

John S. Jameson (1842–1864)

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The Civil War era marked the apogee of the New York–based Hudson River School of landscape painters. On the eve of the conflict, in 1859, Frederic E. Church mounted the most significant art event of the time in America, the exhibition of his monumental *Heart of the Andes* as a pay-admission showpiece at the Studio Building on Tenth Street, New York’s new purpose-built artist work place and residence, where the most prominent tenants then were landscape painters. Among them was Albert Bierstadt, who aimed to rival Church with his own panoramas of western American scenery, the first major example (1863) of which he subtitled with the name of a fallen Union general, Frederick W. Lander. With Church and Bierstadt at the forefront of a landscape movement prompted decades earlier by Church’s teacher, Thomas Cole, and husbanded after Cole’s death by his contemporary Asher B. Durand, Cole’s followers found success and cultivated it through a time when the political integrity and security of the United States had never been more challenged.¹

It may well be that many of the landscape painters regarded their enterprise as a patriotic service—Church, with occasional pictorial allegories such as *Our Banner in the Sky*, at times surely did. But for most of the painters, both their pursuit and, perhaps, their age and social station, precluded actual military service. By the war’s start in 1861, most of them were well into their thirties, even forties; their artistic careers were just blossoming, and their community in lower Manhattan, at the National Academy of Design, the Century Club, the Studio

Building, and other nearby ateliers, was solid and rewarding. Enlistment, therefore, was exceptional: at war's outbreak, both Sanford R. Gifford and Jervis McEntee, Studio Building neighbors, good friends, and sketching companions, joined New York regiments headed for Washington, D.C., and Virginia, but McEntee's service ended after three months, Gifford's after three consecutive summer terms.²



The only known aspiring New York landscape painter who saw combat—and paid with his life—was the young John S. Jameson (1842–1864; fig. 1), a native of Hartford, Connecticut.³ Hartford, of course, was also the hometown of Church, and the older artist evidently became an instrument of Jameson's brief emergence as an artist.

Fig. 1. *John S. Jameson*, c. 1860, Rockwood & Co., photographers, Broadway, New York, OL.1986.235, Olana State Historic Site

Introduced to the piano by his parents—his father was organist, his mother a singer, at the Third Congregational Church led by the renowned Rev. Horace Bushnell in Hartford—Jameson in 1853 moved with his family to New York City, where his father became organist at the Church of the Puritans in Union Square. In New York, Jameson continued his keyboard training with Henry W. Greatorex, Louis Moreau Gottschalk, and especially William Mason. His progress must have been rapid, for

when Jameson's father died in 1859, James succeeded him in his role at the church, at least for a time.

Concurrently, however, Jameson had been prospecting a future in the fine arts. About 1854, while still attending grammar school on Thirteenth Street, Jameson made a chalk drawing of his grandmother, which, reportedly, "was so lifelike that it attracted the notice of several Artists, especially of Mr. Frederick [sic] E. Church, who became, subsequently, his warm friend and patron."⁴ By 1858-59 Jameson had enrolled in the antique drawing classes at the National Academy of Design and, reportedly, at least once visited Church in his Tenth Street studio while the older artist was at work on *The Heart of the Andes* (1859; The Metropolitan Museum of Art). Jameson's then music teacher, the pianist and composer Mason, had accompanied him to Church's rooms and was asked by the painter whether he thought the youth should pursue music or fine arts. "My answer," Mason recalled, "was that I was not competent to judge of [Jameson's] ability as a painter, but it seemed to me that I had never met with a finer musical talent. Mr. Church expressed a nearly similar opinion regarding his talent for painting."⁵

The dialogue between the two older men reflects a conflict that may have contributed to Jameson's ultimate enlistment in the army in January 1864. Not long after his visit with Church in the Studio Building, Jameson began exhibiting landscape paintings, first, in 1860, at the Artists' Fund Society, a group formed in 1859 to raise funds for the families of deceased artists' families, then at the National Academy of Design, as well as at a few out-of-town venues. Reportedly sojourning annually in the Catskills, Adirondacks, and New England, he continued painting and

exhibiting until late 1863.⁶ But the available testimony of Jameson's life indicates that he also kept apace with his music, not only at the Puritan Church after his father's death but, according to the diarist George Templeton Strong, in public performances in venues such as the Palace Gardens on Fourteenth Street and Dodworth's Hall on Broadway.⁷ Small wonder, then, that the young man reportedly felt "puzzled himself, as his friends were, to decide which [, music or fine art,] had upon him the superior claim."⁸

Jameson ultimately chose neither. Even at war's outbreak he felt the desire to enlist but heeded the warnings of friends and colleagues, who cited his youth, delicate health, and obligation to his widowed mother. But in 1863, referring to the war front, he reportedly told friends, "My heart is there and I can accomplish nothing here."⁹ Just after New Year's Day 1864, Jameson and his younger brother, Edward, "responded to the call of the President" and signed up in the First Connecticut Cavalry.¹⁰ Voicing his determination to "rough it with the boys," Private Jameson refused the chance to serve administratively in Hartford and departed for the regimental camp in Maryland, where he was promoted to Quarter Master Sergeant.¹¹ Two months later he camped with his brigade in the late winter mud of Stevensburg, Virginia, beginning the train of privations that ultimately contributed to his death. Even so, in the rare intervals of sunshine during that wet, chilly season, Jameson could admire "the very extensive and picturesque prospect, the view of the Blue Ridge [Mountains to the west] being singularly fine, as its peaks were then covered with snow."¹² Simultaneously, "by common consent," he led a camp glee club "with his clear baritone tenor."¹³

Before long, however, on scouting sorties with his cavalry unit, Jameson encountered Rebel forces at least thirteen times and once had his horse shot from under him.¹⁴ The action he saw culminated in the Wilson-Kautz Raid, beginning 22 June 1864, whose aim was to destroy railroad lines and depots between Lynchburg and Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy. In a measure successful, the raid nonetheless cost the brigade a third of its men, mostly through capture in the course of a protracted retreat.¹⁵ Among them was Jameson, reportedly seized by Rebel troops when he dismounted to fill his canteen in a stream, which his company had just crossed near Reams Station, Virginia. Stripped of his valuables (including much of his clothing) and, suffering from diarrhea, he was imprisoned in Richmond, then with other prisoners was loaded onto a boxcar and sent to the Confederate prison camp at Andersonville, Georgia. Prostrate with hunger and illness on arrival, Jameson was consigned to the camp hospital, where he succumbed on 1 August.¹⁶ As with most of the nearly 23,000 Union prisoners who did not survive Andersonville, Jameson's death went unreported until after war's end. Dorrence Atwater, a Union prisoner clerk at the camp who secretly recorded the names of the dead and had even marked many of their shallow graves—including Jameson's—smuggled out the data on his release following the Confederate surrender in April 1865. Exactly two years after Jameson's capture at Reams Station, his remains were reinterred in the family plot in Hartford.¹⁷

In 1867 Frederic Church, already stung by the loss in the war of his dearest friend, Theodore Winthrop, and also, just before war's end, by the deaths from diphtheria of his first two children, and most recently by the death of his sister

Charlotte, wrote to Jameson's mother with a mixture of affection, esteem, and indignation that "no one [among the younger artists] has interested me so much as your son, or held out better grounded hopes of future higher excellence. . . . When I think of how such a pure, high-minded and talented youth was sacrificed to the rage of the wicked—I almost feel tempted to rejoice that the direct calamity has visited those regions of inhumanity."¹⁸ He was alluding to Georgia, site of Andersonville and of Union General William Sherman's destructive campaign to break the deep South's will to fight on. For the "sketch" (fig. 2) of her son's that Mrs. Jameson had sent him, Church thanked her, adding that it "will be one of the few things I expect always to have as fixtures for my home."¹⁹ Photographs from Church's time of the interior of his great house at Olana, his estate in Hudson, New York, show Jameson's picture on the wall.



Fig. 2. John S. Jameson, *Landscape*, c. 1860, oil on canvas, 6 x 9 inches (image size), OL.1980.1920, Olana State Historic Site

Jameson's eulogist, Theodore J. Holmes, the chaplain of his regiment, identifies just thirteen titles of paintings by the artist (he also cites unidentified "others").²⁰ Only eleven different titles are recorded among the works the artist exhibited at the National Academy of Design, the Artists' Fund Society, and the Young Men's Associations of Troy and Buffalo, New York.²¹ There are few correspondences among Holmes's titles and those in the exhibitions and perhaps fewer between any of the works identified historically and the six Jameson landscapes known today. Given his youth, divided interests, and the small number of titles cited in his own time, it seems unlikely that Jameson could have produced many more than twenty-five to thirty paintings, executed over a span of about four years (ca. 1860–1863). That quantity might still be sufficient to evaluate Jameson's progress and accomplishment over that period if a majority of the paintings were known, but most are not. Those that are suggest a talented if not prodigious applicant to the community of New York landscape painters, eager to essay a variety of light and even meteorological effects, but—whose development may be beyond a just measurement.



Fig. 3. John S. Jameson (1842-1864), *Mountain Landscape*, 1860, oil on canvas, 14 x 26 inches, Richard T. Sharp Collection



Fig. 4. John S. Jameson (1842-1864), *Saranac Lake*, 1861, oil on canvas, 26 x 14 inches (images size), Laura and David Grey Collection

Jameson's earliest known pictures, a *Mountain Lake* dated 1860 (fig. 3) and the "sketch" now simply called *Landscape* (fig. 2), which the artist's mother gave to Church in 1867 and is thought to date about the same time, prefigure the compositions of two more accomplished paintings, both dated the next year: the picture today called *Saranac Lake* (fig. 4) and the sunset or twilight over a creek (fig. 5) that may be identifiable with the *Twilight on Catskill Creek* cited by Holmes.²² *Saranac Lake* is a striking picture, offering a fresh, sunlit effect, perhaps precisely because of the summary articulation the young artist brings to the foreground foliage. Except in his last-known work, Jameson's delineation of foliage was always broad and painterly compared to the Hudson River School masters, but the high, abrupt contrasts of sunlight and shadow he managed in the pine and leaf trees at right look almost *plein-air* in origin, while the fleet of clouds transecting the mountaintops across the water suggest that Jameson never forgot the impression made on him by the same feature in Church's *Heart of the Andes*. Overall, however—

and especially given the Adirondacks setting and the bold imposition of foliated foreground at right—Jameson’s scene evokes the earlier Adirondacks oils of William Trost Richards, such as the *Autumn in the Adirondacks* (1857–58; private collection) or *In the Adirondacks* (1857; St. Louis Art Museum).

The influence of Church’s genius for sky and weather effects is detectable in Jameson’s twilight painting (fig. 5), dated the year after Church’s renowned *Twilight in the Wilderness* (1860; The Cleveland Museum of Art), but somewhat closer in spirit to the less dramatic domestic evening scenes of the mid-1850s. Its intense, focal yellow and orange at the tree line at right is adeptly graded into the pale green and cerulean sky above and complemented by the pale orange and deep violet clouds that seem to rise with the radiating light of the sunken sun. In a manner recalling Church’s *Twilight (Sunset)* of 1856 (Albany Institute of History and Art), Jameson gilds with muted orange the edges of the trees lining the creek banks; their forms are little more particularized than the clouds, yet the scene below conveys the lingering warmth and restful gloom of a retiring summer day.



Fig. 5. John S. Jameson (1842-1864), *untitled*, 1861, oil on canvas, 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 17 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches (image size), Private Collection



Fig. 6. John S. Jameson (1842-1864), *A Storm—Summer Afternoon*, 1862, oil on canvas, 18 ½ x 34 ¾ inches (image size), Richard T. Sharp Collection

Jameson's last pictures that have come to light are his largest and most ambitious. The earlier of them (fig. 6) is dated 1862 and is perhaps identifiable with *The Mill in the Storm* cited by Holmes in his list of the artist's paintings—as well as with *The Storm* exhibited in the 1862 National Academy exhibition. It continues and amplifies Jameson's explorations into piquant light and weather effects—if, for Jameson, with unprecedented stridency. Church's relatively new friend and Studio Building neighbor Martin Johnson Heade had ventured conspicuously into such subject matter just a few years earlier and continued his storm essays through the Civil War era. Though Jameson's mill iconography had surely been prefigured by Church's as early as the 1840s, the "rare and true" effect of Heade's black sky and water, and the eerie lunar-like light about to be extinguished on the terrain in his *Approaching Thunder Storm* (1859; The Metropolitan Museum of Art)—a painting

hailed by critics when shown at the National Academy of Design in 1860—are ably approximated in Jameson’s *Mill in a Storm*.²³ The young painter augments the sense of incipient violence with the tree boughs startled by the rising wind in the foreground. Yet Jameson’s figures (never his strong point, whether human or animal) share with Heade’s the same bland indifference to the imminent tempest. The incandescent cumuli peeking out from the upper-right corner are an adroit accent disclosing the beautiful summer day that was.

In some measure, the painting now called *Saranac Waters* (fig. 7), dated 1863, amplifies and refines the “mountain lake” composition of three years earlier. That is, the identical hill profiles overlooking the water preside in the background but are, in the later picture, reduced in scale to give precedence to the towering copse of trees just beyond the immediate foreground at left. I have not been able to examine this work firsthand, but what can be gathered from photographs suggests



Fig. 7. John S. Jameson (1842-1864), *Saranac Waters*, 1863, oil on canvas, 20 x 36 in., Private Collection

that it may be, among Jameson's few known works, his most fully accomplished product. Although the late afternoon (or early morning?) sunlight is as vividly rendered as the midday sunlight in the *Saranac Lake* of 1861 (fig. 4), the realization of individual forms looks more cogent and painstaking. A compelling feature of the foreground here is the eroded bluff at left, whose clayish red concentrates the more diffuse warmth of the mountains and island (or peninsula) in the distance at right.

Even as Jameson's remains still lay "in the loathsome fields of Andersonville" through 1865, the landscape painter John Frederick Kensett, then president of the Artists' Fund Society, professed to its membership that, "had his life been spared, the rare qualities of [Jameson's] mind—his exquisite taste and accomplishments, and fine promise of future excellence in his art, would have reflected honor upon this Society and upon the country of his birth."²⁴ The available evidence indicates that Jameson's eye and hand discernibly improved and that he could well have fulfilled Kensett's expectation. A musical colleague, the violinist Henry Appy, insisted equally that "as a musician and a pianist [Jameson] would certainly have become the praise of his country."²⁵ Could he have blossomed in both arts? Jameson himself was confused and, in Church's words, "no selfish ambition guided his hand."²⁶ National service finally compelled him; perhaps it would have clarified his future course. Instead, it abolished it, and his fate beggars speculation on what might have been.

¹ For the exhibition of *The Heart of the Andes*, see David C. Huntington, *The Landscapes of Frederic Edwin Church: Vision of an American Era* (New York: Braziller, 1966), pp. 5-9; Gerald L. Carr, "American Art in Great Britain:

The National Gallery Watercolor of *The Heart of the Andes*,” *Studies in the History of Art*, 12 (1982), pp. 83-84, 88-89, 95; Kevin J. Avery, *Church’s Great Picture, The Heart of the Andes*, exhibition catalogue, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, 1993), pp. 33-44.

² For the military experience of Gifford and his siblings, see most recently Diane Shewchuk, “‘All is excitement and anxiety here’: a New York Family’s Experience of the Civil War,” *The Hudson River Valley Review*, 27, no. 2 (spring 2011), pp. 27-48; see also Ila S. Weiss, *Poetic Landscape: The Art and Experience of Sanford R. Gifford* (Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press, 1987), pp. 26-27, 91-98; and Kevin J. Avery and Franklin Kelly, *Hudson River School Visions: The Landscapes of Sanford R. Gifford*, exhibition catalogue, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Art (New York, 2003), pp. 33, 158. For McEntee’s experience, see J. Gray Sweeney, *McEntee & Company*, exhibition catalogue, Beacon Hill Fine Art (New York, 1997), p. 8.

³ The chief contemporaneous source for Jameson’s life and art is Theodore J. Holmes, *A Memorial of John S. Jameson, Sergeant in the 1st Conn. Cavalry, Who Died at Andersonville, Ga.* (n.d.); Jameson was first treated in modern times by Patricia R. Everett, “John S. Jameson (1842-1864),” *American Art Journal*, 15, no. 2 (spring 1983), pp. 53-59; and *ibid.*, “Jameson Painting Found,” *American Art Journal*, 15, no. 4 (autumn 1983), pp. 82-83.

⁴ Holmes, pp. 3-4, 10 (quotation, p. 4); Everett, pp. 54-56.

⁵ William Mason to Theodore J. Holmes, Orange, N.J., 12 October 1867, quoted in Holmes, pp. 6-7, and in Everett, p. 57.

⁶ Everett, p. 57-58; Holmes, p. 10; James Yarnall and William H. Gerdtts, *The National Museum of American Art’s Index to American Art Exhibition Catalogues* (Boston G. K. Hall, 1986), 3, p. 1919. Maria Naylor, *The National Academy of Design’s Exhibition Record* (New York: Kennedy Galleries, 1973), p. 491.

⁷ Vera Brodsky Lawrence, *Strong on Music: The New York Music Scene in the Days of George Templeton Strong, Volume III: Repercussions, 1857-1862* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1999), pp. 297, 303-304, 446, 538. See especially p. 304: reviewing a chamber concert at an unspecified venue in New York, possibly at the Palace Gardens, Strong refers to a performance of Carl Reineke’s *Andante for Two Pianos*, opus 6, by “[William] Mason . . . and his brilliant pupil [James] Jameson.” I am most grateful to Ida Brier, Librarian/Archivist at the Olana State Historic Site, Hudson, New York, for this reference.

⁸ Holmes, p. 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* The eulogist’s words quoted in the text suggest the possibility that the Jameson brothers would have been drafted had they not reportedly volunteered. Both would have been obliged by the Lincoln

administration's recent (March 1863) Enrollment Act for Conscription to register for the draft in their home state of Connecticut.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 11-12, quoted in Everett, p. 58.

¹² Ibid., p. 13.

¹³ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 13-17.

¹⁵ Mark Mayo Boatner, *The Civil War Dictionary* (New York: David McKay Company, 1988), pp. 931-932; Edward G. Longacre, *Lincoln's Cavalrymen* (Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 2000), pp. 287-293.

¹⁶ Holmes, pp. 20-25; Everett, p. 59.

¹⁷ Holmes, pp. 25-26; Everett, p. 59.

¹⁸ Church to Mrs. John Jameson, Hudson, N.Y., 24 April 1867, quoted in Holmes, p. 5.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Holmes's list (p. 10) is as follows:

Grain Field; The Mill in the Storm; Hanging Hills; Old Homestead; scenes in Meriden, Conn. [more than one painting?]; After a Shower; Moon rise at Sun set; Twilight on Catskill Creek; Artists' Camp on [sic?] the Catskills; Battinkill Creek; Saranac Waters; Sun set on Big Tupper Lake.
 ["worthy of mention among the last of his works":] *Adirondack Scenery; Meriden from Mount Lamentation*

²¹ Jameson paintings exhibited at the National Academy of Design:

1861.

300. *Sketch from Nature*. Chas. Taylor.

348. *Evening*. For sale.

368. *Sunset*. Henry Appy.

382. *After a Shower*. J. E. Lauer

1862.

61. *A Storm*. For sale.

432. *Summer Afternoon*. For sale.

470. *On the Catskill Creek*. For sale.

Jameson paintings exhibited at the Artists' Fund Society:

1860. 89. *The Grain Field*.

1862. 42. *Landscape*.

1863. 17. *In the Adirondacks*.

1865. 208. *Landscape*.

228. *Sunset*.

Jameson Paintings at Young Men's Association, Troy, New York:

1861. 213. *The Grain Field*.

Jameson Paintings exhibited at the Young Men's Association, Buffalo:

1861. 8. *The Grain Field*. 120.00

160. *Mill Pond*. 25.00

194. *Catskill Creek*. 40.00

²² Holmes, p. 10. In 1862, Jameson exhibited *On the Catskill Creek* (no. 470) at the National Academy of Design.

²³ Of Heade's *Approaching Thunder Storm*, the critic of the *Home Journal* (National Academy of Design, Fourth Gallery," 5 May 1860, p. 2) said: "The pale foreground, the black water, the dread feeling in the coming storm, and the homely and careless fishermen—are all simply rendered, and present an effect that is rare and true."

The review is excerpted in Sarah Cash, *Ominous Hush: The Thunderstorm Paintings of Martin Johnson Heade*, exhibition catalogue, Amon Carter Museum (Fort Worth, Texas, 1994), p. 73.

²⁴ *The Sixth Annual Report of the Artists' Fund Society, 1865-66* (New York, 1866), pp. 10-11, quoted in Holmes, p. 9.

²⁵ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁶ Church to Mrs. Jameson, 24 April 1867, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 5.