New Albany, Indiana is fortunate to have an artist whose name and fame are synonymous with that of the city. George Washington Morrison’s active career as an artist spans more than a fifty-year period from about 1843 to 1893 when he passes away. During that time, he called New Albany home. Morrison earned his reputation as a portrait artist and many of the prominent families in this river town have had their ancestors painted by him. Later in life, and as photography gained in popularity, Morrison focused more upon landscape and still life painting, but interestingly, none of his still life works have yet to be identified. Today, the Carnegie Center for Art and History has fourteen Morrison paintings in its collection and along with the Indiana Room at the New Albany/Floyd County Public Library are the repositories of knowledge on this early and important Indiana artist.

For a person who was as well-recognized and regarded in his own time as Morrison was, he has managed to retain an air of mystery about him. Most of the details of his life come through old newspaper clippings and anecdotal recollections of the man by aged friends recalling Morrison many years after his passing. Generally, Morrison was well-liked and regarded as a good poet too. Some of the details have become blurry, indistinct, and the chronology of years has shifted. In the pursuit of new information additional interesting aspects of Morrison’s early artistic education have come to light.

What we do know is that George W. Morrison was born in Baltimore, MD in 1820. We have a census record for this year, but Morrison’s birthdate does not appear on any other surviving records that we know about. And if he knew what his birthday was, he never told anyone. Morrison is one of five children all born in Baltimore and his parents (James Morrison and Euphemia McCleod) were from Edinburgh, Scotland. During the early 1830’s, Morrison and his family left Baltimore for tiny Connersville, IN (the town is 66 miles southeast of Indianapolis) perhaps seeking fresh opportunities in an Indiana frontier town. Around the year 1834, older brother James Morrison moves to New Albany and George follows in the early 1840’s. One myth about Morrison is that he arrives in New Albany without knowing a soul, but this was not true. At this time, the city of New Albany is a booming river town and the largest city in the state. According to the census data, the population in New Albany, IN as of 1850 is just 90 more people than are living in Indianapolis! George Morrison’s success as an artist parallels the city’s height during the steamboat era.

We do have a record in the form of a business card indicating that George W. Morrison was renting a gallery room on High Street near Bank Street in New Albany where examples of his art could be seen. The earliest painting in the Carnegie Center’s collection is a self-portrait dated 1843. During the next two decades, Morrison paints many of the prominent families and enjoying some regular commissions on both sides of the Ohio River and records the area through landscape painting. Over the intervening years, Morrison would buy property in Silver Hills (1851) and construct a one story cottage house and studio with a nice overlook of the town and Ohio River. He would live and work at this site with its incredible view of the city until his death in 1893. George W. Morrison married Lydia Maynard and together they
had three boys Frank L., Charles G., and George M. and a girl, Mary A. Two of their children, Frank and Mary, are remembered for having artistic talent as well and were taught by their father.

So, where did George W. Morrison learn to draw and paint? This has always been of interest and the persistent story traveling down through time is that Morrison was a student of Rembrandt and Raphaelle Peale who belonged to the first family of American art. If true, this would be an auspicious connection to make. In the early 19th century, few art schools and academies existed in both the United States and Europe. If one wanted to become a successful, professional artist then a trip abroad to study overseas was often required. While it is true that Rembrandt and his brother Raphaelle Peale briefly opened an art academy in Morrison’s hometown of Baltimore, the times do not match up persuasively. Morrison would have been a small child to remotely make those dates possible. What we know is that the school didn’t last long and Morrison was not their student in Baltimore.

Following leads in Estill Curtis Pennington’s book, “Lessons in Likeness, Portrait Painters in Kentucky and the Ohio River Valley”, brought me to an interesting footnote citing the “Illustrated Catalogue of the Art Gallery of the Southern Exposition” in Louisville, KY in 1884 where Morrison exhibited a single still life entitled “Apples and Nuts” in the art gallery. The exhibition’s organizer, Charles M. Kurtz, notes that G.W. Morrison supplied him with the information that he had studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Art in Philadelphia. This academy was founded with the help of the Peale family in 1805 and Rembrandt Peale was later a Director of the Academy. The PAFA is still active today and corresponding with their current archivist has led to a dead end. The Academy has no records of George W. Morrison as having been a student of theirs, although some early records were destroyed by fire and may account for any information gap. Regardless, even when the Peales were associated with this academy, they had no teaching responsibilities.

In the same Southern Exposition catalogue, Morrison reveals that a trip to Bordentown, N.J. he made in 1844 gave him the chance to see Joseph Bonaparte’s collection. During an era when art instruction meant drawing and painting copies and replicas of old masters, where would one have the opportunity to see much less study valuable and time honored art from the past on this side of the Atlantic? The opportunity presented itself before Napoleon Bonaparte’s defeat by the English at Waterloo in 1815. Napoleon’s older brother Joseph who was also the King of Spain and Naples moves to this country upon abdicating in 1813 (coincidentally, this is also the date of New Albany’s founding). Bonaparte then takes on the title the Compte de Survilliers and builds a grand mansion called “Breeze Point” that contains the continent’s best library and art gallery. The inventory of the estate’s artworks survives to this day. In 1839 the Compte returns to Europe where he passes away in 1844. The art collection is then dispersed by auction in 1845. During his brief trip to New Jersey, Morrison would have seen examples of first rate art including a large number of paintings by Rubens, Rembrandt, Bassono, Guercino, Sneyders, Lebrun and many more 17th and 18th century artists. Sadly, the majority of the collection left the country and Morrison records that he became a “student of Nature ever since that time.”

One of Morrison’s most celebrated oil paintings is his “View of New Albany from Silver Hills” is on view in the new Morrison Gallery and was begun in 1851 and finished in 1853. The painting is one of the most
iconic landscapes ever painted in Indiana it is also the subject of a small newspaper article extolling the virtues of the scene just after the work was completed. It depicts New Albany at its height as a city that became wealthy through river commerce extending as far south as New Orleans where Morrison occasionally liked to winter. His view is based on an earlier design Morrison was commissioned to draw by Mr. Nunemacher in order to create a small lithograph showing the city before 1850. This print was offered for sale through Nunemacher’s book shop for 25 cents a print. In 1851, Morrison purchased property on Silver Hills where he eventually built a home and studio. For the next forty plus years, the artist would live near this stunning overlook of New Albany until his passing at age 73 on December 20, 1893.

Morrison has left us a wonderful legacy that is a unique snapshot and record of New Albany, IN. His art is an important document of our area’s transition from emerging frontier town to a Victorian city on the banks of the Ohio River. The search for more information and artwork from and about George W. Morrison will be ongoing. The Carnegie Center for Art and History will continue to preserve this special inheritance from the past.

—Al Gorman, Coordinator of Public Programs and Engagement, Carnegie Center for Art & History
April 26, 2016
Painter George W. Morrison created two versions of the view of New Albany from the overlook also known as Clifton Heights. His first drawing was likely a commission from the local bookseller Mr. Numemacher, who sent the sketch to Philadelphia to be used in the creation of a lithographic print entitled: “New Albany, IND. As seen from the hills below the City.”

The drawing was transferred to the stone by lithographer T. Sinclair. The print appeared for sale to the public in 1850 and priced at 25 cents. This black and white view of New Albany by Morrison is earlier and has marked differences with the oil painting he would begin in 1851. In the print there is a small orchard on the farm in the right foreground, boats are on the river, and what appears to be a wooden covered bridge spans the creek along the bottom. The horizon line is higher and, overall, the city appears less developed.
Morrison’s masterpiece is his large, framed oil on canvas, (50” x 68”) entitled “New Albany from Silver Hills” which is on display in the George W. Morrison Gallery. This painting was started in 1851, which is the same year Morrison purchased property for his home and studio on Silver Hills.

The painting was completed in 1853 and owned by the Scribner Family who would eventually donate it to the New Albany-Floyd County Public Library. This view contrasts from the print in several ways. The image is in color and the mood in the foreground woods is dark and mysterious. The river is calm and all the boats are in port. The horizon line essentially divides the composition into equal halves. The sunken “ghost ship” in the river on the right is an example of “pentimento” which occurred when the artist changed his mind about the composition by painting over the steamboat formerly in the scene. With age, the over-painted pigments used can become transparent and these changes reveal what was once underneath.
A small article written by “B” that appeared in the March 1, 1853 issue describes Morrison’s painting in these terms: The Daily Ledger. “[For the New Albany Ledger], View of New Albany.”

“Yesterday while in the studio of our distinguished fellow townsman, Mr. Morrison, we saw his view of New Albany, as seen from the hills below the city—a picture which is just being finished—and when completed will rank high, not only as a work of art, but for the correctness of location, and beauty of landscape, it is probably unsurpassed by any thing of the kind on the continent of America. There is no place on the Ohio River, from Pittsburgh to Cairo, that affords as fine a view for a landscape painting as the city in which we live; and we defy anyone to point out a single house or shed that can be seen from the hills, that is not laid down with the greatest accuracy on the painting. Twenty years hence this picture will be invaluable. When generations yet to be born will gaze with astonishment at the rapid growth of a city destined to become the great commercial emporium of the West, which is now but in her infancy. We hope all will go and see it.”

*View of New Albany, Indiana from Silver Hills, 2016*
The article “An Artist-Family and Their Studio” that appeared in the Tuesday, October 29, 1867 edition of the New Albany Daily Commercial is uncredited but gives us this nice description of Morrison’s view that could have been taken from the painting as well.

“The knobs just west of the city, perched upon the very top, is situated a one story cottage. It is embowered among trees; when the woods put on the garb of winter, clumps of cedars, firs and other evergreens may be seen from the city dotting the crest of the hill. From a rustic seat at the foot of a great oak, one of the most picturesque and charming landscapes in the world, is presented to the view. Here in the foreground lies New Albany, with its busy machine shops, foundries and rolling mills, with the knobs, crowned with their many-colored woods, throwing long shadows across it. There is that greenest spot in the neighborhood, Sandy Island, covered with its growth of cotton-wood, while beyond are the tall spires of Louisville, and a little to the left of those of Jeffersonville.”

—Al Gorman, Coordinator of Public Programs and Engagement, Carnegie Center for Art & History
April 26, 2016