

NJS Presents**Museums and Archives; Artifacts and Documents****In this Issue:***Alfred S. Roorbach:**A Skilled Artist in Watercolor From New Jersey***By Joseph W. Hammond****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v5i1.195>**

The two watercolors discussed in this essay that depict scenes along the Monmouth Bayshore are signed “A S Roorbach.” A private collector purchased them from a local antique shop in the mid-1980s, even though the identity of the artist was not known at the time. The watercolors were subsequently acquired in the summer of 2019 by the Monmouth County Park System. Searchable databases available today on the internet have finally provided information about the life and career of this talented artist.

In the mid-1980s, two skillfully rendered watercolors turned up in an antiques shop near Freehold, New Jersey. The landscape scenes depicted the Monmouth Bayshore – one a view of the Keyport waterfront looking west from roughly the foot Walnut Street, and the other looking east from the Keansburg / Point Comfort area toward the Navesink Highlands in the distance. Both displayed mastery in the handling of watercolor, especially in the treatment of a vibrant sunset sky in the Keyport work, the reflections of that colorful sky in the water, and in the other the handling of shoal waters around a fishing weir just offshore. Dating the two pictures proved to be relatively easy due to what the Keyport view did or did not show. The Benjamin Terry shipyard was captured in its later location on the town’s waterfront. But the long railroad pier built in 1880 out into New York Bay is absent, thereby indicating that the watercolors were executed perhaps in the late 1870s. Both were signed “A S Roorbach” in a distinctive conjoined

manner. The identity of this artist remained elusive until the advent of internet search engines and such searchable online databases as Ancestry.com, GenealogyBank.com, and Newspapers.com.



Keypoint Waterfront at Sunset, ca. 1875 – 1879. Watercolor on paper, 8.5 inches high by 12.5 inches wide. Signed “A S Roorbach” lower right. Collection of the Monmouth County Park System, Lincroft, NJ.

Alfred Sabbaton Roorbach was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on February 28, 1850, a son of John Ogilvie Roorbach Jr. (1826 – 1913) and Amelia Sophia Lawton (1825 – 1908).¹ Originally from New York, at the time the family lived in Camden, New Jersey, where the head of the household was employed as a bookkeeper.² Census records indicate that the Roorbachs moved rather frequently. In 1860, they lived in De Pere, Wisconsin;³ in 1870 in

¹ *Boston Transcript*, 7 February 1912. As cited in the American Genealogical-Biographical Index. ([Retrieved](#) 27 July 2004.)

² US Population Census, 1850, New Jersey, Camden County, Camden South Ward, 83. ([Retrieved](#) 17 November 2019.)

³ US Population Census, 1860, Wisconsin, Brown County, De Pere, 494. ([Retrieved](#) 17 November 2019.)

adjacent Green Bay, Wisconsin;⁴ in 1880 in Elizabeth, New Jersey,⁵ and by 1900 in Groton, Connecticut.⁶ John Roorbach held such positions as a clerk in a lumber office, a photographer, or as a day laborer.

By his early twenties, Alfred Roorbach had apparently shown some promise as an artist. On 17 February 1874, the *Daily State Gazette* of Green Bay noted that “A. S. Roorbach of De Pere is pursuing painting in Chicago under the direction of a skillful artist. An art publication has written in regard to him, ‘One large picture on his easel would not disgrace an old artist.’”⁷ By April of the following year a Chicago publication noted that, “A. S. Roorbach, one of the young artists of Chicago, who has gained a warm circle of friends, has gone to New York to spend several years in self-improvement in landscape painting.”⁸



Monmouth Bayshore Fishing Weir with Sailboat, ca. 1875 – 1879. Watercolor on paper, 8.5 inches high by 12.5 inches wide. Signed “A S Roorbach” lower left. Collection of the Monmouth County Park System, Lincroft, NJ.

⁴ US Population Census, 1870, Wisconsin, Brown County, Green Bay First Ward, 216. ([Retrieved](#) 21 November 2019.)

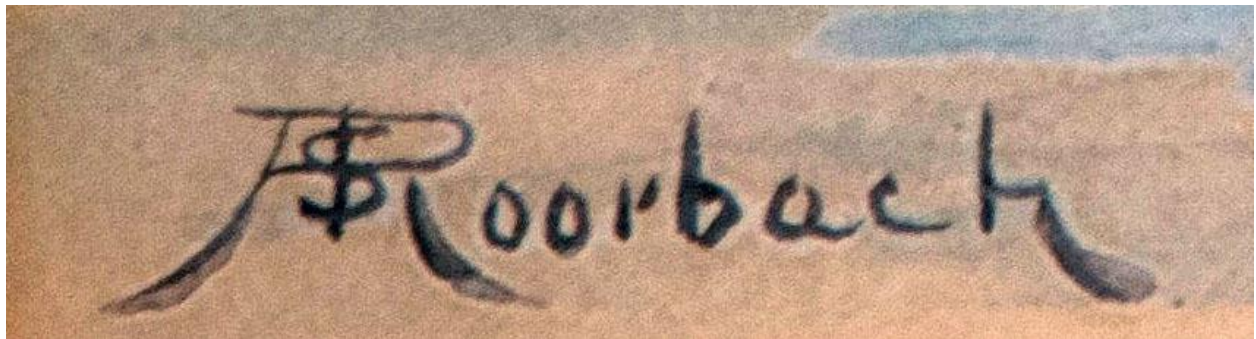
⁵ US Population Census, 1880, Union County, Union Township, 350. ([Retrieved](#) 17 November 2019.)

⁶ US Population Census, 1900, New London County, Groton Town, 5118. ([Retrieved](#) 17 November 2019.)

⁷ *Daily State Gazette*, 17 February 1874, as quoted in the *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 17 February 1974. ([Retrieved](#) 15 November 2019.)

⁸ *The Daily Inter-Ocean*, Chicago, IL, 14 April 1875. ([Retrieved](#) 15 November 2019.)

By the summer of 1880, the entire Roorbach family had relocated to Union County, New Jersey. The census of that year recorded that Alfred S., age thirty, was employed as an “Artist in Painting,” as was his younger brother George Selden Roorbach (1860 – 1930). A third member of the household, listed as a boarder, was Frank D. Grafflin (age 22), whose occupation was also described as an “Artist in Painting.”⁹ The family remained in the area at least through 1885, when they were listed in the New Jersey State Census as living in Union Township, Union County.¹⁰ Alfred Roorbach appeared in the Elizabeth, New Jersey, directory for 1883-84 as an artist located at 216 Broad Street and living in Union.¹¹ He appeared again in the 1886-87 directory, boarding at 116 Broad Street and under the business name of “Roorbach & Bro.” in partnership with George.¹²



The distinctive conjoined signature of Alfred S. Roorbach, taken from the work entitled *Monmouth Bayshore Fishing Weir with Sailboat*.

In 1879, Alfred Roorbach began exhibiting his work at the National Academy of Design in New York City. He continued to do so every year through 1891, listing his address as of New York even while actually still a resident in Union County.¹³ A search of the New York City directories from 1875-76 through 1891-92 failed to turn up a single reference to him, although his brother George appeared for the first time in 1891-92 as “Roorbach, G. Selden. Artist. H. 449

⁹ US Population Census, 1880.

¹⁰ New Jersey, State Census, 1885, Union County, Union Township, 67. ([Retrieved](#) 17 November 2019.)

¹¹ Cook & Hall, compilers and publishers, *Elizabeth City Directory* for 1883-84 (Elizabeth, NJ: Elizabeth Herald Steam Printing House, 1883), 252.

¹² Cook & Hall, compilers and publishers, *Elizabeth City Directory* for 1886-87 (Elizabeth, NJ: Central N. J. Herald Print, 1886), 243.

¹³ Peter Hastings Falk, ed., *Who Was Who in American Art* (Madison, CT: Sound View Press, 1999), v. 3, 2820.

W. 43d.”¹⁴ Alfred, however, may well have continued his art studies in the city during those years. He apparently also became a member of the Salmagundi Club, a prestigious art organization founded in 1871. At any rate, association with the art world in New York certainly contributed more to his growing reputation than listing his address as in New Jersey.

The Salmagundi Club opened its first annual black and white exhibit at the Kurtz Gallery in New York on February 13, 1879. The art critic of the *New York Herald*, in commenting on a number of works on display, noted that “‘Weirdness,’ a landscape, by A. S. Roorbach, is a strong bit of work in oil, in which the foreground foliage is full of suggestiveness. The choice of the landscape outlines in the middle and far distance is not happy.”¹⁵ A review in the *New York Herald* of the Salmagundi Club’s second annual black and white exhibit held at the National Academy of Design in December of 1880 commented that “as many of the club members are well known illustrative artists the collection is worthy of note.” In a listing of exhibitors, the writer observed that “A. S. Roorbach has good little landscapes.”¹⁶ The next annual exhibit of December 1881 drew intense condemnation from the art critic of *The New York Times*. He railed at length against the increasing use among young artists of thick impasto, dabs of color applied over black and white pigments, and what he perceived as a lack of good drawing or delineation. This may in fact have been a critical review of Impressionism, then rising in popularity. After commenting on the bold errors he observed in works by several well-known artists such as George Inness Jr., the writer then had this to say:

Mr. A. S. Roorbach is less bold. In No. 282, “Gloaming,” a delicate fancy of a twilight landscape, the burglarious colors that have been scaling the walls of the Club with such success confine themselves to modest shades. It is not urged that there is any particular crime against art of the use of evasions like this. It is only maintained that certain fine artistic qualities belong to each one of the branches of art expression, and that it is silly, and, moreover, wasteful of power, to force one branch over into the domain of another. A

¹⁴ *Trow’s New York City Directory...For the Year Ending May 1, 1892* (New York: Trow’s Printing and Bookbinding Co., 1891), 1162.

¹⁵ *New York Herald*, 15 February 1879. ([Retrieved](#) 24 November 2019.)

¹⁶ *New York Herald*, 10 December 1880. ([Retrieved](#) 21 November 2019.)

touch of color such as dilute sepia will give is often excellent. In the right hands even the heaviest impasto of oils can be used with such evident propriety that the critic and his rules are overborne. But the fact that a master can take liberties does not warrant a host of indifferent workmen abandoning the legitimate lines, and showing their weakness doubly by the use of a medium they do not fully grasp.¹⁷

Roorbach was apparently following a more traditional style of artistic expression rather than venturing into new techniques of the day.

After 1891, Alfred Roorbach largely drops out of sight. He may have moved with his parents to the vicinity of Groton, Connecticut, as a March 1898 notice in the East Hartford news column of the *Hartford Courant* provided the following information: “Water Color Exhibit. A. S. Roorbach of Mystic gave an exhibition of water colors at the Raymond Library yesterday afternoon and evening and it will continue this afternoon and evening. The exhibition is given under the auspices of the Art Club. There are about sixty-five water colors and in addition to these a number of pen and ink sketches and some pictures made by a special process.”¹⁸

With that event, the life and career of Alfred S. Roorbach, then forty-eight years old, disappear from the historical record, at least as of this writing. He may have died soon after, or perhaps he just gave up painting and went “off the grid,” to use a modern expression. Brother George S. Roorbach continued as an artist, especially in California where he lived for some years near Santa Clara. He died in Cape May, New Jersey, in 1930.¹⁹ George’s estranged wife, Eloise Jenkins Roorbach (1868 – 1961), also gained recognition as a West Coast artist, residing in San Diego. Given the longstanding creative character of this particular family, it seems strange that only a handful of their works have appeared in art markets in recent decades.

An art exhibit held in Green Bay, Wisconsin, in 1946, provides one last footnote to the artistic endeavors of Alfred S. Roorbach. The *Green Bay Press-Gazette* for February 25 advised its readers that, “This week will be the last that the public can visit the Neville public museum’s

¹⁷ *The New York Times*, 11 December 1881. ([Retrieved](#) 15 November 2019.)

¹⁸ *Hartford Courant*, 2 March 1898. ([Retrieved](#) 15 November 2019.)

¹⁹ “George S. Roorbach,” *FindAGrave.com* ([Retrieved](#) 18 November 2019.)

exhibit of art borrowed from homes in Green Bay and De Pere. A new show will start 3 March... Mr. and Mrs. E. W. Lawton are exhibiting 'Sweet Clover and Daisies,' 'Lone Oak' and 'Avenue of Evergreens,' all oils by Alfred Roorbach, a cousin of Mr. Lawton. They were painted in the late 19th century."²⁰

To summarize, the two expertly rendered watercolors of Keyport, New Jersey, and vicinity stand as fine examples of landscape art by a late nineteenth century artist who spent about fifteen years in the northern New Jersey and New York City area. Of the few known works by Alfred S. Roorbach, these two views dating from about 1875 to 1879 are unusual in that they depict specific locations that are still readily identifiable. Roorbach achieved some critical acclaim during his lifetime. He deserves recognition today as one of the many talented artists who found artistic inspiration while visiting Monmouth County, New Jersey.

Joseph W. Hammond retired in February 2019 as Director of Collections for the Monmouth County Historical Association, having engaged in the study of New Jersey history, material culture, and architecture for more than forty years. He served as Director of the Monmouth County Historical Association from 1978 to 1981. After an unrelated business career, Hammond returned to the Association in 2011 as a consulting archivist for the Hartshorne Family Papers project. In 2015, he rejoined the staff as Curator of Museum Collections, a position that was expanded to Director of Collections in 2016. Hammond holds a B. A. degree from Boston University, and an M. A. degree in History Museum Studies from the Cooperstown Graduate Program of the State University of New York, College at Oneonta.

²⁰ *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 25 February 1946. ([Retrieved](#) 15 November 2019.)