

The Eastport Summer Art School, which ran for nine consecutive summers from 1927-1936, sprang from modest roots. In 1923, summer visitor George Pearce Ennis taught a small private class to six students; that class “served a small but useful purpose in being the basis or beginning of what has since been proven to be an important factor in Eastport’s summer life. For several years after 1922, the class lapsed” as Mr. Ennis spent his summers in Newfoundland, Scotland, and Austria. But in the Spring of 1927, he returned to the notion of a summer arts school in Eastport. Thus began a nearly-decade-long experiment that celebrated art and sought to establish a thriving arts community in “the frontier town” of Eastport, Maine. And thrive it did, with support from the city and its residents as well as a host of talented artists who taught and practiced their craft here.

It might seem at first like a stretch to connect the old Boynton Building on High Street in Eastport with the Grand Central Terminal Building in New York City. But a closer look at Eastport’s history makes the connection clear. That Boynton Building—at one point Eastport’s high school, at another point its City Hall, and now a private residence—served as the center of the art colony established by George Pearce Ennis when “The City of Eastport turned over the old Boynton High School building to Mr. Ennis and put it in shape, reroofed it, painted it, and otherwise made it habitable.” The Eastport Summer Art School, as it came to be known, was affiliated with the Grand Central School of Art, a well-known institution that thrived in New York for over 20 years from 1922-1944 in the east wing of the Grand Central Terminal. That school of art served 900 students in its heyday, and Eastport became its center for summer sessions for a memorable and important nine years.

The story of Eastport’s place as a center for the arts is inextricably tied to its director and founder as well as its most passionate advocate, the charismatic and talented George Pearce Ennis. Ennis, who was an instructor at the Grand Central School of Art from its inception in 1922, understood Eastport’s charms and its potential as an inspiration for artists. In one of his early promotions of Eastport as an ideal place for artists, he wrote, “In selecting Eastport, on the coast of Maine, as a prospective painting-ground, we do so with the utmost enthusiasm. It is a fresh country, rich in material of the most varied sort. It is a region offering every phase of painter-material, ranging in scope from secluded bits of shore and inlet, to great panoramas of sea and land. There are bold headlands, rugged coves, scores of islands—wooded, rocky; there is the odd charm of the lobster fisherman—the picturesque life of the sardine fleet; there are wharves and sheds and harbor-life—a varied water-front of intensely appealing material, and and old rambling town of interesting streets and homes. In possibly no other section of the American coast is the life still so quaint and primitive as in this corner of the sea between Maine and New Brunswick.” He would continue to sing the area’s praises in years to come, often with this pragmatic addition to Eastport’s other charms: “Another of its great attractions to students is the delightfully cool summer weather which makes it ideal as a painting country.”

The Eastport Summer Art School: Beginnings (1927-1929)

The 1927 pamphlet for the first year of the school, entitled “Grand Central School of Art and The Eastport Summer School of Art,” is clear in its whole-hearted praise of this locality as inspirational for the artist. The pamphlet begins with this lyrical passage: “Art is essentially a

product of inspiration—And inspiration is not born of the dull, the drab, the commonplace; it springs into being only amid surroundings that kindle with their beauty, that awe with their grandeur, that disturb deeply with their mystery. So we come to find in the sea and its haunts—the sea with its never ceasing changes, its mighty moods of beauty and grandeur, its charm of attendant life—a spur to greatest effort. The sea is big, and it exacts big things.”

With such praise as that, it is not surprising that in its first year, with Ennis, a well-known watercolorist, at its helm, the Eastport Summer Art School attracted 40 students to its six-week summer program beginning in early July of 1927. These students, hailing mostly from New York but also from Florida, Indiana, and West Virginia, were responding to ads placed in a range of magazines, including unsurprising sources like *International Studio* and *Art News* but also in more unexpected places like *Cosmopolitan*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *The Red Book*. Students that year were housed in the homes of families whose names are familiar ones in Eastport like Pike or Corthell; according to the pamphlet from that first year, “Room and board in private homes may be had for from twelve to fifteen dollars a week,” though one enterprising artist, Everett Sharpe of Muncie, Indiana was reported in the *Eastport Sentinel* to be “camping at South End.”

The pattern of instruction established that summer would continue in years to come: “On Tuesdays and Thursdays, personal criticism of the students’ work” was made by Ennis, and on Friday mornings there was “a general lecture and criticism on the work of the students as a whole.” In addition to sessions in the studio and lecture hall, which were housed in the “auditorium of the old Boynton High School,” which had been “placed at the disposal of the school by the city,” the school offered “sketching trips by motor and boat.” These “wonderfully attractive side trips” included “the beautiful St. Croix River; Meddybemps Lake, made famous in the last generation by Grover Cleveland and Joseph Jefferson, and with this a half dozen other beautiful lakes.”

Over the next couple of years, the Eastport Summer Art School continued to establish itself as a vital part of the summer life of the city. While Ennis remained the primary director, both teaching and organizing and promoting the school, he was joined by others, including Nicholas Mayne, who served as an instructor for children’s classes offered to local young people, and Edmund Greacen, president of the Grand Central School of Art, who came to supplement the painting and drawing classes with lectures on a range of topics, from color theory to the history of landscape painting. The 1929 program for the school also lists an offering of “Summer Courses for Teachers,” saying, “There will be a special course given for Teachers of Drawing in the schools which will include Industrial Art. Drawing in various mediums, drawing and painting, still life, commercial and craft work.” By 1929, the school had 56 students in attendance, and the Boynton Building had been further refurbished and put to use, with a studio, supplies store, and a renovated large hall for student exhibitions that were open to the public in the final days of the session. With students hailing from New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, Texas, and Maine, the final exhibition in August of 1929 included 156 artworks—watercolors, oils, and pencil drawings. Drawn by Ennis’ descriptions of the beauty of the area and of the opportunities offered by the school, students came from all over, heeding the call that said, “You can get here by steamer or by railroad, or better still, load the family into the car and come that way.”

Eastport Summer Art School: The Art Colony Grows (1930-1932)

By the summer of 1930, the art colony that had been central to George Pearce Ennis' dream seems to have hit its stride. In the *American Magazine of Art*, quoted in the Eastport Sentinel, he reports on an impressive list of established and well-respected artists who were making their way to Eastport to pursue their craft: "Many well-known painters have gathered material for splendid pictures in this little-known section of the Maine coast. Jonas Lie is a frequent visitor, working early and late to catch the beauties of changing light and stern headlands. William Starkweather [painter of Impressionist landscapes and book illustrations], H. L. Hildebrandt [painter of portraits and landscapes], Loran Wilford, the famous illustrator and watercolorist, Hilton Leech [a watercolorist based at the Ringling School of Art in Sarasota, Florida], and [painter] Elliot Orr have painted here. Edmund Graecen, President of the Grand Central School of Art, enjoys the misty, luminous days. John R. Koopman finds a kindred setting for his strong modern pattern and rich color. Carl Norrell [etcher and painter] visits awhile to refresh his color schemes. Ernest Ipsen walked into my studio last season, feeling that he could not pass by en route to New Brunswick without visiting Eastport. Ezra Winter [a mural painter] and Olaf Olsen [painter of oils and watercolors] are expected to join the colony this year." Elsewhere, he reports on the arrival of Marian MacIntosh, an Irish-American painter who was part of the "The Philadelphia Ten," a group of women artists who exhibited their work together from 1917 to 1945. He adds, "So the group grows yearly, attracted to the varying range of Eastport's charm." Clearly, Eastport had become a hub for artists, moving closer to Ennis' efforts "to make Eastport the most famous art colony on the Atlantic Seaboard."

It must be admitted that not all artists fell in love with the easternmost city; one artist who studied here called it "a godforsaken place," and the renowned artist Edward Hopper, who visited in 1926, commented, "We did not like Eastport at all. It has very little of the character of a New England town. We left after three days...." But these nay-sayers were outnumbered, and the artists' community continued to grow. The work to establish the colony did not rest only on attracting a larger and broader range of artists and students, though the list of students had by now expanded to represent sixteen states and New Brunswick. The school also steadily expanded its scope and offerings. In 1931, as the school continued to grow, the faculty corps expanded, and Robert Craig arrived from Indiana to teach etching and to lead the newly established teacher training program. A talented painter and lithographer who would go on to buy a home and make a life in Eastport, "Bob" Craig served on the faculty for the next five years.

Craig was joined by other new faculty, including "one of the finest lithographers of the 20th century," Stow Wengenroth, in 1932, and Hilton Leach, who would go on to teach at the Ringling School of Art for over a decade. In a 1981 interview with Robert Brown for the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, Elizabeth Saltonstall, an artist from Boston, described Wengenroth as a "perfectly delightful" teacher "who didn't say too much" but "went right to the point." "He was great fun," she reports; "he'd run [a lithographic plate] through the press and look like a poker-face before he'd pull up your print. People always do, you know. It's such a breathtaking moment when you pull your print up off the plate....After that, I was really hooked on lithography."

In addition to curricular changes, the school added a restaurant to its facilities in 1931, The Clipper Ship, which would serve students and guests—and hosted a gallery on its walls for student artwork throughout the summer. The 1931 program for the school calls The Clipper Ship “Eastport’s Social and Artistic Center” and promises that “The food will be of the freshest vegetables, meats, and fish, attractively served.” The pamphlet also includes a passage written by Eastport author Will Beale, who writes charmingly, “You will like Eastport. Everyone likes it. In Eastport you can find your inspiration. In fact, many big things have been painted in Eastport, some of them finding their way into the notable art of the country. You will like the town—you will like the people.” One measure of the success of all these endeavors is the fact that 31 members of the colony went on to have their work included in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago National Exhibitions.

A look at the school’s program from 1932 offers more particulars of the everyday life of the school. Classes taught by Ennis, Leech, and Wengenroth focused on painting, water colors, etching, and lithography, with tuition ranging from \$25 to \$60, depending on the length and focus of the class. Six-week classes predominated, though there were three-week offerings, too. Recreation listed in the pamphlet includes “tennis, golf, deck tennis, and excellent fresh and salt water fishing,” with “high tides and whirlpools” being of “interest to all visitors to Eastport.” The description of transportation options is particularly appealing to us now: “Eastport is easily reached by rail from Boston North Station” for a fare of 14.50; the night train with Pullman service is recommended, with this clear caveat offered: “Do not take train from Boston on Saturday night, as there are no trains east of Bangor on Sunday.”

It seems clear that the City of Eastport enjoyed a number of benefits both financial and cultural from the presence of the school. In 1932, the Downeast Art Gallery Association was formed to strengthen ties between the local population and the art students. Its aim was “to allow every one to become a member of the Colony and to take part in social events as well as exhibiting pictures” at the newly established gallery at the Moses House at 27 Water Street. Local Eastport artists who exhibited their work included Estelle Calder, Eugene Cassidy, Mary Emery, Jack Frost, Cecil Greenlaw, Hollis Hamilton, Peggy Kelley, Julius MacDonald, and Frank Spates. Other shows included a retrospective of the works of beloved local artist Dougal Anderson and a display of ship models by Samuel Leighton. The social events sponsored by the school included dinners, Bridge parties, and dance recitals, all well-attended. The school was becoming stitched into the fabric of cultural life in Eastport.

The Eastport Summer Art School and Colony: Final Years (1933-1936)

These were vibrant years for the school and the community. In an interview with Hugh French, artist Edmund Schildnecht, who taught at the school, looked back at its heyday and said that the area in those years was “full of artists, people painting and sketching all over. They could work about Eastport with little bothering by people looking at what you were doing; it was normal to see people sketching.” The patterns of instruction continued; according to a special edition of the Eastport Sentinel in August 1933 that was devoted entirely to news related to the school, “The Monday classes work from a model out of doors. Wednesday criticism is devoted to landscape work. On Friday afternoon a general criticism and exhibition is held in the studio gallery of the school,” where it is possible to show nearly two hundred works,” with each student

limited to four works. These works remained on display for a week until it was time for the next exhibition. The 1933 show of more than 160 works included oils, etchings, lithographs, pencil sketches, and watercolors in an exhibition that was open to the public for a week. And students, according to the article, were gaining recognition beyond the Boynton Hall: "A remarkable record has been made by students at the local Art School," winning prizes for their work in competitions

in New Jersey, Connecticut, New York, and Florida, "a tribute both to the excellence of instruction" and to "the wealth of available material in and about Eastport." Eastport photographer Cecil Greenlaw also received awards and accolades for his work, with exhibitions in places as disparate as Philadelphia, Boston, Lewiston, and Leicester, England. In sharing the news of his success with his friend Roscoe Emery, Greenlaw wrote this winsome note: "This little bit of publicity won't hurt Eastport any, the greatest little spot on earth, and I for one will be glad when the time comes to ramble east and try again through the medium of photography to express even though my effort be feeble, some of the beauties and strength we call Home—where we have not just acquaintances but friends." For people from elsewhere and for Eastporters, the Art School offered opportunities and opened doors.

The school's influence was felt in other ways, too. For example, the training of teachers in art instruction, under the tutelage of Robert "Bob" Craig continued, and in 1933, "a class of twenty Eastport children [was] given free education in art during the six weeks term. For this study, they [were] granted high school credit by the Eastport authorities. The teacher of this class earned college credit in practice teaching." In addition, large numbers of students and established artists continued to come to Eastport. Artist Schildnecht said that this "made quite a prosperous thing in summers. People had boarding houses" that made rooms available to artists—indeed, George Pearce Ennis and his wife and fellow artist Gladys Atwood Ennis stayed at 20 Key Street for several summers. Many eventually rented summer homes, staying beyond the six-week sessions of the school. Robert Craig bought a home and lived here for many years. The school and its community attracted famous visitors, from John Ringling the circus magnate to Eleanor Roosevelt.

The 1935 pamphlet for the school suggests that it continued the programs that had made it successful in its first eight years, offering painting, water color, drawing, lithography, and etching—and that it continued to grow and explore new offerings, including work in portraiture and figure painting. And while the transportation options of earlier years were no longer available—the Eastman Steamship Company's ships from Boston are not mentioned in the 1935 program—the school continued to attract students and continued to thrive and make its mark on Eastport into the summer of 1936, with George Pearce Ennis its indefatigable head, teacher, and promoter— even as he published a well-received text on watercolor painting and established The George Pearce Ennis School of Painting on New York's Fifth Avenue in 1932 for the times when he was not in his beloved Eastport.

The Closure

Even now, all these years hence, the news of the death of George Pearce Ennis in an automobile crash in September of 1936 hits hard. With his acclaim as a watercolorist and teacher, with his energy and charisma, and with his real love for Eastport and his dream of

supporting the creation of an art colony here in this remote part of the Atlantic Seaboard, Ennis had been the heart and soul behind the school. In that August of 1936, he had, as he had done for the previous eight summers, shepherded another group of students through six weeks of art instruction, and he had overseen and hosted the school's traditional end-of-term exhibition of works, which had been attended by hundreds of locals and visitors. Had it been any other summer, he would have remained in Eastport until Labor Day, but he left for New York early, called to work on a project for a stained glass window at West Point for which he had drawn the design. He'd been en route to visit friends with his wife when another car crashed into theirs. The Eastport Sentinel says of him, "Possessed not only of outstanding ability in his chosen profession but of a personality peculiarly attractive and agreeable, he had literally thousands of friends all over the country, ranging from the lowliest model to the President of the United States, who had repeatedly entertained him and Mrs. Ennis at the White House, Hyde Park, and Campobello. The value to Eastport of his presence and of the school was nothing less than tremendous, not only in the publicity it produced but for the distinguished group of artists and tourists it attracted."

It is hard to know exactly why the school did not continue, though surely the untimely and tragic death of George Pearse Ennis—he was only 52—rang the death knell of the school, with the effects of The Depression finishing it off; the City of Eastport declared bankruptcy in 1937. But it remains a remarkable time in Eastport's storied history, a place of which Ennis wrote, "From the painter's point of view, Eastport—the most easterly city in the United States—is ideally situated. The rocky island over which it spreads is beautifully carved in ledges and headlands, dotted with sturdy pines and spruce trees....The town has been a smiling and interested host to its many artist friends who have enjoyed the rugged northern climate with its warm, clear days vieing with days of fog and cooler nights," a tribute that rings true even now, when the Eastport Summer Arts School is nearly one hundred years in the past.