"Art" and the Language of Progress in Early-Industrial Paterson: Sam Patch at Clinton Bridge

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In 1827 a Paterson, New Jersey, entrepreneur named Timothy B. Crane bought the north bank of Passaic Falls and turned it into a commercial pleasure garden. The Forest Garden, as the place was called, was a combined exercise in romanticism and commerce. Crane expected to make money. But he also expected to improve the landscape of his town and the moral sensibilities of his neighbors, a large portion of whom were first-generation American mill-workers.

The Forest Garden was one of a number of such places—public and private gardens, rural cemeteries, even fully landscaped factory towns—built in and near northern cities beginning in the late 1820s. They offered new wage earners and new entrepreneurs chances to forget their ambitions and resentments and to contemplate the eternal truths of nature—not disorderly wilderness but nature presented to them by the civilizing hand of art. Timothy Crane lacked the wealth, the cultivation, and the doubts about materialism that led the Boston elite to build places like Mount Auburn Cemetery and the utopian town of Lowell, and his romantic vision was filled with silliness and bad taste. But he was an American romantic capitalist nonetheless: he would subdue a wilderness, smooth its rough edges and decorate it, and thus create a balance of nature and art that would provide profits for himself and spiritual improvement for the residents of industrial Paterson.

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Crane cleared his land in the late summer of 1827, announcing that he would reshape the forest in the name of material and moral progress: "although Nature has done more for this spot of earth, than perhaps any other of its size, to render it beautiful and interesting to the visitor, it is nevertheless susceptible of very great embellishments, from the hand of ART," and with that he improved the ground with gravel walkways, imported bushes and trees, and a combination ice cream parlor and saloon. During the next few summers, crowds gathered nightly for ice cream and conversation, and there were periodic circuses, Indian war dances, and displays of fireworks as well. The latter became Crane's specialty; local legend has it that Fourth of July fireworks originated at the Forest Garden.²

The Forest Garden was a bar and outdoor restaurant with facilities for putting on shows. But Crane and his supporters advertised it as something more. The Paterson Intelligencer praised it as a retreat where "the refinements of taste and art [are] combined with the varied and romantic beauties of nature," and later congratulated Crane on his gardens and fireworks: "this rude spot, where the lonely visitor once heard nought but the wild roar of the noble Passaic . . . is now become the brilliant scene of science, added to the sublimity of nature." A satisfied customer agreed, "[Crane] has so far domesticated the wilderness of nature, and blended with it the improvements of art, that Passaic Falls is no longer a place for the melancholy retirement of the horror stricken wanderer . . . but is now become the delightful scene of social gaiety and interesting contemplation." The editor gave this advice to tired clerks and workingmen: Cross the river and "greet the smiles of your friends amid the enchanting groves of the Forest Garden"; "bid dull cares begone"; "lounge at your pleasure under the illuminated Cedars of Lebanon"; and, on the way home, "take a peep at the awful chasm below—listen for a moment to the tremendous roar of the troubled Passaic, [and] contrast the scene with your own quietude of mind."³ Social gaiety, sublimity, quietude of mind, scenes of science—and all of it across the river from the factories of Paterson, New Jersey.

Before receiving guests, Crane had to bridge the falls chasm that separated Paterson from his property. Of the improvements that he made about the falls, he was proudest of his bridge. Designed by Crane himself, the bridge was made of wood and covered, and its arched bottom sat with heavy grace above the falls. The sides were open with latticed railings, affording a full view of the falls and chasm. One nature-loving tourist called it "a feeble bridge thrown across the precipice by the hand of man..." But others pronounced it "handsome" and "substantial," and everyone agreed that it was a well-made span.⁴

Crane called it Clinton Bridge, after Governor DeWitt Clinton of New York. Few of his fellow citizens could have missed the reason why, for in the late
1820s Clinton was a hero to improvers everywhere. He had promoted and then presided over the construction of the Erie Canal, a stupendous triumph of engineering that was opening the whole Great Lakes frontier to settlement and commerce. The Erie Canal stood as a magnificent symbol of the accelerating triumph of American civilization over wilderness, and in the years after its completion a lot of people named taverns, ferry boats, hotels, steam locomotives, and babies after DeWitt Clinton. (In Portland, Maine lived an improver named Neal Dow. Dow was a man who loved progress: he owned a tannery that was as fully automated as such things could be, and his was among the first houses in Portland to have a bathroom with running water and a hot air furnace. In 1825 Dow toured the recently completed Erie Canal, returned home, and named his horse Governor Clinton.)

Crane’s men spent September 1827 clearing land, planting bushes and trees, and assembling Clinton Bridge beside the falls. They finished at the end of the month, and Crane announced that he would supervise his men as they pulled the bridge across the chasm and set it into place. He advertised his exhibition for the afternoon of Saturday, September 30. The factories would be closed; the whole town could come out and watch Clinton Bridge conquer Passaic Falls. It would be a big day for progress, and a bigger day for Timothy Crane.

Across the river in Paterson, a twenty-eight-year-old factory hand named Sam Patch watched Timothy Crane’s improvements take shape. Patch was a pioneer member of America’s industrial working class. His family, after repeated humiliations and failures in the Massachusetts countryside, had moved to Pawtucket, Rhode Island in 1807, and Sam had gone to work in Samuel Slater’s White Mill at the age of eight. Young Patch spent his childhood in the mills, and by 1827 he was boss spinner in Paterson’s Hamilton Mills and one of a handful of adult Americans who had grown up in manufacturing towns. He was also a solitary alcoholic who beat the children who worked under him. Trying to escape the working class, Patch was working in the Hamilton Mills only because his small candlewick mill—apparently his second petty and abortive attempt at proprietorship—had failed the previous year. Sam Patch, in short, was an angry and not particularly admirable victim of the huge social process that was creating places like Pawtucket and Paterson and granting money and respect to people like Timothy Crane. As he watched Crane boss his gardeners and bridge builders, an unhappy constellation of class consciousness and alcoholic resentment took shape in Patch’s mind. Patch let it be known that he would spoil Crane’s day.

That Saturday all of Paterson turned out to watch Crane pull his bridge over the chasm. Constables patrolled the crowd looking for Sam Patch. They had locked him into a basement for safekeeping, but someone had let him out.

Timothy Crane swaggered through the afternoon, tugging at his whiskers...
and shouting instructions to his men, always with an eye on the crowd. Clinton Bridge rested on log rollers on the bluff. Cables stretched across the chasm, and ropes and tackles waited to edge the bridge over the precipice and along the cables and into place. At last the workmen took their stations and pulled at the ropes, and Clinton Bridge edged proudly across Crane's fairy tale landscape, moved by sweating men and by what the Intelligencer called "the exercise of a good deal of ingenuity and mechanical skill" on the part of Timothy Crane. The bridge reached the cliff and began riding out over the cables, and then things went briefly wrong: one of the log rollers slipped and dropped end over end into the pool at the base of the falls. The bridge lurched dangerously, but Crane's men regained control and set it safely into place. Crane looked up for applause, but the cheering was broken by shouts from the opposite bank. For there was Sam Patch, standing erect on a rock at the edge of the cliff. Patch spoke to the people near him. Then he stepped off.

It was a straight seventy-foot drop, and Patch took it in fine feet-first style. At the end he brought up his knees, then snapped them straight, drew his arms to his sides, and went into the water like an arrow. Crane and his kidnapped audience stared into the chasm, certain that Patch was dead. But in three or four seconds Patch shot to the surface. Women smiled and waved white handkerchiefs, and the men cheered wildly as Patch sported in the water, paddled over to Crane's log roller, took the trail rope between his teeth, and towed it slowly and triumphantly to shore.

Before stepping off, Patch told the people on his side of the chasm that "Crane had done a great thing, and he meant to do another."8

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At its simplest level, the leap at Clinton Bridge was an act of vandalism: Timothy Crane was an enterprising and successful man, and Sam Patch was a sullen failure who risked his life to ruin Crane's celebration. We might label the jump an act of drunken resentment and leave it at that. So it may have been. But we must note that the crowd applauded Sam Patch's leap; indeed, it was their reaction as much as the leap itself that took the day away from Timothy Crane and gave it to Sam Patch. We must ask, then, what had prepared the people of Paterson to enjoy the humiliation of Timothy Crane.

A look into the past and future of Passaic Falls reveals the reason why: Timothy Crane's Forest Garden sat on land that had been a free public playground. Many of Crane's neighbors resented what they considered the theft of public space, and in subsequent months and years they launched violent assaults on Crane and his north-bank improvements. The leap of Sam Patch, it turns out, was no isolated event. It was the opening shot in a twelve-year
war for control of the north bank—a war that ultimately drove Timothy Crane into bankruptcy and off the falls ground.

Crane and his friends insisted that the falls ground had been a useless and forbidding wilderness, fit only for "the melancholy retirement of the horror-stricken wanderer." But people in Paterson knew better: before Crane enclosed the land and improved it, the north bank had been free and unorganized recreational space. While the woods had been privately owned for many years, no proprietor had ever tampered with the landscape or tried to exclude the public. There had been a small house of entertainment above the falls since 1770. But the north-bank woods had remained an undeveloped retreat for Patersonians who hiked beside the river and, after crossing a bridge upstream, entered the ancient oak and evergreen forest that brooded over the falls. They threw stones into the chasm, carved their names on trees and rocks, fished at the base of the falls (there were legends of two-hundred-pound sturgeon), or just found quiet places to sit. It was a place the people of Paterson valued highly, a wild and beautiful spot that belonged to everyone and no one, unimproved private property open to free public use. A boy who witnessed Patch's leap later recalled that "the Falls have always been looked upon with pride by the citizen, and they expected it would always remain so. Some folks . . . even demanded that free access should be had by all."9

Timothy Crane's improvements transformed the north bank and took it out of public hands. The Forest Garden was "a place of rational amusement" and a "scene of science," and it was not for everyone. Crane invited "the poet and the painter" and the "man of leisure"; he hoped that refined out-of-towners would patronize his gardens, and he was particularly proud of a visit from the Catholic bishop of New York. He also went out of his way to offer "the man of labor and industry a relaxation from the toils of his occupation." But he insisted that customers behave themselves, and he reserved the right to exclude those who did not. Welcome guests included "decent people," "ladies and gentlemen," "good society," those who were "respectable and orderly," those who maintained "good order and decorum." In short, the Forest Garden was reserved for sober, decorous people who stayed on the walkways and out of the bushes, who conversed politely over brandy and never got drunk, and who contemplated trees without wanting to climb them.10

Crane's transformation of the old pleasure ground, along with his talk about art, nature, and DeWitt Clinton, would have caused trouble in any event. But he compounded his crimes by charging a toll at Clinton Bridge. The toll was only a penny, but Crane insisted that it be paid. Some of the neighbors responded with violence. Even Crane's friends thought the toll "impolitic," and in 1831 Crane took space in the newspaper to justify the toll. First, he pleaded that he had risked everything he owned in his north-bank improvements; he would survive only if he turned a profit. Second, and closely tied
to the first, the toll was his one means of keeping the place decent and safe. Crane knew what happened when he let just anyone cross Clinton Bridge: “1st. If the bridge were thrown open, the Garden would be occupied with a set of lazy, idle, rascally, drunken vagabounds. 2d. This would drive away all decent people. 3d. We should thereby lose all our income; and 4th. Our little ornaments and improvements would be defaced, ruined, and in fact, destroyed.”

Crane spoke from experience, for since opening the Forest Garden he had been under violent attack. In his first season he installed spring guns to discourage “Night Poachers” who defaced his tollgate and entered the grounds to steal liquor. During business hours, drunken, foul-mouthed men insulted respectable customers and threw firecrackers at the feet of ladies. Others cut down Crane’s trees, broke his imported bushes, smashed his glassware, stole his lanterns, and hurled his tables and benches over the falls. Rowdiness and vandalism escalated into physical assaults on Crane and his family and employees. Crane’s boys were kicked and beaten when they worked the tollgate; some attackers threatened to throw them into the chasm. The boys found trouble whenever they ran errands into town, and Crane himself could not walk safely in Paterson. At night, musket balls and doses of buckshot slammed into the walls and through the windows of buildings on the old pleasure ground.

These were violent and potentially lethal assaults, and through it all, Crane knew who his tormentors were. Some were well-dressed sports who might have passed as gentlemen. Others were men “from whom we might expect better things,” who condoned the violence. But most were workingmen, and Crane singled out the English weavers and spinners (the latter were Sam Patch’s direct peers in the mills) as the worst: “They come into my gardens, and cut down my young trees, and mutilate my seats and tables and bridge, and get drunk, and curse and swear,” and scare off respectable women and men.

The attack on the Forest Garden was an early round in the contest over recreational space in industrializing America, a contest that consistently pitted the noise and physicality of working-class recreations against the privatized, contemplative leisure pursuits of the middle class. In Paterson, however, the contest took on a particularly personal and violent edge, for many of Crane’s attackers were men who had been his friends. Crane had been in Paterson since 1812, and as an architect, builder, speculator, and sawmill-owner he had watched his fortune grow with the town. His work, his public services, and his membership in the Episcopal Church brought him into cooperation with Paterson’s leading families. His joviality and love of talk won him entry into other circles as well: between 1815 and 1823 he was an elected chief in Paterson’s volunteer fire companies, and he was widely known...
as a storyteller, a genial braggart, and a friend to traveling acrobats and circus riders. One of the boys from the mills recalled that people had liked Timothy Crane. A lot of them called him Uncle Tim.\textsuperscript{15}

Crane seems to have retained the goodwill of the community until 1827, when he bought a public playground and turned it into a romantic retreat for ladies and gentlemen. The decision transformed his relations with society. Crane’s old associations—the fire companies, the sawmill and construction workers, the storytelling groups—were with a democracy of males that excluded women. The Forest Garden, on the other hand, catered to respectable women and their male escorts, and pointedly excluded the working-class men who had made up much of Crane’s old social world. The reasons for Crane’s decision must remain a mystery. But we should note that the purchase of the north bank was the second big event in Crane’s year. In February 1827 he had married Maria Ryerson, daughter of an old Knickerbocker family of New York City. He was a fifty-four-year-old widower. She was twenty-four, and when Crane bought his land in August she was pregnant with their first child.\textsuperscript{16}

Crane’s marriage to a young and sophisticated woman, coupled with his withdrawal from the old male democracy and his new interest in exclusivity and romantic sentimentalism, suggest that he had determined to change his whole way of life. Timothy Crane was no longer one of the boys; he had become a pioneer of American bourgeois culture.

Viewed from the factories and tenements of Paterson, Crane’s north bank was a vast provocation. It violated customary use rights to the falls ground, and that alone would have started a fight. But Crane’s personal transformation made it worse. Timothy Crane had been a successful businessman who enjoyed the informal, democratic society of other men. Now he broke those ties and surrounded his own and the north-bank’s transformation with redefinitions of respectability and right behavior that included middle-class contemplatives and excluded nearly everyone else. The Forest Garden, in short, translated the familiar hierarchy of wealth into a new, undemocratic, and utterly unacceptable formula for the distribution of respect, and that is when Paterson changed its mind about Timothy Crane.

We begin to understand why Patersonians greeted Sam Patch’s leap at Clinton Bridge with laughter and applause. They seem to have admired Clinton Bridge; it was a straightforward conquest of nature and a fine feat of engineering. But at the end of the bridge there were tree stumps, gravel walkways, and orderly bushes and shrubs where their pleasure ground had been, and Uncle Tim was talking in strange new ways. The bridge-raising was a truly ambivalent celebration. Sam Patch resolved the ambivalence with a little speech about the democracy of worth and a spectacular reassertion of the freedom and physicality of the old north bank. As it turned out, Patch’s leap was the first in a continuous series of assaults that destroyed Timothy Crane.
The Forest Garden never made money, and Crane's creditors seized the land in June 1830. Crane stayed on as manager, dodging rocks and demanding tolls all the way, until 1839. Then he abandoned his vandalized and neglected gardens and retired to a log cabin in a forested corner of the north bank. He died there, broken and alone, in 1845. It was the end to a long and ugly war with the neighbors, a war that began the day Sam Patch sneaked past the constables and joined the crowd that came to see Timothy Crane conquer Passaic Falls.

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Months after the episode at Clinton Bridge, when Sam Patch had begun to jump professionally, he offered an explanation of his leaps. Crane and other friends of progress had been spreading rumors. Some said the jump at Clinton Bridge had been the act of a madman. Others insisted that Patch was merely drunk, and Timothy Crane himself would concoct the best story of all: Sam Patch had leaped for love. Patch was enamored of a young woman, you see, and she had turned him down. He had leaped not to humiliate Timothy Crane, but to kill himself. Patch countered with his own explanation. "It is no melancholy event," he insisted. "I am perfectly sober and in possession of my proper faculties, and [leaping waterfalls] is nothing more than an art which I have knowledge of and courage to perform," — "an art," he went on, "which I have practised from my youth."8

Art. It was an important word in the vocabularies of Sam Patch and Timothy Crane, but it had different meanings for the two. Crane used the word as a crucial component in what might be called the language of progress, a language that described and legitimized what he was doing at Passaic Falls. Patch's use of the word derived from plebian-democratic sensibilities that called Timothy Crane and his works into serious question. With little exaggeration, we might see the episode at Clinton Bridge as a confrontation between the art of Sam Patch and the art of Timothy Crane.19

When Sam Patch said that leaping waterfalls was an art he tied his jumps to familiar notions of Anglo-American manhood. In Patch's world a man's art was his identity-defining skill. There was the shoemaker's art, the carpenter's art, the multiform arts of husbandry—the whole range of combined mental and manual performances through which trained men provided the wants and needs of their communities. The word affirmed the intelligence, learning, and dexterity that went into building a house, making a shoe, or raising a field of wheat. It also affirmed the worth of men who performed those tasks. It was the combination of knowledge (not speculative imagination but mastery of a "system of rules" that was learned from childhood under the guidance of a father or master) and skilled hands that made ordinary work
an art. And it was the possession of an art that made a man independent and useful and therefore the sovereign equal of any other man.²⁰

Patch’s use of the word art called up the yeoman-artisan republic and the ideals of manhood and individual worth that it sustained—ideals that Sam Patch and other workingmen reformulated and extended into the industrial world of the nineteenth century. His “art” was tied to an ethos that his father had lost and that he had regained. The father of Sam Patch had been a landless farmer-turned cottage shoemaker, and in his proudest days he may have claimed possession of an art. But skilled shoemakers knew better. The elder Patch performed clumsy work and sold it to merchants who then put it onto world markets. His rented farm and his misshapen shoes were tied less to the neighborhood bases of occupational arts than to the wider commercial relationships that were dissolving them. Patch’s dimmest childhood memories were of his father’s expulsion from even that dubious artisanship, and then there was Pawtucket and a childhood in the mills.²¹

By 1827, however, Sam Patch was himself master of an art. He had practiced the operation of spinning machinery since childhood, and his elders on the job had recruited and trained him as one of the first American-born boss spinners. If he was anything like the other mule spinners, he talked and acted like a man who possessed an art: he was the master of machinery that his employers did not fully understand, he hired, managed, and disciplined his own helpers, and he demanded respect from lowlier workers and from the owners themselves.²²

The mule spinners pioneered the effort to reshape old standards of male autonomy and to establish them within factory walls, and Patch’s leap at Clinton Bridge—indirectly but unmistakably—was tied to that effort. For Patch’s leaping ability was a kind of occupational skill. Like most textile villages, Pawtucket was built around a waterfall, and during their off-hours boys from the mills went to the falls and dared each other to do dangerous things. They began with jumps from the bridge into the pool below the waterfall. Some carried their dangerous games further than others, and young Sam Patch established a kind of primacy over the other boys with one of the most extraordinary feats in Pawtucket memory: a running leap from the roof of a four-story mill, across an embankment, and into the pool. Jumping at waterfalls was indeed an art, and Patch’s feet-first, knees-bent position in the air was in accordance with the system of rules governing that art that Pawtucket boys had developed over the years. Throughout his jumping career, Sam Patch never deviated from the formal Pawtucket style. (Each mill town, apparently, developed local variations. In 1885, when a man named Odlum killed himself trying to leap from Brooklyn Bridge, Sheriff McKee of Paterson said that as a boy in the 1850s he had known at least twenty young men who could have made the leap safely. Paterson boys, explained the sheriff, knew the secret: the jumper must keep his mouth shut and hold his breath.)²³
Falls jumping was indeed an art. It was also an art that was tied closely to work in textile mills, and Sam Patch seems to have known that. No one recorded what Patch wore when he jumped at Clinton Bridge. But he made his subsequent leaps in a close-fitting shirt and pants of white cotton. It was neat and highly visible, a good outfit for jumping waterfalls. It was also the parade uniform of the Paterson Association of Spinners.²⁴

Patch’s insistence that leaping waterfalls was an art called up ideals of male usefulness and rough male equality that his father had lost and that he and his workmates had reconstructed in the mills. Patch’s membership in that world was hard-won and vital, and he repeatedly talked about his jumping abilities in ways that referred back to it. His speech at Clinton Bridge (Crane had done a great thing, and he meant to do another) called up a world in which things competently done established a democracy of respect among the doers. The following summer Patch jumped on the Fourth of July (the day of Crane’s fabled fireworks display) “merely . . . to show that some things can be done as well as others,” referring once more to the same democracy of arts.²⁵ By insisting that falls jumping was an art—a truly traditional art, one that required knowledge and a lifetime of practice—Sam Patch spoke to the one world in which he could imagine his own worth, the world he represented when he confronted Timothy Crane at Clinton Bridge.

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Timothy Crane may have been puzzled by Patch’s use of the word art. For when Crane used the word (and he used it often) he did not mean things like shoemaking, mule spinning, or leaping waterfalls. Timothy Crane and other improvers were shaping the yeoman-artisan republic into new landscapes, new social hierarchies, and new uses for key English words, and in their vocabulary “art” was one word that stood for all the works of humankind. In particular, it referred to the works of technology and entrepreneurial vision that were transforming nature and the social order in their generation. Art was the Erie Canal, a man-made river that turned a wilderness into new farms and towns. It was water-powered factories and mills. It was bridges and roads and steamboats. It was the whole range of projects by which civilization was conquering nature and putting it to human use, and it had little to do with the skills practiced by ordinary men.

Timothy Crane used art as a near-synonym for civilization, and he coupled it with its ancient opposite, “nature,” in two ways. The first—the one represented by Clinton Bridge—reiterated understandings that had come to North America with the first settlers: art was opposed to hostile natural forces, and civilization, as Keith Thomas has reminded us, was “virtually synonymous with the conquest of nature.” Timothy Crane, however, inflated “art” and
used it in newly aggressive and grandiose ways, for he and others had come to believe that civilization was winning its age-old war with wilderness. As early as the 1790s, Crane’s hero DeWitt Clinton had predicted that “the hand of art will change the face of the universe. Mountains, deserts, and oceans will feel its mighty force. It will not then be debated whether the hills shall be prostrated, but whether the Alps and Andes shall be levelled; nor whether sterile fields shall be fertilized, but whether the deserts of Africa shall feel the power of cultivation.” In the 1790s such language was self-consciously prophetic. By the time Timothy Crane built his bridge, it seemed that Clinton’s prophecy was coming true: art was conquering nature on a broad front and with unprecedented success; man’s long-sought dominion over nature was being realized. Timothy Crane offered Clinton Bridge as a step in that direction.

The Forest Garden represented a second, newer, juxtaposition of nature and art. With the final triumph of civilization at hand, educated northerners began a massive and complex conversation about humankind’s relation to a retreating natural world. They had always seen wilderness as primordial, threatening chaos, and many continued to do so. But others began to perceive a new divinity in nature: a benign and irresistible cycle of birth, death, and renewal that could be counterposed to the transitory, the selfish, and the artificial in their own increasingly civilized world. Among the results of that revolution in perception were attempts to provide access to nature through art: landscape paintings, nature books, half-wild gardens, rural cemeteries and urban parks, and journeys to a Niagara Falls that was surrounded by new hotels. By the 1830s the northeast was dotted with intentional landscapes that domesticated wilderness just enough to rob it of its terrors and reveal its moral lessons—combinations of art and nature that educated, renewed, and uplifted citizens of the world that progress was making. The Forest Garden, which, as Crane’s happy customer testified, “domesticated the wilderness of nature, and blended with it the improvements of art,” was among the first of those landscapes.

Thus the art of Timothy Crane’s north bank had both utilitarian and spiritual connotations. It linked developmentalism and romanticism, material progress and spiritual improvement, prosperity and uplift. Simply put, it linked the material accomplishments and the spiritual possibilities of people like Timothy Crane. There were other places in the northeast that juxtaposed those meanings in powerful ways. Cultivated Europeans often visited Mount Auburn Cemetery and the factory town at Lowell within a day or two of each other—possibly because their guides were wealthy Bostonians who admired both places. Tourists on the Erie Canal experienced that triumph of utilitarian art, knowing all the while that it carried them to a tamed and uplifting Niagara Falls. But seldom were the twin promises of utility and moral uplift linked as dramatically
as they were at Passaic Falls. Clinton Bridge spanned the falls chasm with technological ease, then delivered visitors into the Forest Garden, a spiritualized landscape whose very name combined nature and art. Passing through a new factory town, over a noble bridge, and into the confines of the Forest Garden, Crane’s customers witnessed triumphs of art and combinations of art and nature that represented big pieces of the material and moral agenda of an emerging entrepreneurial class. It was an agenda, we must note, that left little room for Sam Patch and his idea of art.

The art of Timothy Crane and the art of Sam Patch were opposed in many ways. That opposition was clearest at the Forest Garden: Crane simply excluded workingmen because they did not “understand” the new falls ground. The art of Clinton Bridge, however, posed subtler and deeper threats to ordinary men, for it assumed forms of social organization that diminished the arts that they practiced. In earlier centuries the struggle with nature was carried out by the occupational arts: people turned woodlands into farms, trees into furniture and houses, rocks into chimneys and fences, cattle into food and shoes. The progress of “art” was thus little more than the sum of what the arts had made, and the arts of Timothy Crane and Sam Patch were parts of one vocabulary. The new language of progress, however, dissolved the skills of individuals into a larger, more interdependent, and more abstract art. A newsman learned what Sam Patch did for a living, for instance, and described him as “a mechanic connected with one of the factories in Paterson.” It was not an insult. Most skilled workmen called themselves mechanics, had done so for a long time, and would continue to do so for at least a generation. In their usage, a mechanic was the possessor of an art. But in the language of progress, mechanics were more often, like the newsman’s Sam Patch, “connected” with the grander designs of art.

Crane’s friend on the Intelligencer provided a set-piece example of how the language of progress dealt with Sam Patch and his fellow mechanics. In 1828 he described the millwrights of Paterson as “a useful class of mechanics which enables the manufacturer to render the natural elements so immanently subservient to the comfort and prosperity of this town.” He did not mean that millwrights had lost their skills. Indeed the mills of Paterson were among the most complicated and demanding examples of the millwrights’ art in all of North America. The abilities of millwrights were not diluted but devalued—devalued because cognitive and manual responsibilities were no longer lodged in the same men, and because capital and entrepreneurial imagination were assuming primacy over ancient knowledge. With that mill-building lost some of its status, and the balance of respect shifted toward the “manufacturer.” For it was he who thought up projects and financed them, then organized the various “classes of mechanics” (that is, the occupational arts) in ways that
turned unruly nature into “comfort and prosperity” for the whole town—all of it accomplished through a process and with results that people like Timothy Crane called art.

Within all of that, the word art took on a peculiarly abstract and collective character. Timothy Crane’s art did not refer to the knowledge and skills of any individual; it was one word that stood for everything that human beings made. When Crane advertised in newspapers he seldom talked about himself in the first person. He was the “subscriber” or the “proprietor,” and Clinton Bridge and the Forest Garden were made not by him but by “the hand of ART.” (Sam Patch, remember, claimed his art for himself: I have the knowledge and courage to perform it, I have practiced it from my youth.) Crane’s disembodied “hand of ART” was an abstraction not only for his gardens and bridge but for the things that such projects demanded. In order for art to conquer Passaic Falls, Crane had to imagine his bridge and gardens, buy the land on which they would sit, and exclude other users from the property. Then he had to hire scores of laborers, carpenters, and gardeners and supervise them as they assembled the parts of his scheme. And then (here is where “art” was put to new uses) he had to convince the people of Paterson that the project embodied not his own capital and aspirations but the hand of art. The project and the process of realizing it belonged not to him but to humanity. Everyone would profit from it, everyone could be proud of it.

The world that Timothy Crane’s art would make was taking visible shape in the landscape of Paterson. The men who owned mills and foundries along the millrace shared Crane’s sensibilities, and they planted flower gardens between the raceway and the lower Passaic River. The result was a striking vision of nature improved by art. At the head of town stood a majestic waterfall, surrounded on one side by Crane’s gardens and bridge, on the other by a line of factories and flower beds that sloped unevenly down into the tenements and little houses of Paterson—narrow, unpaved streets filled with pigs and dirty children, with émigré English factory hands, and with the wage-earning daughters and sons of American yeomen. A traveler walked through Paterson in 1832 and counted “thirty cotton-mills [and] iron and brass foundries, in the upper part of it, with gardens so tastefully laid out, and the banks of the river kept so neat, and ornamented with weeping willows, as to compensate for the broken bridges and dirt of the lower part of town.” It was a picture-book balance of art, nature, and early-industrial squalor. It was what American romantic capitalism had made in Paterson, New Jersey.

Clinton Bridge was the linchpin in that landscape. And when Timothy Crane invited the neighbors to walk out of their part of the picture and into his and to watch art conquer Passaic Falls, he wanted more than applause. He wanted factory hands and foundry workers to participate in meanings that
he and other entrepreneurs and their friends were inventing. In oblique but profound ways, he wanted them to ratify their own places within the language and landscape of progress.

Crane’s spectacle almost worked. He drew a huge crowd, and when the bridge was in place most of them had to admit that Timothy Crane had done an impressive thing. But Sam Patch, with an anarchic leap and a mock rescue of a piece of failed engineering, stole the day; in a split second the applause went from the art of Timothy Crane to the art of Sam Patch. It was what some scholars would call a silly gesture, existential rebellion at its most juvenile and dangerous. But Sam Patch inhabited a world where “art” was a vehicle of self-expression within a system of recognized equalities and reciprocities, and he wanted to show Timothy Crane how an American man conquers a waterfall.

NOTES


7. The lock up story is told in Longwell, A Little Story, 37–38, and idem., Historic Totowa Falls (Paterson, n.d.), 37, and corroborated in the Connecticut Courant, 15 July 1828.

8. New York Post, 1 Oct. 1827; Boston Patriot, 5 Oct. 1827; Paterson Intelligencer, 10 Oct. 1827 (quote). Longwell, A Little Story, 37–41, and Historic Totowa Falls, 36–39, reminiscing at a distance of over seventy years, differs in some details from the story in the New York Post, which was the most widely reprinted account. In Longwell’s story the bridge sways dangerously after the fall of the log roller, and this near-disaster provides the backdrop for Patch’s leap. Longwell has Patch’s pre-jump speech as “Now, old Tim Crane thinks he has done something great; but I can beat him.” Given the many decades that intervened between the two accounts, they are remarkably similar; when they differ, this essay follows the account in the Post.


10. Paterson Intelligencer, 1 May 1831, 7 July 1831, 14 July 1831; Fidler, Observations, 98.

11. Paterson Intelligencer, 1 May 1831.


13. Fidler, Observations, 97 (quote); Paterson Intelligencer, 1 May 1831.


16. Albert Winslow Ryerson, The Ryerson Genealogy: Genealogy of the Knickerbocker Families of Ryerson, Ryerse, Ryerss; also Adriance and Martense Families; all Descendants of Martin and Adriaen Reyersz (Reyerzen) of Amsterdam, Holland (Chicago, 1916), 128; Crane, Genealogy of the Crane Family, 1:102.

17. Paterson Intelligencer, 16 June 1830, 18 Nov. 1835, 15 June 1836, 20 July 1836, traces Crane’s economic troubles. The north bank remained contested territory for many years. In the 1850s a silk manufacturer bought the grounds and closed them off with the intention of building a house for himself; he reconsidered and turned the property into a privately owned “public” park, with the advertised intention of improving Patersonians. He, too, was harassed and vandalized off the grounds. See Longwell, Historic Totowa Falls, 40, and Levi R. Trumbull, A History of Industrial Paterson (Paterson, 1882), 332–33.


19. The discussion that follows begins with the analyses of art and related words in Raymond
Williams, *Culture and Society, 1750–1950* (New York, 1958), and *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York, 1976). Williams’ principle concern is with the dissociation of “art” from occupational skills (Sam Patch’s definition) and its attachment to anti-occupations practiced by special people who operate apart from and above the workday world, a redefinition that was not accomplished until at least the 1850s. A third use of the word (Timothy Crane’s definition) stemmed from the old vocabulary used by Sam Patch, but reshaped “art” in ways that gave it new entrepreneurial and developmental meanings. Crane’s “art” is fully illustrated in the historical and critical studies cited in notes 1 and 28. Those studies and the works in labor history cited in note 20 establish the centrality of Patch’s and Crane’s definitions of art in working-class and middle-class perceptions of economic development during the crucial second quarter of the nineteenth century.


28. The educated conversation about nature in the second quarter of the nineteenth century was long and complicated, but it tended strongly to transform pristine nature from an implacable enemy into a divine teacher. Among the most helpful studies of that conversation are Perry Miller, “The Romantic Dilemma in American Nationalism and the Concept of Nature,” in *Nature’s Nation* (Cambridge, 1967), 197–207; Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, 1967); and French, “The Cemetery as Cultural Institution”; Harris, *The Artist