



HAWTHORNE

Fine Art

John Heyl Raser (1824-1901)

Born in Mobile, Alabama in 1824 John Heyl Raser spent most of his life in Pennsylvania. He lived for several years in Milton, Pennsylvania where he worked as a druggist. In 1851, Raser and his family moved from Milton to Reading, Pennsylvania. In order to accommodate his large family and drug store stock the move was made aboard a packet boat that traveled through the old Union Canal.¹ In Reading, Raser established two drugstores located on North Sixth Street and on Penn Street. The store on Penn street became an attraction for visitors near and far as it was the first in the region to be illuminated by gas.² The store was also notable for having the first soda fountain in the area.³

By 1865, Raser was already working as an artist and teacher from his North 6th Street location. An advertisement placed by Raser in the *Reading Times* indicates that he offered paintings, engravings, and drawings as well as artists' materials and stationary for sale. Raser also offered "neatly executed" patent designs and cleaning and restoration of old paintings.⁴ The same year, Raser exhibited, "some beautiful paintings, pastel and oil," at the Reading Agricultural Fair.⁵

When Raser retired in the spring of 1872 he transferred ownership of his North 6th Street drug store to his son John B. Raser, a graduate of the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy.⁶ Raser, "a lover of art, music, and flowers," established a studio in the Philadelphia neighborhood of Germantown "where he painted his most pretentious canvas."⁷ During the same period the newly retired artist exhibited two oil paintings including a view of Yosemite Valley and a work entitled *The King of the Pasture* at Janetzky & Co.'s on Philadelphia's Chestnut Street.⁸ In the fall of the same year, Raser exhibited "a beautiful shell picture" at Kline, Eppihimer & Co.'s, a dry goods store in Reading.⁹

In 1875, Raser's large scale painting *The Falls of French Creek* was exhibited at Kline, Eppihimer & Co.'s and later exhibited in New York. The location depicted was a popular summer destination in Chester County just miles from Pottstown. Working from sketches, Raser

¹ "Dr. John B. Raser Dies at Age 88," *Reading Times* (Reading, Pennsylvania), Tue, Feb 14, 1939, 1

² "Dr. John Raser at Home For 86th Birthday," *Reading Times* (Reading, Pennsylvania), Tue, Dec 8, 1936, 2.

³ "Dr. John B. Raser Dies at Age 88," *Reading Times* (Reading, Pennsylvania), Tue, Feb 14, 1939, 1

⁴ "John Heyl Raser," *Reading Times* (Reading, Pennsylvania), Mon, Jul 3, 1865, 3.

⁵ "The Fair," *Reading Times* (Reading, Pennsylvania), Thu, Oct 5, 1865, 2.

⁶ "Notice," *Reading Times* (Reading, Pennsylvania), Wed, May 1, 1872, 1.

⁷ "Dr. J.B. Raser Retires," *Reading Times* (Reading, Pennsylvania), Mon, Jul 2, 1906, 3.

⁸ "Local Affairs," *Reading Times* (Reading, Pennsylvania), Wed, May 1, 1872, 1.

⁹ "Local Brevities," *Reading Times* (Reading, Pennsylvania), Tue, Nov 19, 1872, 4.



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executed the 54 x 80 inch painting over the course of 6 months. The work emphasized Raser's talent as a draftsman as well as his skill in atmospheric perspective. The critic for the *Reading Times* lauded the work stating that the early autumn scene captured, "...a vivid reality in the presentation of the leafage, both of the tree and vine, and in the depiction of rocks and mosses, that suggests more than a mere aesthetic knowledge of natural subjects: its shows an intimate practical and scientific acquaintance with the mysteries of botany, geology and arboriculture." The critic noted a similarity between Raser's, "intimate knowledge of nature [and] his close attention to details..." with the work of American landscapist James M. Hart.¹⁰

That same year, Raser's painting entitled *Klaperthal* was sold to Peter D. Wanner, Esq., a prominent resident of Reading and a collector who owned several of the artist's works. His painting entitled *The Islands in the Schuylkill below Reading* and *Scene along the Wyomissing* were sold to another resident of Reading, Rueben Hillegas. Raser spent the spring of 1875 working on several floral works. The *Reading Times* noted, "[Raser's] intimate knowledge of botany gives him superior advantages in the reproduction upon canvas of this class of subjects." In May, Raser's *The Falls of French Creek* was displayed at Caldwell's, a prominent jewelry store in Philadelphia.¹¹

In 1882, Raser exhibited with artist Chris Shearer and other artists at F. Woerner's Art Gallery in Reading.¹² The following year his painting *Blarney Castle* was displayed in the window of Raser's Drug Store. Executed from a sketch Raser made while in Ireland several years earlier the painting according to the *Reading Times* was, "...a very faithful representation of all the details of that historic castle and its surroundings, and is one of the best of that artist's productions."¹³

In 1925, Raser's son William H. Raser gifted 7 of his father's paintings to the Reading Museum and Art Gallery.¹⁴ The same year, Raser's 1850 watercolor sketch depicting Milton as viewed from Red Hill was included in an exhibition at the Milton Public Library. The exhibition commemorated the Great Milton Fire of 1880 and highlighted the town's growth from its beginnings as Mill Town in 1792 to what later became Milton.¹⁵ In 1929, his son George Prentice Raser gifted the Milton Public Library with 6 of his father's works. The paintings which included scenes near Reading and Nisbet as well as a view of the Connecticut Valley were exhibited at the Library along with works by other former Milton residents. An 1849 circular

¹⁰ "Another Triumph of the Painters Art," *Reading Times* (Reading, Pennsylvania), Thu, Mar 4, 1875, 4.

¹¹ "Art Notes," *Reading Times* (Reading, Pennsylvania), Tue, May 11, 1875, 4.

¹² "Oil Paintings," *Reading Times* (Reading, Pennsylvania), Fri, Sep 29, 1882, 4.

¹³ "Picture on Exhibition," *Reading Times* (Reading, Pennsylvania), Sat, May 12, 1883, 1.

¹⁴ "Raser Paintings Given To Reading Art Gallery," *Reading Times* (Reading, Pennsylvania), Tue, Mar 31, 1925, 2.

¹⁵ "The Growth of Milton is Shown in Photos," *Miltonian* (Milton, Pennsylvania), Thu, May 14, 1925, 1.



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from Raser's drug store displayed in the Library's window provided a look back at items sold in Raser's store nearly eighty years prior.¹⁶

A member of the Art Exhibition Gallery and the Philadelphia Art Club, Raser exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts during the latter decades of the 19th century. While known for his Pennsylvania scenes, Raser also painted in the Connecticut River Valley and in the Catskills in the Hudson River Valley.¹⁷

In 2015, Raser's work was included in the exhibition *Rollin' on the River: The Schuylkill and Its Canals* at the Berks History Center in Reading.¹⁸ Today, Raser's painting entitled *In the Catskill Mountains* can be found in the collection of the Reading Public Museum along with several other works.¹⁹

John Heyl Raser died in Pennsylvania in 1901.

¹⁶ "Former Miltonians Remember The Public Library," *Miltonian* (Milton, Pennsylvania), Thu, Apr 4, 1929, 1.

¹⁷ "Riverscape: John Heyl Raser," Reading Public Museum, accessed July 2, 2021, <http://collection.readingpublicmuseum.org/objects/2605/riverscape?ctx=86d63f8a-1781-41b6-99c2-16ebc997c6bb&idx=3>.

¹⁸ "Art Exhibits," *The Morning Call* (Allentown, Pennsylvania), Sun, Feb 22, 2015, E7.

¹⁹ "Riverscape:John Heyl Raser"