

Colebrook's Artist Colonies

It shouldn't come as a great surprise that Colebrook has hosted artists, but it is not generally known that during the twentieth century there were not one, but two distinct artist colonies within its borders.

While it is true that individual artists occasionally chose to paint in town, such as Frederick Remington in 1906, a fairly large number of artists congregated here for an extended period of time.

The first group we will deal with called Colebrook Center their headquarters. The studio was in a small barn on the property known locally as Rockwell Hall, across from the Congregational Church at 549 Colebrook Road. During the mid-nineteenth century, Rockwell descendant Ralph Emerson owned this property. The Emerson family was a strong supporter of the arts, and for many years encouraged talent to enjoy the beauties of the region. In 1915, a painter named Charles Warren Eaton met Mary Emerson Lathrop, who had recently inherited the house. Eaton stayed there while he painted around Colebrook. Eaton's favorite subjects were rugged landscape and mature forests, both of which abounded in town.

Two years later Eaton liked painting here so much that he was given permission to undertake the remodeling of the barn next to the house into a studio. He opened up the interior of the barn to two stories, adding a large window facing northwest, and built a fireplace. On the wall of the studio he wrote, "Studio built in July, 1917 and first occupied by Chas Warren Eaton Aug.-Sept. 1917."

Mary Lathrop seems to have set up an "artist in residence" schedule, which allotted the studio to one artist each summer. 1918 saw Wilfred Muir Evans, an obscure painter who worked in both Hartford and New York, unpack his easel and paints there, to be followed the next year by Eaton once again. During the winter, Eaton lived in Bloomfield, New Jersey, where he had artist friends who lived nearby. One of them, Thomas R. Manley, took the Colebrook studio in 1920. Manley is remembered best for his soft, impressionist scenes painted in northern New Jersey.

In 1921 Matilda Browne was in Colebrook. She had spent the previous ten years in Old Lyme, where she had established a reputation painting garden pictures. Colebrook was ideal for her, because the extensive gardens on the Lathrop property could be seen from the windows in the studio.

Eaton was back in residence from 1922 through 1926. After he left that year, Macowin Tuttle, a Paris-trained painter, finished out the year and also returned in 1932 and again in 1933. Artist visits lasted until the onset of the Second World War, after which the studio remained empty.

The second group in Colebrook was centered on the John N. Brown farm on Sandy Brook. (Today this house still stands at 368 Sandy Brook Road.) Brown, a retired musician who had also been a music publisher, had built cabins on his property to be used by artists during the summer. These cabins did not survive past the mid twentieth century.

Among the artists who stayed there were five illustrators; all of whom were from Leonia, New Jersey – Peter Newell; Charles Shepard Chapman; Enos Benjamin Comstock; Frank Street and Howard McCormick. Leonia had an artist's colony composed entirely of illustrators. The Harvey T. Dunn School of Illustration was there

and the town was close to New York publishers. Chapman taught at the school, and it is possible that through his friendship with Eaton these artists learned about Colebrook and Brown. It is also possible that Peter Newell, who had been summering at Riverton for some time, spread the word.

Chapman was a National Academician whose painting career was more important than his career as an illustrator. He was primarily a landscape painter, and the rough terrain around Colebrook suited him. Few annual exhibitions at the National Academy took place without a Chapman landscape from this area. Three titles of his works painted here are: "The Deserted Cabin" (1919), "The Riverton Mill" (1929) and "Sandy Brook in Winter" (1933).

Most illustrators, who spent their careers working against deadlines, treasured opportunities to get away to paint for themselves. In Colebrook, Enos Comstock, Peter Newell and the others were able to turn to easel painting, if only for the summer.

The Brown property, as opposed to the Lathrop property, had more of the feel of an artist's colony, because there were numerous artists in residence at one time. Nevertheless, the Lathrop house was directly across the road from the Colebrook Store. This store was the heart of the community, and as such was a meeting place for both year around residents and the summer visitors. It is therefore almost a certainty that both colonies knew each other and interacted.

Brown's colony closed by around 1940, and since that time there has not been further attempts at creating another artist colony in Colebrook.

The information contained within this article is from "Artists of the Litchfield Hills" by Robert Michael Austin, published in 2003. It was a gift from Mr. & Mrs. Thomas Lawton, long time members of the Historical Society, and has been added to our library.