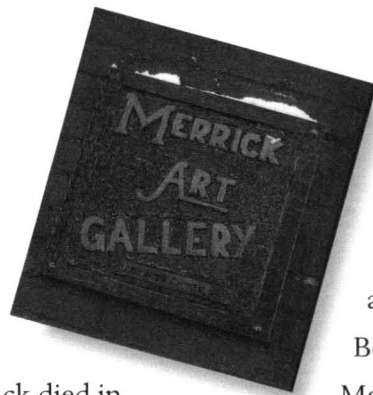


**Portrait of Merrick Art Gallery founder by  
Albert F. King (original in color). *Opposite*  
page: Original Merrick Gallery sign.**



# EDWARD DEMPSTER MERRICK AND HIS ART GALLERY

by Charles S. Wright



**M**ORE THAN 85 years have passed since Edward Dempster Merrick died in what is now the upstairs exhibition hall of Merrick Art Gallery in Beaver County, Pennsylvania. Yet from an honored vantage point, centrally located on the hall's back wall, he still peers down the cavernous length of his beloved gallery. His cherished paintings, collected during the last years of his life, surround him. Bearded and bespectacled, Edward Merrick lives on in the portrait by Pittsburgh artist Albert F. King.<sup>1</sup>

Merrick was also a painter in his own right, and what makes his personal odyssey and the museum he established in New Brighton all the more curious is that not a single canvas of his own is known to exist.<sup>2</sup> During Merrick's time, in Merrick's community, art was primarily considered a hobby and not a career, and it

appears likely that the provincial attitude of his Beaver County relatives led to the destruction of Merrick's paintings.

Such tragedy aside, Edward Merrick led a life that many artists would envy: amassing a small fortune by age 53, he retired from business to pursue his love of art. This he did with an unbounded enthusiasm, collecting and painting an impressive number of works (over 500 total), and also establishing his museum. Known today as the Merrick Art Gallery, the sprawling red-brick building at Fifth Avenue and 11th Street in New Brighton stands as a stately monument to the "impractical" vision of Edward Merrick.

Merrick's artistic strain must have entered the bloodlines from English descendants, among whom, according to *Burke's Peerage* (1887), were "many men of prominence in the church, in the army and in letters." The family also has royal lineage. "They have the rare

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distinction of being literally descended both from the sovereign Prince of Wales of the Welsh royal family and from King Edward I, whose eldest son was the first Prince of Wales of the English royal family." In 1636, the American branch of the Merrick family (four sons of the Reverend John Merrick, Rector of Llandachyo, Wales — William, James, John, and Thomas) arrived at Charleston, Massachusetts, on board the "good ship James."

Six generations later, in 1828, Silas Merrick of Essex County, Mass., married one Fannie Miner. Four years later, on August 24, 1832, Edward Dempster Merrick was born. The family arrived in Beaver County, at Fallston, in 1837, and in 1842 put down permanent roots in New Brighton, where descendants continue to prosper.

It was in New Brighton that Merrick, as an adolescent, first dreamed of becoming an artist. He tells the story in concise fashion in a five-page autobiographical reminiscence written in 1902, his 70th year. He writes that early in his life he immersed himself, through books, in work of great artists such as Raphael, Titian, and Michelangelo, becoming thoroughly saturated with the romantic ideal of art for art's sake. Merrick's father, however, "threw cold water on the scheme at once." Merrick goes on to record his father's additional thoughts on art as a career for a young man: "There is nothing in it; they all starve to death. Go into manufacturing; do something to make money." Lacking parental blessings, Merrick was resigned to a business career, following in his father's footsteps.

Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to construct an accurate chronological account of Edward Merrick's life. Speculation has it that he probably worked for a time at Merrick House, a 70-room hotel completed in 1851. Opulent, palatial, grandiose — undoubtedly one of the finest hotels in Western Pennsylvania — it was destroyed by fire in October 1855. Famous lodgers included P. T. Barnum and Jenny Lind, the "Swedish Nightingale." Stephen Collins Foster, a frequent guest, is said to have composed one of his songs ("Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair") while staying at Merrick House, though the story cannot be verified. The 19th-century Chickering piano, which now resides in the Eva Mae Merrick Music Room of the present-day gallery, purportedly felt the hands of Foster's genius.

What follows here is not speculation, though it may not be purely factual, since Merrick wrote his autobiographical sketch late in his life. There are minor inconsistencies with known dates of events which most likely may be attributed to an old man writing about the happenings of many years earlier.

Between 1851 and 1858, Merrick took up telegraphy. He got his start at the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago Railroad passenger station in New Brighton, where he learned Morse code. According to his autobiography, he "was operator in Philadelphia in the summer of 1858, when the first cable was laid across the ocean." He worked as a telegrapher also in Pittsburgh and Cincinnati.

At one point during the 1850s, Merrick and brother Charles fell victim to what Merrick diagnosed as "western fever." Silas





The museum occupies a small building that from its earliest days was crammed with some 500 pieces of art. This photograph of the main exhibition hall is from the early 20th century.



Remodeling over the years enlarged exhibition space, but the art is still primarily displayed in "salon style," with many pieces filling each wall.





Merrick gave each son \$1,000 in gold, and off the brothers went to the land office in Fort Dodge, Iowa. Their wanderlust and land speculation led them through Wisconsin, Minnesota, and back to Iowa. They were then summoned home by their father because, as Edward Merrick wrote, "the black clouds of the panic of 1857" loomed. They arrived home "about even in money, but way ahead in experience, as a result of the trip."

In 1859, Merrick gave up telegraphy and went to work in the iron freight car factory owned by his father and uncle. He worked there until 1863, the year the factory closed its doors. Merrick's years at the factory coincided with the Civil War; the government was in need of telegraph operators. Merrick, acquainted with the Morse code and the closed key from his job at the train station in New Brighton, and accomplished in telegraphy from his various jobs, turned out to be the perfect dot-and-dash man for the Union Army. He joined the service and was assigned to telegraph duty in Beltsville, Maryland. All told, Merrick served three stints in the military: the first and longest began in 1861 and lasted until ill health forced him into convalescence about a year later; the other two were three-month tours-of-duty in 1862 and 1863.

Merrick, a Unionist through and through, recorded his views of the war in a journal. His entry for July 21, 1861, predicts a lengthy and ghastly victory for Union forces: "The bones of many of our brave men will whiten the ground of the 'Sunny South' and their blood enrich the soil, but for this we will have a country saved; a Union preserved."

After the Civil War, Merrick returned to New Brighton, and with his two brothers, Charles and Frank, formed a partnership with J. K. Buckley in a foundry business, churning out stoves, grates, fenders, and all kinds of castings. During this venture, Merrick took out a patent on an anti-dust grate. Silas Merrick had obviously instilled good business sense in all of his sons — even the one who had the audacity to want to be an artist.

The foundry stayed in business for 18 years, from 1867 to 1885. All four brothers — Edward, Charles, Frank, and Frederick — then banded together in 1885 to form the Standard Horse Nail Corporation (still operating today producing machine keys and cotter pins). The nail company prospered tremendously in the years right after its formation — so much so that Edward Merrick withdrew from day-to-day participation in the business.

Merrick records 1885 as the pivotal year in his life — "Now came my chance for realizing the hopes and aspirations of my boyhood" — and between 1885 and his death in 1911, he studied paintings, painted paintings, collected paintings, and hung paintings. A "foundry worker" in Weyand and Reed's *Beaver County Centennial Directory* of 1876, his occupation is "artist" in the *Beaver Valley Directory* of 1900. "I went to the woods and painted as I saw," he writes in his autobiography. "I went to the ocean and studied her changing moods, and painted the pictures right on the spot. I hired male and female models to sit for me, and studied them in various poses and moods."

As noted earlier, dates are disputed in Merrick's saga. Two historical markers — one in front of his childhood home and one near his museum in New Brighton — designate 1880 as the year

the museum sprang to life. In any event, as Merrick's art collection grew, so grew his gallery. He purchased the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago passenger station in 1880, and it first housed his art. Onto the 25-by-50-foot building, Merrick added a second story in 1884, complete with a fine skylight. With the acquisition of additional property in 1888, he lengthened the two-story structure by 75 feet. Then in 1901, an identical structure was built parallel to the first. Previously the two 25-by-125-foot buildings were linked in "H"-shape fashion by a connecting transom nearly as large; today, they are joined by a beautiful glass foyer.<sup>3</sup>

Merrick's autobiography notes that his collection had swelled to 420 pieces by 1902, of which 220 came from his own brush. The final collection totaled 544, with his contribution being an impressive 236. He kept fastidious records of all paintings he collected, typing on seven linen canvases the artist's name and native country, and the title of each painting. Merrick had a penchant for collecting landscapes, seascapes, historical pieces, and ideal heads. He especially adored portraits of women.

Merrick did not have the financial resources of, say, Andrew Carnegie, but this is not to say his collection lacks paintings of historical significance or artistic merit. Quite the contrary. Gracing the gallery's walls in salon-style presentation are paintings by Frenchmen Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) and Pierre-Paul Prud'hon (1758-1823), as well as American artists grouped in the Hudson River School: Asher Brown Durand (1796-1886); John Frederick Kensett (1816-1872); Thomas Hill (1829-1908); John William Casilear (1811-1893); William M. Hart (1823-1894); and Thomas Worthington Whittredge (1820-1910). In addition, the gallery's collection includes two prominent American artists not associated with the Hudson River School — Thomas Sully (1783-1872) and Ralph Albert Blakelock (1847-1919). Local painters Emil Bott of Monaca (1827-1908) and George Hetzel of Pittsburgh (1826-1899) have works on display as well.

A key painter not represented on the gallery's walls, of course, is Merrick himself. Various oral and written accounts (most notably, *The Twentieth Century History of Beaver County*) allude to female nudity in Merrick's paintings, Victorian

sensibilities being trampled, and relatives creating a giant bonfire.

Indeed, the linen-types record paintings he executed of numerous New York misses — Hortense Jacobsson, Mamie McGuire, Flora Burton, Dorothy Merritt, Madge Lansing, Flora Duval — and others. Nevertheless, even a huge bonfire could have consumed only a small portion of what he painted, for Merrick's own titles document seascapes and landscapes as well. And then there are also "Rockwellian" titles such as "Fatherly Advice," "Trying on the Jewels," "A Tambourine Player," "Grandpa's Pet," "The Mirror," "The Death of Grandpa," "The Young Widow," "The Banjo Player," "Resignation," "Innocence," "The Convalescent," and "The New Silk Purse."

On June 10, 1911, while working in his gallery, Merrick was stricken by a cerebral hemorrhage. Because there are no known extant paintings, and only glancing written descriptions of them, it is futile to try to describe Merrick the artist. He once wrote that "to paint a fine picture I consider the greatest achievement of man," but no living person knows, it seems, whether Edward Merrick ever fulfilled his great expectations.

Perhaps one day a "Merrick" painting will surface, but for now his supreme achievement remains the work of others which he collected, then bequeathed, to the world. ☼

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Elizabeth A. Douglas, *The Merrick Art Gallery* (New Brighton, Pa.: Merrick Art Gallery Associates, 1988). This is the official catalogue describing the paintings collected by Edward Merrick.

<sup>2</sup> The following newspaper articles provide a strong historical overview of Merrick Art Gallery and its founder, Edward Merrick: Terri L. Gallagher, "Eva Mae Merrick bringing people to their gallery," *Beaver County Times* (hereafter cited as *BCT*), 28 Nov. 1983, A11; Bill Jackson, "Merrick Gallery holds collection of art treasures," *BCT*, 17 Nov. 1985, Sunday magazine, 6-7; Donald Miller, "Gallery provides portal to past," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 3 Oct. 1993, Sunday magazine, 12-13; George Swetnam, "The Merrick Mystery," *Pittsburgh Press*, 24 Nov. 1968, Sunday magazine, 4-5; Stephanie Waite, "Merrick family dominant force in preserving art," *BCT*, 13 Nov. 1988, Sunday magazine, 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> For a full discussion of the buildings that became Merrick Art Gallery, see Kay Orr and Cynthia A. Kunder's essay, "Evolution of the Merrick Buildings," in *The Merrick Gallery*, 90-91.

<sup>4</sup> Cheryl Weller Beck, ed., *The Twentieth Century History of Beaver County, Pennsylvania 1900-1988* (Beaver, Pa.: Beaver County Historical Research and Landmarks Foundation, 1989).

## PHOTOGRAPH CREDITS

### Falling Into Some Sort of Hole

Page 92-105 Photographs courtesy Charlotte Wolkin

### Four Generations of Buchanans

Page 113 Large photo courtesy Mercy Hospital; inset courtesy Dr. E. Bayley Buchanan  
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Page 115 Courtesy Dr. E. Bayley Buchanan  
page 117 Courtesy Mercy Hospital

page 118 Courtesy Debbie Prelaz, Results Marketing, Wexford, Pa.

### Edward Dempster Merrick and His Art Gallery

Page 120 "Portrait of Edward Dempster Merrick," by Albert F. King (original in color). Courtesy of Merrick Art Gallery  
Page 121-126 All photos courtesy of Merrick Art Gallery