

UPSTATE

New York

Towns That We Love

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CONTENTS

Introduction

v

Greenwich

1

Schuylerville

17

Saratoga Springs

29

Easton

41

Salem

51

Cambridge

61

Day Trips

68

Conclusion

79

Acknowledgments

79

Bibliography

81

Index

83

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



INTRODUCTION

Town That I Love

The first time you climb Thunder Mountain,
You feel like a sparrow in the sky,
Above the treetops, above the steeples, way up
high.

You see the houses of the people,
Always smiling, always kind,
And the sun's light on the river, as it winds...

And like the water always flowing,
The paths we take may lead us far away,
But never too far from knowing,
We all can come home again someday.
Every time I climb Thunder Mountain,
And look at the world from above,
My heart is like that little sparrow,
Looking down on the town that I love.

Lyrics by songwriter, Bob Warren ©2004

Town That I Love

*2005; gouache on canvas;
30 x 24 in.*

We launched our canoe into the Battenkill River from Rock Street, just above the dam. Looking up, we could see the Baptist and Methodist church steeples in the distance, rising above the town. It was July, and the air was steamy with humidity and filled with anticipation. Viewing this scene firsthand, one is struck by what a wonderful place this would be to live in.

The inspiration for this book is our love for the place where Elizabeth grew up. This collection of paintings is a celebration of the hills, valleys, rivers, history, and architecture of the region around Greenwich, New York. Elizabeth painted the pictures; I wrote the text. The beauty of the countryside speaks for itself, but the friendliness of the people is something that needs to be experienced. As a newcomer to these parts, I feel particularly blessed to have been welcomed into the circle of Elizabeth's friends and family. Bob Warren says that when he interviewed the local school children before writing the songs for *Greenwich: The Musical*, they all told him that their experience of the people is that they are kind and cheerful. That has certainly been my experience as well.

The lyrics to the song "The Town That I Love," reproduced by Bob's kind permission, are especially poignant for Elizabeth and me. Bob Warren and his son sang it at the funeral of Elizabeth's father, Bob Barber.

Dillon's Hill, dubbed "Thunder Mountain" by Bob Barber and his friend John Friday, is on the Barber farm just east of the village. Many parts that were open field and pasture when Elizabeth was a child have since grown up with trees, but the mountain still affords a serene view of the valley of the Battenkill, its houses, and farms. For many years, Elizabeth's father opened the property to the children's outdoor program and shared with them his store of woodlore and camping skills. At eighty, he could climb the trail to the top of the hill with the easy step of the seasoned outdoorsman.

Three years ago, he was diagnosed with advanced tongue cancer. He had a few months to prepare for his death, and one day he remarked in his nasal, up-country voice, "I guess I'm about to find out what it's like on the other side." I said, "I hear it's pretty good over there." He tilted his head and replied, "Well, if it's not, I'm gonna be mad as hell." Wherever he is now, his ashes are scattered on the mountain, and maybe his spirit still looks after the place.

For Elizabeth, Greenwich and its environs have the allure of home and hearth. For me, as a southerner from Baltimore, the region beckons with the excitement of new discoveries. Some aspects of the place have required some explanation. For example, the Village of Greenwich is mostly in the Town of Greenwich but also partly in the Town of Easton, both of



Civil War Monument

2007; gouache on canvas;
9 x 12 in.

The statue was erected and dedicated by the local GAR (Grand Army of the Republic) veterans, many of whom fought in the 123rd Infantry. The monument sits in one of Greenwich's parks on Washington Square in memory of those who fought and died for the Union.

which are in Washington County. Up here, you will see a sign along the road saying "Entering the Town of Such-and-Such," with nary a town in sight. This curiosity becomes easier to understand when you grasp the underlying purpose of an added subdivision: it helps to provide job security for more government officials and regulators. This clever arrangement goes a long way toward justifying the extraordinarily high taxes here, which in turn depress the local economy and help to maintain the slightly down-at-the-heels, quaint, old-time charm of the place. So everything is right as right can be. To avoid confusion, I use the word "town" as a common noun when speaking of a village in the ordinary sense and "Town" with a capital *T* when referring to the official geography.

As someone who grew up in the city and always dreamed of being a farmer with a red tractor, I feel a tinge of envy listening to Elizabeth's stories of farm life. On the north side of the Salem road, at the foot of Thunder Mountain, is Elizabeth's grandmother's house. The frame structure was built by one of her ancestors in the mid-1800s. It was the place of Elizabeth's early childhood. She loved the big, old barn where she sat with her grandfather while he milked the cows and told her stories about his adventures in World War I. She would help herself to her



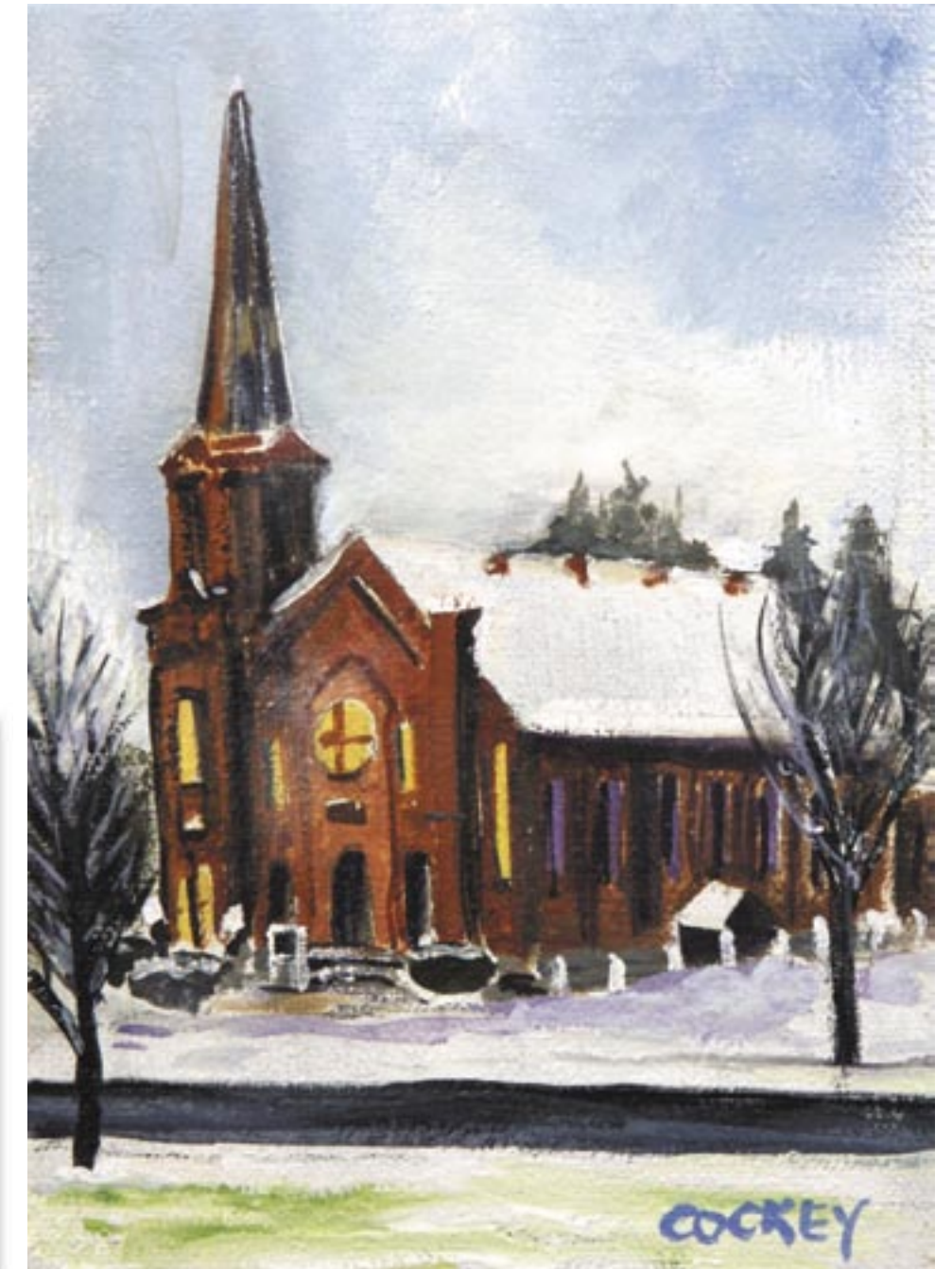
favorite snack, spoonfuls of formula for the baby calves. She wanted a horse more than anything but, at the age of five, settled for riding the calves, which bucked her off. She would get up, dust herself off, and climb onto another calf and ride some more.

As the oldest of three children, Elizabeth was the family activity director and organized theatrical productions, art projects, and expeditions to the "peeper pond" to catch frogs. Her favorite entertainment, then as now, was painting. If paint and a brush were available, Elizabeth found a use for them. Some efforts, like painting a neighbor's wall red or collecting all the baskets from the cemetery and painting them blue, were not well received by her elders; but all the punishments never deterred her from trying a new project. This book is the latest in a long series of such artistic endeavors.

Bottskill Baptist Church

2006; gouache on canvas;
5 x 7 in.

It was early December, and it had snowed. The snow had lightly covered all the houses and trees just before dusk. It was too inviting to sit in the house; we had to go out and take a walk through the town. The first thing we noticed was how the light was filtering down at the end of that day. Across the street from us was the Baptist church, all lit up on the front wall with that beautiful golden light, just like a Christmas card.



Reuben Stewart, Great-Great-Uncle (Opposite page)

1864; historic photograph;
3 x 5 in.

Reuben Stewart was my great-great-uncle. Reuben fought in the Civil War with the 123rd Infantry from 1862–1865. He was a prolific writer and wrote many letters home to his sister, Julia, and his father, Nathan Stewart, about the tragedy of war and the beauty of the South. He became engaged through the mail and, upon returning to Greenwich after the war, went on to live a long and successful life.

CHAPTER 1

Greenwich

The village of Greenwich is at the heart of our story, not because we love the other towns less but because we love Greenwich more. It is Elizabeth's hometown, and we are blessed to be among people who have been her friends since childhood. Imagine a place where the houses have scarcely changed since the age of Victoria, where the people are kind, generous, and welcoming, and where a chance conversation on the street seldom lasts less than half an hour. That's Greenwich.

Hugging the shore of the Battenkill River, Greenwich started out as a mill town. In 1804, Job Whipple dammed the swift-running waters a short way from their final falls into the Hudson. The first mills sawed wood and ground grain. Whipple had come from Cumberland Hill, Rhode Island, obtaining title to the present site of the village in 1781. He bought the land from a Mr. Carbine of Albany, who had already built a dam, a sawmill, and a store. A hard-working, devout Quaker, Whipple was well regarded as a man of integrity and served as justice of the peace, holding court sessions in his home. Back then, the little hamlet was called Whipple City. The name changed to Union Village in 1809, reputedly in a fit of goodwill and harmony on the part of the villagers over the uniting of people from two Towns (Greenwich and Easton). Another theory I have heard is that the renaming was part of the tail end of the general fervor over the establishment of the Federal Union. The name is preserved by Judy Flagg's Union Village Shop on Main Street.

Main Street, Greenwich

2007; gouache on canvas;

16 x 24 in.

Many of the historic buildings on Main Street have been restored or revitalized. Today there are a delightful variety of shops and stores to peruse: a natural foods market, a flower shop, antiques and collectibles, and numerous gift shops. Union Village Ltd. is one store that stocks a unique collection of Colonial decor and crafts such as cloth floor rugs, stenciled design patterns, and handmade pottery and furniture. Further along the street, you can find historic memorabilia in other local shops featuring antiques from the late 1700s.



The name of Greenwich was adopted later still, in 1867. Perhaps reflecting a more general loss of local autonomy, the present name is said to have been assigned by the post office. Straight-talking Yankees that they are, the folks here pronounce the name exactly as it is spelled. Like Thames Street in

Baltimore (rhymes with aims), this kind of honest pronunciation, uncorrupted by the German accent of King George I, is as bracing as the cool water of the Battenkill River where the children swim on hot summer days at a bathing beach bought by the town from the Michael Brock farm in 1948.

Called Ondawa by the Indians, the Battenkill rises in Dorset, Vermont, and flows twenty miles through Vermont before entering New York. It is said to be one of the best trout streams in the country. Once filthy with the careless effluent of paper mills, the stream is again pristine.



One brilliant August afternoon, Elizabeth and I launched a canoe at the park on Rock Street and paddled upstream to the stony shallows above the bathing beach, at the foot of Thunder Mountain. I waded out toward the middle and soon

The Academy

2006; gouache on canvas;
11 x 14 in.

The Village of Greenwich offices are housed in the historic Academy building, which was previously a private school in the 1800s. The building is listed on the register for historic buildings and is right down the tree-lined street from where we live. Today the Academy is not just used for the village offices, but is also used by the local fire department that parks its fire trucks out back. Barton and I “snuck” upstairs once and were awestruck by a huge ballroom that took up the entire second floor and was complete with a stage for theatrical productions.



found that the clear water was deceptive; it looked only knee-deep, but I was up to my waist. Soon I was treading water. Looking down, I could see my feet dangling above the round rocks on the bottom. The only sounds were birdsong and the gurgling of water. I regained my footing and flipped over a flat piece of shale with my toe. The underside was crusted with caddis fly larvae. A crayfish darted out, and his flight took him under the nose of a smallmouth bass hanging motionless in five feet of water, facing upstream. In one continuous motion, the bass sucked the crayfish into his mouth and spit out the shell, which flowed past him like a discarded wrapper thrown from a car window.

The sun was nearing the level of the western treetops as we paddled back to the landing. The wind picked up, and if we had slackened our paddling, we'd have been blown back up the river. Ahead of us, the sun cast a million diamonds on the ripples. Also ahead and to our right were the steeples of the Baptist and Methodist churches. From this vantage point at least, it

Town Offices

2006; gouache on canvas;
11 x 14 in.

Next door to the Village of Greenwich offices is another historic building, which is now the location for the Town of Greenwich offices. This was originally confusing to us, but we eventually learned the protocol for local governing bodies in upstate New York: we live in Washington County, in the Township of Greenwich and in the Village of Greenwich. Believe it or not, there is a portion of the Town of Easton that also lies in the Village of Greenwich. (I still haven't figured out where they pay their taxes!)

appeared that God was in his kingdom, and all was right with the world.



Up close, it is even more evident that Greenwich was built according to the Maker's specifications, with plenty of opportunities for patience, charity, repentance, and par-