

## Chapter 1

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# A Schenectady Youth

William J. Stillman was born June 1, 1828 in the Mohawk Valley town of Schenectady, New York. He was the son of Joseph Stillman (1779–1861) and Eliza Ward Maxson (1785–1869). The ancestral Stillmans had fled from England to Wethersfield, Connecticut at the time of the Stuart Restoration. Their associations with the Regicides, implicated in the death of Charles I, made it prudent that they leave England. His grandfather Joseph (1743–1825) had been born as a subject of King George III. Stillman remembered hearing from relatives that his grandfather had never reconciled himself to the new nation. His father Joseph, in the manner of the day, tried a variety of occupations including fishing on the Grand Banks. However, he had a Yankee's mechanical bent and began experimenting with a variety of devices. Stillman respected his father's mechanical ability, but saw in his lack of resolute, directed purpose a failing that he himself had inherited.

His mother Elizabeth Maxson belonged to a family whose ancestors had been among the original settlers of Roger Williams' Rhode Island. That ancestor-settler John Maxson was a Seventh Day Baptist, a sect that combined belief in full immersion baptism with the observance of Saturday, the old Jewish Sabbath, as their day of rest and worship.<sup>3</sup> The group had split from the Baptist community of Newport in the 1660s and by 1671 had formed their own church in the tolerant world of that colony. In 1729, they built their own meetinghouse graced with a simple but elegant interior done in the Georgian manner by Richard Munday, sophisticated Newport's leading architect. The Newport Historical Society still maintains the building today.<sup>4</sup>

The Maxsons figured prominently in the history of the Rhode Island Seventh Day Baptist community. So did her maternal line, the Wards, one of whose members, Samuel was governor of Rhode Island from 1762 to 1765. Stillman's maternal grandfather ran a smallpox hospital in Newport, where his parents met during an inoculation cure. They married and spent their early years in Westerly, Rhode Island as part of a community of Seventh

Day Baptists that dated back to 1708. The first of their nine children, the future engineer Thomas Bliss Stillman, was born in Westerly.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Rhode Island became one of the birthplaces of the American Industrial Revolution. Joseph Stillman was a mechanical tinkerer at a time when small, burgeoning factories were always seeking some “device” that would improve production and profit. It was with the aim of perfecting and marketing a fulling machine of his creation that Joseph Stillman took his family from Rhode Island to the old Dutch town of Schenectady in New York’s Mohawk Valley. The stay in Schenectady was supposed to be temporary, but business misadventures caused by Joseph’s partner in Westerly made it prudent for him to remain in Schenectady. By 1841, he was listed in the Schenectady directory as a “machinist” who was living at 10 Canal Street. It was a street inhabited mainly by craftsmen with Dutch and English names. However, a doctor lived next door, and an African American hairdresser lived two houses away. A Universalist Church and a market were also located on the street. William, the last of the nine children, was born there.

The Schenectady of Stillman’s youth was an old, Dutch Colonial town located both on the Mohawk River and on the recently opened Erie Canal.<sup>5</sup> The artist Eliju Vedder, a friend of William’s and a fellow resident of Schenectady of venerable Dutch lineage, described the town in his youth as being

a beautiful place and full of interest: the Mohawk River, the Canal, the awe-inspiring college. . . . It was still Dutch. The house stoops on which the peaceful pipe sent up its fumes in the quiet evening, when the boys brought from their distant pastures the slow-moving cows to be placidly milked in the back yard.<sup>6</sup>

An 1840s painting executed by Stillman’s local artistic mentor Samuel Sexton, shows the dominant Old Dutch Church surrounded by houses of various architectural styles and colors.<sup>7</sup> An engraving of the era depicts the town as a cluster of houses, churches, and small factories located near the river. A painting done in 1832 by the topographical artist John William Hill (1812–1879) renders Schenectady from the vantage point of a nearby hill (Figure 1.1).<sup>8</sup> In the foreground is a bucolic scene, complete with resting cattle. Trees line the streets and a small factory shows the intrusion of the Industrial Revolution that had drawn Joseph Stillman to the town. The riverfront is peppered with the masts of ships, reminders of Schenectady’s role as a transit point between the Mohawk and Hudson rivers. The ships

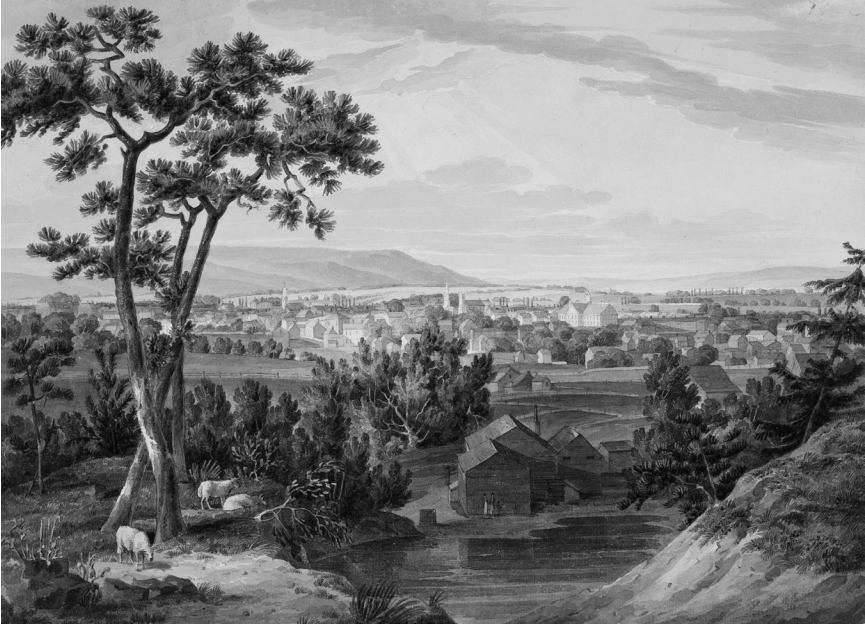


Figure 1.1. Watercolor View of Schenectady, NY in 1832 by John William Hill (Collection of The New-York Historical Society, negative number 1918.40)

are now gone, and the old channel of the Erie Canal is filled in. However, the streets and structures of Schenectady's Stockade Historical District still preserve a sense of that past.

The community had been established in the 1661, when a group of Dutch settlers and fur traders purchased from the Indians land on the *Grote Vlachte* or *Great Flats* along the bank of the Mohawk River.<sup>9</sup> That first settlement was protected by a stockade, whose site still forms the core of the modern historical district. The frontier town survived French and Indian attacks, including the Great Massacre of 1690. The gradual opening of central and then western New York stimulated trade. That and boat building helped Schenectady to flourish. There were to be found farmers, millers, traders, carpenters, tavern keepers, and even Indian agents for the New York colony. Early limner/portrait painters like Nehemiah Partridge (1683–1737), Pieter Vanderlyn (1696–1777), and John Heaton (c. 1732–c. 1750) came to the expanding town to paint the emerging elite.<sup>10</sup>

Schenectady was not directly involved in the Revolutionary War; however, its location on the Mohawk River made it a near witness to such key actions as Oriskany, Saratoga, and Fort Stanwick. Years later, local diarist Jonathan Pearson came to know the aging Revolutionary War veterans and visited battlefields like Saratoga.<sup>11</sup> The destruction of the Iroquois Confederacy and the opening up of the lands of western New York to new settlement was very important for the future of the city.

By the early nineteenth century, Schenectady was still active as a port on the Mohawk River and as an embarkation point for wagons heading west. However, the town of that era did not impress sophisticated visitors. Governor DeWitt Clinton, who was forced to spend some time there in 1810, described it as a “large country village.”<sup>12</sup> The situation was not helped when, in February 1819, a major fire leveled large sections of the community.<sup>13</sup>

The transport revolutions that were changing America soon affected Schenectady. In 1825, “Clinton’s Ditch” opened, linking the Middle West and the Great Lakes through the Mohawk Valley to the Hudson and the Port of New York.<sup>14</sup> The canal skirted the edge of the old town, and a new port developed on the southeast side. That led to deterioration of older sections of the community, already negatively affected by the fire of 1819. For those reasons, the opening of the canal was greeted in Schenectady with minimum celebration.<sup>15</sup> However, Schenectady was a small place that had long been linked to water trade, so the community adjusted and created new neighborhoods along the canal.

The waterways were soon to be challenged by an even newer mode of transport. In 1826, two prominent local citizens obtained a charter for the first passenger rail line in America. One of Stillman’s earliest memories was the 1831 arrival of the first passenger train from Albany. Tracks were soon extended to Saratoga and Utica.<sup>16</sup> In 1848, as William was departing for New York, a locomotive works was established in the town.<sup>17</sup>

In the years of William’s youth, Schenectady was still a community of limited appeal. Jonathan Pearson, the man who chronicled the town’s life for much of the century, described it in 1836 as a place “fit only for hogs and Dutchmen. A dirtier place never existed on this ‘footstool. One cannot walk the streets without brushing against a hog or meeting a cow on the sidewalk.”<sup>18</sup> Not surprisingly, the smallpox struck in 1828, 1836, 1838, and cholera in 1832 and 1834.<sup>19</sup> Schenectady also was changing in ethnic and social fabric. By 1850 it had, in addition to the core Anglo and Dutch stock, 1,064 Irish, 731 Germans, and 299 African Americans.<sup>20</sup>

The early years of Stillman’s childhood were not easy. He admitted later that he had “no pleasure in looking back into my early life.” His father had

lost all of his capital in the Rhode Island business ventures and had to seek whatever employment was available. Like many of the Yankees of the period, his father was a hard man, who subjected his children to harsh discipline. His mother had to raise a family that was patriarchal and often impoverished. She was, however, tough and was sustained by her strong religious faith.<sup>21</sup> Hers was a severe brand of fundamentalism, which combined anguishing introspection with a strong sense of charity for other mortals. Although her particular sect was small, the core values were shared by the other protestant faiths. It was a world of revival and camp meetings in which people found Jesus in a most emotional manner.<sup>22</sup>

William, who was closely attached to his mother, could not help but be influenced by her demanding creed. He wrote at the end of his life:

I lived in an atmosphere of prayer and trust in God, which impressed me so that to this day the habit of thought and conduct so formed is invincible and in all the subsequent modifications of the primitive and Hebraic conception of the spiritual life which she inoculated me with, an unconscious aspiration in prayer and an absolute and organic trust in the protection of the divine providence persist in my character, though reason has long assured me that this is but a crude and personal conception of the divine law.<sup>23</sup>

However, he early developed a strong confidence in the power of reason that made the emotionalism of his mother's fundamentalist creed less appealing. Life experience reinforced that skepticism. Some of that new formation came through his maternal uncle William, a sailor who had in later life turned to religion, but to a religion of faith and reason and not of revivalist excitement.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, William felt throughout his life the importance of those youthful religious experiences. One of the goals of his *Autobiography* was to reconstruct his complicated spiritual pilgrimage:

It occurred to me in the connection that to give a human document of Puritan family life, and the development of a mind from the archaic severity of New England Puritanism to a complete freedom of thought, by a purely evolutionary process, without revolt or revulsion might be worth doing.<sup>25</sup>

His was an evolution typical of sensitive intellectuals during the nineteenth century. Although Stillman did not express allegiance to any

formal sect for most of his later life, he was a person of strong ethical values and very much a “man of the spirit.” He remained fascinated with the emotional appeal of religion, whether manifested “in the revolutionary condition of the revivalist meeting or that of the conservative and decorous ecclesiastical forms.”<sup>26</sup> He retained a lifelong interest in spiritualism.

William was the last of the nine Stillman children. Despite the straightened circumstances of the family, great effort was made to give all the children a decent start in life. His mother in particular stressed the importance of advanced training and education at a time when technical and professional opportunities in America were expanding. Two of William’s brothers studied medicine, and three others went into the world of mechanical engineering.

Of these siblings, the most important for William’s future was his brother Thomas Bliss (1806–1866). Thomas was born in Westerly and moved with the family to Schenectady. His mother hoped that he would go into the ministry. However, his mechanical and engineering abilities attracted the attention of Eliphalet Nott, preacher and Union College president, who had his own well-developed mechanical interests. In the age of DeWitt Clinton’s first steamboat experiments, Nott was an important pioneer in the development of nautical steam engines. It was a world filled with technical challenges and opportunities for mechanically minded tinkers like Nott and Thomas Stillman.

Early on, Nott saw the commercial potential of these new steam engines and established in New York City a place for their manufacture. The H. Nott and Company factory was located on the East River. From there, the engines and other heavy equipment easily could be transferred to the new steam-powered vessels. They included the experimental steamboat *Novelty*, which Nott himself designed. In 1832, Thomas moved to New York to work for Nott’s fledgling enterprise. Ultimately, two more of Thomas’s brothers followed him into the firm.<sup>27</sup> His family loyalty, abundant financial resources, and location were to play a key role in young William’s emergence as an artist and intellectual.

Nott’s firm, renamed the Novelty Iron Works, did well. A colored lithograph from the early 1840s depicted the factory complex.<sup>28</sup> The buildings were constructed around a central courtyard with one side open on the waterside. On the end of one of the buildings were the prominently displayed words, “Novelty Iron Works. Stillman, Allen, and Company.” The legend under the print noted that the factory was located at the foot of 12th Street on the East River, and that they were “Iron Founders, Steam Engine, and General Machinery Manufacturers.”

Thomas prospered with the company. By the early 1840s, he was one of the partners who purchased the company from Nott. Another partner was

Horatio Allen (1802–1889), an engineer, also from Schenectady, who had joined the firm in 1842. It was Allen, who in 1829 had assembled the first steam locomotive in America. In 1855, the firm was formally incorporated as Novelty Iron Works of New York with a listed capital of \$300,000. It specialized in the manufacture of maritime engines, including some of the massive machines used on the Atlantic sea routes. During the Civil War, the factory produced the turret plate and mechanisms for the Union ironclad *Monitor*. Thomas was interested in more than just the mechanical side of the expanding world of shipping. He pioneered in the development of the steamboat-powered coastal trade with special connections to Charleston, South Carolina.<sup>29</sup>

In his *Autobiography*, William provided a detailed profile of his eldest brother:

In my oldest brother, Thomas B. Stillman, known in the last generation as the chief of steam engineering of his day in the United States, the mentor of that profession, I can see more of my mother than in any other of the six brothers. He inherited, like all of us, his father's mechanical tendency and inventiveness, and added to it a persistency and constancy of purpose peculiarly hers, which none of the other children inherited to the same extent; and he had in its fullness the devotional sentiment, the absorption in religious duties, as the chief motive in life, which was her ruling passion.<sup>30</sup>

That sense of duty led Thomas to become involved in a variety of civic duties in New York. During the Civil War he was appointed supervising inspector of the Revenue Marine (the Coast Guard) and worked with the Department of the Treasury in developing a series of steam-powered revenue cutters.

Thomas and his wife Susanna had no children. Thomas treated his youngest brother with an indulgence, which compensated in part for their father's rigor. He bankrolled William's first trip to Europe in 1849 and provided half of the capital for his art magazine *The Crayon*. Thomas' support was there when William needed to settle his debts accumulated during the Roman consulship. Unfortunately for William's later financial travails, Thomas' religious devotion prevailed over family loyalty. He left his fortune to the Seventh Day Baptists.<sup>31</sup>

William and Thomas had six siblings who survived infancy. A sister Mary Ann (1808–1826) had died at Westerly before William was born. Another sister Elizabeth H. (1821–1853) married Peter LaDue (1821–1889),

who also had attended Union College. She died at an early age at the Seventh Day Baptist community in Plainfield, New Jersey. Brothers Alfred (1809–1850) and Paul (1811–1856) became engineers. Alfred died in a steamboat accident on the Mississippi River. Paul, who lived in New York at the same time as William, joined him in activities such as spiritualist séances. Paul died relatively young. Charles (1817–1881) and Jacob (1819–1888) became doctors.

After Thomas, Jacob was the brother closest to William. He, like William, benefited from his mother's desire that her younger sons receive more formal education. He graduated from Union with a degree in biology and botany. He turned first to school teaching and then to medicine. He received his medical education at New York's College of Physicians and Surgeons and was for a time on the staff of Bellevue Hospital.

In 1849, Jacob followed the Gold Rush frenzy to California and set up a medical practice in Sacramento.<sup>32</sup> On the trip out to California he became friendly with Mark Hopkins (1813–1878), the future treasurer of the Central Pacific Railroad, and a man who would become one of the most important economic powers in emerging California. Jacob's first stay in California was brief. By 1850, he was practicing medicine in New York. In 1856, he returned to California, first to Sacramento and then to San Francisco. There he established himself as a leading physician, numbering among his patients the politician, railroad baron, and fellow upstate New Yorker Leland Stanford (1824–1893). Stanford not only used him as his personal physician, but also traveled with him to Europe. In 1881, he subsidized Jacob's study of motion in horses, research that combined animal physiology with a pioneering use of motion photography.<sup>33</sup> Jacob's medical skills helped Mrs. Stanford to conceive their only son after many years of marriage. That son's tragic death at a very young age led to the foundation of Stanford University.<sup>34</sup>

Jacob shared a number of qualities with William. His obituary described him as a "man of fine endowment, with a dash of quiet and unrest. Naturally high strung and impulsive, he was genial, magnanimous, and honorable." Both brothers had the wanderlust. In Jacob's case, it led him to California and Texas and on several trips to Europe. The brothers shared a great appreciation for nature in its infinite detail. Jacob, educated as a botanist, described the beauties of the Texas landscape in essays that he published in his brother's art magazine *The Crayon*.<sup>35</sup>

William's relationship with his brother Charles was less close. Charles had joined Thomas in moving to the New York area, where he practiced medicine. Charles and William did share an interest in natural history. While William was resident in New York, they would shoot, botanize, and study



geology and conchology in the relatively unspoiled countryside that still lay at the city's doorstep.<sup>36</sup> Charles would later move to Plainfield, New Jersey, where he developed his medical practice and became one of the pillars of that Sabbatarian community.<sup>37</sup>

Plainfield was the setting of the only surviving group photograph of the Stillman family. It was taken during a clan gathering in June 1860. Charles sits on the left with his mother next to him. Two seats down is the aged patriarch Joseph Stillman. On the right is Thomas. The rest of the photo is filled with various Stillman wives and children, as well as members of the in-law Maxson clan. Missing were Jacob and William, who had moved to distant parts.<sup>38</sup>

For the young man who would develop such a complex personal and ideological relationship with the changing landscape of the Northeast, Schenectady presented diverse real and symbolic challenges. To the southwest was the "Leatherstocking Region" (now known as Central New York) of James Fenimore Cooper's fiction with that author's ancestral seat at Cooperstown.<sup>39</sup> Much of that frontier had disappeared in the decades after the American Revolution, but it had been recreated in myth and legend in Cooper's novels. To the northeast was the still largely untouched wilderness of the Adirondacks, which was to be Stillman's place of spiritual escape in the years just before he fled to Europe. Rural landscapes could still be found on the outskirts of Schenectady. The young William devoured books on nature. Alone or with his brothers, he explored the Mohawk Valley. Nature came early to hold an almost religious attraction for Stillman, a more appealing spiritual substitute for the harsh creed of his parental household.<sup>40</sup>

As part of this bonding with the natural world, Stillman developed a love of animals, especially squirrels. His first pet was a squirrel, and to the end of his life he found them appealing, fascinating animals.<sup>41</sup> They were, like William himself, clever and flexible survivors. Years later the august reporter of the London *Times* would be observed in Rome with a squirrel perched on his shoulder. Those Roman squirrels went with him on the last trip back to England.<sup>42</sup> He could hunt with the best of them, as John Ruskin ruefully observed, but he did not share the delight in slaughter that became so central to the later nineteenth-century American outdoor macho ethos.

Stillman learned something of his love of animals and nature from his father. Indeed, father and son seemed only to have bonded, as they took long walks through the woods near their home.<sup>43</sup> Otherwise, their relationship was a tense one. Both possessed an intense, even hard honesty that inevitably led to conflict. Moreover, the father had little sympathy for the educational ambitions of his son and especially for his artistic inclinations.

Stillman was taught his first letters by his mother, who desired that her last born child receive a better formal education than had been possible for her older sons. By his teen years, William was already pursuing artistic interests, which were to dominate his early adult life. His mother encouraged his exercises in drawing. However, the family emphasis was always on scientific, mathematical, and engineering skills, and William was encouraged to develop basic competence in those areas.

Schenectady already had a good history of public education with a community literacy rate far higher than either Albany or Rochester. However, by the mid-1830s public education in the town was facing severe problems.<sup>44</sup> As William matured, the limits of the schooling available in Schenectady became obvious. His parents dispatched him to live with Thomas in New York so that he could benefit from the better education opportunities offered in the city. He attended a school established by the Public School Society, an association of wealthy citizens, who sought to provide a free quality education to worthy children from families outside the elite. It promoted a curriculum that combined Bible study, rote memorization, and strict discipline.<sup>45</sup> Although Stillman regarded the strongly math-centered education to have been a good one, he found the severity of both the school and the household of his brother's neurotic wife unappealing.<sup>46</sup> He suffered from what he described as a mental lethargy, which undermined his academic efforts. Most of all, he missed having nature at his doorstep.

After two years in New York City he transferred to a Sabbatarian school run by his brother Jacob in the central New York town of DeRuyter.<sup>47</sup> The school itself was short-lived, for it proved impossible to maintain such an experimental institution in interior New York. However, during DeRuyter's brief existence it established a reputation as a "school of very high repute." William flourished while he was there. The more creative pedagogy lifted his mental lethargy. He changed from a dullard into one of the brightest boys at the school. This metamorphosis was certainly aided by the fact that he had his brother's close guidance and was once again near to his beloved rural world.

One of the most important influences of the DeRuyter experience was a young female teacher, a "charming and poetical creature" who taught him "French (very little) and drawing (very little more)." This adolescent contact with an appealing young woman left a lasting impression on the innocent young man. Their ways parted. Years later, while he was distributing Seventh Day Baptist tracts for his brother Paul near Utica, William encountered her again. A broken romance had driven her to insanity, but the renewal of their friendship helped restore her to mental health. The experience anticipated in

many respects the tense and ultimately tragic relationship he was to have with his first wife. Although any romantic hopes on Stillman's part were thwarted, he credited her with "the beginning of my real literary education, for her taste in literature was excellent, if a little sentimental, and her criticisms were so sound that in some respects they have never lost their effect on my way of thinking and expressing thought."<sup>48</sup>

The brief time at the DeRuyter school started another important friendship, that with Charles Dudley Warner (1829–1900). Warner's background was similar to William's, one of a bright boy with limited resources but high ambition. He had lost his father at a young age and had been raised on a farm at Charlemont in western Massachusetts. He cultivated his nascent literary interests by memorizing poems while milking the cows.<sup>49</sup> His family had central New York roots, and a Quaker aunt in DeRuyter arranged for him to attend Jacob Stillman's school. William described young Warner as a "sensitive, poetical boy, almost girlish in his delicacy of temperament."<sup>50</sup> He went onto a distinguished career in journalism, editing the *Hartford Courant* for many years. He was also a prolific writer, co-authoring *The Gilded Age* with Mark Twain. The 1873 novel defined the post-Civil War era of opulence. He also produced literary and travel essays and more polemical works on prison reform.<sup>51</sup> While Warner's and Stillman's temperaments and tastes became rather different, and their worlds often were far apart, they maintained their friendship into old age.

The time came for the family to decide on young William's future. His father had no great faith in the benefits of higher education and wanted his youngest son to develop his mechanical skills by working in the family business. However, his mother insisted that he should receive a college education. The wishes of young Stillman himself were hardly consulted. In later life, he looked back at that period of his youth as one of budding artistic interests, whose development the time spent in college had fatally delayed.<sup>52</sup> He felt that his college education, by encouraging his literary side, had created in him divided intellectual loyalties and interests. Those conflicting interests combined with the impulse to wander both physically and intellectually had turned him into a dilettante. However, such selective retrospection distorted the reality of his world in 1840s Schenectady. His options were not of being an artist or a collegian, but rather of being a collegian or a craft apprentice.

His artistic development and especially his interest in painting had been nurtured during his youth in the odd ways not untypical of talented young people in back country America during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>53</sup> Some art was visible, locally. Prosperous citizens of Schenectady had commissioned a number of portraits of varying sophistication.<sup>54</sup> Some

of those portrait paintings and a few landscapes were seen in the houses of the elite. Painter John O. Wilkie, who was born in Schenectady, executed many local commissions during Stillman's youth.<sup>55</sup> Other artists of minor fame appeared in the city.<sup>56</sup>

One such figure was an English artist by the name of John Wilson, who had been trained in miniature painting. After a tragic, adventurous early life, Wilson settled in the small Mohawk Valley college town. There he earned his living by instructing in Pitman's shorthand methodology, skills useful to journalists and court stenographers.<sup>57</sup> In exchange for room and board at the Stillmans house, he agreed to teach young William the principles of perspective and the basics of doing portraits and landscapes in watercolor. Wilson was an intellectual free spirit and a disciple of the English social reformer Robert Dale Owen. He brought those controversial doctrines into the pious Stillman household and first exposed young William to atheism and political radicalism.

Another local artist who helped develop Stillman's painting skills was a shoemaker and amateur painter named Samuel Sexton (1813–1890).<sup>58</sup> A local historian described Sexton this way:

Mr Sexton began as a shoemaker and worked at trade for a considerable length of time. He possessed art talent, however, which raised him from the shoemaker's bench to the plane of art. His struggle in this field of endeavor was more severe than as a mechanic on the bench, and not more remunerative, yet he continued to paint pictures, both scenes and portraits. He was recognized as an artist of talent and had not alone local repute, but also in New York and Paris, where his work was exhibited. Mr. Sexton painted many portraits for the leading residents of Schenectady and also for others in different places. Yet with his talent of a high order and earnest labor of years he died an old man in penury.<sup>59</sup>

Sexton's cultural universe was not limited to interior New York. He expanded his knowledge of the wider world of painting from books and prints, and kept himself current on the art world by annual visits to the exhibitions of the American Academy of the Arts in New York City. He even garnered commissions in the city. His portrait of Levi Hale Willard, the New York businessman, who was an early supporter of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, shows an artist with considerable skills both as a draftsman and a colorist.<sup>60</sup> His 1832 historic painting of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*

proved less successful, for he crowded an awkward rendition of the historic scene to one side, while concentrating on the background landscape.<sup>61</sup>

An aesthetic life in upper New York created limits and frustrations for the painter-shoemaker. In Schenectady he found that only Uriana Sheldon Nott, the wife of President Nott of Union College, had any real artistic sensibilities. However, Sexton seems to have accepted the limits of his environment with serenity.<sup>62</sup> The young William Stillman learned many of the fundamentals of painting and especially of landscape rendition from him. Together they explored Sexton's favorite locales in the countryside of the Mohawk Valley. By joining in such excursions the young, aspiring befriended the lonely, isolated man, whose stifled career as an artist in a small town became a warning to Stillman.

Since his diverse and sometimes desultory early education had not yet prepared him for college work, William Stillman was enrolled in the "male department" of the Schenectady Lycaemum and Academy. The Lycaemum had been founded in 1834, part of a wider movement to encourage quality instruction in America. The Schenectady Lycaemum was located in an octagonal building at the corner of Union and Yates streets. It became the venue for public lectures as well as the instruction of youth.<sup>63</sup> The Lycaemum advertised that it taught English, Greek, and Latin, and for the more practically oriented, the basics of surveying.

At the Lycaemum, William improved both his Classics and mathematics. Such schools were becoming increasingly important as preparatory institutions for ambitious, elite families, who did not have access to the classic preparatory schools. Among William's classmates was the son of a local Baptist minister named Chester Arthur. Arthur (1830–1886) distinguished himself as a Greek scholar at the Lycaemum, and then went onto study Classics at Union College. He pursued a colorful political career that culminated in becoming president after the assassination of James Garfield.<sup>64</sup>

The best and indeed the only place for advanced education for a bright Schenectady youth with limited finances resources was the town's own Union College. The Stillman family was already well known to Union and its president. In 1844, William J. Stillman followed in the family tradition and climbed up to the campus on Nistiquam Hill to start his studies.<sup>65</sup> Like many of the other students, he enrolled as a junior, using his Lycaemum education to test out of the first two years.

Today, Union College is a respected liberal arts college, one of many in New York State. However, it played a much more important role in early nineteenth-century American higher education. It was one of the first colleges founded west of the Hudson. Its establishment in Schenectady in

1795 came after a long contest with rival Albany.<sup>66</sup> Union became a pioneer in the westward spread of American college education. By the time William arrived, it also had become a highly respected educational leader and had established a reputation as one of America's most experimental institutions. The Union of Stillman's student days could be described as third only to Harvard and Yale in national prestige.

Among its distinctions was the fact that it had been founded as a nondenominational college, a rarity in late eighteenth-century America. The locally powerful Dutch Reformed Church would have been expected to dominate the fledgling institution. In fact, most of the early presidents were Presbyterian. The student body included a significant number of pupils of modest means, many working their way through college. Both Chester Arthur and William J. Stillman taught part time in local schools to pay their bills. That was not generally a pleasant experience in the isolated and parochial world of New York rural communities.

Much of the prestige that Union enjoyed during the first half of the nineteenth century was owed to its president, Eliphalet Nott (1773–1866). When Stillman was a student, he had entered his fifth decade as the college's leader (Figure 1.2).<sup>67</sup> A Presbyterian minister with a high reputation for pulpit



Figure 1.2. Eliphalet Nott. President of Union College (Courtesy of Special Collections, Schaeffer Library, Union College)

eloquence (he had as a young man delivered a famous funerary sermon for Alexander Hamilton), he assumed the presidency of the struggling college in 1804. Through his drive and his imaginative and sometimes dubious financial management, he helped the college grow and even prosper. In 1815, Union moved from a swampy location on the Mohawk plain to the plateau overlooking the town.

Nott planned big for the future of the college. He was an enthusiast for French culture and ideas. That francophilia was articulated in the college motto, which was written in French rather than in Latin. He incorporated serious French studies into the Union curriculum. He enlisted the French architect Joseph Jacques Ramée (1764–1842) to create the master plan for the new campus. Ramée was a cultured Frenchman, who had begun his careers in the last years of the *Ancienne Régime*. As a result of the Revolution, Ramée, like many of his compatriots, was washed up on American shores.<sup>68</sup>

He created for Nott a campus of classical design with strong symbolic markers. In its architecture and its intellectual ideology the Union plan anticipated in many respects Jefferson's famed University of Virginia. His campus was oriented toward the west, facing toward the expanding frontier of post-Revolutionary America. The centerpiece was to be a Pantheon-type structure, similar to Jefferson's Rotunda at Virginia. College buildings of more traditional designs would flank the building, with the whole surrounded by formal paths and gardens.<sup>69</sup> The scheme reflected an Enlightenment mentality that was common in early Republican America.

Even more important than the proposed new campus design were Nott's curricular reforms. Union became the first college in America to have a true science track, which was treated as the equal of the classical curriculum. After their first year, students could pursue a course of study, which stressed math, science, engineering, and modern languages, one that allowed them to by-pass Latin and Greek.<sup>70</sup> Stillman integrated both approaches in his course of studies. He did the scientific curriculum but also continued his Greek studies. He would balance those two intellectual worlds throughout his life.<sup>71</sup>

The Union curriculum not only reflected Nott's belief in the education Americans needed to guide the young Republic, but also his own diverse intellectual interests. Like a latter-day Benjamin Franklin, he followed the latest scientific developments of his era. In his spare time he loved to tinker and create mechanical devices. His first invention was an improved heating stove, with a rotary grate that facilitated ash removal and increased air intake. It also was able to burn anthracite coal rather than depleting further the rapidly diminishing northeastern wood supply. His "saracine" stoves, dubbed "coffins" by the students for their tall, narrow shapes, became widely used.

He transferred some of the experience acquired from the development of the stoves to the design of steam boilers. His steamboat boilers also burned anthracite coal and helped to revolutionize the emerging American water transport industry. The effect on the Stillmans has already been considered.

In Stillman's day the now-aged Nott, although past his prime, was still a major force on campus.<sup>72</sup> He taught a special seminar for seniors, which stressed the development of their faculties of critical enquiry. The central text used was Lord Kames' *Elements of Criticism*. Henry Home, Lord Kames (1696–1782), had been a distinguished Edinburgh jurist and one of the stars of the Scottish Enlightenment.<sup>73</sup> He established himself as a leading figure in the Scottish legal system, a judicial world where rational argument dominated over the precedent-citing mentality of the English Common Law.

Kames considered himself an historical evolutionist. He argued that the legal system must respond to each stage in the evolution of human society from that of primitive hunter-gatherers to the contemporary commercial world. He was a mentor to such Scottish intellectual figures as James Boswell and David Hume. Kames was a social and intellectual conservative. He has been characterized as representing "the Scottish mind geared entirely toward the practical and the concrete, shorn of any sentimentality or pretense, but also of any compassion."<sup>74</sup> Along with other eighteenth-century Scottish philosophers, he played an important role in shaping critical thought in early nineteenth-century America.<sup>75</sup> His realistic rationalism had great appeal for Nott. However, the president had reservations about the Scot's rigid intellectuality, for he remained open to the appeal of the irrational as articulated by the Romantics.<sup>76</sup>

Nott was in the end more interested in Kames' pedagogic usefulness than his intellectual authority. He remarked that he "would as soon have a book of riddles as Kames' 'Elements of Criticism' so long as he could make us think out our conclusions." Years later, Stillman remembered with appreciation that:

With him our recitations were a perpetual contest of wits against his; he showed us the shallowness of our acquisitions, and dissected mercilessly both textbook and the responses to the questions which we had drawn from it, admitting nothing and pushing the pupil perpetually into the deeper water as soon as began to think his foot had touched firm land. The first term under the doctor brought up every intellectual faculty I possessed, and I suppose it was to this intense appreciation of his leading that I owed his friendship and partiality in the following years.<sup>77</sup>



He regarded the president as “the greatest teacher of young men of his generation.”<sup>78</sup>

He also paid special tribute to the humane side of Dr. Nott. Having been poor in his youth, Nott was sympathetic to students with limited means. He did everything possible to encourage them to pursue their education. He also took pride in his ability to reform students who had been troublemakers at other institutions. As a result of this openness to the educationally challenged, Union College often was referred to as “Botany Bay,” identifying it with the infamous Australian penal colony. Nott had the special ability of identifying and fostering outstanding talents, while letting those with lesser ability move through college without major hindrance. Supporting this whole endeavor was his excellent “spy system,” which operated within the Union student community. He maintained social control and constantly detected the perpetrators of the student pranks, which were commonplace among the free-spirited youth of the college.<sup>79</sup>

We know relatively little about William’s life at Union. Between study and work he probably had little free time. Because his family had left Schenectady for New York City, he lived on campus in the North College building. He was unable to pay the full bill of expenses of a little more than one hundred dollars and left a permanent debit on the Union College books. Nott, who knew the Stillman family well, was willing to ignore it.<sup>80</sup>

William was later to claim that his years at Union were a waste, coming at a time when he could have been developing his artistic talents. That the time spent in college slowed his artistic development may have been correct. However, the Nott experience shaped Stillman’s broader path in life and helped sustain and guide him after he was forced to abandon a career as an artist. In many ways, he became the ideal of what Nott wanted his undergraduates to become, a blend of humanistic and scientific interests. He had strongly held values combined with a well-developed concern for the practical applications of science and a realistic view of the world. Throughout his life, he questioned assumptions. Stillman became a painter and art critic, who still respected the family traditions of honest craftsmanship. In later years, Stillman the photographer involved both in the aesthetics and the technicalities of the emerging field would be an expression of those intersecting interests. All that would have pleased Eliphalet Nott.