

Memphremagog masterpiece: Long-lost grand drape finds a new home

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from Québec Anglophone Heritage Network

*Founded in 2000, the Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network (QAHN) is a non-profit, non-partisan province-wide organization engaged with its members in the preservation of the built, cultural and natural heritage of Quebec. QAHN aims to promote a greater understanding of the history of Quebec's English-speaking communities by informing, inspiring and connecting people through its activities. **Matthew Farfan**, the author of this text, is the (now) former President of the Haskell Free Library and Opera House. He is currently President of the Stanstead Historical Society and the Colby-Curtis Museum in Stanstead, Quebec, and Executive Director of the Quebec Heritage News, QAHN's quarterly magazine, based in Sherbrooke. The above article appeared in the Fall 2016 edition of Quebec Heritage News, QAHN's quarterly magazine.*

After languishing forgotten for decades in the basement of the Haskell Free Library and Opera House in Stanstead, a rare and unusual artefact now has a new home at the Stanstead Historical Society's Colby-Curtis Museum, just two kilometres away.

The artefact, or rather, the work of art, is actually a 29-foot wide grand drape (complete with its original wooden roll) depicting Owl's Head Mountain and Lake Memphremagog. It was painted by the Canadian scenic artist William Gill (1854-1943).

A grand drape is the decorative curtain that would be raised and lowered on the audience side of the stage, at the beginning and end of performances or individual acts during plays. Gill's curtain features a splendid view of Memphremagog from a beach on the east side of the lake, framed by tasseled trompe-l'oeil curtains. The name "Memphremagog" appears at the centre edge; the signature "Wm Gill," in the bottom left corner. A small steam launch chugs across the placid water; sailboats are visible in the distance; a rowboat sits idle on the beach.

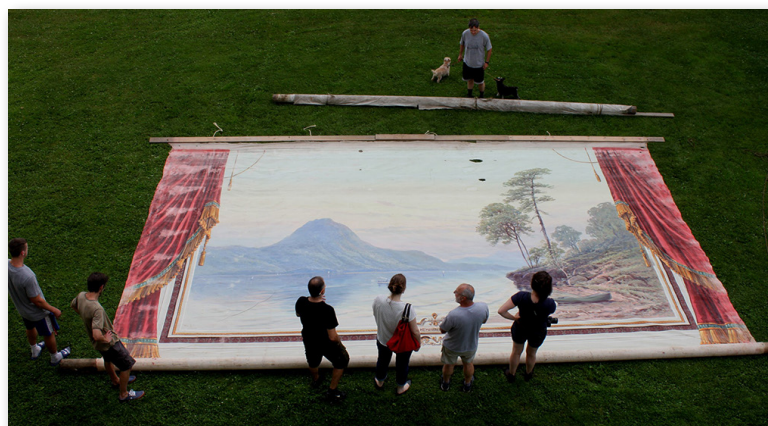
Gill was born in England but immigrated to Halifax, Nova Scotia, with his family when he was a small child. When his father died, he was just fourteen. According to the theatre historians Dianne and Patrick O'Neill, Gill "found employment as an usher in the Temperance Hall and the Theatre Royal. Observing and studying under various scenic artists... Gill mastered the techniques of the scenic artist and acquired a local reputation painting sets for amateur productions." (O'Neill and O'Neill)

Over the next few years, Gill worked on several more amateur productions, completing his apprenticeship and quickly building a name for himself as a professional. He received commissions for work in Halifax, St. John, Montreal, Quebec City, Kingston, and Ottawa. His scenery for a production of *Around the World in 80 Days*, according to the O'Neills, was described by the St. John press as the "most gorgeous spectacle ever presented on a St. John stage." Beginning in 1878, when he was only twenty-four, Gill began work in Boston, where he painted scenery for the Boston Museum and several

other major theatres. He continued to receive commissions for work in Atlantic Canada, however, returning home on a regular basis. (O'Neill and O'Neill)

Until now, only one other example of Gill's work was thought to have survived -- a backdrop known as the "Italianate Garden Scene," painted in 1892 for the Halifax Academy of Music, and housed since 1929 at the Musquodoboit Valley Bicentennial Theatre and Cultural Centre in Musquodoboit, Nova Scotia. This work, one of the oldest known surviving examples of scenic art in Canada, has recently been professionally restored. It has been called a "masterpiece," and Gill himself "one of the finest itinerant scenic artists of the nineteenth century." (O'Neill and O'Neill)

A significant number of historic theatre curtains have survived in the United States, for example, in Vermont and other parts of New England. (Hadsell) Very few, however, may be found in Canada, where far too many small town opera houses and big city theatres have been demolished, and their painted scenery disposed of. This makes the William Gill curtain an extremely rare Canadian example of this art form.



The grand drape of Lake Memphremagog, by William Gill, at its unveiling on the lawn of the Haskell Free Library and Opera House.
(Photo - Matthew Farfan)

According to local tradition, Gill's Lake Memphremagog drape originally hung at the old Olympic Skating Rink in Stanstead Plain. Built in 1892, this indoor rink was known in its later years as the Channell Rink (after Ernest Channell who was the rink's owner from 1913 to 1945).

In June 1900, the *Stanstead Journal* reported that the then owners of the rink had "supplied the building with new seats giving it a seating capacity of fully 400. They purpose offering inducement to some 1st class theatrical companies during the summer season." (Parent) Henceforth the establishment was also known as the "Rink Opera House." Over the next few years, the venue hosted a variety of popular entertainments, including minstrel shows, vaudeville acts, dramatic performances, and concerts. The building was equipped with a stage.

During the summer of 1907, the *Journal* reported that an artist had been busy at the Rink Opera House painting scenery. The paper reported the artist's name as "Mr. G. Grill," of Boston. (Parent) This was likely a typo, a not uncommon occurrence in the paper, William Gill in all probability being the artist in question.

The Rink Opera House apparently ceased operating a few years after the Haskell Opera House opened in what was then Rock Island in 1904. The facility continued to function, however, as a very popular skating rink until the mid-1940s, when it was demolished.

It is not known how long William Gill's splendid curtain was in use at the rink, or if it was stored there after the establishment stopped hosting theatrical performances. But at some point, it was donated to the Haskell Free Library and Opera House, probably on the assumption that the Haskell could use another curtain.

As is well known, the Haskell Opera House was (and is) well equipped with its own original antique scenery. Its collection includes the famous (and much photographed) grand drape depicting Venice Harbour (complete with large steamship, a special request by patron Col. Horace Haskell), several backdrops and numerous other stage elements -- all painted by the renowned scenic painter Erwin LaMoss in 1902. (Farfan) Coincidentally, LaMoss was also based in Boston, and knew and even worked with William Gill for a time. (O'Neill and O'Neill) The Haskell collection remains intact to this day, and represents the last work by Erwin LaMoss known to have survived. It is the pride of the Haskell and is still in use.

Whenever Gill's painting was donated, the Haskell certainly did not need an extra drape. So it was stored on racks in the basement where it remained unseen, unused, and unappreciated -- until 2016.

In February 2016, the then-president of the Haskell (the author of the present article) approached the Stanstead Historical Society to see if the museum would like the drape for its collection of local artefacts and art, and if it could accommodate such a large item. He and his fellow trustees felt that the basement of the library was not an ideal place for a piece of this caliber, especially since the basement is not equipped with the environmental controls and storage space required to properly care for a large antique painted textile.

The historical society's acquisition committee and its board of directors agreed that the Gill drape would be an important addition to its collection, as did director-curator Chloe Southam, who was very excited by the idea. All that remained was to choose a dry day during the summer when the curtain could be safely moved from its old home to its new one.

On July 15, the morning of the move, volunteers from the Haskell and staff from the Colby-Curtis gathered at the library. One member of the Haskell's building committee brought his boat trailer to transport the curtain on its heavy roll. Despite the threat of a thunderstorm all morning, not a drop of rain fell, and the volunteers were able to pass the 30-foot roll through one of the basement's narrow windows and out onto the lawn. There it was unrolled for the first time in decades...

What would it be like after all those years in a moisture-filled skating rink, followed by even more years in a dank basement? What kind of shape would it be in? Would there be mould? Insects? Would the paint have flaked off? No one knew what to expect.



William Gill.

(Photo - courtesy of Painted Rooms of Nova Scotia)

When the moment of truth arrived, and the curtain was slowly unrolled for the first time in years, those present were absolutely stunned by the beauty of the artwork – and by its excellent state of preservation. The curtain was, and is, spectacular. Aside from a few small holes near the top edge, and some paint loss at the sides, possibly from early water damage, the curtain is remarkably intact, its colours surprisingly vibrant.

After being measured and photographed by museum staff, the drape was carefully transported to the Colby-Curtis, where it is now stored in a proper climate-controlled environment, and where it begins a new chapter of its life. It is the hope of both the Haskell and the Stanstead Historical Society that a grant can be secured to have this magnificent piece professionally restored. Perhaps in the not-too-distant future, a suitable temporary venue can be found, where it can once again be enjoyed by all.



Unrolling the curtain for the first time.
(Photo - Leslie Farfan)

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