

Edward Mitchell Bannister: *Pond Scene*, n.d., watercolor on paper, H.12 in x W.15.5 in (30.5 cm x 39 cm.); *Beach Scene*, n.d., ink wash on paper, H.21 in x W.16.25 in (53 cm x 41 cm); and *Buttonwoods Cove*, n.d. pencil/graphite and watercolor on paper, H.12 in x W.15.5 in (30.5 cm x 39 cm). Bequest of Ruth C. Ely, early 1970s.

These three delicate landscapes, created by artist Edward Mitchell Bannister [Canadian-American, 1828-1901], testify to the skill of one of the nineteenth-century's most significant black landscape painters and encapsulate the oeuvre of Bannister; he primarily reproduced the picturesque coastal landscape of Rhode Island in his ethereal and expressive painterly style in his works. Additionally, his infatuation with the Rhode Island scenery underscores Bannister's importance to the Rhode Island art establishment, which is corroborated by the large collection of Bannister artworks once owned by the Athenaeum.

Following Bannister's move to Providence in 1870, he appears to have been drawn to the hilly landscape of Rhode Island—and in particular, to the dunes and shoreline of the Narragansett Bay. It is probable that the pond and beach scenes in this group depict Rhode Island vistas, as the works share the same serene introspection, dreamlike manner, and common land features, such as rolling dunes, dense wild grass, and tranquil pools of water, seen in such identified works as his *Sabin Point, Narragansett Bay* (1885).

In documenting a more recognizable scene along of Narragansett Bay, Bannister captured the popular summer retreat, Buttonwoods Cove, in his eponymous (if also undated) graphite and pencil drawing. Tucked beneath the town of Warwick, Rhode Island, Buttonwoods Cove was established by a group of Baptists in 1871.¹ Led by Reverend Moses Bixby of Providence's Cranston Street Baptist Church, the community sought to “establish a summer colony similar to the Methodist campground at Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard, where they could relax, play, and worship in a wholesome environment.”² Buttonwoods Cove became very popular, due to the close-knit community, and lack of commercial development. Still a well-liked neighborhood today, the area is full of beautiful historical homes and quaint attractions, such as a duckpin bowling alley, community tennis courts, and its closeness to the water. Drawn in Bannister's signature sketchy, unfinished style, the lush trees encircle the rocky shoreline that hugs a small bay. Here, Bannister's fascination with nature's effects—wind, light, and clouds—is on full display. Despite its limited tonal range, this black-and-white image successfully captures the quiet tranquility of this waterfront retreat.

By the time Bannister is likely to have created these works – sometime after the 1870s – he had become a well-respected, even celebrated artist; utilizing educational opportunities to overcome racial bias. Although Bannister earned much of his artistic education through the Boston rather than the Providence Athenaeum, success through knowledge is a concept dear to the values of both institutions. As Francis Wayland remarked at the inauguration of the Providence library in 1838, because “God has scattered the seeds of preeminent ability as profusely among the poor as

¹ Christine Dunn, “Neighborhood of the Week: Buttonwoods began as a summer place,” *Providence Journal*, February 27, 2016, accessed May 1, 2016, <http://www.providencejournal.com/>

² *Ibid.*

among the rich,” the library aimed from its start to provide the public with tools for personal enrichment.³

Shortly before Bannister’s birth in New Brunswick, Canada in 1828, the British had abolished slavery in all of their territories.⁴ Bannister was therefore able to attend public grammar school, receiving “a better education than persons in his position.”⁵ Although he never studied art formally as a young boy, Bannister soon earned local recognition for his talent. While still a young man he moved to Boston, a city that would significantly impact his identity as an artist.

Upon Bannister’s 1848 arrival in Boston, he found a city that promoted the arts and abolitionism in nearly equal measure. Known as “the American Athens,” Boston offered Bannister the opportunity to frequent libraries, museums, and galleries – a form of self-education that allowed him to hone his craft and expand his worldview.⁶ The city provided Bannister with early opportunities to show his work, as well, in such venues as the Boston Art Club and Museum.⁷

Two institutions, in particular, propelled Bannister’s formal training in Boston. In 1863, he became the first man of color to study drawing at the Boston Lowell Institute, under the noted sculptor, William Rimmer.⁸ Perhaps through Rimmer’s connections there, Bannister also began to frequent art exhibitions at the Boston Athenaeum, then one of the primary exhibition venues in the city. Given the institution’s regular-advertisements in the abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*, it is likely that African-Americans were welcome, or at the very least tolerated, at its exhibitions.⁹ Not only did the Boston Athenaeum offer an education for Bannister, but it also dramatically altered his artistic style. Greatly affected by the French Barbizon artwork on display at the library, he adopted the style of *plein air* landscape painting that soon became his artistic signature.

The Barbizon movement originated in the mid-nineteenth century with a group of artists in the village of Barbizon, France, about forty miles to the southeast of Paris.¹⁰ Rejecting the grand, classicizing subjects of the previous generation, artists of the Barbizon School worked directly

³Jane Lancaster, *Inquire Within: A Social History of the Providence Athenaeum since 1753* (Providence: The Providence Athenaeum, 2003), 58

⁴Roman Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 41

⁵*Ibid.* [p. #?]

⁶Jaunita Marie Holland, “Reaching Through the Veil: African American Artist Edward Mitchell Bannister,” in *Edward Mitchell Bannister 1828-1901*, edited by Jane Philbrick (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 18

⁷Roman Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 42

⁸Jaunita Marie Holland, “Reaching Through the Veil: African American Artist Edward Mitchell Bannister,” in *Edward Mitchell Bannister 1828-1901*, edited by Jane Philbrick (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 22

⁹*Ibid.*, 18

¹⁰Jean Bouret, *The Barbizon School and 19th Century French Landscape Painting* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1972), 9

from nature, attempting to capture their own state of mind before the beautiful vistas they painted. A precursor to Impressionism, the Barbizon School is characterized by soft and loose brushstrokes, and a muted palette, and the suggestion of mood conveyed through natural form.

The three Bannister works in the Providence Athenaeum's collection exemplify his allegiance to the Barbizon style. These gentle and light-filled scenes are suffused with palpable feelings of serene meditation. Bannister quietly observes the intimate details of nature; he paints the reflection of the wide expanse of sky in still pools of water and captures natural formations in motion, such trees swaying in the breeze, and clouds racing across the sky. In his tranquil *Pond Scene*, Bannister plays with light and dark in subtle ways, sunlight peeks through ominous grey clouds, softly illuminating the pond and its encircling, leafy trees. His mastery of light and shadow is displayed in an even more pronounced fashion in his *Beach Scene*, where the sun radiates down on a peaceful beachside where, tall grasses spill onto the sand, touching the gleaming water in an almost human way. Bannister expertly captures the visual similarity between the rolling Rhode Island landscape and the voluminous clouds above. Though small in scale and in some ways unfinished, these paintings epitomize Bannister's training as well as his birthright; raised by the sea in New Brunswick, and powerfully drawn to it in Rhode Island, the ocean remained a constant theme throughout his life.

Bannister's post-Boston career was distinguished by numerous awards and honors. In 1876, he won the Bronze Medal in at the ~~1876~~ United States Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia with his masterful work, *Under the Oaks* (1874); an art critic for *The Boston Traveler* declared the painting "the greatest of its kind that we have seen by an American artist."¹¹ Other signs of his growing reputation include his involvement with the Providence Art Club, which Bannister helped to establish in 1880, and his appointment to the Board of Directors for the Rhode Island School of Design in 1878. In the years 1878, 1881, and 1884, he would receive the Bronze Medal the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics Association for his landscape oils.¹²

Bannister's work was not only celebrated in New England, but also collected by forward-thinking Rhode Island patrons even well after his death in 1901. Distinguished Athenaeum member and benefactor, Ruth C. Ely [1881-1973], the daughter of former Athenaeum President, Joseph C. Ely, was one such collector; after her death she generously bequeathed the scrapbook of Bannister's painted sketches, drawings, and watercolors to which these three works originally belonged.¹³ Although the Athenaeum's Board received several offers to purchase the scrapbook by 1975, its directors temporarily deferred the decision, meanwhile loaning its Bannisters Frederick Douglass Gallery of African Art. In April 1977, a subcommittee of the Board led by John S. Chafee (father of then-United States Senator from Rhode Island, John L. H. Chafee) recommended selling the majority of Bannister scrapbook to public, educational, or charitable institutions.¹⁴ The scrapbook was auctioned later that year, netting the library just over \$11,000.

¹¹ Roman Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 44

¹² *Ibid.*, 49

¹³ Jane Lancaster, *Inquire Within: A Social History of the Providence Athenaeum since 1753* (Providence: The Providence Athenaeum, 2003), 162

¹⁴ *Ibid.* [p. #?]

The decision to sell Bannister's work—although not as controversial as the library's later, 2005 sale of John James Audobon's *Birds of America*—still ruffled feathers in the Providence art community. A writer from *The Providence Journal* observed that the Athenaeum encountered “resentment from several quarters interested in Rhode Island art and artists, [who felt] the degree of loss to the history of Rhode Island art.”¹⁵

Sadly, history has proven these critics right. Bannister's reputation, which had dimmed by the period of the Athenaeum sale, has only increased since the 1970s. Once a celebrated regional artist, today he is considered a major figure within the canon of African-American art, as a whole. However reduced in number, the remarkable Bannister works that remain in the library's collection demonstrate one man's triumph over racial prejudice and the critical educational role that a membership library played in furthering his career.

¹⁵ Edward A. Giarusso, “Ruing an Earlier Athenaeum Loss,” *The Providence Journal*, June 2, 2003, accessed April 8, 2016 in the Providence Athenaeum