

The Illusion of the Ordinary: John Lewis Krimmel's *Village Tavern* and the Democratization of Public Life in the Early Republic

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John Lewis Krimmel's Village Tavern (1814)

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John Lewis Krimmel's *Village Tavern* (1814) provides a revealing glimpse of the taproom of a country inn in rural Pennsylvania during the War of 1812. Justly praised for its extraordinary wealth of descriptive detail, it has been interpreted by scholars in a variety of ways. None of these interpretations pay more than incidental attention to Krimmel's preoccupation with the novel role that information had come by the 1810s to play in the United States. Far more than merely a group portrait of a picturesque assortment of villagers enjoying a pint, *Village Tavern* is one of the first major visual representations of the fundamental changes in American life that had been set in motion during the 1790s with the rapid expansion of the postal system, the stagecoach industry, and the newspaper press.¹ In one small canvas, Krimmel limns a world that is saturated in information, even as it is awash with drink.

John Lewis Krimmel is widely regarded as the first genre painter in the early republic.² Born in Germany in 1786, he studied art in Germany before emigrating to the United States as a young man. Settling in Philadelphia in 1810, he worked steadily until 1821 when he died at the age of 35.

Krimmel is often praised as a faithful chronicler of the routine, the unremarkable, and the taken-for-granted. Yet, in our view, it is a mistake to treat *Village Tavern* as an ordinary scene from everyday life. Unlike so many genre paintings, it is neither sentimental nor nostalgic. Rather, we contend that—like Krimmel's well-known paintings of major civic rituals in the early republic, such as his *View of Centre Square on the Fourth of July* (1812) and *Election Scene, State House in Philadelphia* (1815)—it dramatizes a significant development in American history. In *Village Tavern*, Krimmel ponders the social consequences of the communications revolution that had been set in motion with the Post Office Act of 1792. Just as a late twentieth-century photojournalist might find newsworthy the hustle-and-bustle of an on-line internet café, so Krimmel documents the new informational environment that this revolution had spawned.³

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Krimmel's drama unfolds in 1814, during the darkest days of the War of 1812, the second armed conflict with Great Britain in thirty years. The setting is the taproom of a public house located somewhere near Philadelphia.⁴ We know the year was 1814 because Krimmel emblazones that date on an almanac hung from a post at the corner of the bar. Like so many commercial establishments of the period, the taproom doubled as a post office. This circumstance has been overlooked by the leading students of Krimmel's work, obscuring a full understanding of the painting's significance. The oversight is particularly curious since, shortly after Krimmel's death, an enterprising art exhibitor made the tavern-post office connection explicit by displaying the painting under the title, *Interior, the Country Stage-House Tavern and Post-Office, with the News of Peace*.⁵

Gathered inside the tavern are a motley collection of villagers who exemplified the social diversity of the rural republic. At the bar mixing a drink is the tavernkeeper. An influential figure in his own right, his authority is augmented by the fact that, as the nearby writing desk implied, he is also the postmaster—making him the only representative of the general government whom ordinary Americans were ever likely to meet. Standing near the bar, and engaged in a heated conversation, are two members of the local gentry. Wearing vests and cravats as badges of their social standing, they both adopt a pose of genteel refinement, as if to underscore their elevated rank. The gentleman on the left sports a broad-brimmed hat, which, in conjunction

with his elaborate, multi-buttoned vest, gives the distinct impression that he is a country squire with extensive landholdings in the immediate vicinity.

Seated around the table are four patrons in various poses, drinking, reading, and lounging about. Two are artisans whose leather aprons strongly suggest that they are enjoying a pint in the middle of their work day. Though neither seems much inclined to defer to his betters, they plainly occupy a lower rung in the social ladder than the gentlemen behind them. Indeed, it may well be the growing political awareness of the artisan on the left that so disturbs the woman, presumably his wife, who has taken his arm. Might she be concerned that he is about to leave the family and go off to war? Or, alternatively, is she merely warning him about the dangers of drink?

Framed by the doorway at the extreme left is the mail carrier, a once ubiquitous yet elusive figure of whom few images are known to exist. Krimmel's rendering is precise. Over one shoulder the government agent has slung the official portmanteau, which is covered in waterproof leather and secured with a lock. Under his arm is a bulging stack of newspapers, which, in accordance with postal procedure, are bundled together and wrapped with twine. Such a figure was a common sight in the early republic, yet one whose identity is easily misinterpreted today. One recent scholar, for example, misidentified the portmanteau as a duffel bag and the newspaper stack as a basket of bread.⁶

Krimmel's villagers may have come from different rungs on the social ladder, yet they all enjoy more-or-less equal access to the time-specific developments in politics and commerce that were commonly called news. In this period, newspapers were not merely vehicles of local or regional information. Rather they were "paper windows on the world" concerned largely with national and international affairs.⁷

While timeliness was an important feature of this new informational environment, it was by no means its only or even its most salient attribute. Equally important was the *quantity* of information available, its *penetration* into the back country, and the *regularity* with which it arrived. All were the product of public policy. To guarantee an abundant supply of newspapers, Congress subsidized their transmission in the mail. To ensure that they reached the hinterland, Congress expanded the postal network well in advance of commercial demand. And to guarantee their periodic transmission, postal officers required every mail stagecoach to maintain a fixed schedule. Together, these mandates helped to establish a communications network that was far more extensive than anything that an earlier generation of Americans could have imagined. By the 1810s, even Americans living hundreds of miles from the seats of power could take for granted a flood of up-to-date information about the wider world.⁸

The novelty of this situation is easily overlooked. As recently as the 1780s, few public figures in the United States had anticipated that the government

might soon subsidize the geographically extensive transmission of time-specific information on public affairs. Only with the passage of the Post Office Act of 1792, four years *after* the adoption of the federal Constitution, would Congress create the necessary institutional mechanism to keep the citizenry continuously informed of its proceedings. The results were impressive. The United States, declared minister Samuel Miller in 1803, presented "a spectacle never before displayed among men": "It is the spectacle, not of the learned and the wealthy only, but of the great body of people...having free and constant access to the public prints."⁹

Krimmel's preoccupation with this new informational environment is everywhere apparent in this painting. The commotion occasioned by the arrival of the mail dominates the scene. The light shines on the mail sack, with its up-to-date information, but leaves in the shadows the less timely almanac. Two patrons eagerly pore over newspapers that had already arrived, and which, to encourage tavern-going, the postmaster has neatly folded against the back wall on portable racks. Equally novel are the prints on the back wall that depicted recent naval battles in the War of 1812.¹⁰

As a recent immigrant to the United States, Krimmel could not help but find this new informational environment intriguing. No comparable realm, after all, existed in Krimmel's native Germany, or, for that matter, anywhere else in the world. This was because, at this time, most governments remained highly suspicious of an informed citizenry. Only in the United States had policymakers decided, as a matter of principle, to subsidize public information that permitted the citizenry to monitor their routine performance. Even in Great Britain, the country from which the United States derived most of its institutions, access to public information remained far more circumscribed. To maximize government revenue, Parliament limited the expansion of post offices into the countryside; to check the spread of dangerous political ideas, it taxed newspapers heavily, greatly limiting their circulation. In addition, British postal officers permitted only those newspapers that originated in London to move freely through the mails and carefully monitored their contents, further limiting their influence.¹¹

Several features of the communications revolution had a decidedly traditional cast. Though the flow of information had been greatly expanded, the explosion in printed information did not displace older oral forms of communication, as is sometimes assumed. Rather, it greatly increased opportunities for ordinary Americans to discuss public affairs face-to-face. In post offices throughout the country, as Krimmel so vividly suggests, ordinary Americans talked loudly and often acrimoniously about current events. Sometimes, like the elderly taverngoer at the right corner of the table, they even read the news aloud. Only much later, well after the Civil War, would newspaper-reading become the largely silent, private act that it has become

today. Indeed, even the solitary soul by the stove at the left who is silently scanning a newspaper twists around to follow the discussion taking place in front of the bar.¹² Equally traditional, at least from the standpoint of our day, is Krimmel's implicit assumption that the citizenry was white and male. It is the men, after all, rather than the woman and child, who are reading the newspapers and discussing public affairs. People of color, similarly, are nowhere to be seen.

It would, however, be a mistake to treat social exclusivity as Krimmel's major concern, as, for example, with such later paintings of post office interiors as Richard Caton Woodville's *War News From Mexico* (1848) or William Sidney Mount's *California News* (1850). Far more notable from Krimmel's perspective is the inclusion *within* the new informational environment of such a substantial portion of the population. With the recent expansion in the means of communication, even humble artisans now had access to the latest broadcasts from the seats of power. No longer would access to information remain a monopoly of the favored few.

This rapid democratization of news, far more than the continuing restrictions on women and blacks, provides a key to the drama that Krimmel depicts. Though the country squire raises his hand in evident disgust to protest against the commotion occasioned by the arrival of the mail, he is rebuffed almost at once by the gentleman to his left. It is conceivable that Krimmel intended the squire to be a Quaker who opposes the war out of religious scruple. Equally plausibly, Krimmel may have conceived of him as a principled opponent of the rapid dissemination of public information to the lower orders. Either way, the point is plain: no longer can the gentry control the flow of news.

The squire's uneasiness takes on added significance when it is recognized that, during the very months when Krimmel was completing his painting, the transmission of information had become a major topic of political controversy. The catalyst for this debate was a recent decision of Congress to require postmasters to open their post offices to the public on every day the mail arrived, including the Sabbath, the traditional day of rest. In practice, the new law required the opening of hundreds of taverns, since, in countless localities—including the Pennsylvania village in which *Village Tavern* was set—the tavern and the post office occupied the same physical space. Predictably, this government-sanctioned invasion of a sacred realm outraged many devout Americans, who claimed, quite understandably, that it violated the welter of local and state Sabbatarian laws that prohibited the opening of commercial establishments on every seventh day. Though the Sabbatarians ultimately failed to convince the government to suspend the transmission of the mail on the Sabbath, their protest did heighten popular consciousness

regarding the importance of the institution, and, in many parts of the country, actually encouraged its more widespread observance.¹³

The Sabbatarian controversy was particularly intense in eastern Pennsylvania during the very months Krimmel was completing his painting. It is, therefore, tempting to identify the country squire as a Sabbatarian who opposes the government-sanctioned invasion of a sacred realm. This interpretation is consistent with certain other features of the painting as well. Dressed in what appeared to be her Sunday best, the woman may be imploring her husband not only to give up the bottle, but also to join her in keeping the Sabbath. And if this were the Sabbath, the artisans' aprons are an additional affront to the dignity of the day; almost everyone else is appropriately dressed for church. Certainly the Presbyterians who first saw *Village Tavern* could have been expected to have the issue of Sabbath-day observance in mind. In the 1810s, after all, temperance had not yet emerged as the pressing issue that it would soon become. But Sabbatarianism had.¹⁴

It is impossible to know if Krimmel intended his painting as a commentary on the Sabbatarian controversy. But even if we assume that *Village Tavern* depicts an ordinary work day—as, doubtless, many contemporary viewers did—it dramatizes several of the major conflicts that were shaping American public life in the 1810s.

The most immediate of these clashes was, of course, the War of 1812, which, in 1814, continued to rage. Krimmel alludes to the struggle by including a pair of prints on the tavern wall that depict recent naval clashes on the Great Lakes, recalling the celebrated American victory the previous year in the Battle of Lake Erie. In recent months, taverngoers had received little good news from the front; doubtless, they took comfort from these tangible reminders of American military prowess.

Less palpable, yet even more far reaching in its social implications, was the looming struggle between masters and artisans over control of the labor process. By mandating the opening of post offices to news from afar, Congress hastened the emergence not only of a democratic political culture, but also of a new commercial order that, by mid-century, would challenge deeply-rooted patterns of behavior and belief. Slowly yet inexorably, the independent artisan who set his own pace would find himself transformed into a dependent laborer who lacked even the autonomy to repair to a tavern during the work day for fellowship or drink. With the spread of market relations into the hinterland, and the temperance movement that it helped to inspire, Krimmel's artisans would within a few short years find themselves forced to choose between self-discipline and social control.¹⁵

Krimmel, wrote art historian William T. Oedel in a perceptive essay, explored the limits of propriety in a pluralistic world.¹⁶ *Village Tavern* portrays some of the most basic of these boundaries, as well as some of the conflicts that proved impossible to contain. Such an interpretation helps to solve one of the enigmas that have preoccupied historians intent on locating this painting in its social setting. How can one treat as ordinary a scene that is so plainly infused with such palpable tension? Neither the passions of war, nor the early stirrings of the temperance movement, nor even the emerging contest between master and artisan can fully account for the drama that Krimmel has staged.

No more helpful are interpretations that hinge on faulty assumptions about the circumstances of its composition. Krimmel scholars have recognized for some time that he could not have intended *Village Tavern* to commemorate the end of the War of 1812, as the posthumous title, *News of Peace*, mistakenly implied. The painting, after all, was exhibited in May 1814, several months prior to the end of the war.¹⁷ Only slightly less anachronistic are interpretations that dwell on the centrality of the temperance theme. In the 1810s, well-funded national temperance organizations such as the American Temperance Society had yet to be established, and the war on alcohol had barely begun.

Instead, *Village Tavern* fits best with what we know about the period if we regard it as a dramatization of the far-reaching changes in public life set in motion with the communications revolution spurred by the passage of the Post Office Act of 1792. No other extant image brings together the three principal agents of this epochal event—the postal system, the stagecoach industry, and the newspaper press—in such an aesthetically satisfying way.

To fully understand the canvas, in short, one must recognize that what is ordinary to twentieth-century viewers was a revelation to the artist. By Krimmel's day, the local post office had become a key node in the new informational environment that was dramatically reshaping American public life. For the first time in American history, the timely movement of enormous quantities of information had become not the exception but the norm. Every day, including the Sabbath, Americans witnessed the emergence of a new political and commercial order in which local custom would be subordinated to the invasive pressures of new ideas, new opportunities, and new constraints. But with these changes came a host of difficult issues. Did *all* the white men who constituted the core of the citizenry have an equal right to participate in national politics? How would public life be altered once the government made good on its promise to keep everyone informed about public affairs? What changes might take place in other realms of experience? Such contentious matters gave Krimmel's painting a startling immediacy in its day, particularly for those contemporaries troubled—as many remained—by the recent democratization of American public life.

It is, thus, perhaps a bit ironic that, in the years immediately following Krimmel's death, exhibitors found it expedient to rename Krimmel's painting *News of Peace*. After all, the drama that Krimmel depicted remained unsettled, with many issues unresolved. The role of ordinary people in public life had yet to be debated in the forthright manner that it would be in the 1820s and 1830s, with the rise of organized party competition and national voluntary associations dedicated to moral reform. The labor question, similarly, was still very much in flux. By mid-century, the stagecoach would give way to the railroad and the postal system would be supplemented by the electric telegraph. But in Krimmel's day, the postal system and the stagecoach, along with the ubiquitous newspaper, remained at center stage. Looking in at one village tavern, he revealed just how profoundly the rhythms of everyday life had already been transformed.

Notes

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1. On this point, see Thomas C. Leonard, *News for All: America's Coming-of-Age with the Press* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), chap. 1.

2. Milo M. Naeve, *John Lewis Krimmel: An Artist in Federal America* (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses 1987), p. 9; Anneliese Harding, *John Lewis Krimmel: Genre Artist of the Early Republic* (Winterthur, Del.: Winterthur Museum, 1994), p. 1.

3. For a model study that has influenced our approach, see Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991). Johns, unfortunately, does not analyze *Village Tavern*.

4. On tavern interiors, see Kym S. Rice, *Early American Taverns: For the Entertainment of Friends and Strangers* (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1983) and David W. Conroy, *In Public Houses: Drink & the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

5. Naeve, *Krimmel*, p. 74.

6. Harding, *Krimmel*, p. 59. Better informed is Rice, *Early American Taverns*, p. 84.

7. Ian Steele, *The English Atlantic, 1675-1740: An Exploration in Communication and Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 145.

8. For a more extensive discussion of postal policy in the early republic, see Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), chaps. 1-4. For a discussion of the communications revolution in one region, see William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989).

9. Samuel Miller, *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1803), vol. 2, p. 253.

10. Prints were of course not a new media, yet it is interesting to note that the War of 1812 greatly stimulated their production. If the holdings of the Library of Congress can be taken as representative, more prints were issued in this three-year period than in the

preceding quarter century. Bernard F. Reilly, Jr., *American Political Prints, 1766-1876: A Catalog of the Collections in the Library of Congress* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1991).

Much, however, was yet to change. Indeed, from the vantage point of the Civil War, what is perhaps most notable about Krimmel's age is the extent to which our visual understanding of it continues to be dominated by paintings, such as *Village Tavern*, rather than by the cheap mass-produced images that would soon flood the country. For a more extended discussion of these later developments, and their implications for American public life, see Thomas C. Leonard, *The Power of the Press: The Birth of American Political Reporting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), chap. 4.

11. John, *Spreading the News*, pp. 41-42. See also Richard D. Brown, *The Strength of a People: The Idea of an Informed Citizenry in America, 1650-1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

12. On this point, see Thomas C. Leonard, *News for All: America's Coming-of-Age with the Press* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), chap. 1.

13. John, *Spreading the News*, chap. 5.

14. In a useful article on the temperance theme in Krimmel's paintings, Janet Marstine identifies the country squire as a Quaker. If Marstine is correct, this would make it far less likely that the squire could have been a Sabbatarian, since the Quakers displayed little enthusiasm for the legal enforcement of a day of rest. Yet the squire's garb was also characteristic of many Presbyterians, a religious body that vigorously opposed the opening of the post offices on the Sabbath. One can also wonder whether Marstine may have occasionally exaggerated Krimmel's commitment to the temperance cause, a theme she finds in six of his sixteen surviving genre paintings. It seems a bit misleading, for example, to claim that the country squire is "refusing a drink" when none is being offered. Janet Marstine, "John Lewis Krimmel: America's First Painter of Temperance Themes," *Rutgers Art Review*, 10 (1989): 125.

15. The role of public policy in shaping a "market revolution" in the early republic is a theme of Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

For a recent survey of the voluminous literature on the changing character of labor process in the nineteenth century, see Merritt Roe Smith, "Industry, Technology, and the 'Labor Question' in Nineteenth-Century America: Seeking Synthesis," *Technology and Culture*, 32 (1991): 555-570.

16. William T. Oedel, "Krimmel at the Crossroads," *Winterthur Portfolio*, 23 (1988): 275, 278. Also helpful is Susan Danly, *Telling Tales: Nineteenth-Century Narrative Painting from the Collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1991), p. 60.
17. Naeve, *Krimmel*, p. 74.