁵ Because President Washington himself deemed the landscape fit to protect the new republic, Harpers Ferry was akin to Washington, DC, which Washington had also helped select. Harpers Ferry's historic military value remained resonant throughout the Civil War, when Sonntag painted its landscape.

Sonntag was probably reminded of Harpers Ferry's military merit and attachment to Washingtonian ideals while reading contemporary news. Washingtonian and Federal symbolism saturated the widely circulated coverage of the events surrounding John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859. The *New York Times* ran one of the earliest articles on the raid, which reported that an insurgent named John Edwin Cook had seized Colonel Lewis Washington—the great great nephew of George Washington—as a hostage. The same article emphasized that Cook had also demanded Colonel Washington turn over two of his prized possessions: the sword and pistol General Lafayette gave to George Washington during the American Revolution.⁴⁶ As a result, the meaning of John Brown's raid and its setting in Harpers Ferry were also attached with emblems of the revolutionary fight for liberty in the antebellum American conscious.

⁴⁴ Beckman, *Harpers Ferry*, 7.

⁴⁵ Thomas Doughty, an American landscape painter who is often co-credited for founding the Hudson River School in secondary literature, is known to have traveled south to Virginia to paint Harpers Ferry in 1825. He drew and painted several images of Harpers Ferry, including oil paintings, watercolors and pen and ink works. For more information, see: Eleanor Heartney (ed.), *A Capital Collection: Masterworks from the Corcoran Gallery of Art* (Washington, DC : Corcoran Gallery of Art, 2002), 138.

⁴⁶ "The Harper's Ferry Rebellion; Revelations of Captain Brown. A New Constitution for the United States. Northern Abolitionists Apparently Implicated," *The New York Times* (20 October 1859).

Washington was not the only decorated figure in early American history to be associated with the nineteenth-century perception of the Harpers Ferry landscape. Thomas Jefferson, founding father and third President of the United States, held a profound affinity for the same scenery. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson mused that, “The passage of the Patowmac (sic) through the Blue ridge is perhaps one of the most stupendous scenes in nature.” He described the landscape as at once “placid and delightful” and “wild and tremendous,” finally suggesting that, “This scene is worth a voyage across the Atlantic.” Jefferson purchased large tracts of land near Harpers Ferry, deeming its scenery pleasant enough for his vast collection of Virginian land.⁴⁷

The Jeffersonian tradition of idealizing the Virginia landscape was of great import to American landscape painting in the nineteenth century.⁴⁸ When Jefferson endorsed the beauty of Harpers Ferry in his eighteenth-century publication on Virginia, the value of its landscape ascended to the echelon of other prized geographic areas in the state. The Natural Bridge remains the most notable example.⁴⁹ Like the landscape around Harpers Ferry, Jefferson also owned the Natural Bridge and its environs. Jefferson poignantly

⁴⁷ According to historian James Beckman, other American heads of state disagreed with Jefferson’s perception of the Harpers Ferry landscape. In his book on Harpers Ferry, Beckman writes that John Quincy Adams visited Harpers Ferry in 1834 and later recalled that “...those who first see it after reading Mr. Jefferson’s description are usually disappointed.” Regardless of their interpretations of Harpers Ferry’s beauty, many American presidents visited the site during the nineteenth century, including Presidents John Quincy Adams and Abraham Lincoln, and tourism remained a steady source of income for the area. See: Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (London, 1787), 27-28; Beckman, *Harpers Ferry*, 22, 266-27.

⁴⁸ For more information on Jefferson and American landscape painting, see Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875* (New York : Oxford University Press, 2007), 42-44; William S. Rasmussen and James C. Kelly, *The Virginia Landscape: A Cultural History* (Richmond, VA : Howell Press, 2000), 14.

⁴⁹ The Natural Bridge and its significance in American landscape painting have been extensively researched and documented. Natural Bridge imagery was in fact seminal to some of the most critically acclaimed American landscape painters of the nineteenth century, including Joshua Shaw (1776-1860), Thomas Cole (1801-1848), and Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900). Admiration for the Natural Bridge as an American wonder is also known to have disseminated into the repertoire of self-taught artists, including Edward Hicks (1780-1849) and Flavius Fisher (1832-1910). For more information, see Rasmussen and Kelly, *The Virginia Landscape*, 70-78.

wrote about the sublimity of the Natural Bridge in the same text that declared Harpers Ferry a natural wonder: “here, as in the neighbourhood (sic) of the natural bridge, are people who have passed their lives within a dozen miles, and have never been to survey these monuments of a war between rivers and mountains, which must have shaken earth itself to its center.”⁵⁰ Academically trained American landscape painters like Sonntag were familiar with Jefferson’s writings, making them privy to Jefferson’s suggestion that Harpers Ferry was no less a worthwhile destination than the famed Natural Bridge.⁵¹

Sonntag would have been readily aware of the Jeffersonian esteem attached to Harpers Ferry when he first passed through it by train around 1852, if for no other reason than Jefferson’s name was by then permanently attached to the topography and tourism of the area. The boulder Jefferson preferred to perch from in order to admire the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers at Harpers Ferry had been specifically named Jefferson’s Rock decades earlier. The rock was elevated by four sandstone pillars sometime between 1855 and 1860, making it a visible part of the Harpers Ferry landscape from several points of view.⁵² Jefferson’s Rock was even recognizable from the river beneath it, meaning that Jeffersonian and national ideas were consistently present in the Harpers Ferry landscape physically and ideologically by the time that Sonntag painted it in 1864.

Viewing Harpers Ferry through the eyes of America’s founders disseminated into landscape painting long before Sonntag encountered the town himself. When American landscape painter Thomas Doughty visited and painted Harpers Ferry in 1825, he likely

⁵⁰ Rasmussen and Kelly, *The Virginia Landscape*, 70-78.

⁵¹ Novak, *Nature and Culture*, 43.

⁵² Beckman, *Harpers Ferry*, 25.

had Jefferson's comments from *Notes on the State of Virginia* in mind.⁵³ On his trip, Doughty produced several images of Harpers Ferry in oil, watercolor and pen and ink. One of Doughty's lost Harpers Ferry paintings, *View on the Potomac, at Harper's Ferry, One Mile above the Junction of the Two Rivers*, hung in the grand hall of a popular tourist steamboat called The Albany. Along with its eleven commissioned counterparts, Doughty's painting of Harpers Ferry was probably viewed by thousands of passengers along the Hudson River from the mid 1820s until the winter of 1843-44. Several of Doughty's images of Harpers Ferry were also exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1825 and at the Boston Athenaeum and National Academy of Design in 1826.⁵⁴

The idea that Doughty's images of the Harpers Ferry landscape disseminated into American visual culture suggests that Sonntag's *Harper's Ferry* was influenced by the same interpretation. Many engravings were made after Doughty's images of Harpers Ferry. Several were reproduced in news periodicals in the context of high landscape art rather than in that of news imagery circulated after John Brown's raid. While subsequent engravings subscribed to different views of Harpers Ferry, a few—like Doughty's 1825 *Harper's Ferry, Virginia*—were loyal to the view from Jefferson's Rock. It is unlikely that any of Doughty's Harpers Ferry images were drastic departures from his 1825 *Harper's Ferry, Virginia*, which is one of the few Doughty paintings of Harpers Ferry

⁵³ Kenneth John Myers, "Art and Commerce in Jacksonian America: The Steamboat Albany Collection," *The Art Bulletin* (vol. 82, no. 3, 1 September 2000), 504.

⁵⁴ The Albany collection was assembled by the Stevens family of Hoboken, New Jersey and stands as one of the earliest assembled collections of contemporary art in American history. For a useful account of the reception of Doughty's Harpers Ferry paintings, see Myers, "Art and Commerce in Jacksonian America: The Steamboat Albany Collection," 503.

that survive. Sonntag's *Harpers Ferry* retains the softly rendered foliage and cluster of Claudian trees that are present on the left side of Doughty's canvas.

Reminders of Jeffersonian vision at Harpers Ferry were continually recalled and represented in American visual culture well into the 1850s. An engraving called *Harper's Ferry, Virginia from Jefferson Rock* was printed in the October 1854 issue of *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion* (fig. 7). The hulking rocks present in the engraving are widely apparent in the foreground and middleground of Sonntag's *Harpers Ferry*. Additionally, Sonntag's painting assumes the same elevated perspective used in Doughty's painting and the 1854 engraving. Both works evoke Jefferson's position atop the rock. The presence of these images in periodicals of the 1850s suggests that an earnest appreciation for the Jeffersonian view of Harpers Ferry persisted in American visual culture. Sonntag's painting subsequently assumes a place in the Jeffersonian tradition of admiring the Harpers Ferry landscape from above while also subscribing to academic conventions in American landscape art.

The title and content of Sonntag's *View of Harpers Ferry, Virginia* also make significant allusions to John Brown's 1859 raid. The politics and massive social consequences of the event retained their place in American awareness throughout the Civil War. Sonntag would have readily recalled the details of the raid and its catalytic relationship to the Civil War when he set out to paint Harpers Ferry in 1864. Sonntag's *Harpers Ferry* evokes the story of John Brown, a noted abolitionist who had assisted the Underground Railroad and possessed a profound relationship with abolitionist activist Frederick Douglass. In the night of 16 October 1859, Brown exacted a bloody attack on

the town of Harpers Ferry.⁵⁵ After overpowering prominent white residents, arresting a Baltimore and Ohio Railroad train, arming slaves with bayonets, and seizing the federal Armory and its contents, the majority of the party was captured two days later. Eighteen men, including raiders, civilians and marines, were killed.⁵⁶

A rash of images and text focused on Harpers Ferry spread across American periodicals between the raid's October inception and the December execution of its leader. While immediate coverage of the raid focused on disclosing the multifarious events of the three-day ordeal, press coverage led to increased editorial speculation regarding relations between northern abolitionism and Virginia as a southern slave state. A response to a scathing column from *The Richmond Examiner* was published in *The New York Times* only seven days after John Brown's execution and clearly delineates the socio-political schism between the two areas. After ridiculing the *Richmond Examiner's* suggestion that the entire North was "crazed on the subject of Slavery," the writer of the *New York Times* article charged:

It seems impossible that any human being should live in so secluded a region of the earth, as to be thus ignorant of the state of things here, and thus torment himself with the fearful shapes of his own imagination. But anything is possible in Virginia now-a-days... So long as they believe that the

⁵⁵ After the raid, reporters made immediate attempts to compile a timeline in order to disclose Brown's premeditation. As a consequence, it was revealed that Brown approached longtime friend Frederick Douglass for assistance in rallying slaves and free blacks to participate prior to the raid. Brown intimated his intentions to begin a riot that would trail as far south as Alabama in which enslaved blacks would overthrow their white masters. Douglass declined to participate, suggesting that Brown's plan was a suicide mission waged against the federal government. Brown also approached Harriet Tubman, whose absence is said to have been caused by temporary illness. Following the raid, Douglass expressed his approbations for Brown's action in written contributions to periodicals and public speeches, which directly contributed to the association of Brown's December execution with martyrdom. See James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York : Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁵⁶ For an excellent account of the raid at Harpers Ferry, see Jonathan Earle, *John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry: A Brief History with Documents* (New York : St. Martin's Press, 2008).

whole North sympathizes with John Brown's invasion, it is perfectly natural that they should feel excited and indignant... Such propositions as this in the *Examiner*, we hope, will arrest the attention of the conservative portion of the South, and lead them to consider into what perilous shoals and quicksands of insanity they are allowing the Southern public mind to drift.⁵⁷

According to *The New York Times*, John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry gravely widened the perceived divide between North and South. The language in the article also suggests that by the winter of 1859 and 1860, Virginia had become synonymous with the South in terms of its perceived attitudes toward slavery and indignation toward abolitionist movements in the North.

The tradition of constructing memories of the raid at Harpers Ferry in images, to which Sonntag's painting subscribes, began almost immediately following its inception. Engravings by noted artists and writers like David Hunter Strother punctuated the coverage of the trial following Brown's raid.⁵⁸ Many of the engravings focused on depicting the raid's key figures, most notably Brown and his fellow white insurgents, rather than attaching them to the landscape in which the events transpired. An engraving

⁵⁷ --"The Temper of Virginia," *The New York Times* (9 December 1859).

⁵⁸ David Hunter Strother (1816-1818) was a Virginian artist and writer renowned for his contributions to periodicals years prior to John Brown's raid. Known most predominantly under the pseudonym "Porte Crayon," which paid homage to the work of Washington Irving, Strother wrote and created unprecedented amounts of imagery associated with Virginian identity and the Virginia landscape. The hundreds of engravings he contributed to periodicals like *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* undoubtedly reached the hands of William Louis Sonntag and other landscape painters in the Northeast, where the magazine's circulation was highest. Poignantly, Strother was in nearby Charlestown, Virginia when John Brown first stormed Harpers Ferry. Additionally, Strother attended Brown's trial and subsequent execution, even lingering to make sketches of the deceased Brown as he hung from the gallows. For excellent accounts of Strother's life and work, see Keith O'Donnell and Helen Hollingsworth, *Seeking Scenery: Travel Writing from Southern Appalachia, 1840-1900* (Knoxville, TN : University of Tennessee Press, 2003); Cecil B. Eby, *A Virginia Yankee in the Civil War: The Diaries of David Hunter Strother* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

called “The Arraignment” (fig. 8) depicts a wild-haired John Brown amid a group of his co-conspirators hearing charges of treason and murder brought against them in a Charlestown, Virginia courtroom.⁵⁹ The limp frame of a wounded insurgent, who is propped up by another figure, starkly contrasts Brown’s forlorn but stoic presence.

Another engraving published in *Harper’s Weekly* on 19 November 1859 (fig. 9) shows a white planter and his wife distributing backhoes, hay forks, axes, scythes and rifles to his slaves with instruction to resist Brown’s oncoming invasion.⁶⁰ The slaves appear shadowy, hapless and completely dependent upon the instruction of their master, the central figure of the composition. Both engravings in question allude to the cultural divide highlighted by Brown’s raid, but this schism remains obscured in both compositions. In the former engraving, the Virginian court is invisible as it levels charges of treason against Brown and his men. In the latter, a single planter and his brood of faithful slaves are depicted without visual reference to the tumult experienced by other unsuspecting slaveholders in Harpers Ferry. The reader of Strother’s accompanying text was consequently left to fill in the holes of the story at their own discretion.

Although Sonntag barred blatantly militaristic imagery from his rendition of Harpers Ferry, the painting’s academically focused composition successfully communicates political disparities between the North and South. A photograph of the same area from the train trestle across the Potomac River taken by Civil War photographer Alexander Gardner in 1865 (fig. 10) bears striking similarity to the

⁵⁹ Charlestown or Charles Town, Virginia is now known as Charleston, West Virginia. David Hunter Strother, “The Arraignment,” *Harper’s Weekly* (12 November 1859).

⁶⁰ David Hunter Strother, “A Southern Planter Arming his Slaves to Resist Invasion,” *Harper’s Weekly* (19 November 1859).

topographic features in Sonntag's *View of Harpers Ferry, Virginia*, which elucidates more socio-political symbolism. Gardner's photograph depicts a developed Harpers Ferry, but Sonntag's picture excludes the town's contemporary attributes. Sonntag submitted to an unusual practice of painting a specific landscape, and his perspective toward the scenery is also uncharacteristically detectable.⁶¹ It is especially important to note that Sonntag's painting and Gardner's photograph were made following the 1861 Wheeling Convention, which separated West Virginia from Virginia. Examinations of the positions of the hills in the photograph and Sonntag's painting reveal West Virginia in the foregrounds, flanked by the Union state of Maryland on the left and the Confederate state of Virginia on the right. In Sonntag's painting, the river provocatively demonstrates the social and cultural gap between Virginia and the two Union states.

The arrangement of figures and structures further amplify the presence of cultural divide in Sonntag's painting. Because of the color of their attire, the pair of fishermen draws the eye of the viewer off of the center of the composition and compels the examination of the river, which ebbs to the right. Significantly, the tallest makeshift fishing pole forms a deliberate line through the center of the river, which further severs the land of Maryland on the left from that of Virginia on the right. The Claudian tree on the left side of the composition lends itself to the stoic conventions of beauty used to render the Maryland landscape. Conversely, the crude buildings on the right side of the canvas connote human struggle. Their sparse number and precarious positions next to

⁶¹ In his text on the history of Virginia in American landscape painting, William Rasmussen writes that art historians have spent extensive amounts of time attempting to determine the exact locations of William Louis Sonntag's paintings of Virginia. According to Rasmussen, the titles of the paintings allude to regions but remain detached from specific places. Additionally, Sonntag's surviving sketches suggest that he invented the compositions of most of his landscape paintings from his perceptions of the most aesthetically ideal features of the region in question. As a result of its resemblance to an existing landscape, Sonntag's *View of Harpers Ferry, Virginia* is one of Sonntag's most important surviving works. For more information, see Rasmussen, *The Virginia Landscape: A Cultural History*, 133-135.

unforgiving mountain elements indicate rudimentary occupation of the Virginia landscape.

The compositional disparities between the two states' landscapes poetically recall the position of Harpers Ferry during the Civil War. Following the Wheeling Convention of 1861, which permanently divorced West Virginia from the slave state of Virginia, Harpers Ferry existed in West Virginia but remained wedged between the Union state of Maryland and the Confederate state of Virginia. More ominously, Harpers Ferry and its federal Armory changed hands nearly ten times during the four years of the Civil War.⁶² Each skirmish was reported in periodicals like *The New York Times*, which means that Americans were reminded of Harpers Ferry for the duration of the conflict. Sonntag's decision to paint Harpers Ferry was likely based in part on the idea that it was an apex of the Civil War conflict in the conscious of both the Union and the Confederacy.

The atmosphere of the painting most readily implicates Sonntag's personal interest in painting Harpers Ferry at the end of the Civil War. The aforementioned landscape elements and figures bask in the soft, polychromatic light of sunset. While using sunset in landscape art was an academically justified tradition by the time that Sonntag became an active painter, the artist regularly employed the light of sunset as a device that conspicuously referenced the passing of time.⁶³ In the composition of *Harpers Ferry*, the emotive light of sunset compliments Sonntag's revisions of the landscape.

Just as the sun is missing behind the prehistoric hills, Sonntag has eliminated nearly every element from the contemporary Harpers Ferry landscape evident in

⁶² Earle, *John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry: A Brief History with Documents*, 18.

⁶³ For an in depth analysis of Sonntag's interest in incorporating sunsets into his landscape art, see the description of his 1864 painting, *Valley River, Virginia*, in the preceding chapter of this thesis.

Alexander Gardner's photograph. No homes dot the stepped hillsides, no industrial buildings line the slow-moving river, and no large mill looms over the water. Most importantly, Sonntag erased the train trestles and several bridges from the perception of Harpers Ferry, which he used to first encounter the same landscape on his own ten years prior. Rail lines were one of the most significant means of replenishing Union and Confederate armies with supplies and soldiers during the Civil War. Trains were highly prized commodities that were constantly captured to damage opposing armies during the Civil War. It is also poignant to note that rail lines crossed the Potomac River at Harpers Ferry, which would have been a symbol of connection between North and South. The idea that Sonntag omitted the train from view suggests that he sought to exclude elements that could connote contemporary struggle.⁶⁴

The fact that Sonntag painted figures and rudimentary buildings perched within a powerful wilderness in 1864, the final full year of the Civil War, implicates that Sonntag desired to revise an American memory that had been written by conflict. The landscape is reminiscent of the eighteenth-century wilderness encountered by Washington and the boundless beauty described by Jefferson, presidents who remained heroic in the American historical narrative during the Civil War. Like Thomas Doughty's images of Harpers Ferry, Sonntag's painting honors early American vision.

By removing modernity from the picture, Sonntag returned the hugely emblematic, war-torn landscape to the state that had romanced two figures upon whose

⁶⁴ Barbara Novak provides an extensive discussion of the use of the train as a symbol of progress in American landscape painting of the nineteenth century. This chapter is also indebted to Susan Danly's interpretation of the train as a means of bisecting scenery in American landscape painting. See Novak, *Nature and Culture*, 143-169; Susan Danly and Leo Marx (eds.), *The Railroad in American Art: Representations of Technological Change* (Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1988), 97-98.

legacies Americans could still rely during the Civil War. The color of the twilight sky implies change, but in a hopeful, impending revolution into a new day.⁶⁵ Sonntag has ultimately portrayed the two fishing figures in the foreground as pioneers of a new age in a pre-established landscape. The disappearing sun pulls the conflict of the Civil War with it, reminding its viewers that the omnipotence of nature continues to withstand the gravest of human atrocities.

By the time that Sonntag's *View of Harper's Ferry, Virginia* was exhibited at the National Academy of Design in June of 1865, the last shot of the Civil War had been fired.⁶⁶ The title of the painting immediately conjured fresh memories of John Brown's catalytic raid of 1859 and the more recent news headlines disclosing the events of the war in Virginia. The setting sun, figures and Jeffersonian beauty of the Virginia landscape also refreshed hope for a cultural shift during Reconstruction. Most poetically, Sonntag's painting offered a return to the memory of Harpers Ferry as a capstone of early American liberty.

⁶⁵ William Louis Sonntag's conception of sunset as a positive, progressive emblem was largely influenced by his relationship with patron Elias Lyman Magoon. These ideas are extensively discussed in the preceding chapter of this thesis.

⁶⁶ --"National Academy of Design; South Room," *The New York Times* (13 June 1865).

CHAPTER 3

PRO PATRIA: THE RECEPTION OF WILLIAM LOUIS SONNTAG'S LANDSCAPES DURING THE CIVIL WAR

Although William Louis Sonntag seldom appears in texts on American landscape painting, evidence suggests that the artist and his works held acclaim in their time. In 1864, Charles Brandon Boynton, a Cincinnati bibliophile and art lover, authored a catalog, *History of the Great Western Sanitary Fair*, and included descriptions of Sonntag's works within it. In the catalog, Boynton opined that two of Sonntag's earliest works, the oil paintings *Ancient Ruin* and *Landscape* from 1844, had been made by "one who has since become celebrated, and who was strongly influenced by their sale to persevere in the profession he now so much adorns."⁶⁷ The passage elucidates an important idea about Sonntag as an artist: not only had he ascended to notoriety and critical success by the end of the Civil War, but that the reception and subsequent sale of his early works bore extensive influence on how he would paint later in his career.

The importance of reception to Sonntag is also provocatively aligned with the analysis of the some fifty paintings of Virginia that the artist made during his career. Sonntag's unusually devoted interest in the Virginia landscape as a subject was likely prompted by several factors, reception being among them. Given that many of the Virginia landscapes were both painted and exhibited during the Civil War, their meaning

⁶⁷ Charles Brandon Boynton, *History of the Great Western Sanitary Fair* (Cincinnati : C.F. Vent & Co., 1864), 406.

was hinged to the viewer's ability to immediately relate the images and their subject to the contemporary social and political tumult. If Boynton's aforementioned quotation is applied to Sonntag's landscapes, the intentionality and significance of their reception requires analysis. This chapter examines the history of the reception of Sonntag's works during the American Civil War in order to develop an understanding of how the artist's painting was made *pro patria*, or for one's nation.

A simple examination of Sonntag's catalog raisonné reveals that many of the artist's works were exhibited in politically colored settings both during the Civil War and prior to its 1861 inception.⁶⁸ The United States Sanitary Commission and its local affiliates, which were located in cities of varying sizes across the country, produced what may have been the most discernibly partisan exhibitions of art in Civil War America. The Sanitary Commission was a Union organization from the day of its origin in June of 1861. It was originally proposed by the Women's Central Relief Association, an active Unionist group in New York, and established in an act of legislation by President Abraham Lincoln.⁶⁹

While the Sanitary Commission's initial purpose had been to supplement care for wounded Union soldiers, the mission rapidly evolved to favor development and fundraising for the Union war effort. In the interest of rapidly drumming up morale and

⁶⁸ Since the publication of Sonntag's catalog raisonne in 1980, several additional works by Sonntag have surfaced at auction, often from private collections. For a more complete list of Sonntag's works, see Nancy Dustin Wall Moure, *William Louis Sonntag: Artist of the Ideal* (Los Angeles : Goldfield Galleries, 1980).

⁶⁹ The most comprehensive history of the Sanitary Fairs remains the 1866 volume dedicated to the events by Charles Stille. For a thorough analysis of the development of the Fairs, see Charles Janeway Stille, *History of the United States Sanitary Commission, Being the General Report of its Work During the War of Rebellion* (Philadelphia : J.B. Lippincott & Company, 1866). For excellent analyses of the impact of the Sanitary Fairs on the Civil War North, see Linda C. Dowling, *Charles Eliot Norton: The Art of Reform in Nineteenth-Century America* (Lebanon, New Hampshire : University of New Hampshire Press, 2007); Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston, *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class* (New York : Psychology Press, 2001).

money for the military cause, the Sanitary Commission endorsed local communities creating their own Sanitary Fairs, which featured displays in agriculture, mechanics, music and art. Newsletters regarding the fundraising progress circulated between participating communities, which successfully added competition to the community projects. The local “networks of benevolence” quickly learned that the sale of donated fine art would contribute largely to their earnings for the cause, which reached an estimated total of \$2,750,000 by the close of the Civil War.⁷⁰ Consequently, the importance of the Art Gallery element of the exhibitions expanded between the first large-scale Sanitary Fair, held in Chicago in October 1863, and the time Sonntag’s works were exhibited at Cincinnati’s Great Western Sanitary Fair at the end of that year.⁷¹

Perhaps the earliest exhibition in which viewers examined Sonntag’s work in a politically inclined context took place in the Art Gallery of the Great Western Sanitary Fair. The exhibition was held in Sonntag’s hometown of Cincinnati in 1863 and was subsequently commemorated by Boynton’s aforementioned catalog in 1864.⁷² Several of Sonntag’s paintings, such as *Scene on the Susquehanna*, *Landscape* and *Ancient Ruins*, were sold at the Fair by their prominent owners.⁷³ The fact that the author of the

⁷⁰ Bledstein and Johnston, *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class*, 83.

⁷¹ The first large-scale Sanitary Fair was called the Northwestern Sanitary Fair and began on 27 October 1863. It closed on 7 November, 1863 after raising nearly \$100,000 for the Union war effort. The Great Western Sanitary Fair was open in Cincinnati from 21 December 1863 to 4 January 1864. Ibid.

⁷² An oversize poster at the Ohio Historical Society advertising the Great Western Sanitary Fair proclaims that the fair was “...in aid of the Cincinnati Branch, U.S. Sanitary Commission! For the benefit of Sick and Wounded Soldiers!” Item OVS 7113, “Great Western Sanitary Fair,” 1864. Oversize broadside. Ohio Historical Society archives.

⁷³ Charles Brandon Boynton listed Sonntag’s *Landscape* as number 10 in the Great Western Sanitary Fair. The artist’s painting *Ancient Ruin*, also titled *A Ruin*, was listed as number 11. *Scene on the Susquehanna* was listed as number 22. The former two paintings were listed in Boynton’s text without measurements or dates. Coupled with the fact that their general titles were often changed or mislabeled, the lack of information on size or date renders pinpointing these works in Moure’s catalog *raisonne* an exceedingly difficult task. *Scene on the Susquehanna* is labeled in Moure’s text as *On the Susquehanna*, but no date or

exhibition catalog avoided describing Sonntag's works in the text suggests that their content was likely innocuous and conventional. These would have clashed with many other surrounding works, meaning that the entirety of the exhibition was a more nuanced reflection of the Civil War in Northern visual culture.

At the Great Western Sanitary Fair, Sonntag's American landscapes were dispersed between several works of art that explicitly rendered Civil War subject matter in the tenor of Unionist patriotism. For example, fourteen of the one hundred twenty-six featured works of art were titled *War*. Boynton listed these works as both oil paintings and sketches while simultaneously providing a lengthy description of the group. According to the catalog, these oil sketches depicted Florence Nightengale tending the bedside of a stoic Union amputee, a dancing squad of uniformed soldiers, a Zouave mourning at the grave of a deceased comrade, and a dignified Union volunteer flattening a snake beneath his heel while firmly gripping the Union flag in his hand. In another, which Boynton calls an "allegorical sketch of considerable excellence," a Union soldier waves his flag while tarnishing a Confederate flag beneath his boot. At the close of his description, Boynton added that "the above sketches add very much to the attractions of the Gallery," reiterating their importance to his reader.⁷⁴

The Art Gallery of the Great Western Sanitary Fair was also lauded for disseminating hopeful ideas about the course of the nation during the Civil War. While many art objects at the Fair were devoted to the specific depiction of violent Civil War events, landscape paintings like Sonntag's whose messages were less evidently related to the conflict were also present. The two types worked in concert to comment on the war

measurements were listed. It is likely that if they survive, each of these works continues to reside within a private collection. See Boynton, *History of the Great Western Sanitary Fair*, 406-407.

⁷⁴ Boynton, *History of the Great Western Sanitary Fair*, 411-412.

by contextualizing American imagery within the trajectory of human history.⁷⁵ Boynton prefaced his chronicle of the objects exhibited at the Fair by suggesting that be it for offense or defense, the power of free Americans had “...never been so clearly seen, so triumphantly set forth, as in the progress of this war. From the beginning it has been regarded... as a war of the people.”⁷⁶ According to Boynton’s interpretation, freedom and progress were two concepts attached to both the act of supporting the Union and the experience of viewing art during the Civil War.

It is especially fitting that Emanuel Leutze (1816-1868), author of the now iconic 1851 painting *George Washington Crossing the Delaware*, received great attention at the Fair for his *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* of 1861 (fig. 11).⁷⁷ A trail of horse-drawn Conestoga wagons and fur-clad settlers wind through the center of the composition, which is abbreviated by several clusters of figures triumphantly summiting small peaks in the unforgiving Western wilderness. In the larger context of the Civil War-themed Fair, Leutze’s painting suggested that continuing westward per the tenets of Manifest Destiny would provide an uplifting transition after the end of the Civil War. In its hand-painted, illusionistic frame, Leutze used vignettes of the Magi and Moses Parting the Red Sea to place Manifest Destiny within a Christian narrative. These allegories conspicuously conveyed travel as a historic requirement for salvation, which would have been amplified by the consideration of Union efforts during the Civil War.

⁷⁵ Some thirty paintings out of the one hundred and twenty-six listed in the chapter of Boynton’s catalog devoted to the art at the 1863-64 Great Western Sanitary Fair indicate Civil War subject matter in their titles alone. Many more are likely to have commented on the events of the war through more metaphorical means. Boynton, *History of the Great Western Sanitary Fair*, 405-413.

⁷⁶ Boynton, *History of the Great Western Sanitary Fair*, ix.

⁷⁷ Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze (1816-1868), *Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way*, 1861. Oil on canvas. Bequest of Sara Carr Upton. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. See Ibid.

Similar ideas of hopeful progress were also readily present in *Progress of Civilization*, a series of four paintings Sonntag painted around 1847 and exhibited at the Fair in Cincinnati.⁷⁸ Unlike Sonntag's three other landscape paintings exhibited at the Fair in Cincinnati, Boynton took care to develop a description of the *Progress of Civilization* series in his catalog. The four paintings that make up *Progress of Civilization* became lost to the historical record at some point after 1865, but Boynton's documentation explains that Sonntag depicted the American landscape in his well-known "expressive" nature.⁷⁹ The first painting was said to show a landscape in a frightening, "dismal" state of nature; in the second, several Native Americans were shown fishing and basking in sunshine; the third picture showed the advancement of American pioneers—presumably westward—past clusters of log cabins; the fourth and final painting depicted a single, private home situated within what Boynton described as a suburban area, populated by several figures.⁸⁰

While Boynton's descriptions left a tremendous amount of information to be desired regarding the size, color, composition and tenor of the individual works, they included vocabulary that indicate Sonntag's incorporation of popular elements within

⁷⁸ According to Boynton's record, Sonntag's *Progress of Civilization* series was hung under entry number 118 at the Great Western Sanitary Fair. Nancy Dustin Wall Moure's *William Louis Sonntag: Artist of the Ideal* (1980) suggests that Boynton's volume includes the only descriptive passage on the now-lost series of paintings. Boynton provided no date for the series in his text, but Moure uncovered evidence that suggests Sonntag started the series before or during 1847. See Boynton, *Book of the Fair*, 412-413; Moure, *William Louis Sonntag: Artist of the Ideal*, 18.

⁷⁹ *Progress of Civilization* was first described in a letter between Benjamin McConkey and his friend, American landscape painter Thomas Cole, who had painted a well-known and likeminded series of landscape paintings, *The Course of Empire* (1834-36, New York Historical Society). McConkey was unimpressed with the series, writing that "Sontag (sic) is painting a series the Course of Civilization... start not reader—there are four pictures and will probably be done in four weeks." Baltimore Museum of Art, *Annual II: Studies on Thomas Cole, An American Romanticist*. Baltimore : Baltimore Museum of Art (1967), 39. For more information on Cole's *Course of Empire*, see Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* (Ithaca, NY : Cornell University Press, 1993); William H. Truettner and Alan Wallach (eds.), *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History* (New Haven, CT : Yale University Press, 1994).

⁸⁰ Ibid.

American landscape iconography. The dead tree limb and “dismal” landscape ascribed to the first painting suggested that it adhered to conventions of the sublime. Conversely, landscape elements in the series’ final painting were described as “palatial,” emblemizing a positive end to the human narrative. The exhibition catalog confirms that the fact that the series ended at a crescendo was not lost on its viewers. For those who saw it at the Fair as a complete series, *Progress of Civilization* functioned as a commentary on the horrors of the Civil War by way of implicating the cyclical nature of human failure and success. The context of the exhibition and its intentions to bolster support for the Union war effort also subsequently developed additional meaning in Sonntag’s series. A dynamic relationship existed between Sonntag’s work and the context in which it was exhibited.

After 1863, exhibition and sale of art at Sanitary Fairs continued at a tireless pace. Sonntag’s art retained value and continued to be included in the Fairs held outside his hometown. One of the largest Sanitary Fairs to have taken place in the Union during the Civil War was the Brooklyn and Long Island Sanitary Fair, held in February of 1864. Its proximity to the fine arts academies of metropolitan New York meant that the Fair’s art exhibition boasted works from highly acclaimed artists more easily than Sanitary Fairs in smaller cities had. A mere two weeks after the close of the Great Western Sanitary Fair in Cincinnati, organizers for the Brooklyn and Long Island Sanitary Fair mailed a circular to selected artists to request submissions for a compilation of fine oil sketches called *The Artist’s Album*. The call for submissions announced that, “As an effective means of

aiding this cause, the Committee will form a collection of sketches; and a work from your hand is respectfully solicited.”⁸¹ Sonntag received and responded to the letter.

The invitation sent to Sonntag placed the artist among about forty other accomplished American artists, including Eastman Johnson, Frederic Edwin Church, John LaFarge, Asher Brown Durand, Albert Bierstadt, Sanford Robinson Gifford, John Kensett and Thomas Moran, which implied that Sonntag’s work was considered to be of similar echelon in New York during the Civil War.⁸² It is especially important to recognize that at the Great Western Sanitary Fair, the owners of Sonntag’s works had been instrumental in having the paintings accepted for exhibition and sale. Conversely, at the Brooklyn and Long Island Fair, Sonntag had to submit an oil sketch himself, which marks intentionality in choosing the painting he submitted.

The timelines of Sonntag’s life and work coalesce around 1864, revealing that the artist continued to avidly create oil sketches and larger paintings of the Virginia landscape from his residences in New York and New Hampshire. According to Moure’s monograph, Sonntag spent 1863 and 1864 exhibiting paintings at the Brooklyn Art Association and the National Academy of Design. An examination of a checklist of Sonntag’s works reveals that many of the paintings he exhibited in New York in 1864 were paintings of Virginia he had made around the same time. This number included small oil paintings, *Sunset on Laurel Hill, Virginia* and *Little Mount Savage, Virginia*, which were exhibited at the Brooklyn Art Association in 1864. Another eminent

⁸¹ --, *History of the Brooklyn and Long Island Fair, February 22, 1864* (Brooklyn, New York : “The Union” Steam Presses, 1864), 61-62.

⁸² Ibid.

example was Sonntag's *Valley River, Virginia*, which the artist had painted and exhibited at the National Academy of Design in the same year.⁸³

Because Sonntag concentrated on painting and exhibiting Virginia landscapes around the same time, it is likely that the oil sketch he submitted for *The Artist's Album* at the Brooklyn and Long Island Sanitary Fair was also an image of Virginia. The more subtle allusions that Sonntag's Virginia landscapes characteristically made to regional divisions during the Civil War would have been highlighted by other examples present in *The Artist's Album* in 1864. Sarah Burns, historian of American art, has suggested that the oil sketch submitted to *The Artist's Album* by American painter Thomas Moran (1837-1926) was a rendition of his larger painting *Slave Hunt, Dismal Swamp, Virginia* (fig. 12), originally made in 1862.⁸⁴

In Moran's oil study, the hulking roots of massive, moss-covered trees and choking vines fan out behind two fugitive slaves who stand petrified in the murky water of Virginia's Great Dismal Swamp. Hunting dogs bound into the water after the slaves, who turn back to hear two approaching slave hunters at the far right background of the canvas. The autumnal coloring of the deciduous foliage also hearkens the death of plant life at the onset of winter and the slaves' impending danger. Like in many of Sonntag's

⁸³ Nancy Dustin Wall Moure's catalog of Sonntag's works reveals that in 1862, Sonntag had exhibited a painting called *Valley River, Western Virginia* at Brooklyn Art Association. It is tempting to believe that the two paintings express separate representations of Virginia and West Virginia landscapes in response to their 1861 separation. Unfortunately, the location of *Valley River, Western Virginia* is currently unknown, and the idea that the two paintings were executed in different years and exhibited separately lends little credence to this idea. Sonntag's *Valley River, Virginia* is discussed at length in the first chapter of this thesis. For more information, see Moure, *William Louis Sonntag: Artist of the Ideal*, 142.

⁸⁴ Burns' idea was published in 2004, but has been since confirmed by the Virginia Historical Society, which owns the sketch in question. An inscription written on a photograph of the sketch by Moran's late daughter denotes that the sketch was included in the "album collection" at the 1864 Sanitary Fair. The inscription refers to the *Artist's Album*, of which both sketches by Sonntag and Moran were a part. For more on Moran's *Slave Hunt*, see Sarah Burns, *Painting the Dark Side: Art and the Gothic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 2004), 137.

small sketches, the thick and wildly expressive application of colorful oil paint amplifies the sublimity of Moran's picture.⁸⁵

The significance of Sonntag's oil sketch of an American—presumably Virginian—landscape painted during the Civil War would have been amplified by surrounding images like Thomas Moran's *Slave Hunt*. Visitors to the Art Gallery at the Brooklyn and Long Island Sanitary Fair would have found it especially difficult not to interrelate the content and tenor of the oil sketches in *The Artist's Album*, which were displayed together on a walnut portfolio table or hung in groups on the walls.⁸⁶

The idea that Sonntag willingly donated an oil sketch upon formal request from a committee designed to provide funding to the Union war effort is equally provocative and novel to his present historiography.⁸⁷ The presence of Sonntag's painting at the Brooklyn and Long Island Sanitary Fair signifies that the artist consciously exhibited paintings under the pretense of supporting the anti-Confederate cause. As guests passed through the halls of the Art Galleries of Sanitary Fairs and examined the *Artist Album*, they surveyed contemporary American vision. Images of America's past, like Leutze's aforementioned painting, or images of the Civil War present emblemized by Sonntag's oil sketch conferred to form a cohesive representation of the American visual narrative.

⁸⁵ Moure has written extensively about Sonntag's perception in the nineteenth century. According to the historian, Sonntag's style was usually either applauded or disdained due to its "expressive" nature. Looseness with paint, stark palette and thick application are all easily evidenced *in esse* on the canvases of many of Sonntag's smaller works. An oil sketch like the one Sonntag submitted to *The Artist's Album* at the Brooklyn and Long Island Sanitary Fair would have subscribed to an even looser style. Moure, *William Louis Sonntag: Artist of the Ideal*, 36-37.

⁸⁶ For a complete list of works included at the Brooklyn and Long Island Sanitary Fair and additional information on their display at the exhibition, see: --, *History of the Brooklyn and Long Island Fair, February 22, 1864*, 60-66.

⁸⁷ Sonntag's personal contribution to the Brooklyn and Long Island Sanitary Fair is evidence of the artist's personal beliefs that went unexplored in Moure's 1980 monograph. Because so few of Sonntag's papers have disseminated into public record, present historiography devoted to the artist suggests that because he was raised and resided in the North, Sonntag was likely pro-Union and against the practice of slavery. Sonntag's political beliefs are explored at length in the first chapter of this thesis.

The association of Sonntag's painting with Sanitary Fair exhibitions suggests that his interpretation of American imagery assisted in shaping national identity during the Civil War.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most profound perspective on William Louis Sonntag's Virginia paintings is derived from considering the artist's active years. When Sonntag began working as a professional painter, the political uncertainties of Jacksonian America were in the process of giving way to the turbulence of the antebellum period. Sonntag painted relentlessly for the five decades that followed, spanning the Civil War from its inception to its end, Reconstruction and the rise of industrialism in the Gilded Age.

For those fifty years, Sonntag returned to painting the worn, aged mountains of Virginia. With each characteristic autumnal element or depiction of Virginia in a state of wilderness, Sonntag countered the cultural events of his present. It is even more provocative to consider that when Sonntag painted Virginia, he did so from memory. Consequently, I propose that the artist's paintings of Virginia be collectively read as traces of the artist's rendition of American memory, which consistently found its setting in the untamed Virginia landscape. As this thesis has shown, painting the Virginia landscape enabled Sonntag to comment on contemporary America while rooting it in its auspicious, wild beginnings.

Sonntag used sunsets inspired by thoughts of hopeful new beginnings to idealize the Virginia landscape as it was being contemporaneously marred by the Civil War. Depicting specific areas of Virginia like Harpers Ferry also enabled Sonntag to muse on the state as an early Federal symbol. Sonntag coupled America's earliest settled land

with the consistent state of wilderness, begging for the revision of Civil War American culture by suggesting a return to the common desire for development.

The idea that his paintings were also commonly featured in exhibitions like the Sanitary Fairs used to drum up funds to support the Union war effort also suggests that Sonntag's art expressed Sonntag's desire to protect nation from division. Sonntag's paintings of Virginia are thereby not only images of an idealized landscape, but are extensions of his desire for the regeneration of America from its earliest, oldest setting.

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FIGURES



Figure 1—William Louis Sonntag, *Sunset of Western Virginia*, 1859.



Figure 2—William Louis Sonntag, *Shenandoah Valley*, c. 1860.



Figure 3—William Louis Sonntag, *View of Harper's Ferry, Virginia*, 1864. Oil on canvas, 34 x 54 in. Private collection.



Figure 4—Thomas Doughty, *Harpers Ferry, Virginia*, 1825. Oil on canvas, 17 x 24 in.
Private collection.



Figure 5—Detail, William Louis Sonntag, *View of Harpers Ferry, Virginia*, 1864.



Figure 6—Detail, William Louis Sonntag, *View of Harpers Ferry, Virginia*, 1864.

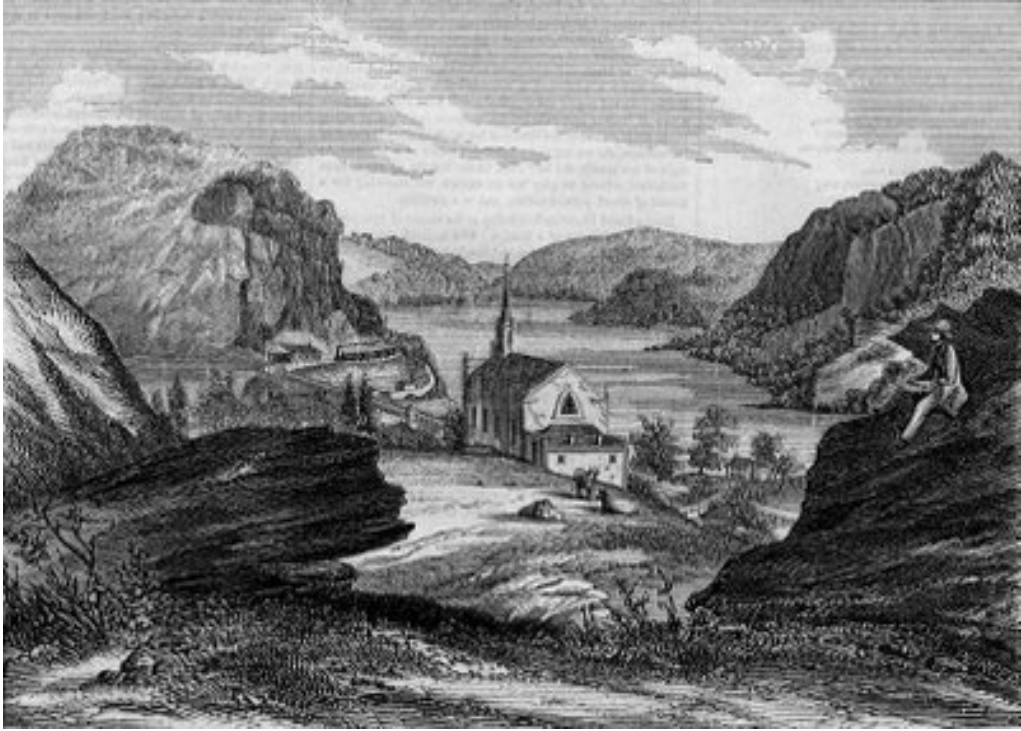


Figure 7—"Harper's Ferry, Virginia from Jefferson Rock," 1854. Engraving.



Figure 8—David Hunter Strother, “The Arraignment,” 1859. Engraving.



Figure 9—David Hunter Strother, “A Southern Planter Arming his Slaves to Resist Invasion,” 1859. Engraving.

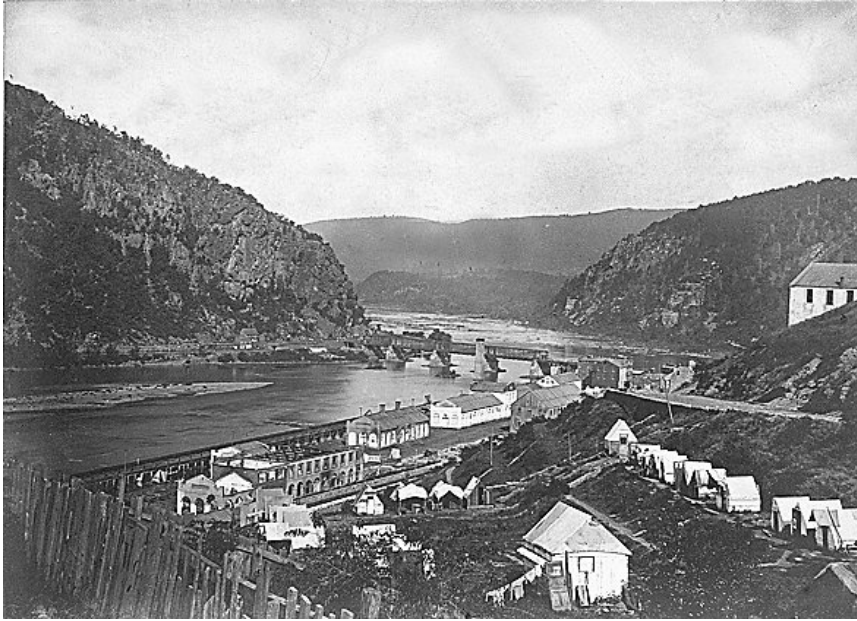


Figure 10—Alexander Gardner, *Harper's Ferry*, 1865. Photograph. In *Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War*, c. 1861-1865.



Figure 11—Emmanuel Gottlieb Leutze, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way*, 1861. Mural study, U.S. Capitol. Oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum.



Figure 12—Thomas Moran, *Slave Hunt, Great Dismal Swamp, Virginia*, 1862. Sketch for painting. Oil on board, approx. 6 ½ x 9 in. Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.