

Painting Stories in the Land



Art historians are fond of saying that early American landscape paintings are primarily topographical, while the Hudson River School landscapes that followed in the antebellum period rise to the status of painted poetry. However, just as colonial and early national portraits have proven to reveal more about the culture than the appearance of a select group of individuals, landscapes from the same period can tell us about the aspirations and values of early Americans. For example, the artist Ralph Earl (1751-1801), who was primarily a portraitist, painted a small group of landscapes at the end of his career that are not only descriptive views but that also tell stories. As a case study, I invite you to share in the stories, both personal and cultural, that are told in Earl's *Looking East from Denny Hill* (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Ralph Earl, *Looking East from Denny Hill*, 1800, oil on canvas, 45 3/4 x 79 3/8 in. (116.2 x 201.6 cm), Worcester Art Museum, Museum purchase, 1916.97. Clicking this image will open a graphic of this painting in a new window.

At first glance, *Looking East from Denny Hill* is merely a topographical landscape. Like a surveyor, the painting's viewer stands at a particular vantage and takes measure of the land: the Denny farm in Leicester, Massachusetts, in the foreground; the towns of Worcester and Shrewsbury along the left side; and the farms of southern Worcester County at the right. More than fifty houses, barns, churches, and other buildings are depicted in the painting, with enough specificity to suggest that Earl was intent upon cataloguing exactly what he saw from the top of the 950-foot-high Denny Hill.

Upon further examination, however, one finds in the composition explicitly artificial elements that Earl introduced to signal his intention of moving beyond a literal record of what lay before him. Two symmetrically placed tall trees frame the scene and offer a stage-like setting upon which to depict stories about the role of the land in the lives of the people who shaped it. This pair of trees is echoed by another pair in the near distance; by making the one on the left lower than the one on the right, Earl opens up the left side of the composition and directs the viewer's attention there.

But stage directions alone do not make a story. In order to lend a narrative quality to the Denny Hill landscape, Earl also needed to invoke time. He accomplished this by painting the sky in a range of pinks and blues that imply a rising or setting sun. The edges of the trees are tipped with orange and red, invoking not only a time of day but also a time of year: late August or early September. The vivid colors of the sky and foliage also set an optimistic tone of peace and prosperity for both the personal and national stories that unfold

in the land. Earl populated the foreground with a group of farmers harvesting the hay and a pair of fashionably dressed women strolling across the farm. These figures become characters in stories of cultivation and prosperity, both individual and collective.

Before exploring the specific stories embedded in the painting, it is important to note that Earl also manipulated the scene through the vantage point that he selected for the composition and the way that he chose to frame the image. Anna Henshaw (1778-1854), a resident of Leicester at the time the painting was done, recorded the view from Denny Hill: "There is a most splendid panorama view from Denny Hill, which embraces the surrounding country, dotted with the white houses of the inhabitants and a dozen or more churches. At the north west is seen Leicester village situated on a hill equal, if not superior in height, about two miles travelling distance . . . In the north east in a valley are Worcester and New Worcester villages. All around below are hills and dales, woodlands, plots of grass, and arable fields, delightfully diversified." Henshaw's description demonstrates that there was nothing inevitable about the view represented in *Looking East from Denny Hill*, since she described a different view from the very same spot where Earl painted his panoramic view of farms, towns, and woods. Most notably, Earl pointed his easel to the east, leaving out the village of Leicester. Thus Earl's landscape reflects a set of choices made by the artist, probably in consultation with his patron, Thomas Denny Jr. (1757-1814).

Earl's choices concerning viewpoint and composition helped to set the stage for the stories he would paint in *Looking East from Denny Hill*, stories that range from the individual to the national. On the personal level, we can read *Looking East from Denny Hill* in relation to the lives of the artist and his patron. Both Earl and Denny grew up in this landscape and were the grandsons of some of its original white settlers. In relation to the artist's life story, *Looking East from Denny Hill* expresses Earl's reconciliation with the town from which he was alienated as a young man. In 1778, Earl was a loyalist who was driven from New Haven (where he had gone to advance his career as an artist) by town leaders and fled to England, leaving behind a wife and two children. In remaining a loyalist, Earl was also estranged from his father who fought as a captain in the militia company led by Thomas Denny's uncle, Samuel Denny. Upon Earl's return to Massachusetts in 1785, he brought a second wife from England, even though his first marriage had never been legally terminated. That there are no paintings known by Ralph Earl of Leicester subjects until 1800, the last full year of his life, suggests that he remained dissociated from his kinsmen and townsmen until then. Besides *Looking East from Denny Hill*, Earl painted a portrait in 1800 of his cousin, Thomas Earle (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), a gunsmith who supplied weapons to local Revolutionary War hero Colonel William Henshaw, among others. While the painting commissions themselves signify Earl's reconciliation with the people of Leicester, the orderly character of the landscape that he painted for Thomas Denny imparts the personal narrative of Earl's return to the fold.

For the patron Denny, the painting tells a very different story, one of his and his forebears' role in transforming the land from a wilderness to an orderly and prosperous community. The original Denny farm, established by his grandfather Daniel Denny, consisted of 70 acres. By 1784, Thomas Denny owned 431 acres (an area about two-thirds of a mile in each direction), the land that occupies the lower half of the green area of the painting. Denny's property holdings in 1784 encompassed 4 unimproveable acres, 5 acres of tillage, 8 acres of fresh meadow, 40 unimproved acres, 50 acres of upland mowing, 118 acres of pasturage, and 206 acres of woodland. What may appear to the modern viewer as a uniformly rural landscape was understood to eighteenth-century landowners and landscape viewers in more diverse terms that were defined by function and the level of the owner's success in improving the land. By employing the laws of linear perspective and a vantage point from the Denny farm, Ralph Earl gave equal weight to Denny's 431 acres and the 11 or so miles of land that recede into the distance. Through this choice, Earl established Denny as the main protagonist of any stories inscribed in the land.

Moreover, the structure established by Earl with the symmetrically framing trees in the foreground complements the structure that Denny wrought in the land. The farm is partitioned into neat fields by fences and stone walls. Different shades of green imply a variety of grasses and staple crops to feed the livestock that is penned at left and grazing in the middle distance. A team of nine hired men reap the hay in the foreground and load it into an ox-drawn cart, demonstrating that Denny had graduated from the hard work of the fields to the role of gentleman-farmer. In this way, Earl represented Denny as a model citizen whose leadership demonstrates to fellow farmers that clearing, planting, and partitioning the land results in order, beauty, and wealth. Indeed, Denny's example is followed throughout the expanse of the valley below.

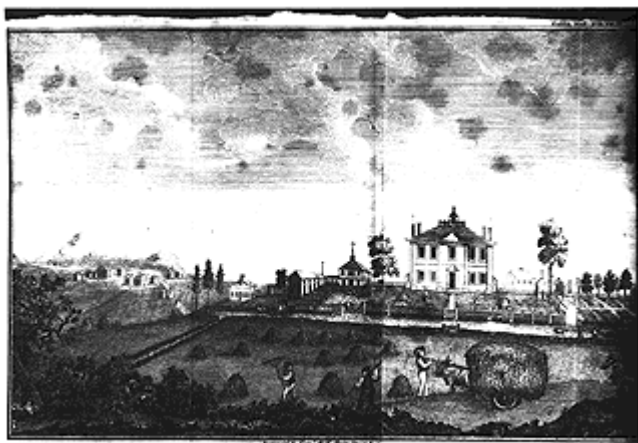
Earl's painting was not just a biography; it was a local history as well. In the painting, as in life itself, we sense that Denny was active not only in shaping his own farm, but also in defining the contours of the community. Town records reveal that Denny served Leicester as town clerk, selectman, moderator, representative to the General Court, and justice of the peace. He was also Leicester's tax assessor, an office that required him to enumerate his neighbor's property in a manner that Earl echoes in his descriptive approach to the landscape. Denny was active in Leicester as a fence viewer, hog constable, and surveyor of the highways, lesser offices that entailed maintaining order among his townsmen. He also participated in the annual "perambulations" in which selectmen of abutting towns met to affirm the boundaries. Denny's contributions in these ways are also reflected in Earl's painting: fences are in repair, livestock is enclosed, roads are in good order, and towns flow into one another without signs of dispute.

Denny was not content to see himself merely as a local leader, and so Earl positioned him in relation to changes in land use that were afoot nationally. *Looking East from Denny Hill* was commissioned at a critical juncture in Thomas Denny's life—the time of his move from the family homestead to his

newly built Federal mansion in the center of Leicester. Denny's move coincided with the shift from his life as a farmer to that as a storekeeper and manufacturer of card clothing. While Earl's painting does not explicitly tell that story, it provides a narrative structure that mirrors the changes taking place in Denny's life.

The axis from foreground to background relates the Denny farm to two key elements in the transformation taking place in Thomas Denny's lands and work at the end of the eighteenth century. Just to the right of the tall tree, in the near distance, there is a field of sheep. These are clearly Denny's animals, as in 1784 he is documented to have owned a pair of horses, six swine, six oxen, eleven cows, and twenty-three sheep and goats. These numbers are themselves significant, as historian John Brooke has shown in his history of Worcester County that farmers who owned more sheep than cows were more likely than other farmers to be entrepreneurs in Worcester's first experiments in textile-related industries.

The road winding through the left half of the painting offers a second hint of the relationship between the agrarian world and the emerging industrial economy. The road connects the rural part of Leicester with the county seat of Worcester in the valley below. At a key intermediate point—the bend in the road that serves as the turning point of Earl's painted story—there stands a mill with a bell tower, a concrete sign of the industrial transition that is underway and which Thomas Denny was intent upon helping to usher in. Thus, Ralph Earl used both time and space to impart stories about Denny and his role in the communities depicted in this landscape.



View of the Seat of the Hon. MOSES GILL Esq. at Princeton, in the County of Worcester, Mass.

Fig. 2. Samuel Hill, View of the Seat of the Hon. Moses Gill Esq. at Princeton, in the County of Worcester, MASSATS, reproduced in Massachusetts Magazine, November 1792, Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

To demonstrate that contemporary viewers would have understood Earl's painted stories of Denny Hill both in personal and communal terms, we need only turn the pages of the popular illustrated magazines of the day. For instance, when the nearby estate of Moses Gill (fig. 2) was engraved by Samuel Hill for *Massachusetts Magazine*, it was accompanied by a brief text that framed Gill's success as an emblem of national importance: "Foreigners must have an high idea of the rapid progress of improvement in America, when they are told that the ground which these buildings now cover, and a farm of many hundred acres around it, now under high and profitable cultivation were, in the year 1766, as perfectly wild as the deepest forest of our country. The honourable proprietor must have great satisfaction in seeing Improvements so extensive, made under his own eye, under his own direction, and by his own active industry." That landscape, like the Denny Hill painting, includes a harvest scene in the foreground. The Gill estate view was published in 1792, eight years before Earl's painting was done. Moreover, Gill was related to Denny by marriage. It seems likely, therefore, that Earl and Denny would have been conscious of Hill's engraving and its implied narrative of personal and collective productivity. In this way, *Looking East from Denny Hill* uses established visual and verbal conventions for representing individual wealth as a common good.

Earl also included two tiny female figures that inform the viewer that this landscape is a civilized place. Just left of center, a pair of women stroll across the field in white dresses decorated with blue sashes and large hats embellished with coral-colored ribbons. Perhaps meant to suggest members of the Denny family, these figures also relate to the larger story of republican community. A contemporary print of Dartmouth College (fig. 3) depicts a woman and a girl walking together under a parasol, while a group of boys play ball nearby. An accompanying text explains that a few years earlier this was a frontier that was heavily battered during the Revolution, but now 160 students attend the college, fifty or sixty more attend the grammar school, and "about fifty dwellings, beside five or six stores and other buildings" now grace the town. Children and women at leisure marked the development of stable communities, a story common to the Dartmouth and Denny Hill landscapes.



Fig. 3. J. Dunham, del., and S. Hill, sc., A front View of DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

with the CHAPEL & HALL, reproduced in Massachusetts Magazine, February 1793, Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In the juxtaposition of agrarian Leicester and the commercial center of Worcester, with a mill standing for the dawn of industry between the two, *Looking East from Denny Hill* also provides a narrative of the national interest in developing a balanced economy to ensure lasting political independence. The road that connects Leicester to Worcester reemerges just below the horizon as it enters the town of Shrewsbury. As every resident of central Massachusetts would have understood, that road continued to Boston, the capital city and principal port of the state. Denny's move from the family farm to his store and card clothing manufactory echoed the national drive to balance agriculture, commerce, and manufacturing.

In short, visitors to Denny's home in Leicester would have encountered a fashionably appointed Federal mansion and a genial host who was one the wealthiest men in town. The landscape painting that he commissioned Ralph Earl to paint in 1800 suggests the manner in which he wanted to be perceived by his neighbors. The Denny farm scene represents him as a third-generation resident of Leicester, whose own fortunes helped to fuel the general prosperity. He contributed to the growth of the town through his own enterprise as a farmer, a storekeeper, and a manufacturer as well as through his diligent service as a public official. Although a man of means, in the end, his heart belonged to the commonwealth.

Further Reading:

The most complete study to date of early American landscape paintings is found in Edward J. Nygren, et al., *Views and Visions: American Landscapes before 1830* (Washington, D.C., 1986). Thomas Denny's neighbor Anna Henshaw kept a diary that is currently unlocated. The fragment of her diary containing her description of the view from Denny Hill was transcribed by a descendant of the Denny family, Mary D. Thurston, and is preserved in the painting files at the Worcester Art Museum. A monograph on Earl is Elizabeth Kornhauser, *Ralph Earl: The Face of the Young Republic* (New Haven, Conn. and London, 1991), an exhibition and catalogue organized by the Wadsworth Atheneum, which traveled to the National Portrait Gallery and the Amon Carter Museum.

The best source for learning more about the early settlers of Leicester, Massachusetts, especially the Denny and Earl families, is Emory Washburn, *Historical Sketches of the Town of Leicester, Massachusetts, during the First Century from Its Settlement* (Boston, 1860). Earl is branded a Tory in the *Connecticut Journal*, New Haven, April 2, 1777. He told his version of the story and pled for financial relief in his loyalist petition to the Lords Commissioners of the Treasury, with a supporting letter from John Money,

January 28, 1779, Public Record Office, ref. no. A0 13/4. Earl's father's military service is recorded in *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War*, 17 vols. (Boston, 1896-1908), 5: 150.

Thomas Denny's tax assessment was discovered by Laura K. Mills in "A list of the Polls and of the Estates, Real and Personal, of the several Proprietors and Inhabitants of the Town of Leicester . . . ," Massachusetts General Court, Valuation Lists, Leicester, 1784, Box 380, State Library of Massachusetts, Boston. Denny's activity in local government is recorded in two manuscript volumes entitled the *General Records of the Town of Leicester*, covering the dates 1745-1787 and 1787-1829.

For an excellent study of the evolution of Worcester and the surrounding towns of central Massachusetts, see John L. Brooke, *The Heart of the Commonwealth: Society and Political Culture in Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1713-1861* (Amherst, Mass., 1992). Robert Blair St. George was the first scholar to identify the building at the bend in the road as a mill, in his book, *Conversing by Signs: Poetics of Implication in Colonial New England Culture* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998), 342.

For the image of Moses Gill's house and the accompanying text, see "Description of the Plate," *Massachusetts Magazine* 4: 11 (November 1792): [651] and opp. [651]. Moses Gill married Sarah Prince, whose mother was the sister of Daniel Denny, Thomas's grandfather. For the view of Dartmouth and its description, see *Massachusetts Magazine* 5: 2 (February 1793): [67]-68 and opp. [67].

This article originally appeared in issue 1.3 (March, 2001).

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