

The Stones of Stonington



Courtesy Stonington Historical Society

WM Timothy Love

The Stones of Stonington are a series of eight oil paintings representing the oldest, original stone buildings currently standing in the Borough of Stonington, Connecticut.

These paintings are my first experience with oils. My early days in art were largely with watercolors, as my high school art teacher, Virginia Burton, was a fine watercolorist. I went on to study art, with a graphic design focus, at Miami University in Ohio. However, after one year of studying basic drawing and design, I decided to switch majors to marketing and advertising. I had decided that my confidence level in art was not sufficient to permit me to pursue this as a sole means of support. Nonetheless, I continued to take an occasional, elective painting course in watercolors or acrylics at Miami and later during graduate school at the University of Illinois.

I work in New York City during the weekdays and return to Stonington for weekends with my family.

Painting the Stones of Stonington has been an exhilarating, creative learning journey. I arrived at the idea shortly after moving to Stonington in August 2000. We had been visiting Stonington for over twenty years, prior to moving here following our return from a six-year European advertising assignment. I had not lifted a pencil or brush in years and wanted to do so again.

The paintings originated from photos first taken in early March 2001. It took me until then to get going and do something about starting the paintings. What helped most was a suggestion by family friend and long-time Stonington resident MZ Thomas to my wife Kate, that we have a Love family art showing at Noah's sometime later in the year (I couldn't allow myself to participate in the show with works done in my youth!).

I took some additional photos of some of the buildings in summer 2001. I discovered that the settings evolved very differently when foliage came in and also due to the presence of more sunlight in the summer months.

This means that each painting is not a pure rendering. There are changes in the environments around the buildings and some "flaws" that may only be visible to the artist (Kate and my son Mac took exception to my using the term "flaws" here. They feel there are no such things as flaws. Rather, in art it is "interpretation" and "artistic license"). Either way, I was trying to capture my impression of each

building and setting, while also reflecting on the personal thoughts at the time each painting was approached.

The first challenge was deciding to do eight paintings. MZ told me that the house on Main Street at Cannon Square is not the original construction that was there. Also, there is actually a second stone building in the back of the Monsanto plant that is not visible from the street. So, I decided “eight is enough” and that people will get the idea. In April, I bought eight standard size canvases to the delight of the woman that runs the art store in Groton, with all the oils and supplies I needed to get started with. Letting myself get consumed at the office in New York, I did not start drawing the structures on the canvases until late June.

My family remembers this event vividly. I had decided that I would paint all eight paintings at the same time! My thinking was that, in this way, the color of the stone would be consistent and the colors of the trees would be similar. Not having done oils before, I figured that this would save paint as well. So, I set up all eight canvases like an assembly line in the basement of our house and said to myself “have at it”.

I started with pencil sketches on the canvases one Saturday. Two weeks later, with advice from Mac, I gave the canvases a yellow foundation. Two weeks after that, I painted a common blue sky on all eight pieces.

Due to an extensive business schedule and because I had to let the paint dry, I was unable to start on the first painting, The Ocean Bank at Cannon Square, until the Sunday of The Blessing of The Fleet in Stonington on July 29th. Immediately, I learned that oils are different on the brush from watercolors and acrylics. It also requires some severe planning and care with what you are doing, because cleaning paint off your face, arms, legs and neck can be very challenging (holding wet paint brushes in my mouth and wiping my brow with the back my hand didn't help either). I became very discouraged. My vision of painting these all, “assembly style” and “lickety-split” went right out the window!

The following weekend, August 3rd and for most, but not all weekends hence, I painted in earnest until I finally “gave up” on September 23rd, my son Harry's birthday.

The following pages provide some insight into each painting, in the order that they were painted.



The Ocean Bank at Cannon Square

I started with this one because it is such a “signature” of Stonington. I had figured if I got it done and none of the others, I would at least have a new painting for the show. Painting a cannon was a real challenge for me. I added some tree presence on the right to help keep some focus on the bank. This canvas is more primitive than the others, in my opinion. I learned a lot from this one, like painting a picket fence with oils can be a bear, if you don’t plan!

When I cleaned the brushes each time I painted, I would spread the remaining unused color onto one of the other paintings that I had not fully started. I found that as I went onto these other paintings, I would invariably “go back” and dabble with The Ocean Bank painting.



The Monsanto Plant

This was the first time I experienced what Mac told me he often experiences when he is creating—“Magic.” I was having a very tense time handling the oil on the brush while painting the plant windows. I got frustrated and decided to call it quits for that day. But, as I started to wrap up, I noticed I had squeezed out a lot of gray, brown and blue on the palette. I couldn’t waste the paint, so I hurried to just put it down as a base on the canvas.

The next thing I knew, the rocks and the water were there and they looked right. It happened in a matter of seconds. I really don’t remember focusing on this at all.

The House at Main and Broad Streets

This is the first of my interpretations of the Trumbull houses. Apparently, Trumbull, one of the borough's earliest settlers, built this stone house for himself and two others for his daughters. The other two are the Elm Street House and a wooden house near the stone house at Cannon Square, the latter having been rebuilt, according to MZ.

Painting the Main and Broad Street Stone, required a start and a total redo. The second pictures from the summer were far prettier, with more sunlight. By summer however, there was a tree on the left of the sidewalk blocking the view of the house. I decided to leave that tree out, as it was not really a factor in the March photo from which I had started the painting.

I liked the light in the summer; especially the way the light came through the trees onto the grass on the town square. This is a special painting for us. It is where we live.

The Calvary Church

Appropriately located on Church Street, this one had me "working the street," so to speak, as the dominant space was the street itself.

It was lying there like a lox, until I inadvertently got a dab of white paint on the previously painted blue sky. When I took my little finger and tried to wipe it up, a cloud happened! Each of the other clouds was subsequently "pinky-painted" in this manner. And this, in turn, helped me know what to do with all that road space.



The Elm Street House

The stone on this house went very smoothly. I decided not to overdo it and liked the resulting impression. Kate and Mac liked the way the houses on the left filled in, so I did not overdo those either. At first, I couldn't figure out why they liked that portion of the canvas, but I later realized it was because I was learning to loosen up. The background elements were never as precisely focused as the foreground elements and everything is not equal. I also learned how to better approach a picket fence on this one. It helped me move on to the next painting—The House At Cannon Square.



This painting has been purchased and now resides (appropriately enough) in the Elm Street House.

The House At Cannon Square

This was the sixth painting I started working on. In reality, I got so frustrated with it that I moved away to work on the Lighthouse and then the Customs House. This painting was frustrating, because of a sense of quiet openness I felt from the time I took the picture, to even now when I stand in the same spot looking at the scene in reality. The word that comes to mind is vacant. There is an odd quiet and kind of attitude I sense at this scene.



That feeling is in the painting, in my opinion. Maybe my body was trying to alert me to something that was about to happen. Anyway, I set this one aside the weekend following September 11th and did not return to it until I had finished the final two paintings. When I did come back to it, it seemed right to let it stay peaceful and subdued.

The Stonington Lighthouse – painted Sept 16

I guess the troubles of the week prior and the fact that my office in New York looks down on the scene had some impact on me with this one. We saw it happen in New York as the tragic events unfolded. I stayed in the city until Friday evening when I came home to my beloved family and gathered together.



Rising early that Sunday morning before the others, I went to the basement and made the sky rain. I also decided to see the stone wall in front of the Lighthouse, because that is what you see. In most paintings and drawings of the Lighthouse, the stone wall is either minimized or not seen at all. For me, the Lighthouse is not the Lighthouse without the wall. I have been back to look at it many times since painting it and always nod to myself about my feelings that Sunday after September 11th. There is hope in the Lighthouse.

The Custom House

The initial sketch of the Custom House seemed to work right away. This is why I left it until the end. I was afraid to “mess it up.” After finishing the Lighthouse, I got this bright idea of painting large tear drops all over it—sort of a surrealistic ending to the series like Dali or Magritte (I make this comparison in all humility). Instead, I decided to paint the cold of winter, with no leaves and the low light of that time of year casting long shadows and coming through the columns.



I have never seen anyone at the Custom House. It has a classic character, sort of like a temple to the whaling business of an earlier time in the town's history. The painting has a distortion in perspective. I thought it was my mistake, but when you look at the building from the front, you can see it is actually not perpendicular to the road and sidewalk. It is one of my favorite buildings in Stonington.

I have wondered how Stonington got its name. Maybe it is because of how the town fought off the British invaders so well, off the point in 1814. Most probably, it is because of the stony shoreline along the harbor's edge.

For me, the stones became Stonington, and Stonington became "The Stones."

Tim Lane

November 11, 2001