

Edward Beyer's View of Edenton, NC

By

Rob Hicklin

So, how do rumors get started? It was after a dinner with Chicago art dealer, Rudy Wunderlich, in 1994 that we returned to his gallery to see what his bins might hold. Rudy napped in his chair as I pulled out painting after painting, talking only to myself. An invitation to work another dealer's bins is a coveted thing in that we hope we recognize the unexpected, those things known to us and not necessarily the man who stocked the bins. Rudy had been an early influence, and though I was not as close to him as I was to Gerry, his son, we did a bit of business together, always had.

The painting I discovered that night was by Edward Beyer (1820-1865), an artist unknown to Rudy as one who worked in oil, though this well-seasoned dealer knew Beyer's prints from the *Album of Virginia*. One of those prints was of the Hygeia Hotel at Old Point Comfort at Hampton Roads, Virginia. Beyer typically layered his compositions with townscapes and surrounding farms, churches, and their attendant graveyards. In that print and this painting, it was all about the water, as if the composition had been reversed with water replacing sky. In that I knew the artist had visited the Virginia coast at Hampton Roads, I

proclaimed the new-found painting as Norfolk, and once in hand, this newly acquired work was offered as such.

Through dealer, Millie McGehee, and on to a client of hers, the painting found its way to a wall in nearby Virginia Beach, where it was proclaimed the best mid-nineteenth century landscape of the city of Norfolk known, and so it entered the canon of such things. The collector engaged an historian to identify all of the buildings that could be, and damned if she didn't, even pinning the date of execution as May of 1849. You know, any earlier, this building would not have been standing and any later not that one. She must have dismissed the 1856 date inscribed in Beyer's hand as simply one of those unexplained anomalies that we so often encounter, such as a painting of Charleston Harbor with mountains ringing it, that sort of thing.

Seventeen years later, Millie's client had decided to sell the painting and engaged me to handle it for him, a second opportunity for me with this wonderful, topographical view. Jim and Marilyn Melchor live in Norfolk, and I wanted to share this view of their town with these friends of 40 years in that they, perhaps more than anyone, would appreciate the rarity of it. Their corroboration of the site as Norfolk would also add important substantiation to my file. You cannot beat a local historian at his/her own game. The Melchors, in a matter of seconds, identified this

painting of "Norfolk" as Edenton. The historian engaged to make the painting Norfolk had worked a little too hard (Fig. 1, View of Edenton by Edward Beyer, Private Collection, North Carolina) (Fig. 2, Enlargement of Beyer oil on canvas in Fig. 1, without frame).



Figure 1



Figure 2

Beyer was all about the display of commerce, and this canvas gave evidence of that with his depiction of the Stag, a packet boat that plied the waters of the Chowan River. Now, I am not from there, and there is too much about Norfolk and that part of Virginia I simply do not know. I do know, though, that the Chowan River is in North Carolina, not Virginia. I did not know how to pronounce it, but spent the night en route back to Charleston in Edenton. There I met Frances Inglis the next morning. This delightful lady is the local historian of the Stanley Horn type. Her family was in Edenton when Mr. Beyer was, and she was pleased to point out her home in the painting. Frances gently corrected my pronunciation and underscored it all by reciting a limerick her mother had written.

*There was a young woman of Chowan
Who went out with only a bow on.
When stopped by the p'lice,
She said, "Mister, please -
It's too hot to have any mo'on.*

-Rebecca Bennehan Wood later Mrs. Fred'k B. Drane

Sadly, Frances Inglis passed away on May 20, 2019.

Norfolk had become Edenton, and the transformation was quick and actually painless. Rumor has it that the Stag got its name taking the good folks of the Albemarle Sound to see this young woman with only a bow on. North Carolina has always been known as the valley of humility between two peaks of pride, though now it can boast of at least one townscape by Virginia's best painter of the period. Edenton may be the most attractive small town on all of the Southern Atlantic coast, and it is gratifying to know that Edward Beyer must have thought so, too.