Editor's Note

Judith A. Ronayne
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"Yet American scenes are not destitute of historical and legendary association — the great struggle for freedom has sanctified many a spot, and many a mountain, stream, and rock, has it’s legend, worthy of poet’s pen or painter’s pencil. But American associations are not much of the past as of the present and the future." (THOMAS COLE, “Essay on American Scenery,” 1835)

From about 1830 to the end of the century, landscape painting became a dominant force in American art. Dominant in that landscape was a vehicle with which the artist exemplified a connection between the self and feelings of nationalism, moralism, and spiritualism. Painters such as Cole, Inness, and later Kensett, Whittredge, and others incorporated landscape into the working of their individual artistic theories and, in fact, saw landscape as the logical prototype. A living symbol of American values, aspirations, and achievements, it was uniquely American. This held particular significance to an America that was in search of a tangible and expressible heritage, an antiquity that was intrinsically of itself and not of Europe. And, though the landscape art was very much in vogue throughout the 19th century, it was not a stagnant form. In fact, artists such as John La Farge and Winslow Homer contributed much to the dynamic quality of landscape expression, particularly during the years following the Civil War.

Newport, a cultural haven during this period for artistic as well as literary figures, provided much of the inspirational incentive and imagery for the development and redefinition of artistic interests. Kensett, Homer, and La Farge were just a few of the painters who drew upon the Newport County scenery for a great many of their paintings.

John La Farge’s involvement with landscape and the Newport area has been of great interest to Dr. James L. Yarnall, Smithsonian Fellowship recipient and coordinator for the National Museum of American Art’s Pre-1877 Art Exhibition Catalogue Index. While a student at Brown, Dr. Yarnall wrote a paper on La Farge’s stained glass windows in Newport’s Channing Memorial Church. This interest expanded during his graduate work at the University of Chicago, 1975 to 1981, to inspire a master’s thesis on La Farge’s trip to the South Seas with Henry James, and later serving as the basis for a Ph.D. dissertation on “The Role of Landscape in the Art of John La Farge.” This dissertation is the primary source for a series of articles written by James Yarnall for NEWPORT HISTORY on the Paradise Valley period of La Farge’s career. — J.A.R.