

The background of the cover is a painting by George E. Morgan. It depicts a coastal scene with several buildings. In the foreground, there are two white buildings with dark roofs and windows. Between them is a prominent red, lattice-like structure, possibly a well or a small tower. The background shows a large, light-colored building with a red section on its roof, and a green area that could be a lawn or a field. The overall style is characteristic of the Kennebec School of Art.

**MEMORIES
OF THE
KENNEBEC**

***THE PAINTINGS OF
GEORGE E. MORGAN***

Steven S. Powers

Mapping has occurred across time and cultures and the ability to map, to express in material form the cognition of large-scale environments from wholly or partially aerial perspectives, is indeed a cultural universal.

*-David Stea, James M. Blaut and Jennifer Stephens
Mapping As A Cultural Universal*

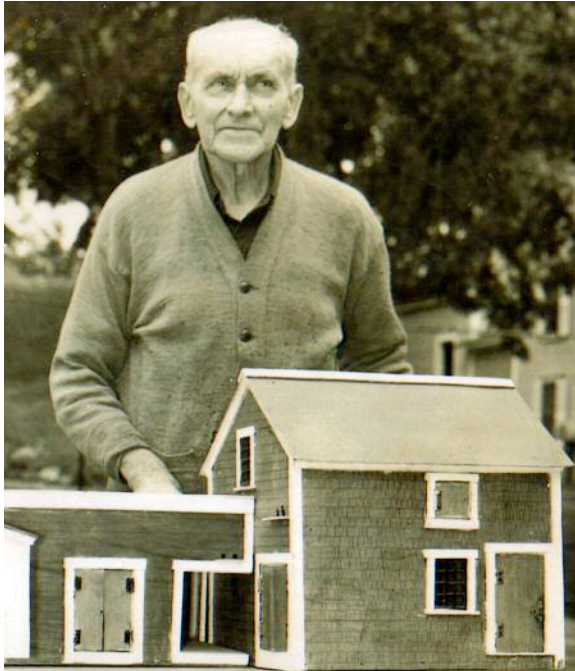


Fig. B: Photo (detail) of George E. Morgan, circa 1955, standing in front of a scale model that he built of the Morgan homestead in Chelsea, ME. The interior is finished as well with rooms, stairs, etc.

In 1962, the town of Hallowell, Maine was celebrating its 200th birthday, or bicentennial. A commemorative book¹ was commissioned and printed, documenting its rich and industrious past—events were planned and banners put up. Nearby in the town of Gardiner, surely inspired by the locale fanfare, a resident nearly half as many years old, put brush to canvas and recorded his recollections of a time when the towns of Hallowell, Gardiner, Randolph, and other mill towns of the Kennebec River were vital exchanges of the Maine economy.

The Kennebec River was first explored by Samuel de Champlain in 1604 and then settled in what is now Phippsburg, Maine by the Popham Colony in 1607 (the first English attempt at a colony in New England—it was abandoned one year later). Providing passage from the Atlantic coast to the Maine interior at Moosehead Lake, the Kennebec also provided a plenitude of anadromous fish (Atlantic salmon, alewives, shad, sturgeon, and striped bass) and loads of water-power, which was ideal for livelihood, commerce and trade. Consequently, over the years, the towns of Bath, Gardiner, Hallowell, Augusta, Waterville, Skowhegan and many others were settled. By the power of the river's falls to the north and with the introduction of a dam in 1839, the towns along the Kennebec, south of Augusta, became thriving mill towns producing and exporting granite, paper, timber, ice, shoes, and textiles. Throughout the nineteenth century in Maine, these industries, including shipbuilding, provided employment and a prosperity that was second only to the commerce of Portland. It is hard to imagine now, but the populations of Hallowell and Gardiner in the nineteenth century were larger (slightly) than

what they are at present. With the advent of electricity, competition from other centers of industry, and cheaper means of production, the shipbuilding and mill industries of the Kennebec River dwindled and eventually all but vanished.

On October 9, 1870, George Eugene Morgan was born to George William and Vesta Rowena Farnham Morgan of Chelsea (three-and-a-half miles east of Gardiner). As a young man and as most in the area, Morgan found work along the Kennebec, first in Augusta with a furniture maker, then for many years as a harness maker, and then for even more years he worked in the shoe factories of Gardiner (Commonwealth Shoe Company and then the R. P. Hazzard Company). He was ranked a sergeant in the Maine Militia, and when World War I broke out, Morgan, already 47, was deemed too old for service. He married twice and had five children.

Perhaps it was because Morgan came to painting late in life, or because there was no known watershed moment, that other writers of Morgan were quick to dismiss his life as mundane or simplistic. It is not the case. Neither Morgan nor anyone that knew him ever considered his life humdrum or uneventful. Throughout his life, he was considered a serious craftsman and even made many of his own tools. He was smart, inventive, forever curious, a constant tinkerer, a talented musician, a first-rate billiards player, and was even known as one of the best marksmen in Maine. Morgan's paintings offer a testament to this tenacity—that even in his nineties, he had the energy and compulsion to make a record of a time and place that he felt was lost to history.



Fig. C: Hallowell from Wharf Hill
Circa 1910



Fig. D: Gardiner, Main and Water Streets
Circa 1905

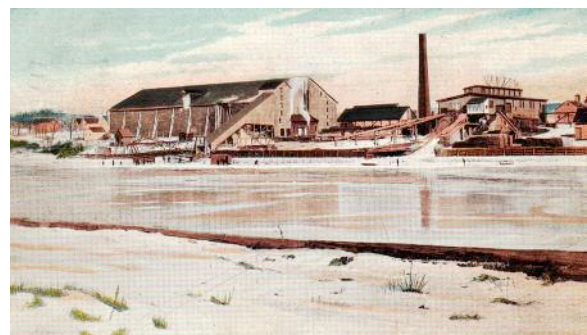


Fig. E: Randolph Ice House & Mill
Circa 1905

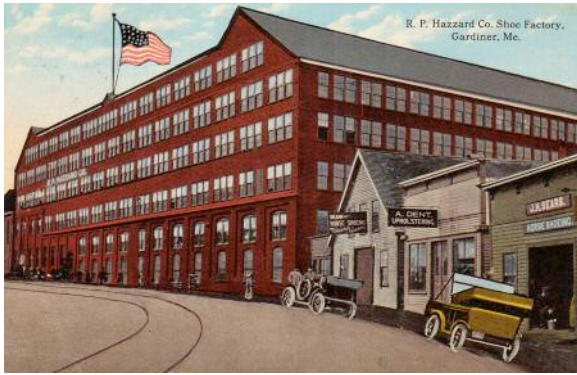


Fig. F: R. P. Hazzard Company Shoe Factory.
Gardiner, Circa 1915

In the spring of 1962, Morgan was 91 years old and living in a rest home in Gardiner. Morgan was not one to sit idle, and though sketching on paper and cardboard occupied him for some time, he ached for something more. Word got out, and apparently through some connection at the home, Morgan was introduced to a local folk art and antiques dealer, Anne Wardwell of Farmingdale. When Wardwell met Morgan, she must have seen something that inspired her. In the words of Howard Rose, from *Unexpected Eloquence*², “Mrs. Wardwell seems to have had one of the great prophetic eyes in dealerdom.” Wardwell became his benefactor—or more so his enabler—providing him with brushes, paints, turpentine, and canvas boards. Over the next 18 months, Morgan created twenty-plus remarkable memory paintings.

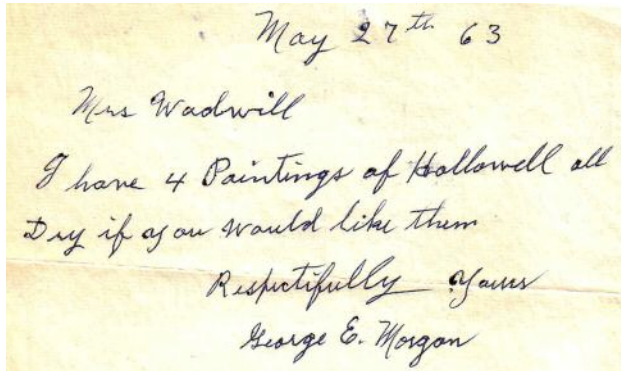


Fig. G: A letter from George E. Morgan to Anne Wardwell, dated May 27th, 1963, stating that he has four paintings of Hallowell ready to be picked up.

A number of factors come into play as to why Morgan chose the subjects that he did and how he painted them—the bicentennial of Hallowell (which fueled a desire to see the Kennebec River towns for what they once were), his age (an old mind best remembers events and details of one’s youth than of the more recent), a lack of mobility (living in a rest home and having an indifference to car travel limited his ability to paint these towns *en plein air*), and though it is usually said of writing, it could be inferred that he thought of the adage, “write [paint] what you know.” As a resident of Kennebec County for nearly 100 years, Morgan knew the environs of Hallowell, Gardiner, and Randolph better than anyone alive.

Fig. H: Hallowell Flood (Freshet)
Circa 1930



Though Morgan was by the strictest definition a folk artist, it is tempting not to label him as such. Today, all too often the term “folk artist” is either incorrectly applied, overused, or misunderstood.

The term also brings to it a certain set of prejudices—positive and negative. It is true that for most, the immediate attraction to Morgan's work is the folksy sense of perspective and his color sense. However, one is taken in well beyond this initial blush. His works combine an innate formal grasp of composition with complex definitions of area and space, color, and balance—as well as a terrific sense of engagement and detachment.

Old Covered Bridge between Randolph and Gardiner (pl. 1, pps. 10-11), his earliest dated work, reveals a sophisticated hold on translating a large-scale, real-world geographical area into a small two-dimensional space. The broadly defined spaces of color and short perspective remind us of another artist working in Maine, Milton Avery. Or, even a Diebenkorn. The same applies for *Moulton Mill* (pl. 5, pps. 16-17), and *Ice Houses on the Kennebec River* (pl. 6, pps. 18-19). The topography is delineated in broad shapes and laid out in colors that work in a formal sense, not necessarily in a real-world sense. Accuracy did not trump color or compositional balance. Even representational artists have to *lie* a little.



Fig. I: *Old Covered Bridge between Randolph and Gardiner*
 July 1962
 Oil on paper
 10" x 14"

Fig. J: *Moulton Mill*
 January 1963
 Oil on canvas board
 20" x 16"

Fig. K: *Ice Houses on the Kennebec River*
 January 1963
 Oil on canvas board
 16" x 20"





Fig. L: *Freshet 1923*
 June 1963
 Oil on canvas board
 16" x 12"

Fig. M: *Bridge Dividing Kennebec River*
 July 1963
 Oil on canvas board
 16" x 12"



Fig. N: *Hallowell: View of Lower Water Street*
 June 1963
 Oil on canvas board
 12" x 16"

The body of Morgan's work is best—and most often—described as “map-like.” His townscapes and depictions of local landmarks are often seen from overhead and/or from a high-vantage point. They provide for us, almost literally, a road map of these towns as they were at the turn of the twentieth century. The three works, *Hallowell: View of Lower Water Street* (pl. 10, page 24-25), *Freshet 1923* (pl. 11, pps. 26-27), *Bridge Dividing Kennebec River* (pl. 12, pps. 28-29), done in a flourish in just two months (June and July 1963) are arguably his most complex, finest, and accessible works. In each, Morgan precisely tries to work out the perspective (a ruler was always at hand); however, it is never (academically) correct. In the essay, “*Mapping as a Cultural Universal*,”³ the authors assert that “to communicate...map-makers distort...distortions from accepted veridicality may be the result of attempts to increase the map's informational value.” Though Morgan's unconventional perspective is incorrect, it is more informative—showing us spaces and details of buildings that we would not otherwise see.

The four isolated architectural studies (plates 17-20, pps. 34-37) reveal to us, on a larger scale, how Morgan painted his numerous tiny houses, which are dotted throughout most of the other works—Morgan lays out each clapboard or brick trying to give us a real sense of space through a false perspective. The areas of sky, land, bushes, and trees are broadly defined and perfectly balanced and arranged. A provincial Charles Sheeler!

George Morgan had an energy and persistence that belied his age; however, he was mortal. At 94, he called it quits. Morgan lived to 99 and died in Augusta, Maine in 1969.

Early on, Morgan's paintings garnered attention and demand. Correspondence shows that Anne Wardwell displayed the works and sold one in October 1963 to the prominent art collectors, Edith and Ellerton Jette of Sebec, Maine (another note states that she was to contact them if ever she wanted to sell the entire collection). After Morgan's death, Wardwell maintained the collection until the mid 1970s, when she sold all of Morgan's work to collector friends in Connecticut. From their hands to another in New York, and then another, they found themselves with the pioneer folk art collectors Howard Rose and Raymond Saroff. Upon a visit to Rose and Saroff, the then-director of the Museum of American Folk Art (now the American Folk Art Museum), Robert Bishop called out, "There they are! You've got them!"⁴

1) *HISTORIC HALLOWELL*, The Kennebec Journal Print Shop, 1962, compiled by Katherine H. Snell and Vincent P. Ledew

2) *UNEXPECTED ELOQUENCE*, Raymond Saroff in association with The Edith Blum Art Institute, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, 1990, p.34 by Howard Rose

3) "Mapping as a Cultural Universal," *The Construction of Cognitive Maps*, Kluwer Academic Publishers. 1996, p.355 by David Stea, James M. Blaut and Jennifer Stephens

4) "George E. Morgan: Self Taught Maine Artist," *FOLK ART MAGAZINE*, Summer 1998, p.33 by Chippy Irvine

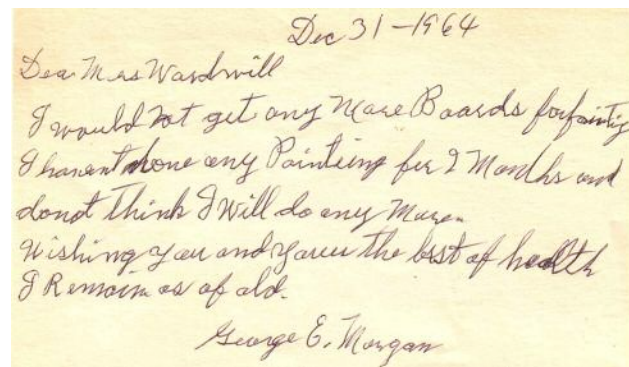


Fig. O: A letter from George E. Morgan to Anne Wardwell, dated December 31th, 1964, stating, "I haven't done any Painting for 2 Months and do not think I will do any more...I Remain as of old, George E. Morgan"

Fig. P: *White House*
Circa 1962/1963
Oil on canvas board
9" x 12"



Fig. Q: *Randolph Methodist Church*
Circa 1962/1963
Oil on canvas board
12" x 8" (board cut to size)



Fig. R: *Searls' Block: Randolph*
August 1962
Oil on cardboard
8 1/2" x 8 1/2"

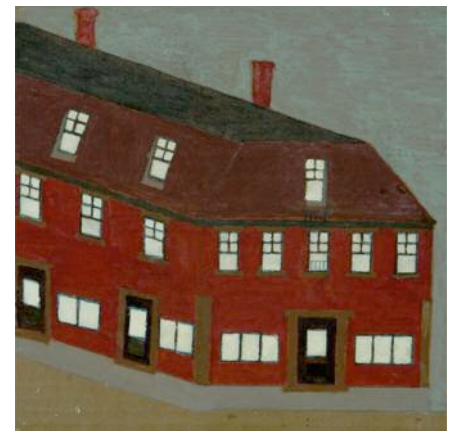


Fig. S: *Metcalf House: Hallowell*
Circa 1962/1963
Oil on canvas board
9" x 12"

