Speculations in Paint

Ernest Lawson and the Urbanization of New York

Ross Barrett

In his lifetime, Ernest Lawson (1873–1939) was celebrated as a painterly "pioneer" who discovered the semiurban lands surrounding downtown New York. Throughout his career, Lawson focused his attentions on the city's half-developed border, where colonial-era farms, apartment blocks, tenements, and squatter shanties intermingled. These contradictory spaces were the material products of an uncoordinated and irregular process of urbanization driven by real estate speculation. In painting the city frontier, Lawson developed a landscape mode attuned to the contradictions of speculative urbanization, which accommodated the conflicting arguments that New Yorkers were beginning to make about the urban fringe and local city building.

IN 1910 Ernest Lawson (1873–1939) submitted a landscape, *Harlem River at Washington Bridge*, to the spring exhibition of the National Academy of Design. The canvas, now lost, attracted significant critical attention. A reviewer for the *New York Times*, for example, selected *Harlem River at Washington Bridge* as one of several paintings in the academy's annual exhibition that "shows the modern tendency to treat the outdoor world with the same respect as is accorded to humanity." Considering the unique merits of Lawson's picture in a later passage, the critic emphasized "its strong repeated greens, its crude white and red houses, its violently modern setting, its look of unfinished civilization common to the environs and outskirts of our great American towns."[1] The *Times* reviewer invokes two important and interrelated aspects of Lawson's career, registered by his contemporaries but often overlooked in subsequent scholarly treatments of his work: the artist's deep engagement with "the look of unfinished civilization" in New York's urban "environs" and "outskirts" and his place within a "modern tendency," or that wide field of artistic activity understood to be engaged with concerns unique to early twentieth-century life. This essay will examine the first of these aspects, Lawson's focus on the unevenly developed outskirts of New York, with the hope of generating new discussion about the second, or the artist's position within modern American art and culture.

Throughout the thirty-eight years he spent in New York, Lawson focused his painterly efforts on the fringe or border of the city, the swaths of incomplete development between and around nodes of denser urbanity. The region around the Harlem River was one such semiurban district and a frequent subject for Lawson. His *Washington Bridge*

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[1] "Landscape Portraiture in the Spring Academy," *New York Times*, March 27, 1910, SM15. For the most recent treatment of Lawson, see Valerie Ann Leeds, "Ernest Lawson in a New Light," in her *Ernest Lawson* (New York: Gerald Peters Gallery, 2000), 11–44. See also Charles C. Eldredge, "Ernest Lawson's Spain," *American Art* 17 (2003): 82–91; William Gerdts, *American Impressionism* (New York: Abbeville, 1984), 275–78; and Henry D. Hill, *Ernest Lawson: American Impressionist, 1873–1939* (Leigh-on-Sea: Lewis, 1968). For period treatments of the artist, see Frederic Newlin-Price, *Ernest Lawson: Canadian American* (New York: Jaques, 1930); and Guy Pène du Bois, *Ernest Lawson* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1932).

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Fig. 1. Ernest Lawson, *Washington Bridge*, ca. 1910. Oil on canvas; H. 25″, W. 30¼″. (Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Museum of Art, Utica, NY, 58.42.)

(1910; fig. 1), for example, explores the ambiguous terrain along the waterway, juxtaposing a disordered and dilapidated stretch of Bronx shoreline with the distant, neater forms of urbanizing upper Manhattan. In painting semideveloped lands such as these, Lawson confronted the physical, social, and symbolic legacies of real estate speculation that deeply marked their terrain. New York's expansion and infilling had long been a decentralized and spasmodic process driven by speculation. Often capricious and illogical, this market-driven process produced a highly uneven and irregular cityscape along New York's border, a semiurban frontier in which modern apartment blocks and commercial buildings mingled with colonial-era country estates, rundown farms, and squatter shanties.[2] In referencing "the look of unfinished civilization," reviewers such as the *Times* critic above had these contradictory social and spatial conditions in mind, conditions they associated with Lawson's painterly practice. Newspaper notices and critical remarks illuminate Lawson's engagement with the conflicting sociospatial conditions of the urban fringe and the unique landscape

[2] I use "border" and "fringe" interchangeably to refer to those developing landscapes, within the postannexation boundaries of New York City, which surrounded downtown Manhattan at the turn of the century. On New York's urbanization as a conflict between chaos and order, see David M. Scobey, *The Making and Meaning of the New York City Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 5–10.

aesthetic that resulted, suggesting a mode of landscape painting attuned to the tensions and contradictions of speculative development.

The artist also explored the symbolic legacies of speculative urbanization, addressing the contending representations of the urban fringe that appeared at the turn of the century: the city border as a booster's dream space, as a nostalgic foothold of rurality or "history," or as a wasteland in which the failings of modern urbanization (its social, aesthetic, and ecological disasters) were alarmingly concentrated. Focusing on different aspects of the uneven urban border, late nineteenth- and twentieth-century New Yorkers made drastically different claims about the shape and meaning of the city's outlying lands, claims that point in turn to deeper disagreements about city building that emerged in the period, after centuries of uncoordinated growth and development. Lawson's city border paintings hold these opposing claims in tension, enabling the artist to target a broad viewership among New York's middle and elite classes, the social groups that took a leading role in debating the problems and potential of the city's urbanization. His multivalent paintings, I suggest, allowed buyers, critics, and viewers from these classes to explore their own contradictory and conflicted outlooks on the developing fringe and speculative urbanization.

This essay examines some of the complex meanings that Lawson's border paintings held in their original context, with the understanding that these meanings were produced by the artist and his audience. Lawson's viewers contributed to the meanings of his fringe pictures by interpreting these works using the themes of a landscape culture in which they participated, alongside the artist. Several factors, however, complicate analyses of the symbolic contributions of the painter and his viewers. Lawson, first, left few personal enunciations behind: the handful of extant letters and newspaper quotes date to the last few years of his life and describe personal and aesthetic concerns that were unique to that segment of his career.[3] Similarly, very few records documenting Lawson's sales, commissions, and professional relationships survive. Nevertheless, a handful of documented examples of patronage offer a glimpse at the sort of viewers that Lawson attracted. The expansive body of critical commentary on Lawson that survives also offers some access (albeit indirect) to the practices, outlooks, and expectations of the artist's viewers and suggests that at least some of these viewers brought ideas and concerns about city building and the urban border to bear on his fringe paintings. To recapture something of the original symbolic texture of Lawson's border pictures, then, this essay builds on close readings of his paintings and critical reception and examines the social, economic, and cultural context of his painterly practice.

Lawson as Painterly "Pioneer"

Lawson's attentiveness to the interrelations of imagery and land development had deep roots: the artist began his career as a draftsman working in Mexico City for the British engineering firm S. Pearson & Son, which fulfilled a number of lucrative contracts for the modernization of Mexican transit infrastructure between 1889 and 1910. Lawson produced technical drawings for the firm's Great Drainage Canal project (1889–90), a large-scale water system designed to divert flood waters from the Mexico City basin north into the Tula River. The artist's earliest visual work was thus closely connected to the processes of construction and land development, laying the thematic foundations for his later landscape practice.[4]

When Lawson relocated to New York in 1898, he settled in Washington Heights, a burgeoning community on the outer rim of the city's dense urban nexus. His first residence was a comfortable flat in the five-story brick building at 453 West 155th Street, a typical example of the speculative structures built in the area in anticipation of a new wave of commuter-class tenants. For most of the nineteenth century, Washington Heights had been a rural community of small farms, long-held family estates, and squatters' cabins. The division and sale of several massive, colonial-era landholdings in the area, however, fueled a speculative surge in building and development that would last well into the

[3] Lawson's late-life letters and quotes describe an artist struggling with health problems and a contracted art market and working to develop a coloristic expression suited to the tropical landscapes of southern Florida, where he spent the late 1930s. See "Ernest Lawson Turns Philosophic—with Color," *Art Digest*, December 15, 1938, 11; and "Lawson Returns from the South with New Jewels," *Art Digest*, December 1, 1936, 14.

[4] On S. Pearson & Son's Mexican undertakings, see Priscilla Connolly, "Pearson and Public Works Construction in Mexico, 1890–1910," *Business History* 41 (October 1999): 48–69. On Lawson's work for the firm, see Newlin-Price, *Ernest Lawson*, 6. For a description of the Great Drainage Canal project, see John A. Spender, *Weetman Pearson, First Viscount Cowdray, 1856–1927* (1930; repr., New York: Arno, 1977), 84–100.

1910s.[5] Lawson spent eight years in Washington Heights at the peak of this speculative boom, and it was there that he nurtured a growing interest in the developing land north and east of downtown Manhattan. In the warm months, Lawson explored the upper half of the island (fig. 2) and the boroughs to the north and east on foot, making sketches and studies that he would use throughout the winter to produce finished landscapes in his studio. After Lawson and his family moved downtown, to 450 West Twenty-third Street, in 1906, the painter continued to travel to the northern end of the island and beyond, taking the elevated railroads at Third and Sixth avenues and probably the Interborough Rapid Transit subway line. By this point, Lawson had begun painting the urban border in high volume, repeating successful subjects and effective compositions serially.[6]

It was around the time of Lawson's downtown move that his focus on New York's semiurban landscapes was first noticed by period critics and reviewers. As early as 1906, a critic for the *New York Times* noted, "Ernest Lawson confines his landscape painting to the neighborhood of the city, particularly about Spuyten Duyvil Creek." Spuyten Duyvil, a district in the southern Bronx, had become one of Lawson's favorite urban fringe subjects early on, along with Cathedral Heights, Fort George, and Inwood on upper Manhattan. The Harlem River was also already another favorite; reviewing Lawson's first one-man show at the New York School of Art in 1907, which included several views of the Harlem and North rivers, the progressive critic James Huneker noted that the artist's "'River in Winter' is from his favorite camping ground—the upper reaches of the Harlem." In an article on the same exhibition, the artist and writer John Nilsen Laurvik made a slightly bolder claim, arguing that Lawson had "discovered" that waterway as an artistic subject. As Lawson continued to churn out pictures of the city's urbanizing margins, reviewers elaborated on Laurvik's assertion, describing Lawson frequently as an artistic "pioneer" whose work opened up the urban frontier for painterly activity. In a 1914 article about his own explorations of New York's subway system, for example, Huneker noted, "It was Ernest Lawson who discovered, artistically speaking, the Harlem River and the unknown reaches of the Bronx." Later in the article, Huneker suggests that Lawson's pioneering landscapes decisively shaped the experience and understanding of New York's outlying spaces, noting, "The various bridges spanning the Harlem become more attractive the further one goes westward. . . . They all look like Ernest Lawsons, so strangely does nature pattern after art."[7] In Huneker's experience, nature organizes itself in a "strangely" homologous way, as if after the contours and structures of Lawson's painting. This passage figures the semiurban terrain along the Harlem River and up into the Bronx as unimaginable, or at least indescribable, without the lens of Lawson's landscape painting. For Huneker and other critical contemporaries, Lawson's pioneering landscapes offered a determinate vision of New York's urban border, a definitive way of looking at and representing its developing spaces.

Real Estate Speculation and New York's Urban Fringe

These spaces often perplexed period observers. Analyzing one of Lawson's later paintings of Inwood, possibly *Hills at Inwood* (1914; fig. 3), the lecturer and critic Frederick W. Coburn noted, "There is an amusing panoramic quality in his view of Inwood, that queer region . . . at the extreme end of Manhattan island."[8] *Hills at Inwood* emphasizes the "queer" or strangely ambiguous character of the neighborhood, juxtaposing a rough foreground, marked only by a crude shack and a handful of spindly trees, with a crowded district of modern

[5] Margaret Bensco, Lawson's daughter, described the Washington Heights apartment as "very comfortable" in a 1976 interview. See transcript of tape-recorded interview with Margaret Bensco, September 7, 1976 (hereafter Bensco transcript), 6, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter AAA). For references to the speedy construction and sale of the speculative apartment building, see "Recorded Real Estate Transactions," *New York Times*, March 2, 1898, 10; "The Building Department," *New York Times*, March 16, 1898, 10; and "In the Real Estate Field," *New York Times*, April 27, 1899, 12. For a review of the partition sales, see *A History of Real Estate, Building, and Architecture in New York City during the Last Quarter of a Century* (New York: Real Estate Record and Guide, 1898), 145–53.

[6] On Lawson's seasonal work process and exploration of upper Manhattan, see Bensco transcript, 7–8, 13, AAA.

[7] "The World of Art and Artists," *New York Times*, April 15, 1906, X5; James Huneker, "Monet, Lawson, Dougherty," *New York Sun*, February 4, 1907, quoted in Leeds, "Ernest Lawson in a New Light," 19; John Nilsen Laurvik, "The Ernest Lawson Exhibition," *New York Evening Post*, February 15, 1907, 7; James Huneker, "Huneker Nervously Explores New York's Subway," *New York Times*, September 13, 1914, SM8. For other reviews that figure Lawson as a pioneer, see "Riverside Church Inspires Artist," *New York Sun*, March 11, 1930, artists scrapbooks, reel 1029, frame 171, microfilmed Ferargil Galleries Records, AAA; and undated/untitled clipping, scrapbook, reel 1788, frame 1061, microfilmed Ernest Lawson Papers, AAA.

[8] Frederick W. Coburn, "In the World of Art," undated clipping from the *Boston Herald*, reel 1788, frame 997, Ernest Lawson Papers, AAA.

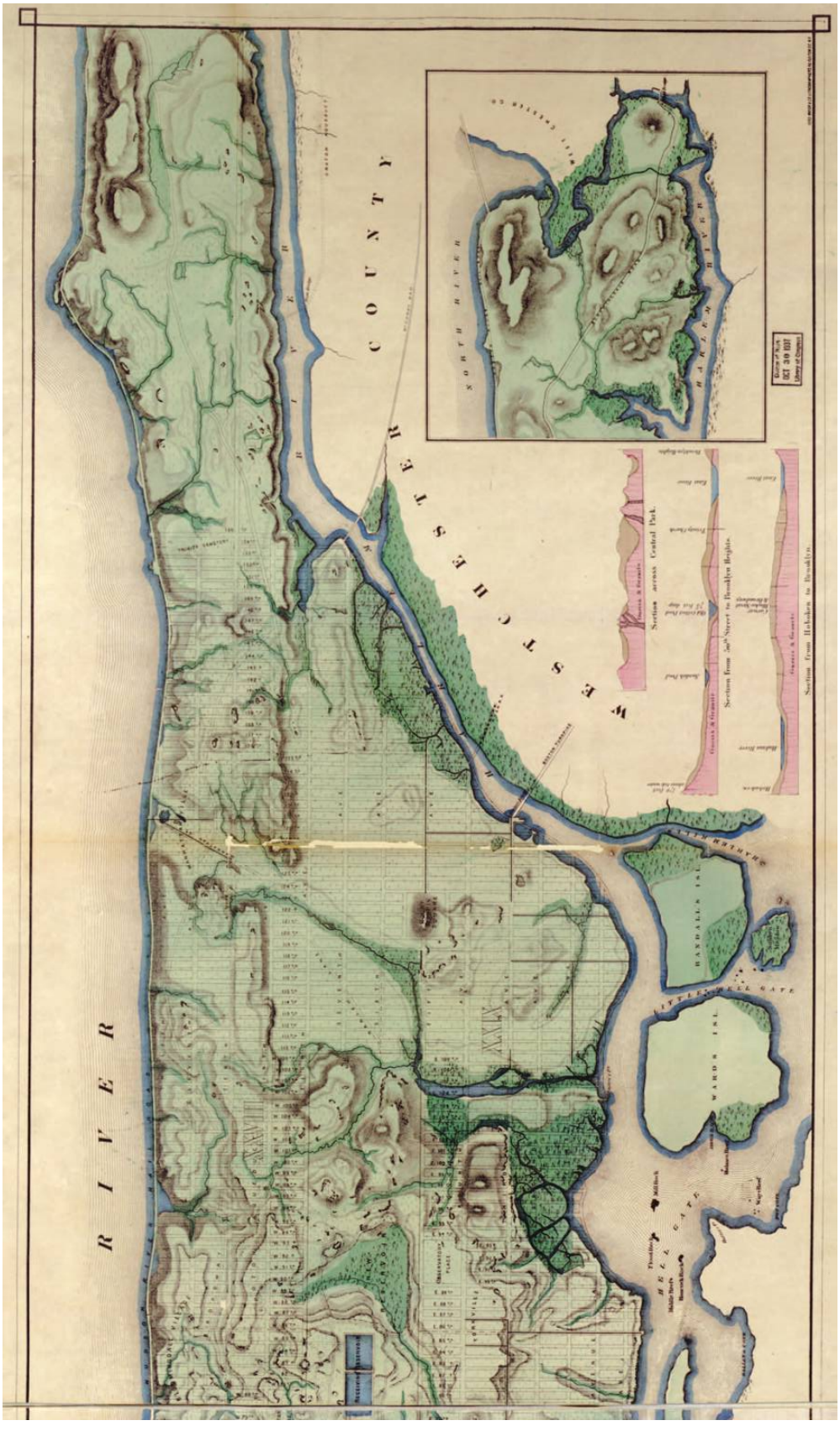

Fig. 2. Egbert Viele, detail of upper Manhattan between Eightieth Street and the tip of the island (inset, showing Spuyten Duyvil Creek connecting the Hudson [top] and Harlem [bottom] rivers), *Sanitary and Topographical Map of the City and Island of New York*, 1865. Lithograph. (Map Collections, Library of Congress.)

Fig. 3. Ernest Lawson, *Hills at Inwood*, 1914. Oil on canvas; H. 36″, W. 50″. (Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, gift of Ferdinand Howald, 1931.200.)

apartment buildings, tenements, and warehouses springing up in the distance. The serpentine wheel ruts of an old road winding into the foreground similarly contrast with the straight lines and right angles of two intersecting roads in the distant valley, which suggest a developing street grid. These juxtapositions add to the unresolved character noted by Coburn, an effect heightened by Lawson's handling of the figures at the center of *Hills at Inwood*. Are these figures, with their simple horse cart, rural laborers scratching at the frozen earth? Or are they construction workers hacking out a modern thoroughfare, a building foundation, or a railroad right-of-way? The painting offers little in the way of an answer: rendered in simple dashes of pigment and positioned on a ridgeline between the unmarked foreground and the developing valley, the crude figures are open signs, readable equally as rustic farmers or as city construction workers.

This indeterminacy was entirely appropriate to Inwood, which was unevenly developed when Lawson explored it. The area saw an upsurge in construction after 1906, when the Seventh Avenue elevated line reached the eastern side of the district. Development efforts in the neighborhood nevertheless remained patchy and irregular: some of Inwood's small farms survived into the 1920s, as whole blocks of apartment houses, commuter cottages, and tenements were rapidly constructed around them.[9] Inwood, as a result, was a persistently semiurban place in the 1910s and '20s—not quite part of the urban fabric of the city but not entirely outside it either. *Hills at Inwood* registers the unresolved character of the neighborhood at the beginning of the twentieth century, intermingling signs of Inwood's enduring rusticity and incipient urbanity.

Inwood was typical of the spaces that composed New York's urban fringe in the period. As urban historians have shown, the northerly and easterly expansion of New York during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a decentralized process driven by the speculations of individual investors, small firms, and corporations. Betting on the

[9] On development in Inwood, see Edwin Spengler, *Land Values in New York in Relation to Transit Facilities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930), 76–78. For a study of life in Inwood around 1900, see Sanford Gaster, "Public Places of Childhood, 1915–1930," *Oral History Review* 22 (Winter 1995): 1–31.

Fig. 4. Percy Loomis Sperr, "Seventh Avenue and West 152nd Street," Manhattan, 1935. Photograph. (Milstein Division of U.S. History, Local History and Geology, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.)

continued inflation of land values, speculators purchased properties along the city's borders and in its urban gaps, to hold, sell, or "improve" with construction; these transactions accelerated during periods of economic growth and ebbed during recessions. In the nineteenth century, businessmen, politicians, and landholders periodically overcame this spasmodic pattern to enact centralized building projects and planning initiatives. A more consistent program of urban planning was frustrated, however, by the local, customary emphasis on individual property rights over communal interests, popular frustration with the corruption that accompanied city building projects, and a general distrust of expansive city governance. At the turn of the century, a reformist community dedicated to the City Beautiful ideals of centralized planning and rational urbanization arose to challenge the pattern of uncoordinated development, spearheading the enactment of a series of building and development ordinances.[10] Despite the best efforts of this small community of planners, engineers, and businessmen, however, uncoordinated real estate development continued unabated in the decades after 1900.

The caprice of speculative market transactions ensured that this process yielded a highly uneven city fabric. When Lawson explored upper Manhattan, the Bronx, and other outlying areas, these border lands were marked by dramatic spatial and social contradiction. A photograph of the intersection of Seventh Avenue and West 152nd Street (1935; fig. 4) taken by the documentarian Percy Loomis Sperr, for example, suggests the unfinished character of Hamilton Heights in the period: modern apartment buildings, billboards, and an auto garage clustered around Seventh Avenue intermingle with brushy and undeveloped lots, a shanty village, and antiquated tenements. A photograph of the intersection of Broadway, West 212th, and Isham streets (ca. 1910; fig. 5), taken by the Brown Brothers photo agency, describes the similarly uneven character of the northern tip of Manhattan. Bits of

[10] As an example of the procedural barriers to city-directed planning, street openings in nineteenth-century New York had to be approved by three-quarters of the property owners whose land was affected by the new thoroughfare. On these barriers and distrust of expansive city governance, see Scobey, *Making and Meaning*, 123–26, 217–67. On the planning community, see Keith Revell, *Building Gotham: Civic Culture and Public Policy in New York City, 1898–1916* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 1–14. On early twentieth-century planning, see Marc A. Weiss, "Density and Intervention: New York's Planning Traditions," in *The Landscape of Modernity: Essays on New York City, 1900–1940*, ed. David Ward and Olivier Zunz (New York: Russell Sage, 1992), 46–75; and Robert Fishman, "The Regional Plan and the Transformation of the Industrial Metropolis," in Ward and Zunz, *Landscape of Modernity*, 106–28.

Fig. 5. Brown Brothers, "Broadway and West 212th Street," Manhattan, ca. 1910. Photograph. (Milstein Division of U.S. History, Local History and Geology, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.)

modern urbanity are sprinkled throughout the scene, including an electric trolley car, telephone lines, billboards, and a turn-of-the-century apartment house. The neighborhood, nevertheless, remains stubbornly semiurban. West 211th and Isham streets, which angle into the scene from the left, are unpaved and overgrown; weedy lots fill the foreground and middle distances of the photograph. The old farmhouse at the base of Inwood hill and a solitary grazing goat in the empty lot just left of center recall the district's rural past.[11]

[11] The late nineteenth-century sale of the Dyckman estate on upper Manhattan suggests the irrationality that marked speculative development in New York. Located at the northern tip of Manhattan, the estate was broken up and sold in three auctions between 1869 and 1871, before it was accessible by public transit and before most of the land south of it was developed or available to the market. For an outline of the development of upper Manhattan, see *History of Real Estate*, 130–55. On Sperr, see "Take 2: A Photo Archive of City Streets," *New York Times*, March 14, 2000, E1. On the Brown Brothers, see Ellen Wiley Todd, "Photojournalism, Visual Culture, and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire," *Labor* 2 (2005): 10–11.

Not distinctly "city" or "country," upper Manhattan hosted land uses and social groups associated with both spatial modes at the turn of the century.

Lawson's "Odd Patterns" and "Haphazard Designs"

Lawson's painterly practice took its cues from this heterogeneous landscape. The artist employed a method of paint application and a compositional approach that were uniquely suited to the uneven dynamics of speculative development, and he returned to specific spots on the urban border that allowed the richest explorations of these dynamics. Lawson frequently loaded his canvases with thick pigment, heaping up paint with a palette knife in a manner that viewers associated with building and construction. In a 1924 *International Studio* article on Lawson, for example, the art dealer Frederic Newlin-Price noted that "Lawson puts on paint

quite fully. He seems sometimes to have used a trowel. . . . There is weight to his canvas . . . [a] substantial quality that, like grand works of the ages, are built for time immemorial." This sort of rhetoric was not uncommon in the period: progressive-era criticism and art theory regularly employed the language of construction in discussing the formal tactics of period artists. Lawson's "constructive" method stood out for his reviewers, however, in its irregularity and unevenness; the aesthete-collector Duncan Phillips accordingly noted in a 1917 essay: "Briefly stated, his technique consists of applying a load of enamel paint to canvas and gradually working it with the help of glazes into a thick, rich impasto, frequently leaving parts of the canvas bare or thinly covered, while on other parts the pigment is modeled into low relief."[12]

Many of Lawson's finished border landscapes and riverscapes juxtapose areas of thick, coagulated pigment with bare patches of canvas. The contrasts can be dramatic, as in the distant belt of upper Manhattan buildings in *Washington Bridge* (see fig. 1), where squares of thick white, yellow, pink, and orange paint are framed by lines and patches of dark brown canvas. In other landscapes, the contrast is less pronounced; spots of brown canvas dot the water and shores of *Harlem River* (Gulf States Paper Corporation, 1918–22), the right foreground of *Winter, Spuyten Duyvil* (before 1908; fig. 6), and the snowy valley terrain of *Upper New York City* (ca. 1918–22; fig. 7).[13] In all of these cases, however, the uneven application of paint echoes and reaffirms the topographical contradictions of speculative development depicted in these images. In building sectors of his canvases up while leaving others vacant, Lawson rehearsed the irrational dynamics of speculative development in his painting practice.

Lawson also explored them compositionally, employing structural devices that seemed arbitrary and illogical to some period viewers. In a review of the artist's Inwood pictures, Frederick Coburn noted: "His design is often unusual, one might say casual and haphazard. Yet he has a way of making an odd pattern seem interesting so that you turn to it again and again trying to discover if some of the juxtapositions are intentional or just happened so." For Coburn, Lawson's "design" is "haphazard," his canvases built around "juxtapositions" that seem unintentional or as if they "just happened so." Lawson had a penchant for these surprisingly "odd" contrasts, employing and reemploying certain compositional devices that created formal disjunctions. The most prevalent of these devices involves a drastic contrast of foreground and background: many of Lawson's semiurban landscapes follow a dichotomous structure that poses an undeveloped foreground against an urbanizing sector or an emblem of modern construction in the distance. *Hills at Inwood* and *Washington Bridge,* as we have seen, bear this structure, setting rocky and underdeveloped foregrounds against urbanizing districts. So too do *Spuyten Duyvil* (ca. 1912–14; fig. 12), *Winter on the Harlem River* (n.d., private collection), and *Winter, Spuyten Duyvil* (before 1908, Wadsworth Atheneum), which offset the rough lot of a ramshackle cottage with a crowded industrial complex in the distance; *Shadows, Spuyten Duyvil Hill* (ca. 1910, Metropolitan Museum of Art) juxtaposes vacant fields with the same distant factory complex. *Upper New York City* (fig. 7) includes a formal device that Lawson often employed to heighten the contrast of foreground and background: a line of scraggly, attenuated trees that veils the prospect beyond.[14] The screen of trees suggests the overgrown, rural character of the abbreviated foreground of *Upper New York City* and complicates the view of the platted and developing valley below. There is a figure/ground tension between the golden-leaved tips of the foreground trees and the lines of the neighborhood grid: while some of the little treetops clearly overlay the gray and white paint that describes the valley surface, others (several toward the right edge of the scene) appear to be cut off from their trunks by the slashing gray streets. The two spaces (foreground/background) and topographical identities (vacant/urbanizing)

[12] Frederic Newlin-Price, "Lawson of the Crushed Jewels," *International Studio*, February 1924, 368; Duncan Phillips, "Ernest Lawson," *American Magazine of Art*, May 1917, 260. For other characterizations of Lawson as a builder, see "Ernest Lawson," undated clipping, reel 1788, frame 1034, Ernest Lawson Papers, AAA; Richard A. Mohr, untitled review of Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts exhibition, probably in the *Columbus Citizen*, reel 1788, frame 1039, Ernest Lawson Papers, AAA; James Huneker, "Seen in the World of Art," *New York Sun*, November 6, 1910, sec. 3, 4; and Laurvik, "Ernest Lawson Exhibition," 7. For a sampling of the wider currency of construction rhetoric, see Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit* (1923; repr., New York: Westview, 1984), 50, 132, 191, 221, 267; Charles Caffin, "The Inventive-Constructive Faculty," in his *Art for Life's Sake* (New York: Prang, 1913), 161–74.

[13] For an illustration of *Harlem River* (Gulf States Paper Corporation, 1918–22), see *Ernest Lawson* (New York: Gerald Peters Gallery, 2000), 61, 92.

[14] Coburn, "In the World of Art." Lawson used screens of trees in many paintings, including *Harlem River at High Bridge* (ca. 1915, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco), *Springtime Harlem River* (ca. 1900–1910, Terra Foundation for American Art), *Hills of Harlem* (after 1916, Nelson-Atkins Museum), and *Spring Morning, Washington Bridge* (1913, Phillips Collection).

Fig. 6. Ernest Lawson, *Winter, Spuyten Duyvil*, before 1908. Oil on canvas; H. 25⅛″, W. 30″. (Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Museum of Art, Utica, NY, 58.41.)

compete for visual primacy, strengthening the painting's evocation of the fringe's contradictory unevenness.

Booster Dreams and Speculative Fantasies

Even as it emphasizes the irregularity and unevenness of the city border, Lawson's dichotomous pictorial structure also seems to contribute a temporal dimension to these landscapes. The foregrounds of many of these paintings signify a spatial mode that defines the fringe landscape before its complete development; their backgrounds, however, appear as projections of its urban future, glimpses of the fringe's development as recognizably urban residential, industrial, or commercial districts. In juxtaposing a foreground-present with a background-future, Lawson's pictures employ a traditional device of American landscape painting, the intertwining of spatial recession and temporal progression, to suggest impending urban expansion.[15] In so doing, these canvases also echoed period representations of speculation and the processes of city building, which frequently engaged the theme of projected futurity.

Imaginative projection was (and is) a constitutive component of the practice of speculation. Buying a remote plot of land or a decrepit house with the expectation of future gain necessarily involves

[15] Angela Miller has discussed the Hudson River School's employment of spatiotemporal progressions: see *Empire of the Eye* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 82–87.

Fig. 7. Ernest Lawson, *Upper New York City*, ca. 1918–22. Oil on canvas; H. 24⅞″, W. 30″. (Private collection, courtesy Gerald Peters Gallery, New York.)

calculative dreaming, the imagining of a continued market trajectory and a distant maximal profit. By the turn of the century, writers, cartoonists, and artists had long recognized the fantastic character of speculative activity and connected projective daydreaming with the speculator and the speculative lifestyle. In 1906–7, for example, the popular vaudevillian Joe Weber caused a sensation with his production *Dream City*, a comedy that recounted the brief speculative career of the fictional farmer Wilhelm Dingelbender.[16] In the first act, the shiftless Dingelbender is approached by Otis Harlan, a real estate speculator who, in offering to subdivide and redevelop Dingelbender's Long Island farm as a commuter suburb, fills the farmer's head with visions of profit and urbanization. The second and third acts trace out the imagined details of Dingelbender's "dream city," which the farmer weaves during a nap in his fields. Although the particulars of Weber's production have been lost, some idea of this speculative fantasy of the fringe can be gleaned from the cover of the sheet music for *Dream City* (1906; fig. 8). At the left edge of the cover, Dingelbender's city appears as a beaux arts dream of cupolas, stringcourses, and pediments, an imagined and unlikely future projected onto the rural hills and fields of Long Island, which are rendered in a dull gray wash.

[16] For descriptive reviews of *Dream City*, see "The Theatre," *Town and Country*, January 12, 1907, 36–37, 62; and untitled article, *Life*, January 10, 1907, 58. For an earlier image of speculative daydreaming, see William A. Rogers's illustration, "Auction Sale of Real Estate," *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, November 1888.

Fig. 8. Starmer Brothers, *Dream City* songbook title page, 1906. (Historic American Sheet Music Collection, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.)

The realization of the speculator's dream, of course, required the production and dissemination of another set of dreams, projective visions of the original land or building transformed and revalued, which could in turn attract other speculators or prospective homeowners to invest at a higher price. To spur and sustain investment, individual real estate companies and industry-wide booster productions, such as the periodical *Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide* (1888–1934), forecasted imminent redevelopment and urbanization on the city border and with it the "certain" increase in land values. A 1905 advertisement for Tremont Terrace, a housing development planned for the

South Bronx, chided the potential investor: "If you neglect to get the benefit of this opportunity you will have to blame yourself in the future. . . . Three years ago south of West Farms lots were selling at $1000 to $1500. Last year when the rapid transit was completed the same lots were sold at $4000 to $10,000 each, and you cannot buy them for that price today. The same will happen in two years from now, and more so, because the location of Tremont Terrace is many times superior."[17] Emphasizing the unique and temporary character of the "opportunity" offered at Tremont Terrace, the advertisement asserts the certainty of development and land-value increases in the area of the "superior" housing tract. Like other booster claims for the linear and inexorable urbanization on New York's border, this confident pronouncement obscures the still-semideveloped character of the southern Bronx in the period and the irregularity of the building processes remaking it.

The booster dream of dramatic and inevitable border development found expression in a range of turn-of-the-century cultural venues, including popular imagery. The bird's-eye views of New York produced by the August R. Ohman Map Company, for example, liberally extended the dense fabric of urbanity well beyond the uneven city border. The company's 1907 lithograph *View of the City of New York and Vicinity* (fig. 9) depicts a wishfully seamless urban web emanating from downtown Manhattan. The northern end of the island and the Bronx (detail; fig. 10) are completely made over in the lithograph as urban districts: the forested ridge and fields of Inwood (the two prongs at the tip of Manhattan), the sloping district of Spuyten Duyvil just above it, and the Manhattan and Bronx shorelines along the Harlem River bristle with beige and red buildings and the sweeping lines of streets and highways. A fantasy vision of dense and extensive development, *View of the City of New York and Vicinity* was only the latest of a long line of aerial-view lithographs that imagined the completion of New York's urban fabric and the building over of the stubbornly semirural city border.[18]

Lawson's contemporaries frequently connected his work to these fantastic visions of the fringe, finding glimpses of an imagined future of border urbanization in his landscapes. A critic for the *New York Times* argued in a 1918 review that "Mr. Lawson is happiest in pictures of towns and cities. He manages to convey the sense of beauty and romance in the least romantic regions of New York. He builds with his pigments castles and fortresses that wear nevertheless the aspect of flat houses and cheap dwellings." In praising Lawson's ability to romanticize the unromantic fringe, the critic identifies the artist's work with an operation of imaginative redevelopment similar to Wilhelm Dingelbender's: like the erstwhile speculator, Lawson's canvases build fantastic "castles" in the air, whimsical constructions that outpace the urban border's unpicturesque present. Although less concerned with the question of Lawson's romanticism, an anonymous reviewer of one of Lawson's three Madison Art Gallery exhibitions (held between 1910 and 1912) suggested a similar imaginative function for his work: "We see, too, a view of Cathedral Heights, an old friend, that we thought hard in its young days, but it has mellowed . . . and we ask ourselves, why did we say to Lawson, when we first saw it, 'Is this an architect's drawing?'" This connection of Lawson's painting and architectural draftsmanship is not likely made on formal grounds, since the thick impasto and formal roughness of Lawson's work is entirely unlike the thin washes and linear precision of the typical period architectural drawing. Instead, the critic seems to invoke the architectural drawing to suggest that Lawson's painting, like the architect's presentation sketch, offers a pictorial projection of future development.[19]

Canvases such as *Washington Bridge* (fig. 1) and *Fort Tryon Hill* (before 1930; fig. 11) presented just such an imaginative prospect.[20] In the former picture, squares of pure pigment along the distant horizon suggest the shapes and rhythms of a crowded city neighborhood without delineating the material specifics—windows, cornices, piers, masonry—of architectural form. The distant scene, as a result, seems to be crystallizing before us, poised on the brink of coherence as a recognizably urban sector. Echoing *Upper New York City*, the undated *Fort Tryon Hill* depicts a valley at the northern tip of Manhattan from the edge of an undeveloped ridge, the view below again mediated by a screen of trees that

[17] "Tremont Terrace," *New York Times*, November 7, 1905, 15. For an earlier narrative of inexorable urbanization, see American Real Estate Investor, *Growth of New York Northward* (New York: American Real Estate Company, 1897), 1.

[18] August R. Ohman also operated a real estate company, the Ohman Webb Company; see "In the Real Estate Field," *New York Times*, November 8, 1908, C5. For another example of city-view lithographs that depict the fringe developed, see J. W. Williams, *New York* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, ca. 1879).

[19] "Ernest Lawson's Paintings," *New York Times*, January 31, 1918, 8; "Art Notes," undated clipping, scrapbook, reel 1788, frame 1034, Ernest Lawson Papers, AAA.

[20] A photograph of *Fort Tryon Hill* appears in Newlin-Price, *Ernest Lawson*, 11.

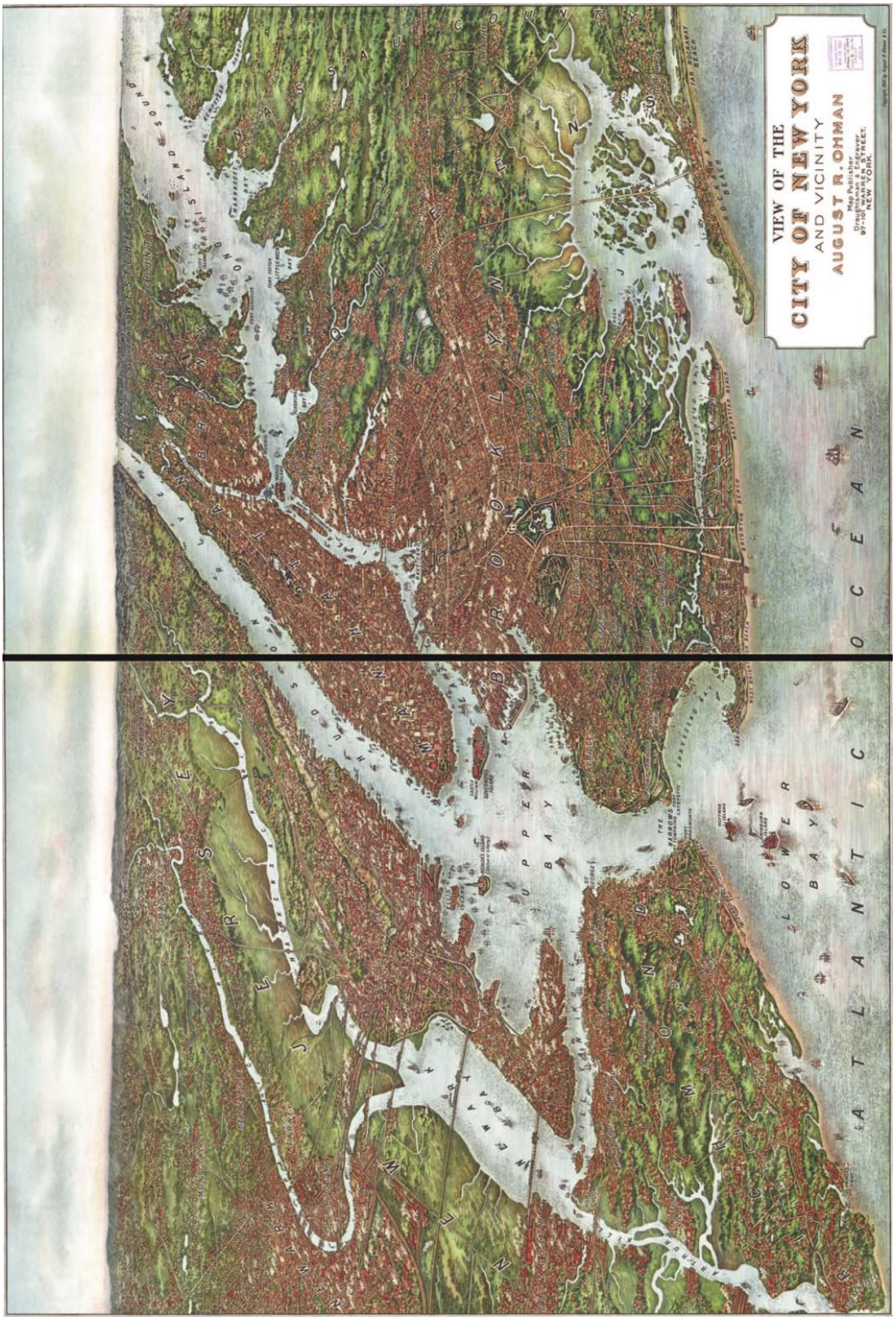

Fig. 9. August R. Ohman Map Company, *View of the City of New York and Vicinity*, 1907. Lithograph. (Map Collections, Library of Congress.)

Fig. 10. Detail of figure 9.

asserts the overgrown character of the foreground. Between and around the trees of *Fort Tryon Hill*, however, a slightly different view takes shape. The angling valley now appears crowded with buildings: apartment blocks line up in rows, while smaller houses cluster along a perimeter road in the distance. The valley has been built over, or will soon be so—dashed out with loose and thinned strokes of paint, the distant buildings do not quite achieve the solidity and formal strength of the foreground trees, which are rendered with more thickly and surely applied pigment. Like the distant band of buildings in *Washington Bridge*, the valley of *Fort Tryon Hill* has not yet fully materialized as an urban district. Sketchily rendered and tonally subdued, the valley appears instead as a projective vision of imminent urbanization.

Spuyten Duyvil (ca. 1912–14; fig. 12), organizes a similar vision, contrasting a rough foreground with a distant industrialized shoreline. Sitting on a rocky and uneven lot, the frame house near the center of the scene exemplifies the informal and small-scale development that marked the terrain of upper Manhattan during the nineteenth century. The house is evidently a crudely built and poorly maintained structure, a simple squatter's house answering the basic need for shelter. Lawson frequently included this type of house as a marker of working-class and indigent life in his pictures of the Harlem River area; similar structures appear in *Winter, Spuyten Duyvil* (fig. 6), *Winter on the Harlem*

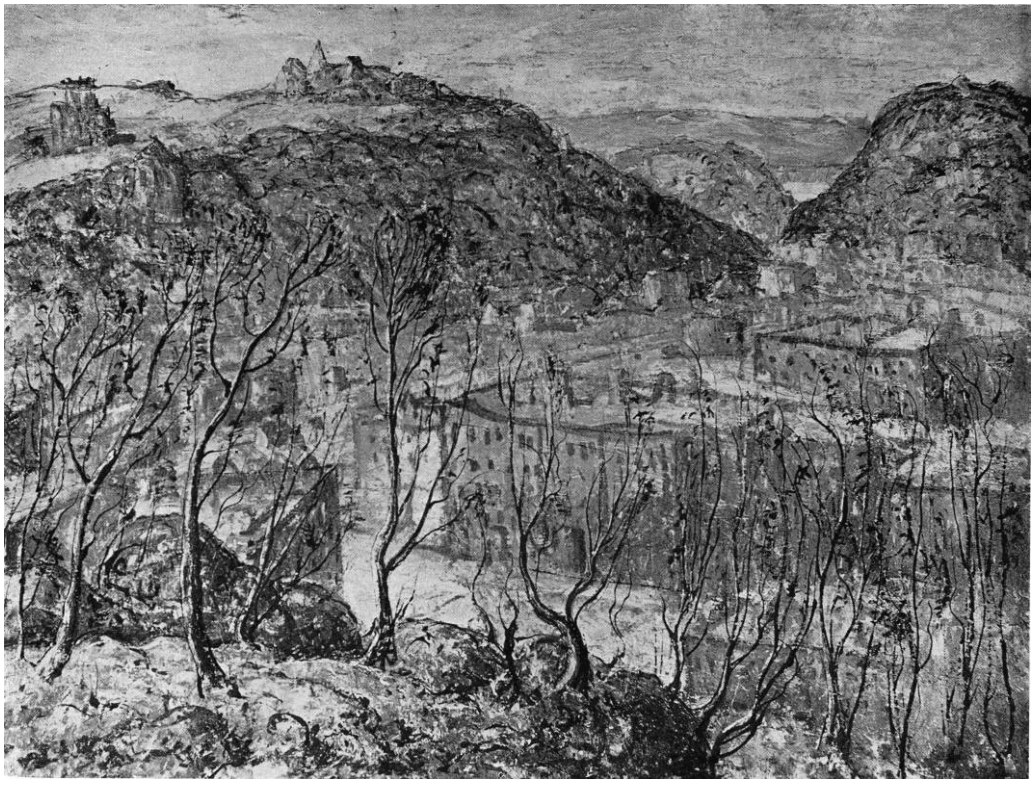

Fig. 11. Ernest Lawson, *Fort Tryon Hill*, location unknown, before 1930. Oil on canvas. From Frederic Newlin-Price, *Ernest Lawson: Canadian American* (New York: Jaques, 1930), catalog 11. (Catalog in possession of author.)

Fig. 12. Ernest Lawson, *Spuyten Duyvil*, ca. 1912–14. Oil on canvas; H. 16″, W. 20″. (Private collection, courtesy Gerald Peters Gallery, New York.)

River (n.d., private collection), and *Squatter's Huts* (before 1930, n.p.), among other canvases.[21] In *Spuyten Duyvil* (see fig. 12), this architectural emblem of poverty and desperate ingenuity is set against a crowded industrial complex on the far side of the river. A curving tree at the center of the canvas, delineated boldly in dark brown and black paint, emphasizes the pairing of the two building forms, leading the eye from the squatter's shack to the distant industrial plant. The factory complex, which appears frequently in Lawson's paintings of the Harlem River and the Spuyten Duyvil area, is likely the Isaac G. Johnson steel casting plant, which was a model of intensive and profitable land use at the turn of the century. Sitting on a peninsula of Bronx land that jutted into the Harlem River, the plant manufactured six types of metal, employed 1,000 men, and occupied thirteen and one-half acres.[22] Lawson appropriates this local landmark for his own symbolic purposes: spreading out along the far shoreline of *Spuyten Duyvil*, the steel complex perfectly embodies the potential for concentrated and lucrative development on the borderlands of northern Manhattan.

That potential future may not be far removed, as the position of the squatter's hut in *Spuyten Duyvil*

[21] *Spuyten Duyvil* is nearly identical to *Winter on the Harlem River* (private collection); both juxtapose huts and the factory complex across the Harlem River. For an illustration of *Squatters Huts* (before 1930), see Newlin-Price, *Ernest Lawson*, 35; and Pène du Bois, *Ernest Lawson*, 44. The two-story house also appears in *Winter, Spuyten Duyvil* (Wadsworth Atheneum).

[22] The Johnson Ironworks Foundry (founded 1853) reached its productive peak in the 1910s. See "Cast Shells Fired," *New York Times*, March 25, 1894, 11; "New York Incorporations," *New York Times*, December 30, 1902, 12; and "Widening Harlem Costs 1000 Jobs," *New York Times*, July 1, 1923, E1.

appears to be highly tenuous. The white pigment that delineates the snowy ledge on which the hut sits intermingles visually with the paint that describes ice floes in the water beyond. As a result, the hut seems to project dangerously over or into the path of the river behind, a precarious situation that is repeated in *Winter, Spuyten Duyvil* (see fig. 6). In both paintings, the foreground cabin is figured as a tenuously impermanent component of an urbanizing landscape. And in both pictures, the river appears as a transformative force, a fluid medium poised to subsume the rough lots and structures of northern Manhattan. In this way, I would suggest, the river can be read as a metaphor for the circuits of speculative exchange that drove the development projected in the paintings' backgrounds. As Sarah Burns has argued, metaphoric connections between market dynamics and natural forces (including oceanic tides, river currents, and storms) pervaded corporate rhetoric and popular culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Frank Norris's 1903 novel *The Pit*, for example, describes the market activity of wheat as a "measureless, almighty river" surging through the Chicago Board of Trade.[23] Marked by the signs of a current and situated as intermediate symbolic steps in the spatial narrative of development, the waterways of *Spuyten Duyvil* (1912–14), *Winter, Spuyten Duyvil*, and Lawson's other Harlem River views seem to draw on this broader symbolic convention, invoking the flows of market exchange that preceded and fueled the work of urbanization.

Nostalgia at the City's Edge

But Lawson's interest in the current of the Harlem River and its branches has further dimensions. Painterly evocations of water current also appear in river pictures, such as *Spuyten Duyvil* (n.d.; fig. 13), that do not follow the dichotomous foreground/background structure. *Spuyten Duyvil* depicts a bend of the creek by the same name, at the base of a sloping hill that bears a large stone building. The surface of the creek is animated with ripples rendered in unblended strokes of thick paint, signs of a current that seems to move into the scene from the left edge of the canvas and swirl around into the foreground. Although *Spuyten Duyvil* includes a distant structure, the choppy and swirling surface of the water seems to speak less to the future of the neighborhood of Spuyten Duyvil than to its past.

Spuyten Duyvil Creek had long been associated with danger and disaster when Lawson discovered it at the turn of the century. A winding extension of the Harlem River, Spuyten Duyvil Creek meandered around Marble Hill, the northernmost point of Manhattan Island, before turning west and opening onto the Hudson (see fig. 2). As a branch of the Harlem, which is a marine inlet, the creek was subject to extreme tidal fluctuations and became impassable at high tide. Frequent drownings in the turbulent creek linked it to tragedy and death in the local imagination, an association strengthened by a mythic and enduringly powerful story that appeared in Washington Irving's fictional *History of New York* (1809). According to the story, the Dutch colonist Anthony van Corlear swore that he would cross the roiling waterway "en spijt den duyvel" (in spite of the devil), leaped into the creek, and promptly drowned, pulled under by a mysteriously powerful current. Irving's story firmly connected Spuyten Duyvil Creek to supernatural danger, an association that continued up to, and beyond, the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[24]

Marked by the signs of a strong current, the water surfaces of *Spuyten Duyvil* (fig. 13) and other views of the creek by Lawson would have invoked the tributary's mythohistorical power for period audiences. In so doing, however, these paintings advanced what was an increasingly nostalgic vision of the looping waterway, as Spuyten Duyvil Creek had lost much of its dangerous force by the time Lawson began painting it. The recent Harlem River Ship Canal project (1895), which rationalized the river for heavy shipping traffic and waterfront development, had greatly diminished the creek's tidal current. After garbage dumping reduced the stagnant creek's water flow even further, the static and polluted waterway was drained and developed in the late 1910s.[25]

[23] I am indebted to Jennifer Roberts for her observations on the metaphoric potential of the river in Lawson's landscapes. See Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 187–217; Frank Norris, *The Pit* (1903; repr., New York: Grove, 1956), 388.

[24] Diedrich Knickerbocker [Washington Irving], *A History of New York* (New York: Burton, 1809), 290. For accounts of drownings in the creek, see "The Mania for Suicide," *New York Times*, June 1, 1878, 5; "New York," *New York Times*, August 20, 1881, 8; "Seven Boys Drown," *New York Times*, August 9, 1909, 1.

[25] Designed to create a more direct route for shipping, the canal was cut through the Marble Hill promontory at the tip of Manhattan, bypassing Spuyten Duyvil Creek and diverting much of the Harlem River's water volume away from the waterway. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact date of the creek's draining since period writers tended to call the modernized Harlem Ship Canal by the older waterway's name. On garbage dumping, see "Giants Share Polo Grounds with Yanks," *New York Times*, January 18, 1913, 14.

Fig. 13. Ernest Lawson, *Spuyten Duyvil*, n.d. Oil on canvas; H. 20″, W. 24″. (Gift of the El Paso Art Museum Association Members' Guild.)

Spuyten Duyvil (fig. 13) therefore described a dynamic waterway that no longer existed. In picturing Spuyten Duyvil Creek as it once was, Lawson's painting contributed to a revival of interest in the old waterway and Irving's story and in turn to a broader local culture of nostalgia that developed around New York's urban border at the turn of the century. Eschewing the speculator's fantastic projections, many period accounts of the city's outer fringe celebrated the still extant (and erstwhile) rusticity of its land, while lamenting haphazard development along the fringe as a threat to its natural plenitude and historical resonances. These accounts were typically laced with anxieties about the means and ends of urbanization. In his anecdotal history of the Hudson River (1910), the poet and antiquarian Edgar Mayhew Bacon (1855–1935) included this rich passage on northern Manhattan:

> The wooded, inviting knoll of Inwood rises above the haunted waters of Spuyten Duyvil creek, itself the home of many a spirit, if it be true that ghosts walk. The Indians long ago gave it a name of unpronounceable gutturals, and sowed its rocky soil with arrowheads and traditions. Along the ridges and through the woods where they disputed titles with their neighbors, the bears and the catamounts, generations of white men have come with their feuds and friendships, their loves and their hates, and have also passed away. From the great city, less and less distant every year, the rumble and roar of approaching activity warn the dweller among

green lawns and trees that the days of his seclusion are numbered.[26]

In contrast to the enthusiastic projection of booster texts, Bacon's narrative ambivalently describes the area around Inwood as a last preserve of history. In his account, the uneven terrain of upper Manhattan offers access to primeval wilderness, agrarian life, and the deep colonial past, aspects of New York's natural and social history that were everywhere disappearing from view.

Even as they addressed the possibility of impending development, Lawson's landscapes explored settings and border subjects that period viewers found especially redolent with nostalgic sentiment. Some of these subjects—such as the Dyckman House, the Jumel Mansion, and the old Inwood tulip tree that purportedly marked the site of the Dutch purchase of Manhattan—had long been celebrated as markers of New York history. Other subjects had only recently begun to acquire nostalgic associations. Foremost among these was the squatter's shack: occupying parcels of undeveloped land, squatters were widely associated with the semiurban landscape ringing downtown Manhattan. As urban historian Richard Plunz has shown, squatters had settled in large numbers on the Upper East and West sides by the mid-nineteenth century, building concentrated colonies in swampy or rocky areas that resisted more formal development. As the line of urbanization moved northward and eastward, squatters resettled on undeveloped land on the city's shifting border, building simple shanties out of salvaged materials. Lawson included squatters in many of his fringe landscapes, working so frequently with the border figure that it became, for some of the artist's reviewers, an emblem of his practice. In an essay for Lawson's 1932 retrospective at the Whitney, the artist and critic Guy Pène du Bois noted:

> The landscape he likes best has been arranged by man, remade, given a human touch. This touch, however, must be slight and, human again, faulty. It cannot have any of the severities of the formal garden nor any of those rigidities which are in the stark frame of a new house. Most of his are ramshackle affairs, adventurer structures, set down where they are by . . . squatters, with no thought of permanency, and very little, if any, of beauty. They are houses, a rather flattering word to use on them, put up by men who, living for themselves, cannot be bothered by the thoughts of neighbors. They are too informal even to be classed with those nude barracks which add so much to the ugliness of Sinclair Lewis's Main Street. They seem to have grown in the landscape, to be as much a part of it as the trees. If I have dwelt upon them so much it is because they are a symbol of his approach, a clue to the generally informal nature of the man.[27]

In this dense passage, Pène du Bois takes up the squatter as a "symbol" of Lawson's "approach" and as a useful analogy for an artist of "informal nature." In following out this analogy, Pène du Bois articulates several facets of the nostalgic cultural figure of the squatter that appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century, facets he found ready at hand in Lawson's work. The squatter is first valorized in the passage as an individual "adventurer," a man who lives for himself and builds "with no thought" of "permanency" or "beauty." The squatter's construction is accordingly "faulty," and thereby "human," as opposed to the "severities" and "rigidities" that mark the "stark frame of a new house," the clean lines and formal logic, in other words, of the new buildings springing up along the urban border. The shanty is thus a marker of an antedated moment on the city's outskirts; although built as temporary structures, squatter's shanties had paradoxically "grown in the landscape," becoming as integral and organic a feature of the land as its trees.

For much of the nineteenth century, politicians, land owners, and developers had considered the squatter a nuisance—an obstacle to development, a threat to the middle-class home, and an illegal loiterer. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the squatter began to take on a more complex meaning in local popular culture. Increasingly, the figure became a cultural screen for the projection of local anxieties over the perceived costs of urbanization and especially the loss of historical and natural spaces. Articles and letters that reminisced about "Old New York" used the squatter as the symbol of a simpler bygone era and even lamented the displacement of old squatter's colonies

[26] Edgar Mayhew Bacon, *The Hudson River* (New York: Putnam, 1910), 158–59. For another nostalgic celebration of Inwood and Spuyten Duyvil, see Helen Henderson, *A Loiterer in New York* (New York: Doran, 1917), 387–401. On the continuing power of Irving's story, see Arthur Guiterman, "Spuyten Duyvil's Meaning," *New York Times*, August 7, 1904, 10; Bacon, *Hudson River*, 193; and Barbara White Dailey, "Growing Up in Spuyten Duyvil," *Bronx County Historical Society Journal* 32 (1995): 60.

[27] Pène du Bois, *Ernest Lawson*, 11. On squatters, see Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 52–57. For another nostalgic reading of Lawson's fringe paintings, see "Riverside Church Inspires Artist," *New York Sun*, March 11, 1930.

by the expanding urban fabric. Although the squatter was still construed as an annoyance, the figure was increasingly romanticized as the representative of an older mode of autonomous individualism rooted in the city's own wild frontier. A 1926 *New York Times* article on the landscapes of upper Manhattan celebrated the squatters still found there: "On a mass of rocky ground . . . certain determined settlers have gone to gardening. There are patches of ground surrounded by crazy fences. Decrepit shanties spread about . . . it is a throwback to the old 'shanty land' that New York once knew as part of its squatter life." With the phrase "determined settlers," the passage reworks the squatter as a purposeful, semilegitimate figure, before delighting in the "crazy" idiosyncrasies of that figure's constructions. This quiet endorsement is reaffirmed in a later passage on river squatters: "No grasping landlord can come around to annoy on the first of the month. Each bungalow-boat is the owner's castle."[28] Free of the hassles and legal proscriptions of tenancy, the squatter emerges as a self-reliant pioneer bent on "settling" the city's frontier.

The shanties and "bungalow-boats" that populate many of Lawson's compositions allowed viewers with sentimental inclinations to indulge in this emerging sector of city-border nostalgia. As if to encourage this exploration, the artist's painted shanties and squatters seem to foreground the traits sentimentally assigned to the figure of the squatter in local popular culture. In their focus on the characteristic irregularity of the shanty and its grounds, Lawson's canvases invoke the celebrated idiosyncrasy of the squatter; thus, the zigzagging "crazy" fences of *Squatters Huts*; the low addition to the hut in *Spuyten Duyvil* (see fig. 12); and the steep lots, undulating handrails, and jerry-rigged additions of *Harlem River (River Shacks)* (1908, Wheaton College) and *Pigeon Coop* (1917; fig. 14) all suggest an informal, ad hoc approach to construction. The figures that Lawson occasionally includes in these scenes similarly invoke the hardy independence associated with the squatter in the period. *Winter, Spuyten Duyvil* (see fig. 6), for example, includes a red-faced figure in an unusual, and unfashionable, broad-brimmed hat just left of the painting's center, leaning into a walk up the snowy path that curves through the foreground.[29] In *Pigeon Coop* (fig. 14), a squatter stands on the flat roof of his hut, holding a large tree branch aloft in an ambiguous gesture; the figure might be in the midst of a roof repair or pruning job or could be using the branch to guide his pigeons home to roost. The exact nature of the operation remains undefined, leaving the painted squatter open to a romanticizing interpretation: the figure engages in a private routine that, in its very inscrutability, signals the idiosyncrasy and unconventionality that sentimental New Yorkers attributed to the squatter existence.

"Squalid Cabins" and the "Shivering Poor"

Of course, not all turn-of-the-century audiences were charmed by the figure of the squatter or the other vagaries of the border landscape that Lawson explored. In reviewing the artist's fringe canvases, period critics often struggled with the unpicturesque character of his subjects. In his 1917 article on the painter, for example, the collector Duncan Phillips wondered: "Who but Lawson can bring beauty out of a region infested with squalid cabins, desolate trees, dumping grounds, and all the other impossible familiarities of any suburban wilderness? How does he do it? He seizes upon some cheerful aspect of an otherwise cheerless scene. If there is no redeeming feature, he invents one. This pleasure upon finding or imagining beauty in an ugly place inspires him to outbursts of lyrical painting." Critics had acknowledged the jarring bleakness of Lawson's fringe subjects since at least 1907, when James Huneker noted that the artist's paintings were "for people with nerves and strong stomachs who can see realism, not fictitious life." Although Huneker embraced the "ugly" character of Lawson's subjects as a testament to his commitment to an urban "realism," most critics adopted Phillips's strategy, invoking the ugliness of the artist's subjects while arguing for the ultimately transcendent effect of these paintings. For Phillips and other friendly reviewers, Lawson was a painterly alchemist, taking up the ugly "suburban wilderness" and transforming it to arrive at truly "lyrical painting." This interpretation was built around a fundamental symbolic contradiction. Rather than simply praising the

[28] "Laying a Course around Manhattan Isle," *New York Times*, July 11, 1926, SM8. For nineteenth-century treatments of the squatter as a nuisance, see "Local Intelligence: Our Squatter Population," *New York Times*, July 15, 1867, 8; and "The Colony of the Rocks," *New York Times*, February 24, 1875, 4. For squatter nostalgia, see "Another Landmark Going: Last of Harlem Shanties Damaged by Fire," *New York Times*, August 14, 1901, 7; "Seventh Avenue: Recalls the Time When It Was Inhabited by Squatters," *New York Times*, June 8, 1909, 6; "Memories of New York 50 Years Ago," *New York Times*, July 24, 1910, X1; "Old West Side Men Recall Early Days," *New York Times*, January 22, 1922, 36.

[29] An identical figure appears in *Harlem River (River Shacks)* (1908, Beard Gallery, Wheaton College).

Fig. 14. Ernest Lawson, *Pigeon Coop (along the Harlem River)*, 1917. Oil on canvas; H. 30″, W. 25¼″. (Private collection, courtesy David Finlay Jr. Fine Art.)

painter's grasp of the beautiful, supportive reviews spun a narrative of aesthetic transubstantiation around Lawson's canvases, dramatizing his success in attaining beauty or the spiritual by conjuring the baseness of the original referent. In so doing, they invoked concerns outside the purely aesthetic. In a 1919 review, for example, the collector and editor Frederic Fairchild Sherman gushed about *Pigeon Coop*:

> The Pigeon Coop is truly a poem. For this ballad of a winter's day he employs the rhythm of a flight of white pigeons above a group of sordid sheds in the outskirts of New York, fronting on the Harlem River, the heights of Fort George beyond. We all, I presume, unconsciously read meanings into pictures and to me these pigeons epitomize in life the idea of purity suggested by the snow, and in a way they never would otherwise than as he has pictured them—in flight. His picture has an almost religious significance, which is sensed in the idea of the shivering poor in the dilapidated sheds, their white souls winging in heavenly flight above.

Figured as a "poem" or "ballad," *Pigeon Coop* inspires an enraptured meditation by Sherman on the mystical freedom of the soul "winging in heavenly flight above" the contingent body. As is the case in so many of Lawson's reviews, however, Sherman's rhapsodic narrative of transcendence is complicated by the persistence of the earthly and nontranscendent referent that inspired it, the hard existence scratched out on "the outskirts of New York" by the indigent. Sherman's narrative is freighted throughout with ambivalent references to the mean social conditions of the urban border: the "sordid" and "dilapidated" realities faced by its population of "shivering poor." In these ambivalent phrases, and in the many critical references to the "infested," "neglected," "broken," "scarred," "dreary," and "God-forsaken" character of the subjects with which Lawson worked, we find echoes of a broader turn-of-the-century discourse about the failings of speculative urbanization taking shape around the terrain of the urban fringe.[30]

Some reformist observers drew on their observations of the urban border to criticize the destruction of New York's surviving wildernesses by uncoordinated development. In 1900, for example, the novelist John Kendrick Bangs published "The Booming of Acre Hill," a short story about a fictional fringe development that condemned the devastating effect speculative construction had on local natural spaces. Others focused on the social costs of the city's urbanization. The editor and novelist Henry Cuyler Bunner launched this critical discourse, criticizing the social and aesthetic problems of New York's speculative urbanization in a series of prescient magazine articles, short stories, and essays from the 1880s and 1890s. For Bunner and later reformers, the "squalid" landscape of upper Manhattan appeared as the material result of a city-building process organized around greedy opportunism. Following Bunner, reformers increasingly saw the fringe squatter as a victim of unregulated urbanism and a tragic emblem of the "housing problem" that it produced. In an 1893 study of working-class life in New York, the reformer Helen Stuart Campbell lamented the insecurity and transience of shanty life, noting that the squatter always faced "the chance of an eviction. The steam drill and derrick are tokens of coming change, and no other warning is needed." Others focused on the dirty and unhealthful conditions of shanties; in his 1905 study of urban poverty the sociologist Robert Hunter, for example, condemned the "evils of those small houses, shanties, and cabins which are overcrowded and devoid of all sanitary conveniences and necessities." Not simply a rugged, adventurous hero, the fringe squatter could also embody the social tragedies attending unplanned urbanization in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reckonings.[31]

Some of Lawson's landscapes accommodate this more critical understanding of the fringe and its inhabitants. Even as they explore the idiosyncrasy and individualism associated with the squatter,

[30] Phillips, "Ernest Lawson," 258; Huneker, "Monet, Lawson, Dougherty"; Frederic Fairchild Sherman, "Ernest Lawson," *Art in America*, December 1919, 34. For other reviews that follow the poet-alchemist pattern, see Laurvik, "Ernest Lawson Exhibition," 7; Albert Gallatin, "Ernest Lawson," *International Studio* 59 (July 1916): xii–xv; Guy Pène du Bois, "Ernest Lawson, Optimist," *Arts and Decoration* 6 (September 1916): 505–9; Catharine Ely, "The Modern Tendency in Lawson, Lever, and Glackens," *Art in America*, December 1921, 31–37; "A New Poet-Painter of the Commonplace," undated clipping, reel 1788, frame 1008, Ernest Lawson Papers, AAA; Edgar Holger Cahill, "Ernest Lawson and His America," *Shadowland* 6 (March 1922): 72; review of Ferargil show, ca. 1930, undated/untitled clipping, reel 1788, frame 1061, Ernest Lawson Papers, AAA; "Riverside Church Inspires Artist," *New York Sun*, March 11, 1930.

[31] John Kendrick Bangs, "The Booming of Acre Hill," in his *The Booming of Acre Hill, and Other Reminiscences of Urban and Suburban Life* (New York: Harper, 1900), 1–12; Henry Cuyler Bunner, *Jersey Street and Jersey Lane, Urban and Suburban Sketches* (New York: Scribners, 1896), 34–67; Henry Cuyler Bunner, "Shantytown," *Scribner's Monthly Magazine*, October 1880, 855–69; Helen Stuart Campbell, *Darkness and Daylight* (Hartford, CT: Worthington, 1893), 414; Robert Hunter, *Poverty* (New York: Macmillan, 1905), 341. For a period account of speculation and housing, see Ernest Poole, "The Sweating Device Applied to the Home," *New York Independent*, April 21, 1904, 899. On shanties, see also Robert DeForest and Lawrence Veiller, eds., *The Tenement House Problem*, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1903), 72–73. Bunner, it should be noted, was not a progressive thinker: class and ethnic chauvinisms pervade his writing.

Lawson's shanty pictures also account for the difficult conditions facing that transient figure. The precariousness of his painted shanties, while suggesting the transformative power of market exchange and the certainty of oncoming urbanization, also invokes the enforced transience of the squatter. And Lawson's squatter landscapes frequently suggest the dirtiness and unhealthy dilapidation of shanty life. This is done in part by color: the shanty, in these scenes, is typically rendered in a muddied mix of subdued colors and earth tones. The meandering structure of *Pigeon Coop* is delineated in gray, dark brown, rust, and black pigment, while the cliff-hanging shanty of *Harlem River (River Shacks)* is painted in black, gray, and blue; the old hut of *The Further Heights* (n.d., University of Arizona) is rendered in black, forest green, and burnt ochre. This coloristic emphasis on the dark and dreary represented a significant deviation for Lawson, whose palette was celebrated in the period for its bright, jewellike luminosity. And these muddied hues firmly separated the shanties from the artist's renderings of more normative structures—churches, apartment buildings, farmhouses, and so on—that typically employed cheery primaries and pastels.[32] Dark and obscure, the shanties appear as unsanitary collections of dirty, sooty materials, secondhand dross salvaged from trash heaps and city dumps. Loose brushwork and raw, caked-on pigment only heighten the evocation of the shanties' filthy and dilapidated condition. In *Spuyten Duyvil* (see fig. 12), peach, black, and olive pigment scraped over a layer of brown paint suggests a decrepit, weather-beaten surface; although not dark in color, the roughly painted yellow, green, and beige cabin of *Winter, Spuyten Duyvil* (see fig. 6) seems to bear a similarly battered exterior.

Conclusion

Of course what signified ignoble suffering for some viewers were nostalgic marks of a bygone mode of eccentric individuality for others. For still other audiences, the squatter's shanty was nothing but a fleeting nuisance, a temporary and surmountable obstacle to a profitable future. Lawson's landscape practice—and sometimes his individual paintings—accommodated all of these readings and the broader

[32] See, e.g., *Watkins Farm, North Caldwell* (1906, Montclair Art Museum); *An Abandoned Farm* (ca. 1908, Smithsonian American Art Museum); *River* (ca. 1913, Philadelphia Museum of Art); *Early Spring* (1918, Cleveland Museum of Art); and *Shadows, Spuyten Duyvil Hill* (ca. 1910, Metropolitan Museum of Art).

Fig. 15. Preston Dickinson, *Fort George Hill*, 1915. Oil on canvas; H. 14″, W. 17″. (Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Museum of Art, Utica, NY, 57.132.)

visions of the semideveloped urban border that they implied. As such, they point us to the possibility of a mode of landscape painting attentive to the problems and potential of speculative development and the contradictions of its cultural representations.

Other period artists, it should be noted, sometimes worked along similar lines. Painters such as Childe Hassam and Oscar Bluemner roamed New York's developing outlands and sometimes employed brushwork or spatial arrangements that echoed Lawson's. Preston Dickinson, a student of Lawson, produced a handful of cityscapes in New York that explore the spatial and social contradictions of the speculative fringe. Dickinson's *Fort George Hill* (1915; fig. 15), for example, renders the terrain of upper Manhattan in a cubist lexicon, juxtaposing frame houses, orchards, open fields, subway entrances, billboards, fin de siècle apartment blocks, and streamlined modern flat buildings in an abstracted landscape riven by a zigzagging road. The last element divides the flattened pictorial space into a series of opposed wedges, heightening the painting's evocation of a fringe neighborhood defined by contradiction.

Arthur Dove's assemblage *Huntington Harbor* (1924; fig. 16), one of a series of works that he did while living on a boat in the Long Island harbor, delineates a dream vision of the developing community that echoes the contemporaneous fantasies peddled by area speculators: framed by verdant hills bursting with golden flora, the harbor hosts a salubrious, leisured lifestyle featuring yachting and beachcombing (suggested by a sailboat crafted

Fig. 16. Arthur Dove, *Huntington Harbor*, 1924. Mixed media; H. 13⅛″, W. 19¼″. (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, museum purchase, 1979; photo, Lee Stalsworth.)

from a boating advertisement and an affixed scallop shell) within commuting distance of downtown (note the scrap of paper reading "Long Island Railroad").[33] Set beyond a strip of metal screening that runs across the bottom of the assemblage, this fantasy of leisure and luxury remains as inaccessible for the viewer, however, as it was for the impoverished Dove.

In exploring and painting the semideveloped landscapes around New York's densely urban sectors, Lawson participated in a broader visual dialogue centered on the city border. Unlike many of his fellow artists, however, Lawson devoted the bulk of his career to the speculative landscapes outside of downtown Manhattan. The body of work that resulted from this intensive focus helped the artist to garner a wide following, enjoy consistent critical recognition, and generate a brisk market for his paintings. These successes, I would suggest, stem at least in part from the capacity of Lawson's landscapes to satisfy viewers who were divided over the issue of speculative city building.

Lawson's critics, as we have seen, found elements of fantastic redevelopment and nostalgic reverie in his canvases, alongside disturbing traces of the "squalid" and "desolate"—contradictory interpretations that echo the opposing claims made in the period about the city border and urbanization. Lawson's buyers seem to have been similarly attentive to the urban fringe and the speculative processes that were slowly remaking it. Some of the artist's patrons were directly involved, professionally or privately, in real estate speculation and development. William T. Evans, a pioneering collector of modern American art, dry goods merchant, and major real estate speculator, owned three of Lawson's fringe landscapes. In the 1900s and 1910s, Evans made a series of large-scale speculations involving land holdings, extant buildings, and new construction projects on the upper reaches of Manhattan Island.[34] Other Lawson patrons, including George A. Hearn and Stephen C. Clark, were equally active in real estate speculation around New York.[35] The artist's landscapes also seem to have appealed to patrons connected to the planning community in the city. George D. Pratt, the oil executive and one-time owner of Lawson's painting *Autumn Hills* (1917, Mead Art Museum), actively pursued coordinated urbanization and land-use planning: Pratt headed the New York state conservation commission between 1915 and 1921 and played a role in the preparation of the Regional Plan (1929–31), a City Beautiful–inspired project that sought to rationalize development in the tristate area.[36] Certainly, no single motive can be assigned to the purchases of any of these patrons: Evans, Hearn, Clark, and Pratt assembled broader art collections that had no necessary relation to other aspects of their public or private lives. Nevertheless, these examples of patronage suggest that Lawson's landscapes could appeal to viewers who held contradictory ideas about city building and the developing fringe.

This viewership stretched beyond direct participants in speculative development or city planning.

[33] See, e.g., "$4 Huntington Plaza, Huntington, L.I.," *New York Times*, February 10, 1910, 14.

[34] Evans owned *Early Evening* (n.p.), *The Swimming Hole* (1908, private collection), and *An Abandoned Farm* (ca. 1908, Smithsonian American Art Museum). See William Truettner, "William T. Evans, Collector of American Paintings," *American Art Journal* 3 (1971): 50–71; "The Real Estate Field," *New York Times*, January 15, 1913, 20; "The Real Estate Field," *New York Times*, May 9, 1913, 17; "Says He Got $700,000 from Mills and Gibb," *New York Times*, May 26, 1916, 19.

[35] On Hearn, see Frederick Baekeland, "Collectors of American Painting, 1813–1913," *American Art Review* 3 (November–December 1976): 148–56; "Hearn Art Yields $30,627 First Day," *New York Times*, February 26, 1918, 13; "Real Estate Transfers," *New York Times*, April 27, 1902, 17; "Real Estate Transfers," *New York Times*, July 12, 1907, 12. Clark owned *Pigeon Coop*; see Newlin-Price, *Ernest Lawson*, 34. See also "Stephen C. Clark, Art Patron, Dead," *New York Times*, September 18, 1960, 86; "In the Real Estate Field," *New York Times*, March 31, 1905, 15; "Real Estate Transfers," *New York Times*, September 27, 1911, 17; "The Real Estate Field," *New York Times*, February 5, 1914, 16.

[36] On Pratt, see Pène du Bois, *Ernest Lawson*, 40–41; *National Cyclopedia of American Biography* (New York: White, 1936), s.v. "George D. Pratt"; "Communal Forests Urged," *New York Times*, April 12, 1921, 32; "Sage Plan Surveys for New City Begin," *New York Times*, May 14, 1922, 33. I thank Trinkett Clark for her help untangling the provenance of *Autumn Hills*.

As we have seen, debates about speculative urbanization and its spaces played out in the local press, fictional and historical writing, reform tracts, the theater, and popular imagery, reaching readers and viewers far removed from the processes of city building, who in turn formed their own opinions about speculation and its legacy. It was this broader body of informed New Yorkers, I would suggest, that embraced Lawson's fringe landscapes—an audience that included viewers both decided and ambivalent about the developing city border. By means of innovative formal strategies and compositional arrangements, the artist developed a mode of painting keyed to the uneven and irregular spaces that he depicted. And, by weaving suggestive elements, sites, and subjects into these contradictory canvases, Lawson opened his landscapes to a wide range of viewers who advanced competing interpretations of his border subjects and the speculative processes that were remaking them.