

The Annisquam Historical Society Journal



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The Firehouse is closed until further notice; please feel free to email us at info@annisquamhistoricalsociety.org



James Knowlton, Painter & Sculptor in Wood by **Leon Doucette**



Preamble from Rita Teele, Annisquam Historical Society:

*In October of 2018, David and Janet McAweeney bought **Chard and Wilkinson's Market**, the oil painting pictured above, at a North Shore Art Association auction. The artist, James Knowlton, was unknown to the McAweeneys—and also unknown to me. Via a circuitous route of connections that included help from Jim and Kathie Groves, I learned that James Knowlton's grandson is Leon Doucette—a Gloucester artist who is employed at the Cape Ann Museum. Furthermore, James Knowlton's children, Patty Doucette, Sally Benjamin, and Jim Knowlton, live in Gloucester. In 2019, I had the good fortune to meet with Sally and Patty, learn of their father's interesting history and view some of his wonderful art—paintings and wood sculpture that are owned by family members. I contacted Leon, who agreed to write the following biography of his grandfather for this publication. It should be noted that Leon has not only followed in his grandfather's footsteps, but has made a mark on the national scene with his portraiture, winning first prize in drawing in the Portrait Society of America's 20th International Portrait Competition and the gold medal at the Guild of Boston Artists' 2018 Regional Juried Show. His grandfather would have been immensely proud of his grandson, as artist, and as biographer. Leon Doucette's biography of James Knowlton follows; the paintings of James Knowlton are courtesy of his family:*

Up the hill on Revere Street, not far from the Annisquam Village Church, stands an old red gambrel-roofed house right on the road. There's a barn out back, hidden at times by masses of bittersweet and flowering Jerusalem artichokes. Until recently there was an ancient willow too, shading the hilly gardens that roll down toward a mucky pond. In the summertime the cattails teem with red-winged blackbirds and fireflies. For me, it was a lovely place to grow up.

Some of my earliest memories are of looking at my late grandfather James Blanchard Knowlton's paintings lining the walls of that house. There were piles stacked in the barn that served as his studio too. He'd passed away five years before I was born, but the old burlap lining his studio walls still carried the smell of linseed oil and turpentine. I remember running my tiny hands across his palettes still slick with long-dried ribbons of paint and being transported into another time and another place.



Despite his absence from my life, I've always felt "Grandpa Jim's" influence like a guiding hand. If not for him, I may never have picked up a paintbrush. He was a fairy tale hero for all his grandkids; a kind and generous man with a strong work ethic and varied interests. His 1938 yearbook from Gloucester High reveals no photograph, only a quote from Thoreau, "It is tranquil people who accomplish much."

My mom was the youngest of his five children and reared my brothers and me in the very rooms she'd grown up in (the ones he'd grown up in too) with the help of my grandma Leah. "Grammie" was a regular part of the household until she passed in 2001. My whole life I've worked to understand and get to know James Knowlton, and I'm glad of the opportunity now to share his story with the community he cared so deeply for, and to help ensure a worthy soul isn't lost to history.



Leah and James Knowlton

James Knowlton was born in 1921 to Sarah "Sadie" (Gardner) and Joseph William Knowlton. Joseph had lost his leg serving in France during the First World War, and made ends meet around the "Knowlton Farm" on Revere Street. In the early years, young James was occasionally sent to stay with Sadie's father Blanchard Gardner in Greenwich, CT. Blanchard was a Nova Scotian yacht captain who spent his retirement piloting a ferry around New York Harbor. He'd built a house on a tiny island known today as Rich Island, but which was known in those days as Gardner's Island. Scarcely larger than the house's foundation, the island was just a stone's throw from the shoreline of the inner harbor, about a half mile due west from Field Point, where Winslow Homer had painted nearly 50 years before.

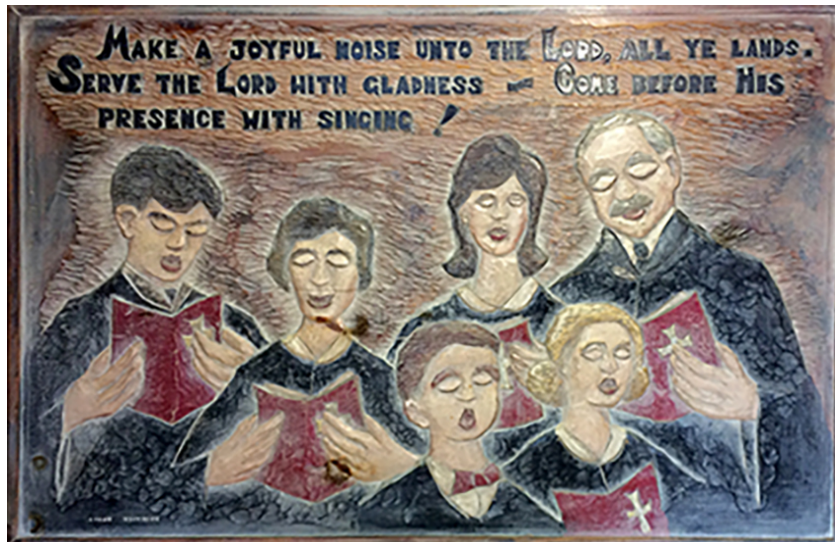
Perhaps the time he spent among the vessels of Greenwich helped James fall in love with the water because after graduating from Gloucester High School in 1938 he went to sea as a Merchant Marine. The following year would mark the outbreak of the Second World War, and around this time James attended a dance hosted by the Officer's Club in Edgartown on Martha's Vineyard. Here he was first introduced to my aforementioned grandma Leah. She was an Everett native who was working for the summer in one of the local bed-and-breakfasts. With America's entrance into the War in 1941 however, the sea was becoming more dangerous and things were put on hold until after the war.

1942 was a difficult year for my grandfather. In April, he was working aboard the *SS Robin Hood* a 7000 ton cargo ship when it was ambushed by German submarine U-575 300 miles off the coast of Martha's Vineyard. The U-Boat fired a torpedo around 10 PM, missing the *Robin Hood*, and then pursued the vessel for five harrowing hours. At 3 AM the German vessel unleashed two more torpedoes, hitting the engine room and cleaving the massive vessel in two. 14 members of the crew were lost in the explosion while a couple dozen survivors swam their way to a single lifeboat. Eight days later, after surviving off hard-tack crumbs and what little water they had aboard, James and the rest of the survivors were picked up by the *USS Greer* and delivered to safety. He had lost 20 pounds over the eight days and was immediately taken to a military hospital to recover.

Before long he returned to service but was again torpedoed a few months later in mid July. He subsequently told the *Gloucester Daily Times* that in comparison to his experiences on the *Robin Hood*, this second ambush "wasn't so bad." The *SS Fairport* was struck by two torpedoes fired by the German U-161. There were no casualties however and the whole crew made it to the lifeboats while the *Fairport* sunk. The shaken crew was picked up shortly afterwards by the *USS Kearney* and delivered safely to New York within the week.

After the War ended, James and Leah resumed their relationship and were married the following year. Initially, they settled in Old Greenwich, Connecticut where James found work first for an appliance manufacturer, and then later doing construction. They had four children and were beginning to make a life when in 1956, James' father passed away, leaving Sadie to run the "Knowlton Farm" back on Revere Street all on her own. Within the year, James packed up the family and returned to Gloucester for good to help take care of his mother and tend the farm. A few years later, after things were settled, my mother was born, and James embraced the neighborhood he knew so well as a child. By all accounts, the neighborhood embraced him back.

James' comparably late entrance into the art-world began soon afterward, when he suffered a series of health ailments that ended his career as a builder. Some combination of emphysema and angina compounded by a lifetime of smoking, lead to a serious heart attack in 1961. From then on, he couldn't work and Leah made ends meet by baking pies and selling them at the Annisquam Market. She also signed on with the Annisquam Village Church as music director and gave private piano and voice lessons out of their living room.



Wood carving by James Knowlton,
Courtesy of Annisquam Village Church

Leah and James' connection to the neighborhood continued to deepen during this period along with their network of friends. It was likely one of these friends who first suggested that James take up painting during his recovery. He did, and to his surprise found within himself a previously untapped talent for it. Over the next few years he became close with Emile Gruppe, Howard Curtis, Alfred Czerepak, Wayne Morell, Harry Gage and Ohrvel Carlson. Through them he found ample opportunities to refine his raw talent and was encouraged. Land and seascapes comprised the bulk of his work, and he took up woodcarving as well.



Gloucester

In 1964 he had his first solo show at the Lane Center Gallery, at Gordon College. A pamphlet for the show referred to him as a “traditional-impressionist.” Today we might say that he belonged to the “Cape Ann School.” His oils borrow heavily from his friend Gruppe, commonly featuring some of the elder artists regular motifs: stone wharves, clamdiggers and wooded streams. James distinguished himself though with a markedly unique color palette, often with soft melon hued sunsets and lavender clouds.

My mother recalls him once pointing out that shadows in snow are often blue and not grey as one might expect. He kept his compositions simple and evidently never let the act of painting lose its therapeutic quality. After his experiences suffering from exposure and thirst on open ocean with nothing but sky and pitiless sea in all directions, it's little wonder James painted with an unapologetic nostalgia and reverence for his hometown.



Essex

By at least 1969, James was serving on the Art Committee for the Annisquam Art Association's 3rd annual show, along with Hollis French, Margaret Fitzhugh Browne, Harry Gage, Carol Pearce, S.F. Haines and Alpheus Hyatt Mayor (nephew of distinguished sculptor Anna Hyatt Huntington). He eventually joined the North Shore Arts Association as well and art became more and more central to his life as time went on. Despite these associations, James's modesty and quiet nature prevented him from embracing the salesmanship the art market often demands. His paintings and carvings became his life, but never quite his livelihood. He often gave paintings away to friends and family, letting people take their pick of recent works. He occasionally bartered with his pieces for goods and services as well.



Cape Ann

The day after Christmas in 1984, James suffered a final heart attack at breakfast. The departure was sudden, and his loss is still felt keenly by all who knew him; a circle that grows ever smaller over the years. It is my hope that these gathered facts and reminiscences can stem that tide and help preserve his memory. I'm sure I could speak for my whole family when I say how grateful I am to Rita Teele and the Annisquam Historical Association for providing me with an opportunity to share a few words about him. I'm sure "Grandpa Jim" wouldn't have wanted me to end on such a tragic note though, so I thought it might be worth ending with a French phrase he'd carved in relief into one of the house's central beams:

Il vaut mieux sourire, qu'être fâché ou triste.
(It is better to smile, than to be mad or sad.)

Leon Doucette, 2019

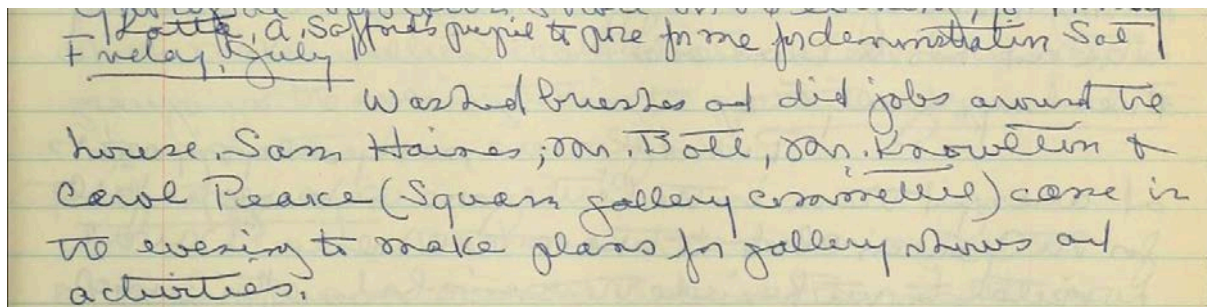
Postscript by Rita Teele

James Knowlton was well ahead of the curve in using old wooden objects, natural or manufactured, and recycling them into art. Here is another of his painting carvings on wood—the wood being an old breadboard. This "house portrait" stayed with the house when the Lufkins sold the property to Bob and Gigs Cunningham in 1983.



Image courtesy of the Cunningham Family

For many years, James Knowlton was involved with the **Annisquam Art Gallery**—from at least the mid 1960s until his death. An extract from Margaret Fitzhugh Browne's diary, dated July 1, 1966, lists members of the gallery committee.



Washed brushes and did jobs around the house. Sam Haines, Dan Ball, Dan Knowlton & Carol Pearce (Squam gallery committee) came in to evening to make plans for gallery shows and activities.

The newspaper clipping, below, from the **Gloucester Daily Times**, dated June 20, 1985, gave notice of a memorial exhibit of works by James Knowlton.

GD 6/20/85

Annisquam Art Gallery

The July show at the Annisquam Art Gallery will be a memorial exhibit of the works of the late James Knowlton.

A native of New England, born in 1921, James Knowlton grew up on a Cape Ann farm, but with a traditional family background of the sea also in his blood.

After spending some years of his life as a seaman, fisherman, and traveling around the world, he returned to his hometown and spent most of his time painting the things he knew and loved.

Knowlton was a traditional impressionist, communicating through the media of wood carving, canvas and paper, his sensitive emotions and deep feelings. With no "formal" art training, he had studied with, and been encouraged by, men such as Emile Gruppe, Howard Curtis, Alfred Czerepak, Harry Gage, Wayne Morrell and Ohrvel Carlson.

His oils, watercolors and wood sculpture are represented in many private collections across the United States, Canada, and England.

Knowlton lived with his family in Annisquam, where he maintained a studio gallery. When he died in 1985, he was the chairman of the Annisquam Art Gallery committee.

With appreciation to David and Janet McAveaney for the image of the painting that they own, and for re-introducing James Knowlton to Annisquam.