

THE ROOTS OF CONFLICT: 1882-1899

THE ROOTS OF Edward Hopper reach back to the old Dutch settlements that punctuate the wooded bluffs and promontories along the lower Hudson River. The conflict in his character mirrors the tension in those communities, where local and traditional values faced the horizons opened by technology and science and new waves of migration. Hopper's childhood spanned the end of the Victorian age and the dawn of the new century with its momentous disruptions and displacements. The decade of the 1880s saw great scientific and social transformations: Hopper was born just weeks after commercial electric lights made their debut in New York. Less than a year later the first telephone line would connect New York with Chicago.

At the time of Edward's birth on July 22, 1882, his home town of Nyack counted a population of about four thousand. Light manufacturing included shoes, carriages, and pianos. Service industries flourished, especially those related to tourism and resort development along the river.¹ Incorporated as late as 1872, Nyack was considered a healthful resort. The streets were paved and there was no threat of malarial mosquitoes. Nearby on the Hudson the promontory of Hook Mountain offered a noble prospect. At "the pond," ice was cut in the winter and recreation such as boating was available all summer. Along the river affluent captains of industry lived in elaborate Victorian elegance. The area had been populated primarily by people of Dutch extrac-

tion well into the 1820s, when more settlers, including Hopper's forebears, began arriving from New Jersey, New York City, and abroad. When later immigrants came, they included refugees from the potato famine in Ireland.²

Change in Nyack had begun in earnest when the railroad linked it with New York City in 1870. Growing rail traffic in both passengers and freight prompted an upgrading of the local country roads. The improvements also caused dislocation, gradually driving out of business the local steamboat lines and the industry that built the boats. Still, during Edward's boyhood, the port remained relatively prosperous and a thriving shipyard turned out racing yachts. The last riverboats steamed up and down and across the Hudson. The lad could spend Saturdays "in the Nyack shipyards where he studied the building and rigging of yachts with a boy's enthusiastic attention to detail," reported Alfred Barr, who interviewed Hopper in 1933.³ When only five or six Edward learned to row on Rockland Lake, the local "pond." He went on to gain community notice from a boating accident on Hackensack Creek. While rowing with a chum, Ralph Bedell, he attempted to take off his coat and fell overboard, capsizing the boat. For once his height stood him in good stead: "It was no stunt for Edward to stand up and keep his head out of water and at the same time to lend a helping hand to Ralph," reported the local paper. "The boys got a wetting, but no further damage was done."⁴ In deeper water, Edward excelled at swimming and enjoyed it all his life.⁵

Edward and his friends, Harold Green, Louis Blauvelt, and Harry MacArthur, spent much of their free time near the docks or on the river, particularly at John P. Smith's boatyard at the foot of Fourth Avenue.⁶ The Baptist minister's daughter, Lois Saunier, remembered the lanky boy and his friends coming to borrow her father's boat.⁷ They would sail on the Tappan Zee, where the Hudson River broadens out between Irvington, south of Nyack, and Croton Point, ten miles to the north.⁸

Eddie and three pals formed the Boys' Yacht Club, for which he designed plaques with the names of the members' boats: one version sported *Glorianna*, *Mary M.*, and *Bubble*, which were traditionally feminine, but upbeat and innocuous.⁹ Edward's choice, *Water Witch*, telegraphs his love of books. *The Water-Witch*, James Fenimore Cooper's 1830 novel, tells how the "exploits, mysterious character, and daring of the Water-Witch, and of him who sailed her, were, in that day, the frequent subjects of anger, admiration, and surprise. . . . All wondered at the success and intelligence with which her movements were controlled."¹⁰ Also, Cooper's character Tom Tiller declares, "A ship is a seaman's mistress."¹¹ Where the title of Edward's fantasy suggests derring-do and mastery even in the mystery of sex, the boat he actually built was something else. At age fifteen he received the wood and tools as a gift from his father, but the resulting cat boat "wasn't very good," its maker re-

called. "I had put the center board well too far aft and she wouldn't sail up-wind very well."¹² One story held that the boat sank, another that it was sold for scrap.¹³ Up in the attic on North Broadway, Edward also built a canoe, which he depicted in drawings as the vessel of the Indians. To an interviewer he once related: "I thought at one time I'd like to be a naval architect because I am interested in boats, but I got to be a painter instead."¹⁴

The circumstances of Edward's immediate family were comfortably middle class. He was the first and only son, but the second child; his sole sister, Marion Louise, had been born on August 8, 1880. Their parents' marriage was marked by dominance on the female side. When Garret Henry Hopper, twenty-six, married Elizabeth Griffiths Smith, twenty-three, on March 26, 1879, the ceremony took place in the house where Elizabeth grew up and the new couple settled there under the wing of Elizabeth's widowed mother, since Garret had no means of providing an independent dwelling. The home on North Broadway was a constant reminder that Elizabeth had married less well than her mother. Her father, John DeWint Smith, had built the house for his wife on coming to Nyack six years after their marriage in 1852. Smith had also acquired two other houses in Nyack, and his mother's family, the DeWints, owned historic houses in Tappan. The DeWints traced their origin to a wealthy sugar plantation owner who had emigrated from the Caribbean island of St. Thomas.

In her roles as mother-in-law to Garret Hopper and grandmother to little Edward, Martha Griffiths Smith wielded more than just the authority derived from providing their home. She was the daughter of a moral force in the community. Her father, the Reverend Joseph W. Griffiths (1782–1860), had organized the Baptist congregation in Nyack in 1854. His story became a part of family lore and stuck in the memory of his great-grandson: even at age seventy-two, Edward Hopper still spoke of the ancestor who "married a French girl—Lozier—when he came to America."¹⁵ In fact, Griffiths came as a young man in his twenties from England to New York, where he worked in a foundry. In the new surroundings, Griffiths left his Anglican origins for an evangelical sect. He became a Baptist, founded a Sunday School, and soon was called to the ministry. He had retired from a long career when he helped to propagate the Baptist persuasion in Nyack. The woman he married was Elizabeth Lozier, descended from Le Sueurs, Huguenots who came to America from Dieppe in 1657. Their Protestant heritage led them to the Dutch Reformed Church and they soon simplified their French name beyond recognition.¹⁶ Yet when Edward remembered the story, he thought of his great-grandmother as "French," emphasizing the trace in his family tree of his favorite culture. Another time, he told Katharine Kuh: "Like most Americans I'm an amalgam of many races. Perhaps all of them influenced me—



*John DeWint Smith,
Edward's maternal
grandfather.*



*Martha Griffiths Smith,
Edward's maternal
grandmother.*

Dutch, French, possibly some Welsh. Hudson River Dutch—not Amsterdam Dutch.¹⁷

The namesake and granddaughter of Elizabeth Lozier Griffiths, Edward's mother Elizabeth, was born to Martha Griffiths and John Smith in Blauvelt, New York, before her parents moved to Nyack and built the house where all of them lived and died and where Edward grew up. Elizabeth enjoyed the privilege of attending private school at the Rockland Female Academy. She was remembered as "full of charm and a complete extrovert, generous, witty, handsome, gay of spirit, natural hostess, always full of concern for friends."¹⁸ Expressive of her feelings, she was said to "rave" when she was angry.¹⁹ Elegant, feminine, yet formidable-looking, she wore her long hair swept up in a chignon. A photograph shows strong features like those that made her son a distinctive subject for portraits. He, when painting her portrait, emphasized her determined stare. Elizabeth showed her skill with children when the new minister arrived at the Baptist church, as his daughter recalled:

Our great favorite was a delightful white-haired lady named Elizabeth Hopper. As soon as we became acquainted, she suggested that we call her “Auntie” Hopper which we were glad to do. She was such fun to be with, always ready to laugh and joke with us and take interest in what we were doing. To join a game of tag or help us dress a doll, seemed to give her as much pleasure as it did us.²⁰

On the paternal side, Edward’s family had been prosperous traders and farmers, more exclusively Dutch. There were Hoppen mayors and aldermen in fifteenth-century Amsterdam. Andries Hoppen came to New Amsterdam in 1652, where he succeeded in shipping and trade. When he died prematurely, aged only thirty-three, his widow and five children went to New Jersey, where they flourished around Hackensack and Ho-ho-kus, once known as Hopper Town. Edward’s great-grandfather Christian, born in 1826, married Charity Blauvelt in Paramus on April 17, 1851. Although Charity’s

*Elizabeth Lozier Griffiths,
Edward’s maternal great-
grandmother.*

*Reverend Joseph W. Grif-
fiths, Edward’s maternal
great-grandfather.*



parents, the cousins Abraham Blauvelt (1789–1864) and Marie Blauvelt (1793–1882), came from a Dutch family, they baptized their daughter in the Methodist church of Waldwick, New Jersey, turning to the evangelical sect of English working-class origin.²¹ Thus the strains of a rigorous evangelical Protestantism took over from more established religious traditions in both sets of Edward's great-grandparents. The effects were felt even to the third generation.

Evangelical austerity displaced the more festive way of life the early Dutch settlers in the new world had kept up in the style of the old world taverns of genre painters like Jan Steen. Beer and rough games had been favorites. This is why Hopper emphasized that he was descended from "Hudson River Dutch—not Amsterdam Dutch." Baptized into the sobriety of the Methodist church, Charity Blauvelt Hopper remained a forbidding figure all her life: Edward, writing home from the relative liberty of Paris, said he wanted no more letters from such disagreeable old ladies. In fairness, it must be admitted that Charity's life was unlucky and hard. Her husband Christian died on April 20, 1854, in an accident with a runaway horse when their son was only two years old. Unlike Andries Hoppen in the first generation, Christian did not leave his heirs secured. Charity took the little Garret to New York City to live with her parents, Abraham and Marie.²² Grandfather Blauvelt died when the boy was only twelve, forcing him to curtail his education and go to work to support his widowed mother. Barred from his natural talent for study, lacking the commercial knack of his ancestors, deprived of paternal guidance, Garret Hopper drifted until a further chance brought him to Nyack and a strong mooring with Elizabeth Griffiths Smith.

In 1878 Garret Hopper went into business in Nyack; four years later, he identified himself on Edward's birth certificate as "Salesman."²³ In 1890, Garret purchased Morris and Minnerly, a dry goods store not far from the family home. In the shop, which became known as "G. H. Hopper," he sold table linens, towels, fabrics, notions, kid gloves, hosiery, underwear, and other items of clothing. Elizabeth Hopper made dresses for herself and her daughter from the fabrics procured by her husband. The fact that "G. H. Hopper" sold men's and boys' underwear may account for the young Edward's otherwise inexplicably detailed reports on the condition of his underwear when he wrote letters home. Garry, as people called him, was active in community affairs. He wore a short, pointed Van Dyck beard and a mustache; he resembled Thomas G. Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia, his son recalled. At the end, Garret was remembered as "kind-hearted and of a genial disposition, with a large circle of friends."²⁴ He was also reputedly "the most polite, gracious person."²⁵



*Christian Hopper, Edward's
paternal grandfather.*



*Charity Blauvelt Hopper,
Edward's paternal
grandmother.*

Garret made every effort to succeed. He advertised regularly in the *Nyack Evening Journal* and in the *Fair Journal*, published by the ladies' auxiliary at the YMCA. He promoted business with periodic sales, claiming to offer the "lowest New York City prices." (The metropolis at the other end of the rail line was already undercutting local autonomy.) He enlarged his business in April 1892, buying out his local competitor, William O. Blauvelt. But Garret's heart was not in commerce. He closed shop about 1901, aged only forty-nine, when his son was already studying in the city.

Garret Hopper's failure to live up to his forebears' mercantile prowess did not undermine the household's standard of living, thanks to the inheritance of his wife, who owned and received rents from two houses and held mortgages on other properties. Upon Edward's birth in 1882, the Hoppers built a new wing onto the north side of their home. About two years later, they enlarged the wing with a second story and bay window. They frequently redecorated, paid for repairs and yard work, and sent their laundry out to be