

# in the parks

My Dear Captain,

Before leaving the city I must express to you the pleasure experienced by me on beholding your magnificent painting of the Army of the Potomac in camp, at Cumberland Landing, Pamunky River. ... For a moment upon entering the gallery I was spellbound, and could hardly realize that the place and event was not actually before me.... I congratulate you on your success.

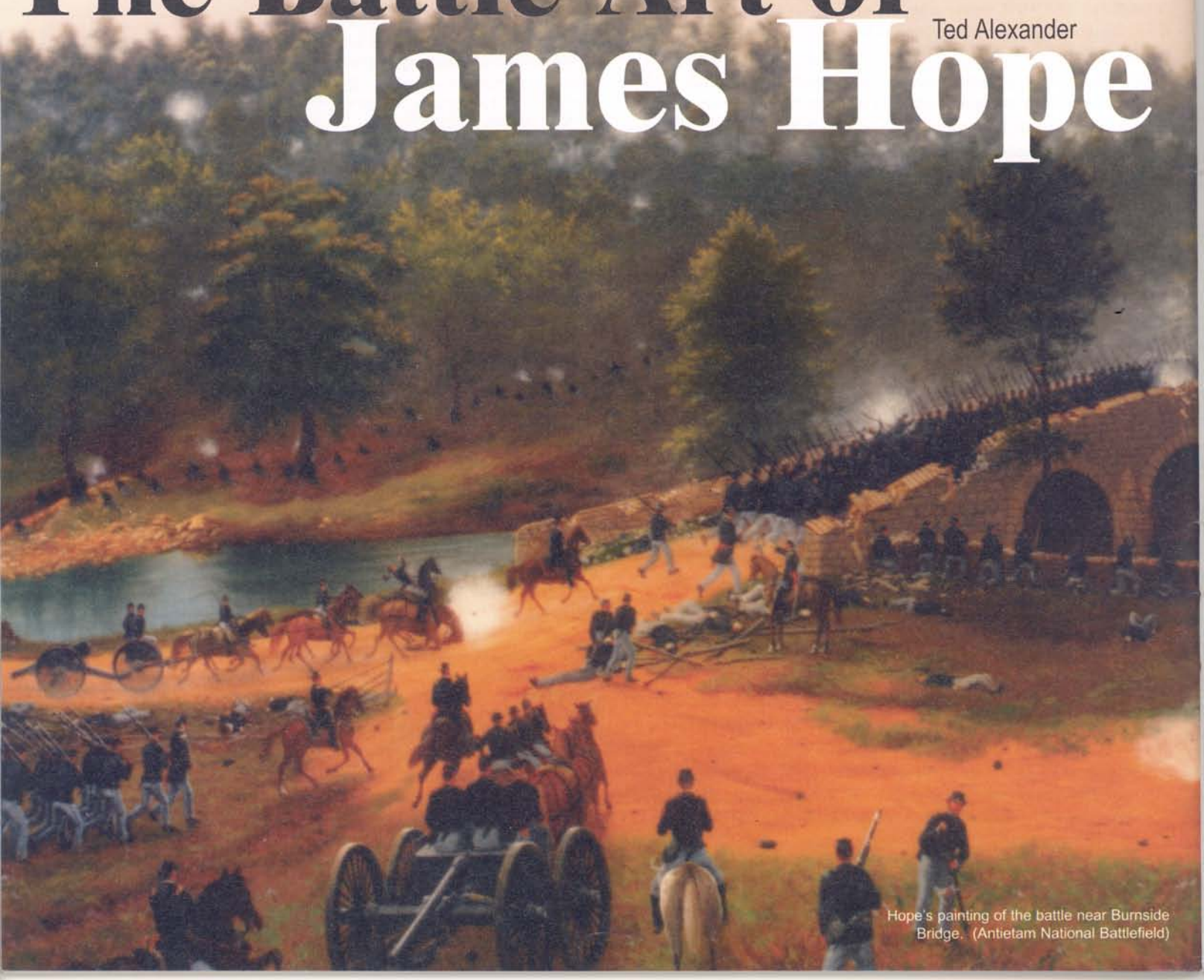
Truly your friend,  
Geo. B. McClellan

This excerpt is from a letter written by McClellan on January 21st, 1865 to artist James Hope in New York City. Although it deals with a painting of McClellan's army during the Peninsula Campaign, similar comments were to be uttered by Civil War veterans of both high and low rank a few years later regarding the realism of other military panoramas rendered by the same artist. Although Hope painted a series of Civil War scenes and many more pastoral landscapes, his most memorable remain his Antietam battle panoramas on display in the museum of the Antietam National Battlefield.<sup>1</sup>

James Hope was born in Scotland in 1819. His mother died when he was barely two. At age nine James and his father moved to Canada. A few years later his father died and at age sixteen the young orphan sought a better life in the United States. Hope made it to Fairhaven, Vermont where he worked as an apprentice to a wagonmaker for five years.

# Antietam On Canvas: The Battle Art of James Hope

Ted Alexander



Hope's painting of the battle near Burnside Bridge. (Antietam National Battlefield)

Hope had an interest in art, dating back to his early childhood. As a boy he had made sketches using charcoal or anything else he could find to draw on shingles, scraps of paper and stones. He saved enough money during his apprenticeship to take an art course at the Seminary in Castleton, Vermont. This led to a job as an art teacher in West Rutland, Vermont. In 1841 he married a local girl and within a few years had four children.

Now with a family it soon became necessary to supplement his art teacher's salary by taking on odd jobs. One day while chopping wood the ax slipped and cut him severely on the ankle. Hope was laid up for many months. However, his accidental ax wound proved to be fortuitous. During his convalescence he started painting again and rendered a self-portrait that caused others in the community to seek him out to do their portraits. Soon Hope had a thriving career as a portraitist, receiving sums of up to \$100 per painting. With his success he moved to Montreal in 1848 to open a portrait gallery. Two years later he moved back to Vermont where he opened up a studio in Castleton. In the 1850s Hope gained a reputation and success as a landscape artist. Soon he was dividing his time between studios in Vermont and New York City.<sup>2</sup>

When the Civil War commenced, James Hope proved to be a super patriot. He was one of the first to enlist from the state of Vermont and soon raised Company B, 2nd Vermont Infantry, serving as its Captain. Hope and his unit were at the Battle of First Bull Run and he was commended for his efforts at that battle. By the summer of 1862 his unit had shipped out for duty with General George B. McClellan's Army of the Potomac in the so-called "Peninsula Campaign." There, Captain Hope, because of his artistic talent with landscapes, was assigned as a topographical engineer. In this capacity he sketched terrain features, vegetation, roads and waterways. These were then incorporated into military maps for the army staff's use. It was during this period that he made the initial sketch of what was to become his panorama of the Union army at Cumberland Landing. That summer, in the heat and swampy environment of the Virginia Peninsula, Hope contracted malaria.

Despite his debilitating illness, Hope remained with the army and was with his regiment in September on the march to Antietam. On this campaign his health was further impaired by dysentery that plagued him for the rest of his time in service. The 2nd Vermont was held in reserve during the Battle of Antietam. It is uncertain whether Hope was with his unit or once again on special assignment as a topographical engineer. What is certain is that during and after the battle he made sketches of various parts of the field.

Rheumatism of the knees and other physical impairments forced Hope to regretfully leave the army in December, 1862, but he returned home with high aspirations to paint his war experiences. Soon he was hard at work on a number of Civil War scenes including a small version of "Bloody Lane, Battle of Antietam." In 1865 he completed "Army of the Potomac," a 4<sup>1/2</sup>' x 10<sup>1/2</sup>' panorama based on his sketch of the Army of the Potomac at Cumberland Landing during the Peninsula Campaign. This painting received critical acclaim and was even viewed and praised by McClellan himself.<sup>3</sup>

The heyday of Hope's art was in the late 1860s through the 1870s. During that period he successfully exhibited not only Civil War scenes but landscapes as well. In 1871 Hope was elected an Associate of the National Academy and did a lucrative business in portrait commissions. Around this time he reached the pinnacle of his career when he secured a

\$10,000 commission to paint a scene in the popular resort community of Watkins Glen, New York. Hope was so taken by the beauty of this mountain retreat that he moved there and set up shop in 1872.

By the 1880s Hope's work lost favor in the art world and he turned to his Civil War art. In September 1888 he attended a veterans reunion and excursion to Antietam and Gettysburg. He returned to Antietam for another reunion the following year. These trips enabled Hope to sketch more battlefield terrain features and to interview participants of the battle. They also inspired him to render a new version of "Bloody Lane" and begin work on four other Antietam battle panoramas and a scene from the

Battle of 1st Bull Run. These works were completed in time for the massive Grand Army Encampment in Washington, D.C., September 1892. This exhibition before former comrades in arms was to be his last. Suffering from the many health problems incurred during the war, Hope died at his home in Watkins Glen on October 20, 1892.<sup>4</sup>



Captain James Hope, a veteran of the Battle of Antietam. (Antietam National Battlefield)

After Hope's death in 1892 his gallery remained open into the early decades of the twentieth century. Tragically, a flood in 1935 destroyed much of his work and severely damaged the Antietam panoramas. In 1955 art collector Dr. Larry Freeman purchased part of the surviving Hope pieces. The Antietam paintings were stored in an old church in Watkins Glen until purchased from Dr. Freeman by the National Park Service in 1979 for the price of \$5,000. But this was only step one in the process of bringing the Hope battle panoramas back to life for another generation of Americans. Besides the flood damage incurred, during the

long years of storage parts of the paintings were eaten away by rodents. Rodent droppings and bugs also covered the canvases and a raccoon had taken up residence behind one of the panoramas, leaving its muddy paw prints all over the paintings. Four of the Antietam panoramas were restored at a cost in excess of \$10,000 for each painting. The Bloody Lane panorama scene was beyond restoration and only a fragment was salvaged. The Army of the Potomac scene was stabilized and remains in storage.<sup>5</sup>

Recently the Antietam National Battlefield Museum underwent renovations, enabling the park to display the Hope paintings under more favorable conditions. New lighting and temperature and humidity monitoring will help preserve the paintings for future generations. Now with new interpretive panels visitors may gain a better understanding of the Battle of Antietam through the art of a participant. James Hope's legacy lives on through his paintings on display at the battlefield he depicted on canvas.

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Freeman, *The Hope Paintings* (Watkins Glen, NY: Century House, 1961), p.23.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, pp.7-8; Elizabeth Theriault Strum, *James Hope: Nineteenth Century American Painter* (Master Thesis, Syracuse University, 1984), pp.1-7.

<sup>3</sup> 2nd Vermont File, *Antietam National Battlefield*; Strum, pp. 8-12.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, pp.13-22; Freeman, pp.24-35.

<sup>5</sup> V.G. Leimer, Superintendent, April 10, 1980, "Management Statement for the Use of the Hope Paintings at Antietam Battlefield," in Captain James Hope Biographical/ Management Policy File, Antietam National Battlefield; "Trip Report: The Hope Paintings, Watkins Glen, New York," October 9, 1979, National Capital Region, National Park Service, Washington, D.C., and Paintings Conservator, "Memorandum to Chief: Branch of Conservation Laboratories; Subject: Hope Paintings," February 13, 1980, both in Captain James Hope Reports on Conservation File/ Trip to Watkins Glen, Antietam National Battlefield.