

O. T. W.  
ON THE WATER

# THE SCHUYLKILL RIVER

A SUITE OF ARCHIVAL DIGITAL PRINTS  
OF  
JOURNAL PAINTINGS

BY

James Lancel McElhinney

HIDDEN RIVER SUITE VOLUME ONE

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Note: In 1616, Dutch explorer Arendt Corssen noticed a strong current flowing into the Delaware River. Concealed behind sandbars and marsh-grasses he discovered the mouth of a major waterway he named *Schuyt-kill*, or “hidden river”. Had he bothered to ask the local Unami-speaking Lenni-Lenape could have told him it had several names: *Gansbobawanee*, “rushing waters”, *Manayunk* “where we drink” and *Tulpehanna*, “turtle-river”.

For Kathie

## A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

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## INTRODUCTION

The Schuylkill River has always been the heart and soul and lifeblood of Philadelphia. With the city ravaged by yellow fever epidemics in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, leaders turned to the Schuylkill—not the Delaware River, around which clustered most of the city’s population and commercial activity—for a clean source of water in 1801. When the original water works proved unable to meet the demand, a second works was built at Fairmount, with neoclassical buildings tucked below a reservoir built atop a 90-foot hill where the Philadelphia Museum of Art now stands. Rowers soon discovered the lake-like quality of the river above the Fairmount Dam and built their fancy clubhouses. Excursion steamboats plied the river’s waters. The city created Fairmount Park, one of the largest in the world, which protected thousands of acres of land around the river from development but failed to protect the water supply from pollution.

The sublime combination of nature and technology inspired hundreds of vivid visual and verbal depictions of the Fairmount Water Works and the riverscape upstream. Fanny Kemble, an English actress, wrote about the Schuylkill in her journal on October 18, 1832:

The sky was so blessedly serene, and the air so still, that the pure deep-looking water appeared to sleep, while the bright hues of the heavens, and the glowing tints of the woody shores, were mirrored with wondrous vividness on its bosom. I never saw such gorgeouslyness, and withal such perfect harmony of colouring.... Indeed a painter would have gone crazy over it, and I, who am not a painter, was half crazy that I was not.

But the mirror of the Schuylkill’s surface, captured so beautifully in words and pictures, hid a growing ugliness underneath. The Schuylkill Navigation (of which the dam and lock at Fairmount was the final piece) led directly to anthracite coal fields in the river’s headwaters. Coal-laden canal boats, quickly superseded by railroad cars laden with this precious fuel, fed the Industrial Revolution, and by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century hundreds of factories in Philadelphia and upstream communities poured their wastes into the river. Population in the Schuylkill Valley boomed: factories

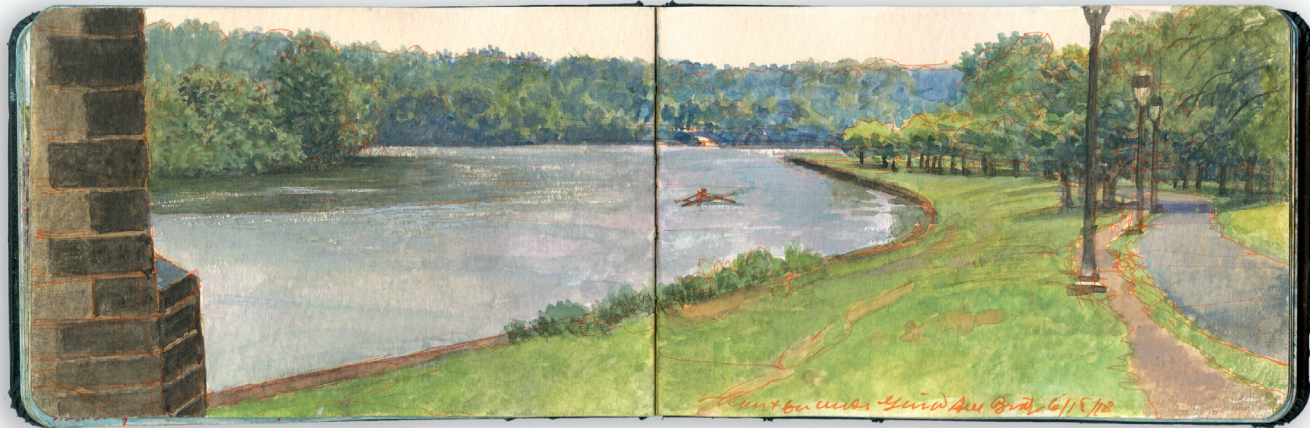
needed workers, who needed homes, which were connected to sewers, which added untreated human waste to the river's flow. Philadelphia's water supply, once the pride of the city and emulated throughout the world, became a polluted, disease-laden stew that killed tens of thousands of citizens in the half century after the Civil War.

Water filtration plants built between 1901 and 1911 took care of the diseases carried in the water supply. By the mid-1950s, millions of tons of coal waste had been removed from the river's bottom, and a system of sewage collection and treatment completed in the mid-1950s helped limit human pollution. With the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1971, laws were passed that eventually have reduced the flow of industrial pollution into the nation's waterways from a gush to a trickle.

In the past thirty years, the Schuylkill has come back to life. Fish have returned, the swimming legs of triathlons are held in the river, and rowers no longer need worry about being dunked in the water after a victorious race. New artists, including James McElhinney, have come to explore the river's banks, lured like others over the centuries by the confluence of earth and land and sky. And while the landscape has changed, with new highways and buildings and bridges added to the views, for any artist who pays close attention there is still beauty to be had along the Schuylkill, at every turn

--Adam Levine, historian and archivist for the Philadelphia Water Department.

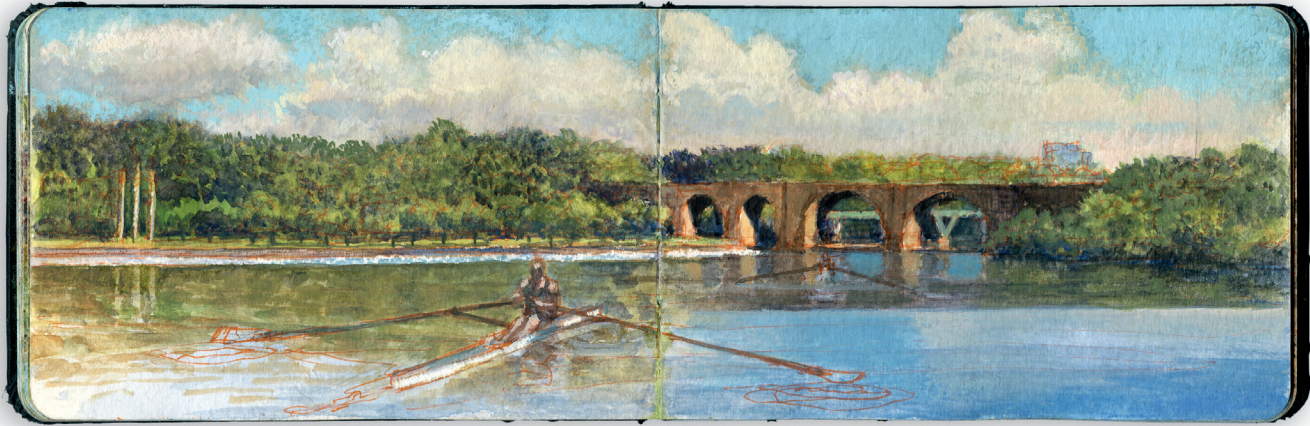
## LOOKING NORTH FROM BELOW THE CONNECTING RAILWAY BRIDGE



Surrounding this pastoral setting is a twenty-first-century city and thoroughfare of human mobility. For thousands of years prior to the arrival of Europeans, the Schuylkill River was a Native American super-highway. From 1815 to 1931 a series of locks and canals linked Pennsylvania coal regions with Reading, Phoenixville, and Philadelphia. Footpaths, motorways, and railroads border both banks of the river. The Schuylkill is crossed by no less than ten bridges between Fairmount and East Falls.

I began this painting on a rainy day, facing northward, sheltered by one of the eastern arches of the Pennsylvania Railroad Connecting Bridge. Kelly Drive is at the right. A paved bike trail runs beside it, separated from traffic by grassy margins. Beside it, a dirt track follows the crest of a bank that descends to the river. Hidden behind the wooded western bank to the left is Martin Luther King Jr. Drive. Just beyond that, the roar and hum of the Schuylkill Expressway distracts one from pastoral reverie. On the far shore is the wide metal ramp and floating dock, operated by the Philadelphia Dragon Boat Association. On the water, in the middle distance, a single scull moves toward us, near where Eakins painted himself, pulling away from Max Schmitt.

## LONE OARSMAN OFF THREE ANGELS



Marking a midpoint between bridges on the eastern bank is *Playing Angels*, a sculpture created by Carl Milles in 1950. Since it appeared along Kelly Drive in 1972, rowers have dubbed it *Three Angels*. Standing on the western shore of the river near the Dragon Boat Dock, I imagined being in the middle of the river, looking southeast. Gliding downriver, a lone oarsman approaches the Pennsylvania Railroad Connecting Railway Bridge. Completed in 1867, the bridge appears in Thomas Eakins's 1871 painting *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull*.

Working in book form presents a few challenges. The binding-gutter forces every painting to be a diptych. Neither an intrusion nor obstacle, this format allows each page to exist in different moments in time. Maintaining a kind of unity within a composite image relates to nineteenth-century pictorial fictions, such as Frederic Edwin Church's 1859 *Heart of the Andes*. None of these journal-works is concerned with simple reportage. All seek to transform experience into knowledge.

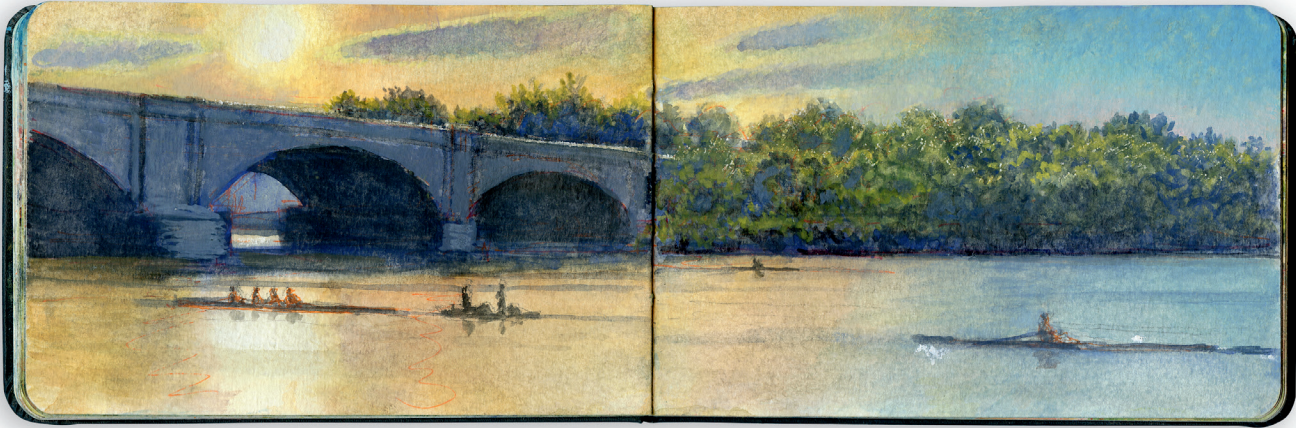


## LOOKING SOUTHEAST FROM THREE ANGELS



North of Girard Avenue, the river widens, flowing southward from Columbia Railroad Bridge. A broad esplanade along the river's eastern bank was created when landfill replaced pestilential wetlands, once teeming with mosquitoes and disease. Midway along its length is a grove of Japanese cherry trees, near the foot of Fountain Green Dive at Kelly Drive. Next to the river, an angelic trio dances on concrete columns. Flowering every spring, the cherry grove was established in 1926, when the government of Japan sent 1600 botanicals to Philadelphia in honor of the sesquicentennial of American independence. Cherry trees were planted in various locations along the river and within Fairmount Park. Crossing the river downstream is the Pennsylvania Railroad Connecting Railway Bridge, completed in 1867. Six years later its arches were modified. Further work was completed in 1915, widening the span from two tracks to five. The original iron center-truss was removed and replaced with the two great stone arches we see today. Rising behind the viaduct is the distinctive form of the new Comcast Technology Center.

## SUNSET: COLUMBIA RAILROAD BRIDGE

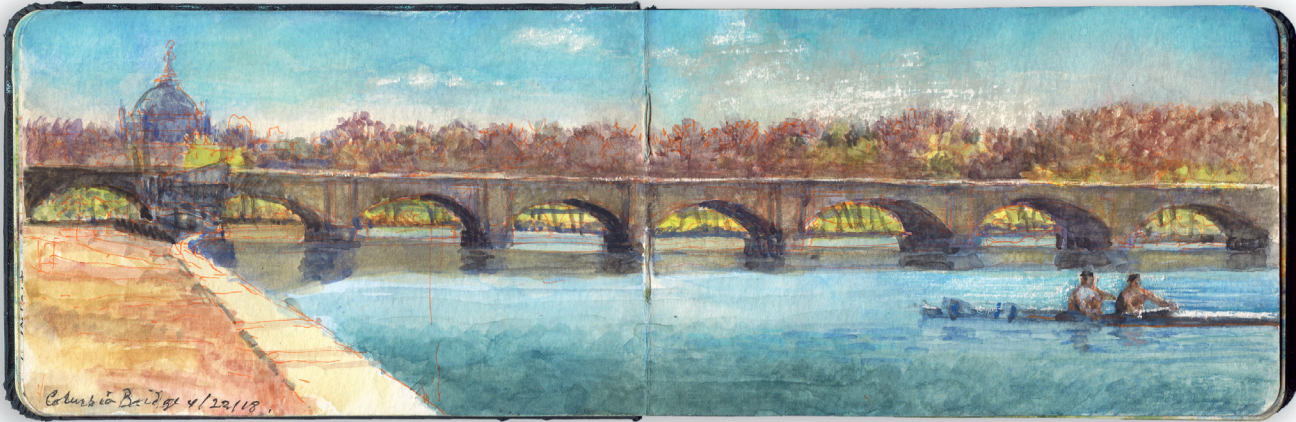


Getting out on the water before work is a tradition that began in the nineteenth century. By the latter part of the century, oarsmen included tradesman and clerks. Barge club members today might include people of color, CEOs and plumbers, men and women, young and old. In her book *Thomas Eakin: The Heroism of Modern Life*, Elizabeth Johns writes:

Rowing had become an art, and Rowers potential heroes. The stroke called for by the delicately balanced boats was . . . a calculated series of movements of body and oar, based on principles of efficiency and grace. So disciplined and comprehensive a leisure did it seem . . . that rowing was a modern reinstitution of the Greek ideal of the union of mental and physical culture. (pg.26)

Popular rowing images celebrate sunshine, pageantry, races, and regattas. Eakin's painting of Max Schmitt resting on his oars tells a different story, one of solitary endeavor. Measuring each stroke, the body adopts a rhythmic movement as the belly of the scull slices through the water. Riverbanks retreat into the distance, soaring bridges mark your wake. Mind, body, time, and the river, all become one, greeting the day or bidding it farewell.

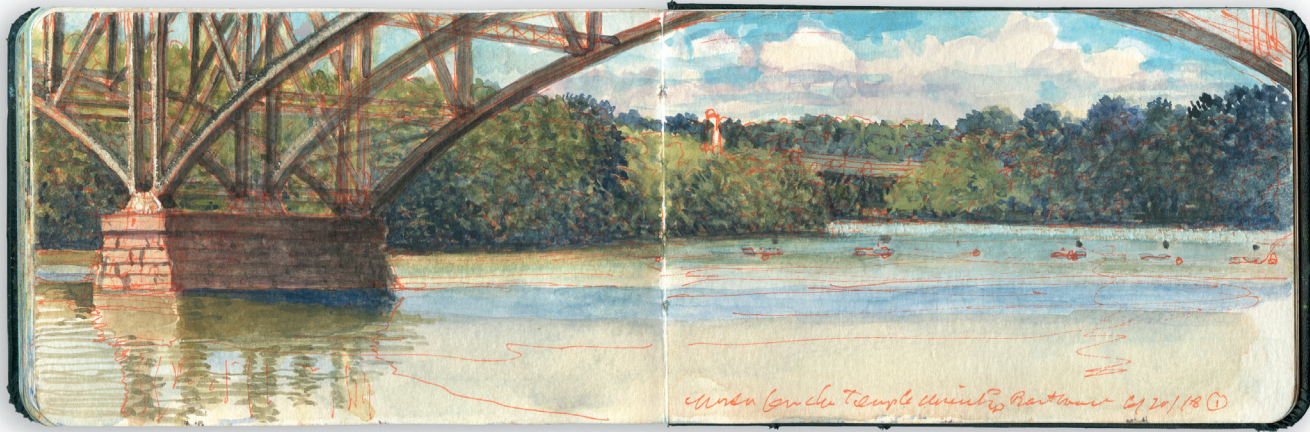
## A DOUBLE APPROACHING THE GRANDSTAND



Crossing the Schuylkill where the river turns sharply from southwest to southeast is the Columbia Railroad Bridge, constructed in 1920, more than eighty years after the first span was completed. For joggers, cyclists, and pedestrians, Columbia Bridge marks a halfway point between the Philadelphia Museum of Art and East Falls. Just north of the eastern bridgehead sits a partially covered grandstand built so viewers can watch the frequent regattas organized by the Schuylkill Navy. At the northern end of the grandstand, a bronze sculpture honors the son of an Irish immigrant. John Brendan Kelly Sr. was barred from competing in the 1920 Henley Regatta. Having worked for his brother as a bricklayer, Kelly was disqualified for possessing an unfair physical advantage over respectable gentlemen who had never performed manual labor. Kelly was vindicated later that year by winning gold at the Olympic games in Antwerp. Rising behind the tree line, on the west side of the river, is the dome of Memorial Hall. Serving as the art gallery for the 1876 Centennial Exposition, it houses the Please Touch Museum today.



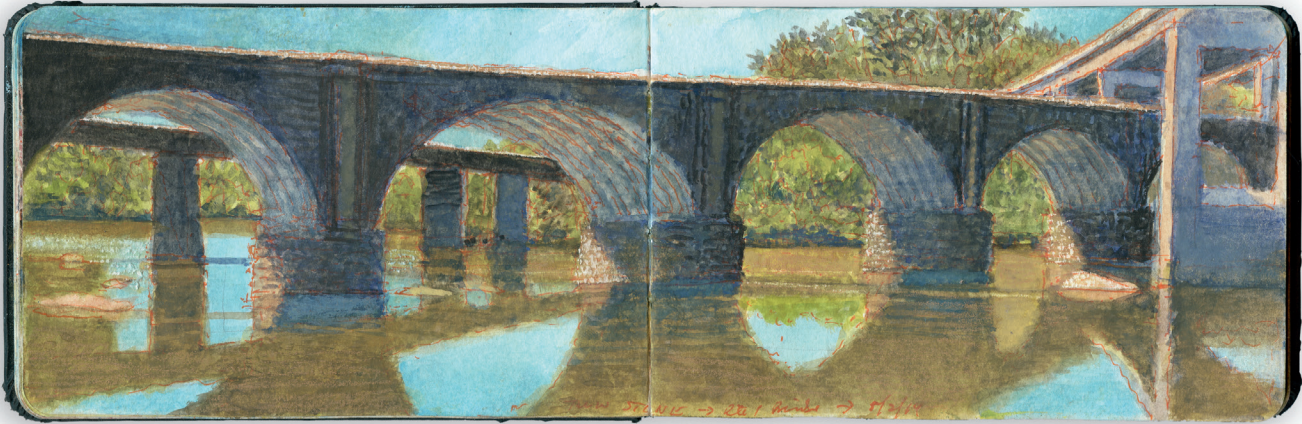
## LOOKING NORTH TOWARD MENDENHALL FERRY



Stretching southward along the west bank of the Schuylkill, between Saint Joseph's University Gillin Boathouse and the grandstand beside Columbia Railroad Bridge is a broad, grassy embankment sloping gently down from Kelly Drive to a stone bulkhead on the riverbank. Traversed by pedestrian and bike trails, the strand is sheltered beneath a canopy of trees. At its northern extremity is Strawberry Mansion Bridge. Taking its name from an eighteenth-century estate originally known as Summerville, the span was hailed as a marvel of modern engineering. Privately funded, the entire span was prefabricated twenty-five miles upstream by Phoenix Iron Company and assembled at its present location in 1897. The bridge's filigreed steel arches soared above the river, conveying trolley-cars, pedestrians, and vehicular traffic between the eastern and western sections of Fairmount Park. Trolleys stopped running in 1946. After decades of hard use and disrepair, the bridge underwent major restoration. Work began in 1991 and was completed four years later, just two years shy of the bridge's centennial. Just downriver from the former site of Mendenhall Ferry, competing crews assemble upstream at a chain of pontoon boats. The race begins. Passing under the bridge, slender hulls glide upon the water on their way downstream to the finish line.



## “TWIN STONE” BRIDGES, EAST FALLS



The Twin Bridges lie in the East Falls section of Philadelphia's Fairmount Park. The concrete span towering above them to the right is the connecting ramp between I-76 and U.S. Route 1, also known as Roosevelt Boulevard. Nearest the viewer the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Schuylkill River Viaduct. Of stone ribbed skew-arch construction, the bridge was regarded as an engineering marvel when it was completed in 1856. Designed by Gustavus Nicolls, its six arches were first modeled in soap. The bridge was constructed under the direction of master stonemason Christian Schwartz, who paid his workmen in coin and whiskey. The bridge beyond was added in 1890, creating a Y junction that merged tracks on the east side of the river. Known to rowers as “Twin Stone”, these bridges for most mark their northern extremity. Submerged rocks bid a cool welcome, yet experienced rowers will venture upstream, to enjoy the calm waters below Manayunk. When I painted this scene, two brothers landed a fifty-pound flathead. A passing chef bought the catfish on the spot, as a delicacy to be served at his restaurant. Offshore, trio of snapping-turtles witnessed the transaction, treading water in a patch of bright sunlight.

## WATERWAY DIALOGUES

Waterways have recently become the focus of my work. Inspired by 19<sup>th</sup>-century explorers and traveler-artists, my painting-practice migrated from the studio into sketchbooks carried on travels within the United States and abroad. Following the success of my *Hudson Highlands* project, Philadelphian friends invited me to revisit The Schuylkill. Having once been a local resident, the river to me at first seemed familiar. As work progressed, it became clear that I had much to learn.

More than scenery, landscape is a projection of human desire, a palimpsest of conflicting systems of value, inscribed upon the terrain in ways that seek either to exploit or to preserve its natural resources. None are so fragile, nor so necessary to human well-being as watersheds; springs, wetlands, streams and rivers that water our farmlands and fill our reservoirs.

Looking at something is not the same as seeing it. One can recognize many things without comprehending them. To understand landscape, one must know one's location, study the terrain, consider the process of nature and human activity that modifies terrain over decades, centuries, millennia and eons. Drawing provides me with the means to develop sensory experience into a species of knowledge, that gives rise to ideas. My hope is that this slim pamphlet, and the seven prints that accompany it, will inspire readers to explore their surroundings, terrain and waterways, to discover these wonders anew, perhaps with a sketchbook in hand.

--JLM. New York, October 24, 2018

## THE ARTIST

**James Lancel McElhinney** is an author, visual artist and historian. A graduate of Yale (MFA) and Tyler School of Art (BFA), he attended Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. McElhinney is a recipient of a 2017 Pollock Krasner Grant, and an artist fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. He is on the Master Artist Council of the Arthur Miller Foundation. Inspired by historic expeditionary artists, McElhinney has produced *painters' books* since 2005. Website: [www.mcelhinneyart.com](http://www.mcelhinneyart.com)

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