

# Dublin Historical Society

Dublin, New Hampshire 03444 • Founded 1920

Newsletter No. 68 – November 2006



Abbott H. Thayer. This unfinished self-portrait was discovered by Clint and Joan Yeomans in their house on Lake Road – the house now owned by Blake and Nina Anderson.

Photograph from the collection of the Dublin Historical Society.

## 2007 HISTORICAL SOCIETY CALENDAR

The 2007 calendar is now available at the Town Clerk's Office, the Archives, Carr's Store and Dublin General Store.

This year's theme is "Lost Dublin", showing houses that no longer exist, such as "High Wells" and the Bond/Robbe house.

The cost is still only \$10.00 and proceeds benefit the Society's projects. Remember, Christmas is coming and the calendars make excellent presents.

## ABBOTT THAYER

*This article is adapted from a talk by Richard S. Meryman, Jr. at the Dublin Public Library on June 21, 2006, under the auspices of the Friends of the Library.*

Abbott Thayer is probably the best-remembered of Dublin's artists. His early work, like that of many of his contemporaries, consisted mainly of commissioned portraits of wealthy patrons, and he was considered by many to be one of the great portrait painters of his day. However, his present artistic reputation rests principally on a series of mythical and mystical winged figures, and of landscapes, mainly of Mt. Monadnock.

Abbott Handerson Thayer, born in Boston in 1849, grew up in Keene as the son of a horse-and-buggy family doctor. In the late 1880s, after study in France and a spell in New York, Thayer returned to Keene for summers, where he painted and gave painting lessons. One of his students was Mary Amory Greene, stepdaughter of Mrs. John Singleton Copley Greene.

Mrs. John S. C. Greene had plenty of money. In 1872 she built one of Dublin's first summer cottages on the Old Harrisville Road. Ten years later she bought the Phillips farm, comprising most of the south side of Dublin Lake, and she parceled out acreage among relatives and Boston intellectuals. One parcel, near what I still think of as the Grenville Clark house, she gave to her aspiring artist stepdaughter, Mary Amory Greene.

Young Mary Amory traveled to Keene by train from Harrisville for her art lessons with Abbott Thayer. Thayer was a needy genius, catnip to the protective instincts of some women. Mary Amory became one of

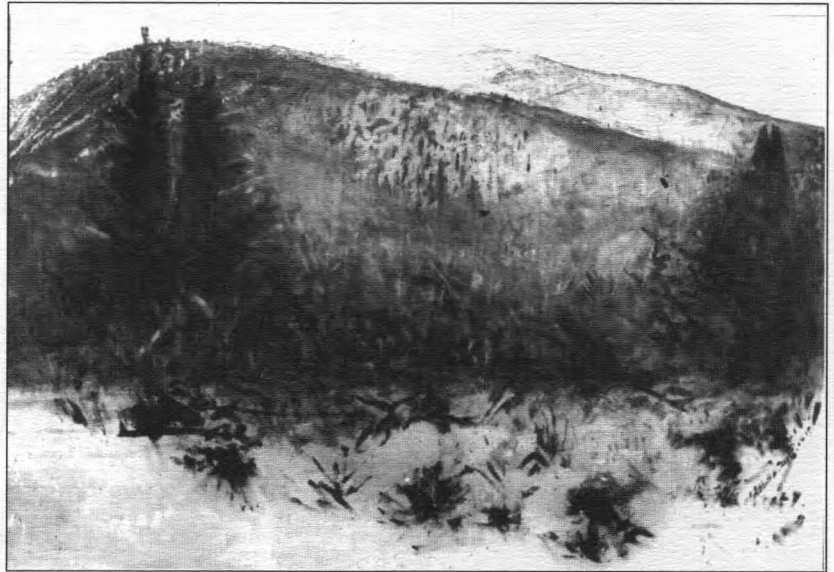
Thayer's devoted acolytes, even following her mentor to New York and becoming an informal secretary. In 1888 she presented Thayer with three of her Dublin acres and built him a summer house and studio on the land where Rosemary James lives today. Now Mary Amory had her teacher next door.

Another devoted acolyte was Emmaline Beach, a tiny sprite of a woman with reddish gold hair. When Thayer's first wife, Kate, was diagnosed with melancholia and banished to a sanatorium, he was left to care for their three children, Mary, Gerald and Gladys. The gentle, enduringly saintly – and efficient – Emma took over the household. Thayer called her his fairy godmother. When Kate died of a lung infection in 1891, Emma and Thayer were married.

Abbott Thayer required saints. He was an Olympic class eccentric. He was, he admitted, a "jumper from extreme to extreme", a condition we would now call bi-polar and which he described as "the Abbott pendu-

lum." There were exhilarated highs of emotions and messianic convictions. At times of "allwellity" he was his essential self – a man of ingratiating charm, grace and generosity. He presided over a house that was a cocoon of culture, filled with music, literature read aloud, discourses on art, philosophy and the secrets of the natural world.

While he painted, he often whistled Beethoven. At other times he played the violin given him by George deForest Brush. Brush and Thayer had been friends since their art school days in New York and Paris. Brush moved to Dublin to be near Thayer and the two families were close companions, snow-shoeing and ice skating in the winter, and enjoying long fireside evenings passed in abstruse discussion of philosophy and literature. Both families educated their children at home, rather than corrupt the purity of youth with the confinement of formal education.



*This view of Monadnock – one of several painted by Thayer from his studio – is reproduced from a glass magic lantern slide.*  
Collection of the Dublin Historical Society; gift of Richard S. Meryman, Jr.

### THAYER THE ARTIST

Thayer never went to church, believing that formal religion smacked of "hypocrisy and narrowness." Central to his work was Emersonian Transcendentalism, which taught that God permeates nature. He settled in Dublin in part because of "the wild grandeur" of Monadnock which to him loomed up like a sacred totem, "a natural cloister" – and he painted it as such. Art for him was "a no-man's land of immortal beauty where every step leads to God."

His artistic mission was "unsullied purity; spiritual truth" – pictures of "highest human soul beauty." This crystallized in 1887 in a winged portrait of his 11 year old Mary, painted during a summer in Keene. Virginal girls with wings became a theme of sorts. To him they were the "infinite beauty of angelic woman." But not angels *per se*. Daughter Gladys said that her father added wings to his beautiful subjects to make each "a creature of all time."

Thayer's standards were impossibly high and he was forever doomed to fall short. His jumbled studio was like a storage attic filled with works in progress. He never felt his paintings were finished. Once at the Harrisville station

he uncrate a painting waiting to be shipped to a purchaser and reworked it by lantern light.

He believed that his act of painting was dictation from God. In the times when inspired creativity flagged, when God went away for other chores, Thayer kept working, but felt that he ruined what he called the God given passages. In 1906 he hired my father, Richard Meryman, Sr., to copy and preserve those passages. Often several versions of the same picture were carried forward simultaneously, with Thayer working on each until he settled on one of them as the finished painting.

For young artists like my father and Alexander James who were mentored by Thayer, his high octane, soul-expanding mind made him a mesmerizing teacher. The artist William Lathrop said, "You knew his heart ached with love for the thing he painted and one's heart aches with love for the lover." My father was a devoted acolyte and returning year after year, and becoming a member of the extended family.

The drama in Thayer's works lies in the tremendous intensity of his emotions. He was a thicket of peculiarities. His bipolar lows several times landed him in sanitariums. In his depressions he suffered "a sick disgust with myself." He experienced "oceans of hypochondria." Health was always a topic – complaints of sleeplessness, anxieties, exhaustion, headaches, bad eyes, petty illnesses. Tuberculosis was rife in those days and the accepted treatment was fresh mountain air. As a precaution, the whole family, winter and summer, slept in lean-tos in the woods. Even in winter windows were left open. Thayer started each winter in a pair of long johns. As the seasons warmed, he cut off sections, till by summer they were shorts.

The house had been built solely for summer, so it had no interior sheathing and no insulation. It was heated in

## The Society's Annual Mid-Winter Potluck Supper

Friday, February 23, 2007  
at 6:30 p.m.

in the Vestry of the  
Community Church  
(Snow date: March 2)





the winter with fireplaces and wood stoves. By the time meals traveled from the kitchen to the dining table, the food was usually cold. For years the only running water was from a hand pump in the kitchen. There was no electricity and only an outdoor privy. He believed that everything modern broke the bond between man and nature.

His daughter Gladys described her home as "something of a camp", but for all Thayer's asceticism, the family always had a housekeeper/cook, one in particular whose beautiful daughter posed for several paintings.

From his boyhood in Keene, Thayer was fascinated by the natural world, an obsession later intensified by his Transcendentalism. Animals roamed the house at will – owls, rabbits, woodchucks, two prairie dogs named Napoleon and Josephine and a crow named Satan. A pet spider monkey was discovered brushing its teeth with Emma's toothbrush.

Thayer painted in the morning. In the afternoon, while his assistants – "the boys" – copied the morning's work, he immersed himself in nature, roaming the countryside or paddling his canoe on Dublin Lake. He was a respected ornithologist. With his son Gerald he made extensive bird collecting trips, amassing a huge collection of skins – 1,500 by 1905. Thayer could skin a small bird in the dark.

#### SAVING MONADNOCK

Thayer constantly prowled Monadnock and its

"... virgin forest where time alone has left his traces, where his mark is on every stage of growth, from mosscovered soil through tiny saplings to the perfect tree to the solemn skeleton that faces a few winters' storms before crashing down to lie still at last and begin the gentle change through all the beautiful mossy stages back to mother earth."

The summit had for him "the mysterious exaltation of mere height, and with it the inexpressible experience of SILENCE coupled with light and sight."

In 1910, walking the eastern ridge of Monadnock just off the Pumpelly Trail, Thayer discovered a sign announcing, "PRIVATE WAY / NO PASSING." It had been nailed on a tree by order of a wealthy widow named Louise Amory. In partnership with her son-in-law, the Reverend George Weld, she had bought some 900 acres of the great bowl of Monadnock.

For Thayer the sign, plus the road and two houses Amory had built high up the mountain, were a blasphemy to its "primeval, wild nature purity." He feared that

"... now, electricity with motors etc., backed by money, has swept away the old comfortable guarantee of the impracticability of occupying the high slopes of the mountain. Villas, villas, villas will insidiously creep up along those roads that these people have already built."

He vowed that "those spruces, after all the centuries of hermit and olive backed thrush voices, shall not know the Victor talking machine if I can stop it." And stop it he did. He admonished Louise and Weld:

"You might as well write your names across the face of the Birth of Venus or the Sistine Madonna because you had bought it for \$200,000, as write with your road across the upraised face of the until now shrine of many pilgrims."

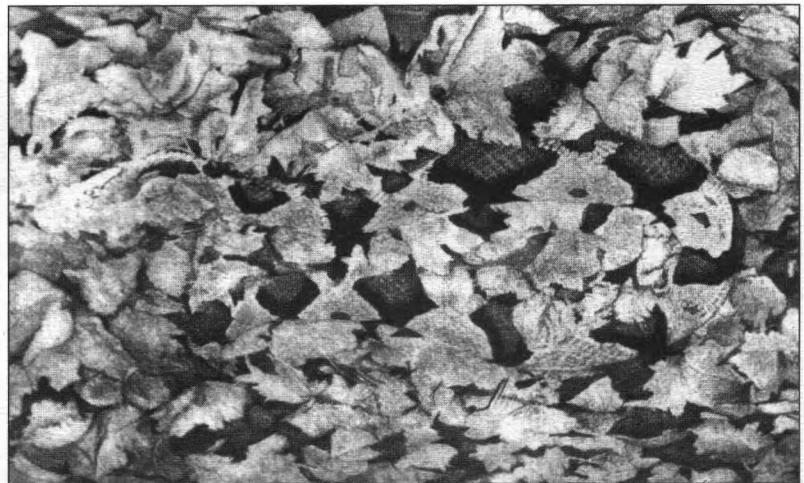
Louise Amory was a woman of intellect and steely whims and did not take kindly to such lecturing. But Abbott and Gerald Thayer did not stop at lectures. They mapped the lots in question, traced their history, consulted legal authorities, and enlisted the help of the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests. Concluding that those wild mountain ledges were still owned by the descendants of the original Masonian Proprietors, the Society located 89 of the heirs, scattered as far away as England and Mexico. A court ruled in favor of the Society. So the pristine, safeguarded Monadnock of today is largely the legacy of Abbott Thayer's prodigious passion.

#### THE ORIGINS OF CAMOUFLAGE

His worship of nature led him to another passion that he called "his second child" and rivaled his painting. It was concealing coloration – how nature hides it denizens in plain sight. He once wrote:

"... for four years this set of discoveries my poor brain has been vexed with – have kept me at work hours almost every night with pencil and pad under my pillow, and this has kept me drawn off so that I never filled up to the point of running out of the painting faucet".

In 1909 *Concealing Coloration in the Animal Kingdom* was



Abbott H. Thayer and Rockwell Kent. *Copperhead Snake on Dead Leaves*. This picture, which appears in Gerald Thayer's book, *Concealing Coloration in the Animal Kingdom*, is here reproduced from one of a group of glass magic lantern slides.

Collection of the Dublin Historical Society; gift of Richard S. Meryman, Jr.

published, written by Abbott and Gerald and with illustrations painted by Thayer, Meryman, and another acolyte, Rockwell Kent. Thayer argued that birds, mammals, insects, reptiles are concealed from prey and predators by eliminating all contrast with the background. This is accomplished by blending – mimicking the background – and by “dazzle” – strong, arbitrary color markings which disrupt the creature’s contours, thus erasing outline, shape and identity. He also postulated the now widely accepted theory of “countershading.” He explained that “animals are painted by Nature darkest on those parts which tend to be most lighted by the sky’s light, and vice versa.” Wiping out the gradations of light and shade that give shape, nature flattens an opaque animal and reduces it to a blank space.

World War I redirected Thayer’s crusade for concealment coloration. In 1916, powered by “future Kaiser fear,” he virtually stopped painting and focused his fanatical energy on convincing the Allies that the same principles that made animals invisible to predators could be used to conceal troops and their weapons. He said that if Navy ships were painted white, they would blend with the sky and be invisible at night. The proof, he insisted, was the iceberg struck by the Titanic.

The French read the Thayers’ book and adapted its principles to conceal trains, gun emplacements, vehicles, even horses. They named the technique *camouflage*, after a small exploding mine that threw up gas and smoke to conceal troop movements. The Germans studied his book to help them conceal battleships. So Abbott Thayer is the father of the dazzle pattern that is now universal in mili-

tary clothing. The brainchild of this worshiper of virgin purity now bedecks not only soldiers, but civilian T-shirts, bikinis, handbags, slacks, etc., etc.

Sparked in part by Thayer’s cousin, the muralist Barry Faulkner from Keene, the American army formed a most unmilitary Camouflage Corps, which was headed by Augustus Saint Gauden’s son, Homer, and included Faulkner and Richard Meryman. But Thayer’s ship camouflage schemes were ignored, though he rained frantic letters of explanation on the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Franklin D. Roosevelt.

After the war, Thayer enjoyed a period of relative peace. He returned to his fervor for Monadnock, painting “Monadnock Angel”, an angel with arms extended, protecting the mountain. But his health had been compromised. He suffered a series of heart attacks, the last of which killed him on May 29, 1921, at age 72.

Gerald Thayer, barefooted, carried Thayer’s ashes to the heights of the Pumpelly trail just before sunset. As he afterwards wrote,

“In this gay solemnness and translucent beauty were given forever back to wind and sun and stars the scanty mortal remains of our artist, father, friend. It will be proper and just for any of us so desiring to regard Monadnock, the mountain, as in a very real sense his monument.”

On hearing of Thayer’s death, John Singer Sargent said, “Too bad he’s gone. He was the best of them.”

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## RECENT ACCESSIONS AT THE ARCHIVES

We have recently been given by their respective boards of directors the records of two organizations: **Dark Pond, Inc.**, founded in 1965 as Dublin Associates, Inc., and **The Dublin Community Foundation**, founded in 1966.

This brings to eight the number of currently active organizations whose records we hold and administer. The others, with the dates of their inception, are:

- Emmanuel Church** (1874 - )
- The Dublin Historical Society** (1920 - )
- The Dublin Riding and Walking Club** (1920 - )
- The Dublin Women’s Community Club** (1920 - )
- The Garden Club of Dublin** (1928 - )
- Monadnock Eastern Slope Association** (1980 - )

In addition, we administer, but do not own, the records of **The Dublin Community Church** and its predecessors, dating back to 1771.

In organizing, cataloguing, indexing and storing these institutional records we perform a service, not only for posterity, but for the current memberships of these organizations. Officers and directors make frequent use of them, and are able to find what they want with a minimum of effort,

in contrast to the days when institutional records were scattered among various people’s houses.

## OTHER ACQUISITIONS

**Elizabeth Pool** has let us copy more pictures from Pool family albums. **Tom and Anne Blodgett** have allowed us to make copies of a number of photographs of the Catlin, Allen, Blagden and Blodgett families. Thanks to modern scanning technology we are able to copy photographs without removing them from albums and frames.

**Jessie Hale Holding** has given us some papers relating to her great-grandfather, Joseph Lindon Smith, and **Nancy Lehmann Haynes** has donated both records and artifacts found in her late parents’ house.

Our grateful thanks also to Anne Anable, Justine Auchincloss, Phil & Nancy Cayford, Hal Close, Fred & Jean Leventhal, Sharron Monaghan, Will Morgan and Tom Vanderbilt.

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## C R E D I T S

This issue of the Dublin Historical Society  
Newsletter was edited by John Harris.

Design & layout by Heidi Thomas  
of Little House Graphics.