

# Garnet W. Jex, Arlington Artist

BY WILLARD J. WEBB

Garnet Jex was an Arlington artist. He lived and worked in Arlington for more than 40 years. He was a painter—a landscapist and a portraitist. He worked in watercolor, oils, and pastel. Although he painted friends, neighbors, and prominent athletes, his favorite genre was landscape. He loved to paint the humble dwellings in old towns and villages and Virginia landscapes with hills and the mountains in the distance. He was an active participant in the Washington art scene and served as president of the Washington Arts Club and the Washington Landscape Club. He also participated in local Arlington affairs.

Garnet Wolseley Jex was born in Kent, Ohio, in 1895 where his Canadian-born father was a veterinarian. His father died when Garnet was four, and his mother moved Garnet and his older brother Walter to Washington, D.C. There they lived with his grandmother, Nellie B. Ward, a reporter for the *Washington Times*.

Garnet attended the District's schools, and graduated from McKinley High School. He finished high school just in time to join the army and serve in World War I. His service was not rigorous. Because of his ability to draw, he was assigned to the Army Medical Museum in Washington as an illustrator. The young soldier lived at home and traveled each day to the museum.<sup>1</sup>

He had always loved to draw and, upon release from the army, began art studies at the Corcoran School of Art. He also studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts during several summers. He worked and continued his studies at night at George Washington University. He earned his bachelor's degree in 1927, graduating with distinction, and winning a prize in history. History was always another great love of his life. He continued at George Washington and completed a master's in fine arts in 1931. He was one of the first candidates to be awarded that degree by the University.<sup>2</sup>

His thesis project was a historical painting, *The Planning of Washington, 1791*. The scene is located on a hill, the future site of George Washington University, overlooking the Potomac with Virginia (present day Arlington) across the river. The painting, an oil on canvas measuring 60 by 84 inches, depicts George Washington pointing out directions and includes David Stuart, Thomas Johnson, and Daniel Carroll, commissioners of the capital city. Also pictured are William Thornton, the original architect of the Capitol; Pierre Charles L'Enfant, holding his plan for the city; Andrew Ellicott with his surveying tools;



Courtesy of Washington Arts Club

***The Planning of Washington*, oil on canvas. Shown in the painting, from left: David Stuart, Daniel Carroll, William Thornton, Pierre Charles L'Enfant, George Washington, Andrew Ellicott, and Benjamin Banneker.**

and Benjamin Banneker, recording Ellicott's survey. The painting hung in an exhibit on the planning of Washington at the National Museum during the bicentennial of George Washington's birth in 1932. Thereafter, it was for many years in the George Washington University Library and today hangs in the office of the dean of the business school.<sup>3</sup>

Jex always worked full-time, usually at art-related jobs that left him free to paint as he liked on weekends, holidays, and vacations. He served as an art editor for *Nature Magazine* from 1927 to 1931 and then in federal service as an illustrator, and later administrator, with the Public Health Service. One of his paintings, depicting President John Adams signing a law that was the first step in creating the federal health service, is owned by the Public Health Service. Jex never regretted the time lost to painting while he earned a living in a nine-to-five job. "I am grateful," he later said, "that I've had a job all these years. I don't have to play art politics at all. I have complete independence to do what I want to do."<sup>4</sup>

Landscape painting was always Jex's greatest love. He became a member of the Landscape Club of Washington<sup>5</sup> in 1925. The club had been founded in 1913 and was limited to 40 members. Membership required sponsorship by

a member and club acceptance of a painting. The club went on weekend painting excursions around the Washington area and held several exhibitions each year at various locations throughout the city. Jex first exhibited with the club in 1926 with a painting titled *Summer Afternoon* in a show at the Ambassador Theatre. He enjoyed the club excursions and became friends with prominent Washington artists Benson B. Moore, Minor S. Jameson, and August O. Rolle. He showed paintings regularly thereafter in the club exhibits during the late 1920s through the early 1970s. He served as the club president in 1939-1940 and received the club's prize for oils in 1941.<sup>6</sup>

Garnet Jex loved rural Virginia and Maryland and his favorite subjects were tumble-down dwellings in the villages of Waterford, Harpers Ferry, Falmouth, and Sharpsburg. The rolling hills of the Virginia Piedmont with their small farms, cabins, and mills were other frequent subjects.

During the 1930s, Jex began teaching landscape classes on weekends. He took his students to all his favorite locations to paint, and he would later



Courtesy of Willard J. Webb

***Spring, North of Taylorstown, Loudoun County, oil painting on canvas.***

claim that he had discovered Harpers Ferry and Waterford before they became the trendy, fashionable places they would become after World War II.

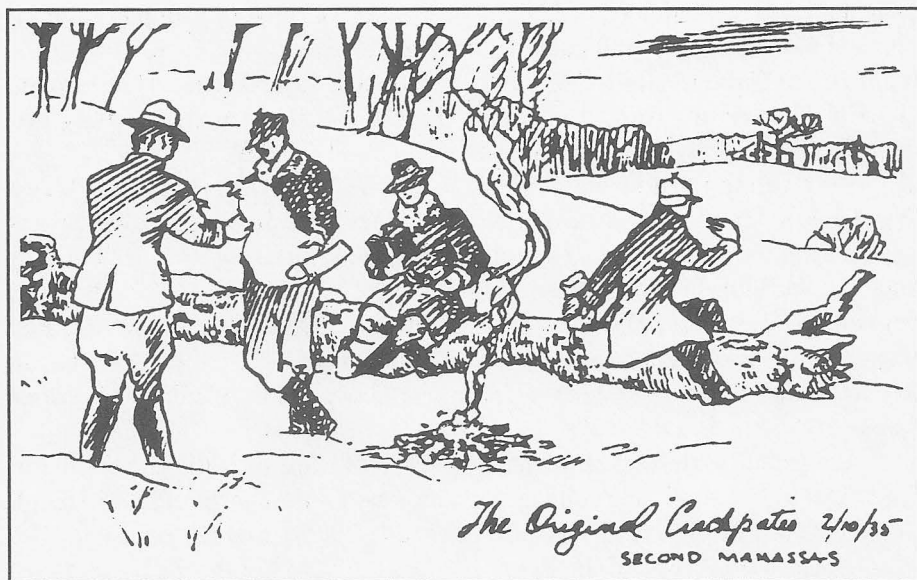
Garnet Jex fell in love with one of his students, Emily Bercaw. Emily grew up in Georgia, but had come with her family in the mid-1920s to Washington where she worked for Senator Harry Byrd. She and Garnet married in 1937.<sup>7</sup> In anticipation of his approaching marriage, Jex purchased a house in Arlington at 6010 20th Street, North in Overlee Knolls. It was virtually a new house, but the previous owner had defaulted on his loan. Jex bought the house at an auction on 8 October 1937. He was the highest bidder, offering the sum of \$100 over the amount of the existing mortgage of \$5,250.<sup>8</sup> It was the Jexes' home for their entire marriage. An upstairs bedroom always served as Garnet's studio.

Both Emily and Garnet loved the outdoors. In the years immediately following their marriage, and before the birth of their only child, Garnet, Jr., in 1942, they took a number of long trips through the West. They camped in the National Parks. Emily photographed and Garnet sketched and painted.

Garnet Jex always had a keen interest in history, especially the Civil War and its battles. He shared this interest with an old G.W. classmate, Willard Webb.<sup>9</sup> They and several other interested friends began to study various Civil War battles, visiting the battlefields to trace the actual course of the battles. In 1935, they began an informal group, calling themselves the "Battlefield Crackpates." The other original members were James Turner and Joseph Mills Hanson. Hanson, who had served in World War I, was known as "Major." In 1935, he was with the US Park Service at the Fredericksburg battlefield and in 1940 became the first superintendent of the newly created Manassas Battlefield National Park. Jex did a pen and ink sketch of the group forming the Crackpates on a snowy February day in 1935.<sup>10</sup>

The coming of World War II and the accompanying gas rationing forced Jex to curtail his painting classes and their travels around the area. He continued to paint and did a series of portraits for the Washington Touchdown Club of famous athletes. There were thirteen in all and included such football greats as Jim Thorpe, Knute Rockne, Red Grange, Cliff Battles, and "Slingin' Sammy" Baugh. He painted the portraits from photographs, and the backgrounds are in Jex style, often with landscapes showing the campuses where the players had made their reputations. The portraits still hang in the Hall of Fame of the Washington Touchdown Club. Jex also painted portraits of family and friends, including ones of the author and his brother as young boys. Another project was a number of backgrounds for displays in the reptile house at the National Zoo, but these have not survived.<sup>11</sup>

In 1949, Jex exhibited 24 of his paintings at the George Washington University library. *The Planning of Washington* served as the centerpiece. The



Courtesy of Willard J. Webb

*The Original Crackpates*, pen and ink illustration.

titles of the other paintings, long since dispersed, reflect Jex's love of the Virginia and Maryland Piedmont, which included, among others, the following: *In the Gorge of the Potomac; Shenandoah Ferry; South from Flint Hill, Virginia; After the Service, Haymarket, Virginia; Old Houses in Falmouth; Lockhouse, C & O Canal; November, Loudoun County, (No. 1 and No. 2); Sledding in Waterford; Bridge over Antietam Creek, and Winter in Virginia.*<sup>12</sup>

When Major Hanson retired from the Park Service in 1947, Jex did a portrait of him and presented it to the Manassas Battlefield Park in a ceremony in May 1948. The portrait hung for a number of years in the battlefield museum, then in the park superintendent's office, and now is in storage.<sup>13</sup>

The Battlefield Crackpates organized themselves more formally into the Washington Civil War Round Table in 1952. Willard Webb served as the first president, and Jex, Hanson, and Turner, together with eighteen others, became founding members. Jex was active in the Round Table over the coming years and did numerous sketches and drawings for Round Table use in programs, newsletters, and banquet menus.<sup>14</sup>

In 1953, the Round Table began bestowing an annual gold medal for distinguished achievement in Civil War history and presented Jex the medal in 1962. The citation read: "To Garnet Wolsely Jex, one of the original Civil War 'Crackpates' and a founder of the Civil War Round Table, whose brush has

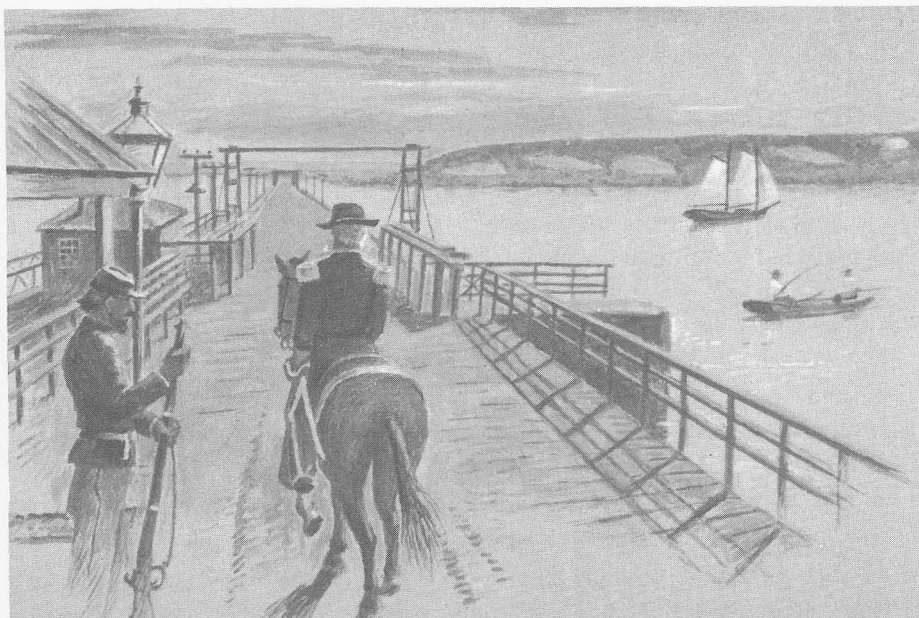
contributed to the understanding of history.” Jex was in good company. Previous recipients of the Round Table medal had included Douglas Southall Freeman, Bruce Catton, Virgil Carrinton (Pat) Jones, Joseph Mills Hanson, and General U.S. Grant, III.<sup>15</sup> In another Civil War history related activity, Jex designed the seal for the Lincoln Sesquicentennial in 1959.<sup>16</sup>

In traveling to and from work at the Public Health Service in southwest Washington, Jex witnessed the demolition and redevelopment of the old Southwest during the late 1950s. He found beauty and nostalgia in the old houses and other buildings that were fast disappearing. “Some of this stuff ought to be painted,” he thought. But, when the weekend came, and he went down to paint, the houses he had wanted to capture had already been destroyed. So he began to photograph much of the area, recording the houses and buildings in various stages of destruction.

Jex found a kindred spirit in love for and interest in the Southwest in Dana Doten, a friend and colleague, who was a writer at the Public Health Service. They began to put together ideas for a history and presentation. The result, “The Bulldozer and the Rose, The Story of Old Southwest,” was a presentation that combined paintings and slides by Jex with a narrative by Doten. In the title, they explained, the bulldozer symbolized the destruction of old Southwest, while the rose, the perennial Rose of Sharon shrub that grew so profusely in the Southwest yards, represented “the human values, persistent human values, now so violently uprooted.” The presentation included many slides and nine paintings of historical scenes of old Southwest as Jex envisioned it. The paintings included the *James Creek Canal about 1860*, *7th Street about 1900*, with a horse-drawn street car, and *East on Maryland Avenue, S.W., about 1895*, with a train crossing the avenue and the Capitol building in the background. Another depicted a dejected *General Lee Crossing the Long Bridge to Arlington, After Refusing Command of the Union Army, April, 18, 1861*. They gave the presentation to interested organizations and groups around the city and the paintings, slides, and narrative are now in the collection of the DC Historical Society.<sup>17</sup>

In 1962, Jex retired from the Public Health Service where he was the Director of Graphics in the Bureau of State Services. Retirement did not mean he became inactive. A quiet man with an infectious smile and a ready sense of humor, he had a wide and varied circle of friends and interests and participated in many activities.

He served as president of the Washington Arts Club in the years 1962-1964. He continued to exhibit with the Landscape Club of Washington throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s and served as the club’s treasurer in 1964. He maintained active memberships in the Washington Society of Artists, the Ameri-



Courtesy of DC Historical Society

***General Lee Crossing the Long Bridge to Arlington, After Refusing Command of the Union Army, April 18, 1861, pastel on paper.***

can Art League, the Art League of Northern Virginia, and the Society of Federal Artists and Designers, and he was president of the Washington Civil War Round Table in 1967-1968. He and several other artists had a small gallery on M Street in Georgetown for several years to show and sell their work. He had an exhibit of landscape paintings at the Payne Galleries in Washington in 1964, and he and Robert Johnstone had a landscape exhibit at the Congressional City Club in February 1965. Two years later, Jex had an exhibit of Civil War watercolors at the Washington County Free Library in Hagerstown.<sup>18</sup> But he never had an exhibit in Arlington.

Jex did sponsor his friend and fellow Arlington artist, Rudolph Wendelin, for membership in the Landscape Club of Washington. Wendelin, in turn, recommended Jex to paint a portrait of Tom Gill, the president of the Society of American Foresters. Jex did do Gill's portrait and it remains today in the Society's headquarters in Bethesda. In 1974, Jex and Wendelin held a joint exhibit of their landscapes, oils by Jex and watercolors by Wendelin, at the Washington Arts Club.<sup>19</sup>

There was also time for travel. Garnet and Emily studied French and then spent several months in France. She photographed and he sketched; then they

returned home where he completed a series of French landscapes. Other trips took them to Spain, Italy, and Mexico, and more landscapes of scenes there followed.<sup>20</sup>

Both Garnet and Emily were active in the Overlee Knolls-Highland Park Civic Association and in the Reed School PTA when Garnet Junior attended there. Later, in 1958, Garnet did a painting of the Reed School and presented it to the student government association. It showed the students walking to school with the Reed building in the background. The painting hung in the hall for all to see until the school closed. It was then given to a former Reed teacher and has since been lost.<sup>21</sup>

Emily Jex died in 1978 and Garnet the following year.<sup>22</sup> In September 1980, the Arts Club of Washington held a Garnet Jex Memorial Exhibit of 44 of his paintings. Again, the paintings showed his interests and range of styles, as indicated by the titles: *Great Falls in October*; *Near the Blue Ridge, East of Flint Hill*; *Spring, North of Taylorstown, Loudoun County*; *Potomac River Gorge*; *Portrait of Walter R. Jex* (brother of the artist); *Brittainy Coast*; *Village Gardens, Near Leon, Spain*; *Lake Garda at Riva*; *Foggy Morning, Taxco, Mexico*; and *Autumn in Virginia*.<sup>23</sup>

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## Notes

Willard J. Webb is a longtime Arlington resident. He served as a government historian for 34 years, culminating in his assignment as Chief of the Historical Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

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## References

- <sup>1</sup> All biographical information, unless otherwise stated, is from: "Garnet W. Jex," in *The Artists of Washington, D.C., 1796-1996*, Virgil E. McMahan ed., (1997), p.112; "Garnet W. Jex," *Washington Star*, 28 September 1979, p. C-6; "Garnet Jex, Civil War Fan, Artist for Public Health Unit," *Washington Post*, 17 September 1979, p. B-6; Harriet Griffiths, "Artist on the Outdoor Scene," *Washington Star Magazine*, 27 March 1960, pp. 10-13; telephone interview, author with Garnet W. Jex, Jr., 2 August 1998; and recollections of the author.
- <sup>2</sup> G.W.U., Information Sheet, "The Planning of Washington, 1791, by Garnet W. Jex," Dimock Gallery Archives.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Griffiths, "Artist on the Outdoor Scene," *Star Magazine*, 27 March 1960, p. 10.
- <sup>5</sup> The Landscape Club of Washington continues today although the name was changed in 1986 to the Washington Society of Landscape Painters. For a history of the club, see Dick Ray, "A Brief History of the Washington Society of Landscape Painters," 1997.
- <sup>6</sup> All information on Jex's activities with the Landscape Club of Washington (LCW) is from LCW Archival Books 2-5 and interview with Dick Ray, Washington Society of Landscape Painters Archivist, and Al Kuentz, long-time society member, July 6, 1998 (hereinafter cited as LCW Archives and interview).



- <sup>7</sup> "Emily B. Jex, 73 Arts Club Member." *Washington Post*, 28 April 1978, p. C-15.
- <sup>8</sup> Arlington County Deed Book 424, p. 273.
- <sup>9</sup> The author's father.
- <sup>10</sup> DC Civil War Round Table, Yearbook and Gold Medal Program, 1961-1962, p. 5. Interview, author with James Burgess, Park Service Historian, Manassas Battlefield National Park, 26 January 1998.
- <sup>11</sup> Interview, author with Howard Henn, Washington Touchdown Club, 9 July 1998. Interview, author with Fran O'Brien, Washington Touchdown Club, 13 July 1998. Telephone interview, author with National Zoo employee. Author recollections.
- <sup>12</sup> G.W.U. Catalog, "Paintings by Garnet W. Jex," 3-21 October 1949.
- <sup>13</sup> Burgess interview, *Manassas Messenger*, 18 May 1948, p. 3.
- <sup>14</sup> DC Round Table, Yearbook and Gold Medal Program, pp. 4-5.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 4.
- <sup>16</sup> LCW Archives and interview.
- <sup>17</sup> Garnet W. Jex and Dana E. Doten, "The Bulldozer and the Rose, The Story of Old Southwest," 1959, collection of the DC Historical Society. Griffiths, "Artist on the Outdoor Scene," *Star Magazine*, 27 March 1960, pp. 10-13.
- <sup>18</sup> LCW Archives and interview. Information from the archives of the Washington Arts Club. Interview, author with Vernon E. Gardner, Archivist, Washington Arts Club. Author recollections.
- <sup>19</sup> Interview, author with Rudolph Wendelin, 2 July 1998. Telephone interview, author with Patricia Adadevoh, American Society of Foresters, 2 July 1998.
- <sup>20</sup> Author recollections. "Emily B. Jex," *Washington Post*, 28 April 1978, p. C-15.
- <sup>21</sup> Interview, author with Sophie B. Vogel, former librarian, Reed School, 24 June 1998.
- <sup>22</sup> Emily B. Jex, *Washington Post*, 28 April 1978, p. C-15. Garnet W. Jex, *Washington Star*, 28 September 1979, p. C-6.
- <sup>23</sup> Washington Arts Club, Catalog, "Garnet Jex Memorial Exhibition, 7-26 September 1980."