



PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES A. MICHENER ART MUSEUM

*The Burning of Center Bridge, 50¼-by-56 ¼ inches, oil on canvas, painted in 1923.*

One hundred years ago this summer, the noted Pennsylvania Impressionist Edward Redfield stood among the mortified masses, watching helplessly as a fast-moving fire destroyed Center Bridge. Known mostly for his Bucks County winter landscapes, Redfield documented the tragedy in one of his most famous paintings.

By PATTI ZIELINSKI



# PAINTER OF FIRE AND ICE

For almost 110 years, Center Bridge stood watch above the Delaware River, the passageway between Stockton and the village that bore the bridge's name on the Pennsylvania shore. Over the century, the wooden structure—named for its location midway between the Trenton Bridge and the Palmer Bridge connecting Phillipsburg and Easton—weathered damaging floods and stared down threats of fire. Center Bridge was completed in 1814, and by 1923 it reigned as the oldest remaining nineteenth-century timber-covered bridge along the Delaware. But by the evening of July 22, 1923—one hundred years ago this summer—the bridge was gone.

A bolt of lightning struck Center Bridge, sparking a blaze that sent ignited soot, blown by stormy winds, downriver, endangering homes on the shoreline. Firefighters from Stockton and New Hope rushed to the scene. Scores of villagers poured to the riverbank to watch, helpless, silhouetted by amber flame against the night sky. They looked on in horror as the span on the New Jersey side collapsed. According to an account in *The Intelligencer*, twenty-five firefighters were plunged into the churning waters thirty feet below. The structure itself crashed down upon rock and sandbar—"crushed like an egg shell," according to an account in the *Trenton Evening Times*. Miraculously, all the men survived.

Electricity was cut off in Stockton, pitching the already dark night into blackness—except for the fire, fanned by the wind, ravenously feeding on Center Bridge's weathered shingle roof and dry timbers, still burning hot and spreading. While the fallen firefighters scrambled to shore, and to safety, their colleagues, conceding defeat, left the bridge to suffer its fate while onlookers watched the glowing timbers cascade to the river and float, still aflame, to distant shores.

Before dawn, the inferno would reduce the historic structure to charcoal.

Among the crowd was Edward Willis Redfield, the renowned Pennsylvania Impressionist and co-founder of the New Hope School of painters. Redfield had been traveling home with his family when he spotted the blaze in the distance. Concerned the fire was at his Center Bridge home, just steps from the bridge's base, he hurried to the river, where he watched the drama unfold alongside fellow painter William L. Lathrop. Later recounting the night, Redfield said, "Lathrop said it was a pity it couldn't be painted. So I took out an envelope and made some notes and painted all the next day."

The resulting work—fifty and a quarter inches wide and fifty-six and a quarter inches tall, an oil-on-canvas titled *The Burning of Center Bridge*—was the only chronicling of the event as it transpired and a rare work that Redfield, who otherwise worked solely *en plein air*, painted in his studio from memory.

"We have this image of Redfield in the midst of this spectacle, one of many who came out to see the fire," says Laura Igoe, chief curator at the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, where *The Burning of Center Bridge* is prominently featured. "He had the presence to take out an envelope and make sketches and color notes so he could do this painting in the studio, which is one of many reasons why it is one of his most important. Redfield was known for his impressionistic landscapes, but *The Burning of Center Bridge* is a history painting. It has a narrative in the landscape that we don't see in his other paintings. The only other historical reference to this event are photographs taken the day after. At the centennial of the creation of this great work, we encourage people to visit and see first-hand how powerful this canvas is."



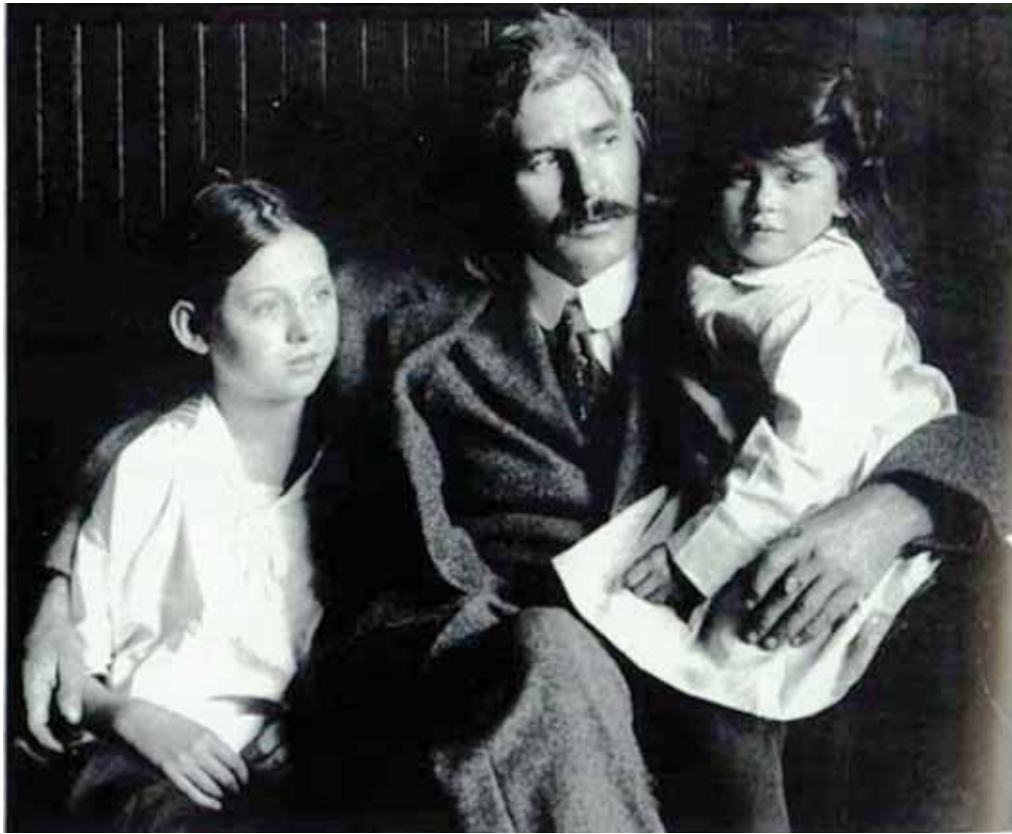


PHOTO COURTESY OF TOM FOLK

*Redfield, circa 1915, with his daughters Louise (left) and Frances.*

Today, nearly sixty years after his death in 1965, at age 95, Edward Redfield remains among the most popular of the vaunted Pennsylvania Impressionists. As recently as June 2020, the Philadelphia auction house Freeman's sold five Redfield paintings for a combined total of more than \$1 million. Redfield's 1926 painting *Spring at Point Pleasant on the Delaware River*, sold for \$483,000, the auction's top lot.

Born in 1869 in Bridgeville, Delaware, and raised in Camden, New Jersey, Redfield recognized his talent early. To hone his skills—and to better prepare himself for admission to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia—Redfield took drawing and painting lessons from commercial artist Henry Rolfe, who advised him that paintings should be made at “one go” and directly from life. That approach defined Redfield's painting style for the rest of his life.

From 1887 to 1889, Redfield studied under Thomas Anshutz, James Kelly, and Thomas Hovenden at the Academy, which emphasized painting from life, working quickly, and drawing with the brush. While there, Redfield formed a friendship with fellow realist Robert Henri, who went on to be a leader of the Ashcan School, a movement that depicted daily life in New York City's poorer neighborhoods.

In 1889, Redfield traveled to France, where he continued his studies at the Académie Julian with the intent of becoming a portrait painter. In Paris, his admiration grew for Impressionists Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, and, notably, Frits Thaulow, a Norwegian Impressionist known for his masterful painting of snow. Redfield's passion for portraiture waned as he became increasingly seduced by depicting nature, particularly snowscapes and maritime scenes.

Redfield began experimenting with tonalism, a somber style of painting in neutral colors. In 1891, with Henri, he traveled to Brolles, near Fontainebleau. “In Fontainebleau,” Igoe says, “he likely became familiar with The Barbizon School of painters, who gravitated to realism in art and painted in the forests in a very atmospheric way. These works are very moody, the colors a little murky, almost like you're looking at a scene through a fog.”

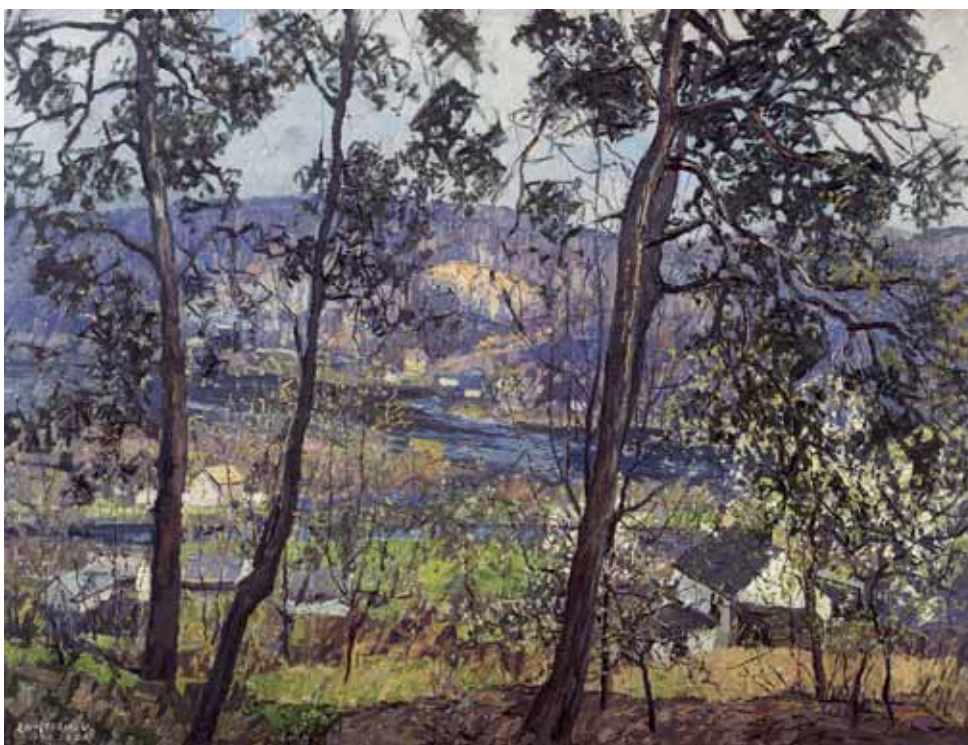


PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES A. MICHENER ART MUSEUM

Early Spring, 38-by-50 inches, oil on canvas. Note Redfield's signature ("EW Redfield") and the date ("April 29.20") in the lower left.

It was in Brolles that Redfield painted his first snow scene, outside the Hotel Deligant, where he fell in love with the innkeeper's daughter, Elise Deligant. The work, *Road—Forest of Fontainebleau*, was accepted by the Paris Salon. In due course, Elise accepted his hand in marriage.

Redfield returned to the United States with Elise, and in 1898 the couple bought an island farm in the village of Center Bridge, set on 127 acres between the Delaware River and Delaware Canal. Redfield had long loved the river, having spent summer vacations as a child in Frenchtown, then a peach-shipping center, while assisting his father, who owned a produce business. Redfield would later say he was drawn to the New Hope area "because this was a place where an independent, self-sufficient man could make a living from the land, bring up a family and still have the freedom to paint as he saw fit."

By the time of the Center Bridge fire, Redfield had been living in the namesake village and romancing the surrounding countryside on canvas for more than two decades, known particularly for his snow-covered scenes around New Hope and serving as a magnet for other artists who would eventually form the New Hope Art Colony.

"He found the New Hope area an ideal location—between New York City and Philadelphia—with easy railroad access to the two metropolitan hubs for exhibitions, teaching, taking classes or meeting colleagues," Igoe says. "The land was comparably cheap and attainable and had all four seasons. Redfield was attracted to the idea of living in a rural area and embraced that as part of his persona."

Once Redfield resettled in Bucks County, his reputation as an artist grew. The Pennsylvania Academy mounted a one-man exhibition of his landscapes, and by the end of his life he had earned more awards than

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PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES A. MICHENER ART MUSEUM

The Trout Brook, 50-by-56 inches, oil on canvas, painted in 1916.





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*Left: Redfield seated in his riverfront home in Center Bridge, circa 1950, facing the Delaware and the rebuilt bridge. He's surrounded by paintings and furniture that he made. Below: An aerial view of Redfield's latter home in Center Bridge, just a short walk from the bridge.*

any American artist besides John Singer Sargent. "Much of his brushstrokes are very clearly delineated, and you can imagine him quickly moving the brush across the canvas," Igoe says. "In general, artists were embracing the French Impressionists like Monet, which then was an avant-garde, controversial style, but Redfield painted in a moody, tonalist way."

This liveliness and energy was noticed by other artists. They moved to the New Hope area to be close to Redfield, who, along with Lathrop and Daniel Garber, are regarded as founders of the New Hope School. "The New Hope School happened somewhat organically: Redfield told friends about the beauty and convenience of the area," Igoe says. "This was a time when there

was a rise in immigration into the cities and industrialization. Artists were looking for a way to escape. In addition, students at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts would move out to study with him or be near him and just stayed."

Unlike Garber, who fostered an artistic community, teaching students at the Pennsylvania Academy and gathering with fellow artists at Lathrop's Sunday afternoon teas at Phillips Mill, Redfield preferred to keep to himself, Igoe notes. "He always struck me as this rugged individualist, but because he achieved big-name recognition in American art, artists came to the area because they wanted to be near him or paint in a similar style," she says. "He was a big advertisement for the area."

The names of artists Redfield influenced read as a Who's Who of American Impressionism—Walter Elmer Schofield, Walter Emerson Baum, John Fulton Folinsbee, Kenneth Nunamaker, Charles Rosen, George Sotter, Robert Spencer—all contributing their distinct styles and points of view in capturing the spirit of New Hope and the surrounding landscape.

According to Lambertville gallery owner James M. Alterman, author of the 2005 self-published tome, *New Hope for American Art*, Redfield's "best period" stretched from 1907 to 1925.



PHOTO BY JUAN VIDAL



“Around 1905–06, Redfield’s style was coming into its own, employing thick vigorous brush strokes tightly woven and layered with a multitude of colors,” Alterman wrote. “These large plein-air canvases define the essence of Pennsylvania Impressionism. By 1907, Redfield had perfected his craft and, from this point forward, was creating some of his finest work.”

**T**he basis for this exceptional work was indeed Redfield’s love affair with nature. He could only truly paint what he experienced with all his senses attuned. “There is a vast difference between people who copy and people who feel what they see,” he said. He would journey to a location time and again, studying it, understanding it, seeing the light at different times of day, in different seasons, before starting a canvas. History recounts Redfield painting with bravado: How working *en plein air*, he braved the brutality of winter, squinting against the glare of the snow as he created works with an impasto technique, layering paint heavily with thick brushstrokes without preliminary sketches and completing paintings “in one go,” even if it meant standing in snow for up to eight hours. “I go into the field with my fifty pounds of equipment and a fifty-by-fifty-six canvas, and do not leave until I have completed my work,” he said. Stories are told of Redfield strapping the backs of large canvases to trees to mitigate the wind.

The resulting canvases are bold, with an impasto buildup of paint. “*The Trout Brook*, in our collection, is a great example of the layers of paint,” Igoe says. “If you look at it from the side, it’s like a mountainous landscape, with the paint sticking up, even curling off of the canvas. Painting snow is challenging. People think you just paint snow white, but there are many colors—purples and blues—and many nuances when painting snow. It takes a lot of technical skill, and I think that’s why he was particularly drawn to winter landscapes.”

Redfield documented other seasons—notably during his summers spent with his family in Boothbay Harbor and Monhegan Island, Maine, painting the coast—and subjects, such as New York City, where he joined his friend Henri for six months in 1909 creating an important series of city views in the moody tonalist style he had embraced in the forests of Fontainebleau. His nocturnal New York scenes are a direct contrast to the bright winterscapes, but they foreshadow *The Burning of Center Bridge*, which is also set in darkness but with pinpoints of light from the soaring embers rather than urban illumination.

Ultimately, the career of this painter of ice, like Center Bridge itself, culminated in a blaze. In 1947, devastated by Elise’s death and with his eyesight failing, Redfield destroyed the paintings he deemed inferior: “I did burn I guess about seven hundred canvases,” he later recounted.

The following year, while in Maine, Redfield completed *Linekin Bay*. It was the last painting he made from nature, although he continued to create the traditional Pennsylvania crafts he embraced throughout his life: Windsor furniture, hooked rugs, painted chests.

Until the end of his life, Redfield remained enchanted by nature. He would spend hours at the picture window in his home, gazing at the canal and the ever-flowing Delaware as it passed beneath the bridge whose predecessor’s fiery demise decades

earlier had inspired one of his grandest creations. “I sit here and look out the window,” Redfield said. “I never get lonesome. To me, it’s a continuous show.” 

*Patti Zielinski is a regular contributor to River Towns. She profiled the Frenchtown landscape artist and gallery owner John Schmidtberger in the Spring issue.*

Edward Redfield’s works can be seen at many nearby museums, including the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. One of the two Redfield paintings in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, in Washington, D.C., is *The Brook at Carversville*.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PATRICIA ROSS AND JAMES A. MICHENER ART MUSEUM

*Top: Redfield painted his own house, inside and out, numerous times, including Our Home, 26-by-32 inches, oil on canvas. Below: A recent photograph of the house from the same perspective as Our Home.*



PHOTO BY JUAN VIDAL