HISTORIC IMAGE OF CONNECTICUT NOT REALITY

The most famous historic image of Connecticut's creation story is geo-fiction. I refer to Frederic Edwin Church's "Hooker and Company Journeying Through the Wilderness from Plymouth to Hartford, in 1636." Though this magnificent painting captures the defining moment of Connecticut history, it fails to capture the physical reality. Instead it shows an impossible landscape, a chimera of imported scenes. Knowing this can help us find a more authentic sense of place.

The definitive published catalog description for this work is by Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, former chief curator of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. Though she describes the painting's cultural setting and points out a factual error in its title, she does not discuss its physical setting, which shows geo-errors beyond the pale of artistic license.

In 1636, Rev. Thomas Hooker (1586 to 1647) led his flock of religious dissidents on an exodus of biblical proportions. Leaving Cambridge, Mass., not Plymouth, they passed through the interior wilderness to reach the fertile Connecticut River Valley, founding Hartford. Their settlement soon merged with nearby Wethersfield and Windsor to become the Connecticut Colony whose "Fundamental Orders" guaranteed the sort of representative democracy later adopted by the U.S. Constitution. Sentiment for local rule was so strong that King Charles II granted the colony more autonomy in its Royal Charter (1662) than later British governors thought wise. This is why, under James II, Edmund Andros came to Hartford in 1687 as governor of the Dominion of New England, to wrest the original charter back to England. Legend holds that it was secreted into the hollow of a nearby ancient tree, the so-called Charter Oak.

In 1847, Frederic Church painted this tree into a realistic -- though romanticized -- rendering of a gnarled old oak on the dry edge of a degraded hillside pasture without a rock or watercourse in sight. At this stage, he was an aspiring artist being informed by actual landscape reality and emerging scientific ideas. Within a few years he "reigned at mid-century as the New World's most talented landscape painter," according to Kornhauser.

Yet barely two years earlier, he was an unknown 19-year-old finishing a two-year apprenticeship under Thomas Cole, founder of the Hudson River School. For the subject of his first major work, Church chose the founding of Hartford, an event witnessed six generations earlier by one of his ancestors. And for style, he mirrored his master, combining New World wilderness with Old World allegories.

In a perfect storm of youthful ambition, hometown pride and homage to his mentor, Church aimed high, with divine light illuminating historic fiction superimposed on geological fiction. For example, the "Father of Connecticut" points to an oak that didn't become famous until a half-century later, one rooted where oaks don't usually grow: on bare rock at the waterline of flood-prone stream. The background hills are like nothing I've seen in the state. They loom too high to be the ancient plateau of its western highlands, and are too irregular to be one of its trap rock ridges. Instead they resemble more closely those of the Catskills, where Church apprenticed. In the middle ground are jagged rock prominences that look surreal, and which could never have survived our state's intense glaciation. The foreground pond is impossibly positioned above an overhanging bedrock cliff, and unnaturally placid below a powerful cascade. Only the width of the Connecticut River and its valley seem realistic.

So what is Connecticut's physical sense of place? For now, let's consider it to be the local watering hole where art, science and history meet for a drink of whatever each is having.
On Sept. 19, that place will be the cafe of the Wadsworth Atheneum in downtown Hartford. I'll be giving a gallery talk about Church's original "Hooker and Company" and other Hudson River School paintings. Though Church's painting of the Charter Oak is elsewhere, another oil on canvas by Charles De Wolf Brownell (1857) will suffice for comparison. Please join us for the fun, beginning at noon.