

Distillery History Mystery: Who painted these scenes?



Gooderham & Worts owned and displayed these two unsigned paintings of the 1869 Fire and 1870 Reconstruction of the Stone Distillery

Gooderham & Worts owned and sometimes commissioned paintings that documented the growth of the business from an 1830s windmill in the wilderness to the largest distillery in the world of the 1870s. The company's paintings are fundamentally important to understanding many aspects of distillery life. For example, they depict the size, style, materials, and location of various buildings. They show landscape details, major events, non-distillery activities, and some of the people who passed through the site.

When deciding how accurate an illustration might be, it's useful to know who created it. In the case of Gooderham & Worts' art collection, sometimes the artists are known; sometimes not ... and sometimes an educated guess can be made.

Once the artist is known, other questions arise. Could the artist have actually seen the buildings, landscapes, or events depicted? Did s/he have a reputation for accurate recording or for "artistic" embellishment? In the case of *possible* artists, the questions multiply. Could the proposed artist have known and been commissioned by the original owner of the image. And so on. Such questions are important in assessing how much faith to place in historic depictions of the G&W distillery.

One of the great mysteries involving Gooderham & Worts' paintings is who painted two important paintings: the dramatic image of the Great Fire of October 1869 that destroyed the interior of the Stone Distillery; and the serene image of the Reconstructed Stone Distillery of 1870. Neither painting is signed on the front; but they were almost certainly painted by the same individual.

The paintings are the same size, adopt the same point-of-view, display a similar style, include the same architectural features, and show the same attention to detail. Intriguingly, they also indicate several elements that have either disappeared from today's distillery site, or were never there. Any assessment of whether or not those

elements ever existed, especially in the absence of surviving physical evidence, depends in part on whether or not the 1869 and 1870 views can be trusted.

For example, both paintings show a classical portico entrance to the old corporate offices. They also depict a boiler house and a decorative doorway across today's Distillery Lane that were made of limestone, not brick. Today's boiler house (Building 2) is made of brick. Was there ever a limestone predecessor? Both paintings also show a limestone archway stretching between the boiler house and G&W's old corporate offices, across today's Distillery Lane. Later paintings and photographs show such an archway made of brick, not limestone. Was there ever a limestone predecessor?

If the artist of the two paintings could be identified and proved to be a skilled and reliable documentary artist, greater confidence could be placed in the accuracy of the scene depicted ... and such questions more reliably answered.

For various reasons, it seems possible, even likely, that well-known Toronto artist, William Armstrong, painted these views. If that proved to be the case, the paintings would provide quite reliable evidence about the site.

Now, let's follow the trail of evidence leading from the known to the unknown, picking up clues from various sources ... even a 1933 history of pioneer Ontario.

First, William Armstrong definitely painted, and was almost certainly commissioned by William Gooderham, to create another view of the distillery found in the G&W art

collection: a view of the 1850s distillery that was signed by Armstrong in the lower right corner.



William Armstrong's eye-witness view of the 1850s distillery and his signature inscribed in the lower right corner of the painting

William Armstrong (1822-1914) was not only a skilled artist, whose work is now owned by the City of Toronto and other public bodies, but also a civil engineer and a photographer, both occupations that placed a high priority on accurate representation. After emigrating from Ireland to Toronto in 1851, he established a partnership known as Armstrong, Beere and Hime, Civil Engineers, Draughtsmen and Photographers, and immersed himself in the professional and social life of his adopted city.

Over the years, Armstrong was hired by various clients to document their works. For example, he was hired by the City of Toronto to document the laying of wooden water pipes under Toronto Bay, and by various railways to document the process of building bridges and laying track across wild and remote Canadian landscapes. He was also hired by various individuals to celebrate prized possessions, such as successful racing yachts like George Gooderham's beloved *Oriole II*. Here also, accuracy, as well as artistic skill, would have been highly valued.

Beyond "accuracy" lies the question of "direct knowledge" of the scene. Could the artist – whether known to be accurate or not – have actually seen the subject of the painting? In the case of the 1850s distillery, the answer is yes. William Armstrong was a resident of Toronto from 1851 onward. He spent a lot of time on and near the water. He would definitely have known the 1850s distillery ... and later expansions, such as the stone distillery and red-brick maltings added in the 1860s.

So, we know that Armstrong painted at least one scene of the distillery for Gooderham & Worts. Did he paint others? Maybe.

Gooderham & Worts owned both an 1830s chromolithograph of the windmill on the waterfront that was painted by Thomas Young and published by N. Currier around 1835; and a painted version of a very similar scene. Although the painting is not signed in-full, it is initialed "WA" in the lower-left corner, suggesting that William Armstrong had painted the scene. Armstrong, who moved to Toronto in 1851, never saw the 1830s windmill site. He almost certainly relied on Thomas Young's print for his own composition. Perhaps he didn't sign his name, because he wasn't the creator of the composition. (There is evidence that he did this on another well-known painting, an 1889 watercolour rendering of architect E. J. Lennox's City Hall. In the lower left corner of that splendid painting, a little guy carries a sign with "WA" ... William Armstrong's initials.) Perhaps the artist only used his full signature on an original composition of his own devising.



William Armstrong probably painted this recreation of the 1830s Windmill with his stylized initials signed in the lower-left corner.

Leet's return to our original mystery: who painted the two views of the stone distillery in 1869 and 1870. We now know, or surmise, that William Armstrong knew the Gooderham & Worts site, knew its owners, and had been hired at least

once, and likely twice, to paint views of the distillery. He was, at the very least, a go-to artist for the proprietors.

As luck would have it, there is one final clue. In 1933, historian Edwin C. Guillet published a history of pioneer Ontario. In this, he included a small, black-and-white copy of the 1869 fire painting that he attributed to “Armstrong” and “reproduced by Courtesy of members of the Gooderham family.” Whether the painting was signed on the back, or was known by family members to have been by Armstrong, hasn’t been determined. But if Armstrong painted the 1869 scene, he almost certainly painted the 1870 scene ... and provided extremely interesting evidence about what the Gooderham & Worts distillery looked like at a significant moment in its history. For now, it’s a good educated guess that Armstrong painted these scenes.



75 years after publication, Edwin Guillet’s reproduction of the 1869 fire painting provides evidence that William Armstrong painted the two G&W scenes

For more information about William Armstrong, see Henry C. Campbell’s 1971 *Early Days on the Great Lakes: The Art of William Armstrong*, which covers much more than Armstrong’s maritime painting.

Please send your comments or questions to Manager of Heritage Services, Sally Gibson, sg@thedistillerydistrict.com.

For more about the history of the Distillery District, visit www.distilleryheritage.com