

Mysteries of the Artist Formerly Known as Fitz Hugh Lane

by Margaret Stocker

Mystery surrounds the American Luminist painter born 203 years ago in the fishing village of Gloucester, Massachusetts, who sometimes signed his oils “Fitz H. Lane.” It has recently been discovered that the “H” did not stand for “Hugh” even though all articles and books published in the 20th century about his tranquil harbor scenes and ship portraits refer to him as Fitz Hugh Lane. In response to a 2004 symposium in Gloucester, students of art history, maritime scholars, curators and genealogists are researching and writing and changing museum labels. John Wilmerding, now Sarofim Professor in American Art at Princeton University, has republished his 1971 monograph on the artist, retitled Fitz Henry Lane.

This is only one of the “mysteries” about an artist whose works sell in the millions and hang in major museums and in the White House. The artist was either the third or fourth child and may or may not have been poisoned as a two-year old. In May 2007, the Cape Ann Historical Museum will open an exhibition, “The Mysteries of Fitz Henry Lane,” which will travel to Spanierman Gallery in New York City, in the fall. Recently, Professor Wilmerding presented new research on Fitz Henry Lane on behalf of the India House Foundation.

Which brings us to the unsigned lithographed sheet music, “The Ship Is Ready” in the collection of South Street Seaport Museum. Was Lane the artist and what is the subject? The lithograph is identified only as the work of Pendleton’s Lithographers of Boston, 1833, where Lane worked during this period. The ship is similar to a lithograph “View in Boston Harbor” in The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, which is signed

**Ay, tear her tattered ensign down!
Long has it waved on high,
And many an eye has danced to see
That banner in the sky;
Beneath it rung the battle shout,
And burst the cannon’s roar;
The meteor of the ocean air
Shall sweep the clouds no more.**

“Old Ironsides” by Oliver Wendell Holmes, 1830 (first verse)



**When the slow and gentle motion
Heaves the bosom of the ocean
While in peace thy back is riding,
And the silver moon is gliding
O'er the sky with tranquil splendour
Where the shining hosts attend her,
Let thy brighted widow be,
Country, home and friend to thee!**

“The Ship Is Ready” by Harriet Flagg Gould, composed by Oliver Shaw, 1833 (third verse)

“Drawn by F H Lane” and published by another Boston firm, Thomas Moore, which produced lithographs from 1836 to 1840. The same wharf and granite building appear in an oil painting dated 1841-1842, titled “View of Boston with Constitution Wharf” and attributed to Lane by Professor Wilmerding in 1964. So now we have three artworks of Boston Harbor depicting the same unnamed ship.

Perhaps America’s most famous vessel is the USS *Constitution*, built in Edmund Hart’s shipyard (now the U.S. Coast Guard Station in Boston’s North End, across the River from the Charlestown Navy Yard, where she is a floating museum.) The battleship was built between 1794 and 1797 by order of President George Washington and served in the Quasi-War with France (1798-1801) and the Barbary Wars (1803-1805.) When the U.S. Navy commissioned a study in 1828 to evaluate the cost to repair her, the public feared “Old Ironsides” might be scrapped. Oliver Wendell Holmes’ poem made an impassioned plea to save the ship that cannon balls bounced off during her battle against HMS *Guerriere* in 1812. In response to the public outcry, Congress approved repair funds and “Old Ironsides” was still in dry-dock at Constitution Wharf when the music and lithograph, “The Ship Is Ready” was printed in 1833.

Do these three images, early in Lane’s career, refer to the USS *Constitution*? If so why are the gun ports for her cannons not shown, and why does she not fly a naval ensign?

Did Lane instead use a generic ship view that he copied from a “how to” drawing book? We can only guess. These are only some of the “Mysteries of Fitz Henry Lane.” ↴