



2: Thomas Chambers *View of West Point* (after 1828)

Peter Ogden Brown

West Point is romantically situated on the west bank of the Hudson River, 52 miles from New York and 93 miles from Albany....No place in the Union exceeds [it] in beauty of location and the stirring incidents connected with its early history, [and in its present role as] the residence and school of the future defenders of the Union.¹

The manner and style of natural adornment that is presented by the face of the grounds and rocks attached to this national domain...cannot fail to impress the traveler, when he observes the formation of the fantastic rocks, wild moss covered crags, luxuriantly-garlanded pillars and creeping shrubs, and the cottages and hamlets perched on the slopes, terraces, and crags, in most admired confusion....²

It is little wonder, with ease of transportation and unabashed promotion of the American heritage and landscape by guide books like those excerpted above, that Hudson River sites became popular images for artists to paint or to copy. Thomas Chambers, a self-taught British artist who immigrated to America, was one of the most prolific of these. While he painted many American scenes, including Niagara Falls and the Genesee Falls in Rochester, he seemed to specialize in the Hudson River. A search of the Smithsonian Institution's Inventory of American Art database yields a variety of descriptive titles, including *Looking North from Kingston*, *View on the Hudson*, and *View Near Fishkill, Hudson River*. Of his many near-identical views of West Point, one, his unsigned *View of West Point*, was a gift to the Memorial Art Gallery from Elsie McMath Cole in 1943, only a few months after Norman Hirsch and Albert Duveen brought the previously unknown painter to national attention. The two dealers assembled eighteen works, only one of which was signed, which they attributed to the artist in a show at New York's Macbeth Gallery ambitiously titled: "T. Chambers: First American Modern."

Thomas Chambers,
1808–after 1866
View of West Point, after 1828
Oil on canvas, 22 1/4 x 30 1/8 in.
Gift of Elsie McMath Cole in
memory of her parents,
Mr. and Mrs. Morrison H.
McMath, 43.43

Subsequently, through the determined work of Nina Fletcher Little and Rochester's Howard Merritt, the artist's life in America was limned in and the identification of his extant paintings expanded to include some sixty-five works, examples of which are now owned by many major art museums.³ Little, a student and collector of Chambers's work, published three articles about him in *Antiques* magazine between 1948 and 1951.⁴ In them she made use of early municipal almanacs, directories, and census records to establish Chambers's places of residence and occupations. Born in England in 1808, he immigrated to New Orleans in 1832. In 1834 he is described in a New York directory simply as an artist and, later, as a landscape and marine painter. By 1843 he was living in Boston, occupied again as an artist and then as a portrait painter. He moved to Albany in 1852, and returned to New York in 1861. Chambers's wife and fellow Briton, Harriett Shellard, died there three years later, at age fifty-five, and the artist, himself, sometime after 1866.⁵

Professor Merritt of the University of Rochester was also a collector of Chambers's work. In a 1956 article about the artist, he noted (as had Little) the painter's evident reliance on published views by other artists, such as Asher B. Durand, William H. Bartlett, and Jacques Gérard Milbert, for much of his subject matter.⁶ He broke Chambers's work down into forty-five landscapes, fifteen marine paintings (five of which constitute his only signed works), and five paintings of foreign subjects. (No portraits have yet been attributed to the artist.) Of these oils, twenty measure 20 x 30 inches, the dimensions of the Gallery's work. Merritt traced the inspiration for a second Chambers landscape owned by the Gallery, *View of the Delaware Water Gap*, to a Durand print of the subject published in 1830.⁷



Laurent Deroy, French,
1797–1886, after Jacques
Milbert, French, 1766–1840
*General View of the Military
School, West-Point (Vue générale
de l'école militaire de West Point),
1828–1829*
Lithograph, ca. 7¹/₁₆ x 11¹/₁₆ in.
Courtesy of Emmet Collection,
Miriam and Ira D. Wallach
Division of Art, Prints and
Photographs, The New York
Public Library, Astor, Lenox,
and Tilden Foundations

View of West Point can, likewise, be tied back to a painting by Jacques Gérard Milbert from the early 1820s, subsequently reproduced as a lithograph in his *Itinéraire pittoresque du fleuve Hudson...*, published in Paris, 1828–29.⁸ Milbert, born in Paris in 1766, was trained as a naturalist and geographical illustrator. Illness prevented him from joining Napoleon's expedition to Egypt, but in 1815 he seized on an opportunity to travel to the New World. He spent nine years in America, drawing, painting, conducting scientific inquiries, and even consulting on the route of the Erie Canal.⁹

The oldest continually occupied military post in North America, West Point was purchased in 1790 by Congress as a

defensive position. In 1794 the government began to train engineers and artillerymen on the site, a level bluff two hundred feet above the west bank of the Hudson. Milbert painted the view from a position on the east side of the river, probably the projection known as Constitution Island. He included the North and South Barracks, the Academy building, with its pedimented front, and the Cadet Mess Hall.¹⁰ The lightning-blasted stump in the right foreground of Milbert's painting, with its new south side growth echoing the tilt of the adjoining trio of wind-bent pines, also appears in Chambers's depiction, together with the larger trees which frame the right and left sides of the composition.

But Chambers cannot be dismissed as a copyist. He developed a distinctive palette and style that separate his works from those of other Hudson River School artists and make them so readily identifiable. Various descriptions of him as pioneering ("First American Modern"), essential, or naïve, in *View of West Point* he juxtaposes the rotund color masses of the rocks, leafy trees, and wooded bluffs against the angular shapes of the straggly pines, sailing ships, and soaring gulls to energize his impression of the outlook. Brilliant orange light contends with the cerulean blue of a hazy sky and distant Hudson promontory, while the white accents of the sails and birds contrast against the deep greens and earth tones of the shaded foreground and point. Although relatively small, the Academy buildings and sailing craft on the river are rendered in accurate detail, a feature of the artist's marine paintings.

Thomas Chambers is thought to have painted this subject between ten and twelve times, making it one of his most popular views, and one seen personally by the thousands of Americans and European visitors who followed the pleasant water route offered by the Hudson River and Erie Canal through the eastern heartland of the new nation.¹¹ Charged with Revolutionary War history, patriotic fervor for the new military establishment sited there, and the natural drama of one of the lower Hudson's most attractive reaches, West Point offered a perfect opportunity for the creation of visual souvenirs of the American "grand tour." As one of the many contemporary guide books put it, "No place in the Union, probably, exceeds West Point in beauty of location and the stirring incidents connected with its early history...."¹²



Thomas Chambers,
1808–after 1866
*View of West Point (detail),
after 1828*
Oil on canvas, 22¹/₄ x 30³/₈ in.
Gift of Elsie McMath Cole in
memory of her parents,
Mr. and Mrs. Morrison H.
McMath, 43.43



Thomas Chambers,
1808–after 1866
View of the Delaware Water Gap,
ca. 1850
Oil on canvas, 23 x 30½ in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
47.16

And we know that Chambers, living at various times in New York and Albany, must have passed the spot himself on at least one occasion, yet, as with his painted views of other popular natural sites, some of which he may not personally have witnessed, such as the Delaware Water Gap, Niagara Falls, and Rochester's own Genesee Falls, the artist still preferred to rely on other artists' popular prints when formulating his paintings. Combined with the paucity of information regarding his life, this has led to great difficulty in dating his work (the Memorial Art Gallery's *View of West Point*, taken from the 1828–29 publication of Milbert's work, could theoretically have been painted at any time between that event and Chambers's death, some time after 1866). It also raises the question, given his unique use of dramatic shapes and color masses, as to why the artist did not trust his own hand to compose these popular views.

The answer may lie in the strong likelihood that Chambers was self-taught and realistic in his own appraisal of his abilities. The evidence of so many multiple copies in his oeuvre, together with the limited opportunities for learning to paint outside of the academy,¹³ suggest that this artist was very much a creature of the marketplace, with his "modernist" tendencies resulting as much from his freedom from the constraints of academic convention, as from any deliberate, creative divergence from contemporary form.

Yet, whatever its derivation, the repetition in Thomas Chambers's work also suggests that the fresh stylistic approach and color liberation struck a responsive chord in his patrons. Being himself an immigrant to these shores, Chambers created dynamic impressions of the young nation's natural and historic attractions that proved very much in keeping with the new spirit of its people.

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