Will Vuyk
History 460
Cronon

4) Using Sanford Gifford's, "Hunter Mountain, Twilight, 1866" as the focus of your essay (you'll find a reproduction of this painting on the next page), identify 3 major themes of American environmental history that we've explored in class so far and discuss how they relate to elements visible (or perhaps not visible?) in this painting. Be sure to ground your analysis by connecting this painting to historical details and ideas drawn from our readings, lectures, and discussion sections to illustrate and support your arguments and to explain the historical significance of the themes you select.

As the sunlight recedes over Hunter Mountain, softening its forested slopes, a subdued sublime witnesses America's course of empire. "Hunter Mountain, Twilight, 1866" by Sanford Gifford is a charged work of art from a pivotal moment in American history. After the North and South battled over the fate of the "United" States, the romantics, like Gifford, too were reckoning with the past and future of their country. A land so full of promise from the beginning, it was a chance to forge a new pastoral republic from the ashes of Roman failure. It was a land of unending plenty, an Eden compared to the necessarily frugal Europe. It was also inherently a land of waste. A real, finite, land "despoiled" (as described on the Terra American Art website) by its reputation of plenty and the home of an empire unable to contain its greed. It is fitting that the namesake of the famed US forester Gifford Pinchot would illustrate these themes of American history through the forests in his painting. In Sanford Gifford's painting "Hunter Mountain, Twilight, 1866", America can be seen as the beautiful pastoral land of romantic ideals, the America of mythic plenty, and the real America stripped both of its dream and abundance with the loss of its wood.

According to pastoral Claudian conventions as discussed in lecture, Gifford has framed his painting with trees. Between the trees an idling boy watches his cattle drink from a

central body of water. These characteristics are emblematic not only of Claude Loraine's style, but of the ideal pastoral America so influenced by his work. European romantics fled into nature and the countryside as an escape from the corruption of Old World society, and American romantics saw their new land as the perfect place to start anew, and build a new society reflective of the sublime natural world - but tamed and beautiful. Beauty has overtaken sublime in the rural landscape of "Hunter Mountain" where savage wilderness was cut down into the stomping grounds of idling children. Just like the second of Thomas Cole's "Course of Empire" series, a witness mountain (Hunter Mountain) looks over this quaint rural scene. Reminiscent of Cole's ancient Greece, or Rome before its fall into conquest and greed, Gifford's painting evokes a sense of America as it should have been, a dream never truly realized.

Even those without romantic aspirations found America to be an idyllic escape from the bounds of Europe. As discussed in *Changes in the Land*, surveyors and colonists were struck by America's wealth of "merchantable commodities" - especially timber trees which were quite scarce in Britain. The scarcity of timber in Britain was a real issue for its inhabitants, forcing frugal use of a material essential not only to architecture, but energy and heating. Houses in Britain were only half timbered (as discussed in lecture) with the rest filled in with wattle and daub and the rooves were made of thatch because no more wood could be spared. The lack of wood for heating also hastened British adoption of coal burning technology. Some astute Indians, mentioned in *Changes in the Land*, hypothesized that Europeans came across the sea because of how badly they needed wood - which was not too far off the mark. In America, freed of supply woes, colonists eagerly consumed large quantities of wood from forests of seemingly unending plenty. The full timbered house in "Hunter Mountain" is reflective of America's

abundance, and the colonist's eagerness to take full advantage. America became a land where everyone could have what they wanted. The smoke coming out of the house's chimney suggests a crackling wood fire within. One Englishman, quoted in *Changes in the Land,* noted how even a poor servant in America could afford to have greater fires than the noblemen of Europe, given the easy access to wood. It was this burning of wood for heat and energy that was the most demanding use of New England's forests after European settlement, turning swaths of wilderness into dejected stump yards like the bare foreground of Gifford's painting. When one looks closer, the background too lies bare, pocked with log cabins instead of trees. Gifford's depiction of America, framed by wood, looks surprisingly empty.

Because they never lacked firewood to put in their open fireplaces, British colonists often heated their homes continuously throughout the winter. A travelling Swedish naturalist, quoted in *Changes in the Land,* was disgusted by this "squandering" of a resource so valuable in Europe. The American reality, based upon romantic dreams and unfathomable abundance, was, and is, one of waste. The smoke from the cabin chimney on this fall evening could be the first of 40 cords of wood burned in a year by one household (as reported in *Changes in the Land)* – not to mention the considerably larger fire across the barrens. The romantic pastoral scene - the property of the full timbered house - is fenced in wood. A worm fence, efficiently constructed with minimal labor, required lots of stacked wood to zigzag around a field. Made with the leftovers from field clearing, most likely not cedar or chestnut, the wood, laid on the ground would rot within a few seasons. Leftovers that didn't even make it into the worm fence can be seen strewn about the field. Using the hypothesis of H.J. Habakkuk, (from lecture) labor in America was as scarce as wood in Britain, meaning only the best trees, of the multitudes cut

down, could be processed into timber. The unused downed trees returned nutrients to the soil, but their roots torn up by plows, much of that soil was eroded away – as can be seen in the gullies crossing the deforested background. Of the soil that was left, those nutrients would leave once and for all after years of depleting monocultures of corn and wheat. Sanford Gifford presents in "Hunter Mountain" an American plenty despoiled. Despoiled by the consumption and greed that the romantics were so keen on avoiding, but that was there from the very start.

Sanford Gifford's "Hunter Mountain, Twilight, 1866" paints not just the end of a fall day in New York State, but the twilight of the American pastoral ideal. After the civil war, America kept expanding, greedily acquiring more land to the west. Custer's defeat at Little Bighorn in 1876 was only a minor setback, and the plains Indians were soon expunged from their lands not unlike the Carthaginians after challenging Rome. Behind the front lines industry was ramping up, with John Deere and Cyrus McCormick mass producing equipment in Illinois factories for use on expansive monocrop fields – both far from beautiful. Expanding roads and waterways soon put farmers in New England into direct competition with the Midwest, changing the livelihoods of many around Hunter Mountain. Soon the pastoral way of life would not pertain to most Americans, with urban populations exceeding rural populations in 1920. An increasingly powerful, greedy, urban America, following Rome through the course of empires, burned its way through not only its forests, but its romantic pastoral pinnacle. In "Hunter Mountain, Twilight, 1866" the idling boy is too concerned with the present demands of his cattle to recognize the tree stumps of change surrounding him. But Hunter Mountain, sublime and eternal still under American hubris, stands witness to it all.