



Lawren Harris, *Cottage Metis Beach, Que.*, circa 1916.  
Photo: Heffel Gallery Ltd  
Private collection

## LAWREN HARRIS – METIS BEACH AND A PAINTING

Hartland W. Price

On Thursday, Nov. 24th, 2011, an auction of Canadian Art was conducted by Heffel Fine Art Auction House in Toronto. It was at that auction that the Jean Paul Lemieux work '1910 Remembered' sold for over \$2.34 million establishing a new record for a contemporary Canadian artist. Amongst other records set that sale, Anne Savage, of Metis lineage, reached a record \$64,350 for one of her works, interestingly of a location on the Skeena River in BC. Also sold that night for \$152,100 was a painting by Lawren S. Harris titled 'Cottage, Metis Beach, Que., Houses Group XXIX' ca.1916. The catalogue showed it as follows:

**Lot # 175**

**LAWREN STEWART HARRIS**

ALC BCSFA CGP FCA G7 OSA RPS TPG 1885 - 1970  
Canadian

**Cottage, Metis Beach, Que., Houses Group XXIX**

oil on panel, circa 1916

signed and on verso signed twice on the board and on the artist's label, titled twice on the board and on the artist's label, inscribed "property Bess Harris 1943 BHC-115 / keep" and with the artist's symbol and numbered variously 26 / 7 / 60  
10 5/8 x 14 in, 27 x 35.6 cm

**Provenance:**

Bess Harris Collection, Vancouver  
Marlborough-Godard, Toronto  
Acquired from the above by a Private Collector,  
Toronto, 1979  
Private Collection, New York

This beautiful painting of a cottage, inscribed by Lawren Harris's wife Bess as one to "keep", is a fine example of his explorations of Canadian architecture as a subject. Harris treated the homes and buildings that he painted as an artist treats a subject sitting for a portrait - indeed, his houses can be considered portraits of what they represent: the people who inhabit them, the activities that are conducted in them, in whatever state they may be in. He delved more deeply into the structure than the surface and shape - he wished to get to the essential character of his homes and buildings. In this depiction of a pleasant Quebec cottage, Harris portrayed a well-kept home, with a porch and gabled roof in contrasting red and white. Framed by blossoming green trees, the scene is absolutely still, and the closed door, shuttered windows and sharply angled shadows emphasize this stillness. Harris's buildings are filled with socially conscious messages; he was keenly aware of the difference between classes, and thus his architectural works can be seen as allegories of Canadian society.

**Sold For: \$152,100.00 CAD**

**Estimate: \$125,000 ~ \$175,000 CAD**



**HEFFEL FINE ART AUCTION HOUSE**

SALE THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2011, 7PM, TORONTO

A Vancouver friend and collector, Chris Mathisen, showed the catalogue to me as he was aware that my family had summered in Metis Beach since the 1870's and that I had built a cottage there in 2008. My curiosity was piqued.

The image had circulated in years past but nobody had ever ascertained the identity of the white house with the red roof. Since first painted, the work had been the property of Lawren and Bess Harris and subsequently, her Estate until sold to a private collector in Toronto in 1979. It changed hands next in 2010 to a private New York collection which put it back up for auction again in November 2011. It does not appear to have ever been reproduced in any publication and was never exhibited except when being sold.

I reached out to various Metisites, a generation or two older than I, who looked at it, and apart from a few guesses, they knew not what house was the subject of Harris' work. Some knew of Anne Savage's connection to Metis but no one recalled Lawren Harris as ever having been associated with Metis.

Recollecting that our builder, Renaud Isabel, had given me a photograph of the house that had previously sat on the property, I dug it out from my files. It is immediately apparent that there were remarkable similarities to the Harris subject; surely, it was the same house.

Further, I referenced a small treatise entitled 'Historic Walk along Turriff Beach' as prepared in 2007 by long-time summer resident Allan Smith; his commentary for the property, now addressed as '414 rue Beach' says as follows:

"The house called Strabane Cottage was built in the 19th century for the Patton family, who would arrive each summer by schooner from Rimouski. Around 1930 the house was rented for 20 years to Dr. A.W. Furness of Montreal and his wife, Madame Furness. A French teaching associate of Madame Furness, a Mlle Judge used the house for many years while running a French summer school... During the school period there would be a celebration in July of Bastille Day. About 1950 the house was demolished. Hartland and Jill Price have purchased the property and construction of their new house is planned to begin in late August."

Further information comes from Jessie Forbes, a great granddaughter of James Patton who was married to Margaret Mathewson, "the sister of James Adam Mathewson, the first tourist to visit Metis in 1854." She goes on to say "James Patton's wife was the first pilgrim to Metis. She came with her six children to the railhead at Riviere du Loup and from there drove the remaining 100 miles by buck board to her destination in a farm house." Her information is that "Strabane cottage was passed on to her son, Charles Patton....and from Dr. Charles it went to his son Charles Francis, who we were told rented it to Madame Furnace(sic). The house was demolished by Charles Francis because he was never really interested in that end of Metis. He said, when he and his mother went to Metis they stayed in the Boule Rock Hotel."

By way of background, the name Strabane Cottage derives from the town of Strabane, in Northern Ireland on the border with the Republic of Ireland. This is the town from whence the Patton family emigrated to Canada in 1833. Coincidentally, the Governor of the Province of Quebec from 1768 – 1778, Guy Carleton, who had also served with Wolfe at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, also was born in Strabane. He famously defended Quebec from the American Revolutionary Continental Army, winning the Battle of Quebec in 1775.

I acquired the property that stretches from the water to Station Road from John Aimers in 2004; he bought it in 1983 from his father Jeffrey Aimers, a Montreal architect who also owned Wenvoe Cottage adjacent on the west, owned since 1971 by Roger Frigon of Rimouski. Jeffrey Aimers had inherited the property from his mother Helen Jane Haskell Grier Aimers in 1960, she having acquired it from Arthur Watson Barry in 1956, according to the deeds in my possession. Speaking with John's mother, Katherine

'Cotton' Aimers, she has absolutely no recollection of a house being on the property in 1956 so opines that Strabane Cottage had been demolished by then.

From available information then, it appears that the house likely was demolished in 1955/56 based on Cotton Aimers and Sherrill Shavers remembrances. The contradictory recollection that Charles Francis Patton demolished it, presumably when he owned it (!), places the demise sometime in the 40's or 50's. Only a detailed examination of the tax rolls and property registration documents in Matane might provide definitive proof.



This then is the photograph of Strabane Cottage, probably from the 1940s or 50s.

In my file, the photograph came from Sherill Tuggey Shaver in 2005 who said that the house was 'built in the 19th century' as she recalls from the 'Ferguson Memoirs or else Clive Mathewson's History of Metis'. She says the house was bought by Dr. Furness in 1930. In conversation with her in December 2011, Sherrill, then 86 living in Mississauga, ONT, recounted how she had been a summer playmate of the Furness daughters, Madeline and Anne Marie. She recalled the house being white with a dark red roof and with the verandas around three sides and still standing in 1955 when she left Metis to get married and thus ended her stint as Postmistress which had begun in 1942. She remembers clearly that 'Mme Furness' regularly worked in the rear gardens and spent time creating paths amongst the flower beds. The house was situated within a few feet to where the new house is today.

Sherrill Shaver recalled that Anne Marie Furness had once been a Professor at UBC in Vancouver. Just before Christmas 2011, I located Anne Furness, 86, living at an assisted care facility in Vancouver; we chatted on the phone and I delivered a copy of the painting to her for her examination.

She wrote me that her parents "acquired Metis in the mid 30ies and Mother sold it in the late fourties (I think) several years after my father died in the early 40ies." She and her sister spent their summers there. "There were 6 bedrooms, 2 toilet rooms and 3 bathrooms – so you see how Mother had endless guests (my father some) and hired help. The Tuggy (sic) family and Dubé family did a great deal of all forms of work for the



Furness family.” After seeing the painting, she said it “was very familiar and must be the house” and dug out old photo albums and discovered this picture.

Comparing the painting with the 2 photographs, the roofline with its shed dormers and chimney brickwork are identical; the porches/verandas on front and sides still visible as depicted in the painting and even the two trees in front on the photo are there. The topography also is similar with trees behind and clearly the land rising to the rear. This is evidenced in the photos, in the painting and from a site visit to this day.



Furness Cottage, probably from the 1950s.  
Photo: Ann Furness  
Hartland W. Price Collection

Interestingly, the front 2nd floor balcony shown in the painting is not in the photographs; note also that the 2nd floor window on the balcony that exists in the photos also appears to be just a window in Harris’ painting, and *not* a door. That balcony may have been removed due to rot or damaged by a storm or collapsed in winter, or a victim of poor overall maintenance that ultimately led to the demolition of the whole house around 1955. Both Anne Marie Furness and Sherrill Shaver, likely the last living connections to the property, do not recall a 2nd floor balcony from their youth in the 30s and 40s. It is certainly possible that it may have been there when Harris painted it or just as likely, it was artistic license taken by him to create a better composition from his perspective. (Ed. note: Sadly, Anne Marie passed away before we could arrange a face to face meeting in early 2012 but as of 2017, Sherrill Shaver, now 93, still regularly visits Metis in the summer!)

In the days prior and just after the auction in November 2011, I spent time with Lisa Christensen, one of Canada’s authorities on Lawren Harris. She is fascinated with the 'connection to art through the connection to place' as evidenced in her entertaining and well researched book “A Hiker’s Guide to the Rocky Mountain Art of Lawren Harris”.

Lisa also notes the startling similarities of painting and photograph and is almost positive that it is the same place. Interestingly, Sherrill Shaver recalls a 'dark red' roof; Harris was known for using his favourite red, Cadmium Red to substitute for whatever

red was 'real'. So Sherrill's recollection is probably a correct one. Knowing in detail how Harris treated his subjects and familiar with the artistic license he might take, Lisa is virtually convinced that the photo mirrors the painting of some 25 years earlier. Based on these photographs and remembrances, it is clear then that the subject of the painting, the WHERE, had been found!

I then got to wondering WHEN Harris had been in Metis, WHO he was with, WHY he was there and WHAT was his motivation to paint the picture. My research has found the following:

**Evidence #1:** I spoke to Marlborough Godard Gallery who had originally received the painting from the Harris Estate in the 1970s. Their records show the dating to be 'around 1916' but from whom that dating is attributed was not known. The dating for the Heffel Auction was from Heffel Gallery which of course is 'ca 1916'. This would be totally consistent with the painting's style, a rather typical Group of Seven treatment.

It is quite possible that Harris and his first wife Beatrice 'Trixie' Phillips (m. 1910) had friends in Metis they were visiting. They were part of the social establishment, indeed, upper class of Toronto so it is probable that they had friends of a similar echelon in Metis, either from Toronto or Montreal.

It is known that he was by 1916 in the army and stationed at Camp Borden but that he did continue to paint while on leave. Did he visit Metis on one of those leaves and was he a guest of a Metisite through family relationships?

If indeed there was a visit to Metis around 1916, any proof may have disappeared. According to journalist Paul Gessell, writing in 2012, that "most of his (Lawren Harris') personal papers, the kinds of documents that allow biographers to peer into a subject's private thoughts, were destroyed in a fit of anger by the artist's first wife, Trixie, after their divorce in 1934." Did he paint the Metis Cottage as a 'hostess gift' but then decide it should stay with him as he loved the subject and it pleased him and indeed, may not even have been 'finished' at the end of his summer sojourn? It is clear that Harris never sold it as it is inscribed in 1943 to second wife Bess Harris as one to "keep".

**Evidence #2:** The only known published reference to Harris being in Metis that I have found is from Jeremy E. Adamson (b.1943) in his landmark catalogue for the Jan/Feb 1978 AGO exhibition, "Lawren S. Harris: Urban Scenes and Wilderness Landscapes 1906-1930" which says: ".....in the fall of 1929, Harris travelled by car with Jackson (ed.AY)

to Metis Beach on the South Shore of the St. Lawrence River east of the town of Rimouski. It was Harris' first trip to that Quebec region but for Jackson, it was familiar territory."

This states that Harris had never been to Metis prior to 1929 giving positive credence to something other than the 1916 dating. Adamson goes on further to say: "Harris' Metis Beach oil studies contain little formal interest in relation to his late sketches of the North Shore of Lake Superior. Most of them depict small cottages and houses set against the green background of the river shore. There are no dramatic vistas, nor any foreground motifs to stimulate transcendental ideas."

Apparently then, Harris did a number of 'oil studies' of 'cottages and houses' of which, only "Cottage, Metis Beach" is known to me. Further research on Doris Mills inventory list (see Evidence #3 following) and locating some of those sketches, if they exist, would no doubt shed some light on Harris' 1929 Metis Beach trip. The whereabouts of other "Harris' Metis Beach oil studies" remains an unanswered mystery.

**Evidence #3:** Curious also that the Harris title contains the reference, "Houses Group XXIX"; this seems an unlikely coincidence i.e. the XXIX 'imitating' 1929.

According to Charlie Hill, Curator of Canadian Art at the National Gallery of Canada who said that "On the 1936 inventory of Lawren Harris paintings left in Toronto after his divorce and move to New Hampshire, an inventory prepared by Doris Mills, no. 29 of the list of "Houses sketches" is listed as "Cottage, Metis Beach 10 x 14". The numbers were only given at the time this inventory was prepared." This '29' reference, which correlates so conveniently with '1929' when Harris visited Metis, is in point of fact, the result of an inventory count.

Apparently, the group called 'Houses Sketches' as inventoried by Mills, are somewhat random in origin and subject and no other canvasses appear to exist that relate to Metis Beach or a trip to the Gaspé. All this does is prove that the painting was executed pre 1936.

**Evidence #4:** The 1929 trip of course resulted in the well known 'Lighthouse, Father Point ' of 1930 that is now in the National Gallery. It was done in the more familiar abstract style that Harris had moved towards rather than the somewhat typical Group of Seven treatment of the Metis Cottage.

Dennis R. Reid, until a few years ago, Curator of Canadian Art at the AGO in Toronto, is likewise not familiar with any of the other Metis Beach sketches to which Adamson refers but given that the only evidence Reid has relative to dating 'Cottage, Metis Beach' was the reference to a 1929 visit, as a bonafide historian/scholar he sought to validate that correlation by opining:

"As to its date, I go for 1929, the only recorded visit by Harris to Metis Beach, when he traveled there with A.Y. Jackson, and as you know, painted the sketch for *Lighthouse, Father Point*. You should be comparing *Cottage, Metis Beach* with the sketch for *Lighthouse*, however, not with the much more tightly handled canvas - it is reproduced in colour in Bess Harris and R.G.P. Colgrove, eds., *Lawren Harris* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company of Canada, 1969), p. 79 - and you will see that the two sketches are very similar in handling."

This is the oil sketch to which he refers and the purported style similarities:

**Evidence #5:** James King PhD, is the author of numerous works of biography, including Paul Nash, Margaret Laurence, Jack McClelland, and Farley Mowat. King is a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and is Distinguished University Professor in the Faculty of Humanities at McMaster University. His groundbreaking biography, "Inward Journey: The Life of Lawren Harris" was published in the fall of 2012.

I have corresponded with him and following his review of my research notes, he responded: "Thank you for your letter. Your research is very impressive. I cannot add to your information, but I would think that the canvas would likely come from LH's known time at Metis Beach. LH often reverted to earlier styles when he wished to, and I think this is a good example."

However, Lisa Christensen disagrees with Mr. King : "Harris did revert to earlier styles at times in his career, but I would not agree that this is an example of that kind of reversion. He did landscapes in the 50's that were based on sketches from the 20's these are obvious at a glance, as his abstract interests cannot seem to hide themselves in these later (perhaps commissioned) works. Further, I have only seen him do this with his landscapes, not with any of the urban or rural architectural scenes. In general those works are quite different in their feel than the earlier ones, and the Metis painting at the centre of this discussion is consistent in feeling with his other houses and buildings. I would suspect the circa date range (established by Heffel) is very small - ten years or so."



Lisa's suggestion then is that the painting's circa date range is somewhere from say, 1911 to 1921. She rejects the suggestion that it is a reversion to an earlier style. The weight of proof for Heffel's dating is style and style alone. The accuracy of that dating assumption could be verified by proof or corroboration that Harris was there around 1916.

**Evidence #6:** Or lack thereof: It is known that in the spring of 1909, Harris painted at Lake Memphremagog with J.W. Beatty and had trips to the Laurentians, north of Montreal in '08 and '13 with Fergus Kyle. (Adamson, pp.47, 48) Along with his 1929 trip to Rimouski and the Lower St. Lawrence, this is the only documented painting that Harris undertook in the Province of Quebec. No evidence of any trip is recorded for the timeframe of 1911 -21 to validate the galleries' dating range based on the canvas' style....and then,

**Eureka Evidence #7:** Pamela Andersson, Office Coordinator of Heritage Lower St. Lawrence is a descendant of the Astle family who were prominent as hoteliers in the golden age of Metis Beach. Pamela was aware of my research and in the summer of 2014, discovered long lost correspondence between Lawren Harris and her family, proprietors of the Boule Rock Hotel, one of the pre-eminent Metis destination hotels of the day.

On March 6, 1922, Harris writes to Mr. Astel (sic): "We desire to spend the summer at Metis". He asks "Have you any houses for rent or know of any close to the Boule Rock so that we can get our meals there?" In those days, it was not untypical for cottagers to patronize the hotels for many meals. Harris goes on: "Some years ago we spent the summer in Mrs. Godfrey's house."

63, QUEENS PARK,  
TORONTO.  
March 6 /22  
Mr. Astel,  
Dear Sir.  
My family consists of  
my wife and self, two  
children and nurse.  
We desire to spend  
the summer at Metis.  
Have you any  
houses for rent or do you

know of any close enough  
to the Boule Roche so  
that we can get our meals  
there.  
Will you kindly give me  
what information you  
can with pieces.  
Some years ago we  
spent the summer in  
Mrs. Godfrey's house,  
Yours truly,  
Lawren Harris

Eureka....evidence that Lawren Harris had indeed spent a summer in Metis; the idiomatic vernacular of “some years ago” would easily point to sometime around 1916! This appears without doubt to validate the circa 1916 attribution by Marlborough Godard and Lisa Christensen.

In his next exchange with Astel of April 15, 1922, Harris goes on to report that “Mr. Norman Seagram has offered his house at Metis Beach for the coming summer....I have taken his house”. He continues: “While in Metis I hope to see you and arrange for a house for the summer of 1923”. Apparently, Lawren Harris and family (“my wife and self, two children and nurse”) were quite taken with the summer pleasures of Metis.

It is clear that Harris spent time in Metis Beach in the summer of either 1915 or 1916 with ‘Mrs. Godfrey’ and the summer of 1922 in Norm Seagram’s house. Whether he actually went back in 1923 is unknown.

**EUREKA! CONFIRMING EVIDENCE #8:** In about 2016, The Globe and Mail, Canada's self styled "national" newspaper, was digitized and became searchable online. My cousin, Alexander Reford, proprietor of Les Jardins de Metis/Reford Gardens, was well aware of my Harris research and had encouraged me since day one in that pursuit. As a serious historian, he had delved deeply into those digitized archives and found, EUREKA confirmation that Harris had indeed been to Metis.

Beyond a shadow of doubt, we now know that Lawren Harris was in Metis during the Summer of 1915. The dating of the painting as circa 1916 is correct.

Thus, the mystery as to **when** Harris was in Metis has seemingly been resolved. The fact that he was there for summer vacationing answers part of the **why**. We know then that he painted a cottage in Metis. Was it just a sketch that pleased him, no more, no less. Was it maybe "Mrs. Godfrey's" house and **who** was she??

The only tenuous link as to **why** I can surmise is that the property immediately adjacent to the *Cottage Metis Beach* to the east, had at the time a very fine house which was owned by a highly respected Montreal newspaper publisher named John R. Dougall (1841-1938). He was a grandson of John Redpath of Redpath Sugar fame and fortune who had built houses for his daughters in Metis and whose family had frequented Metis since the 1870s.

Dougall's sister Lily (1858-1923), a well known author in the day, was likely a regular summer visitor at her brother's Metis house on the small hill overlooking the St. Lawrence. Her biographer, Lorraine McMullen wrote that 'From her early years Dougall had been intrigued by mental telepathy, spiritualism, faith healing, and the relationship

**SOCIAL EVENTS**

Notices intended for the Social Column must be addressed to the Society Editor, and bear the names and addresses of the senders.

**TELEPHONE, NORTH 7168.**

**RECEPTION NOTES.**

Mrs. Arthur L. Carr, formerly Miss Annie Jean Pollock, will receive for the first time since her marriage on Thursday at the home of her mother, Mrs. F. Pollock, 355 Delaware avenue.

Mrs. A. J. Somers is at Niagara.

Mrs. Edward Reynolds goes to Little Metis to-day.

Mr. and Mrs. D. B. Hanna are at Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Mrs. E. B. Elder has gone to Brantford and Guelph.

Mr. and Mrs. K. H. Dickson are at the Queen's Royal, Niagara.

Mrs. Alan Marks and her two young sons are back from Winona.

**Mr. and Mrs. Lawren Harris will go to Little Metis this week.**

Miss Mary Campbell has come down

The Social Events column for 22 June 1915 proclaimed that Lawren Harris was going to Metis, viz. Globe and Mail

of the spiritual, psychological, and physical worlds.’ In her widely read works, she explored such issues as ‘the psychological aspects of religious experience, the relationship between religion and science and between religion and art’. These were topics and contributing aspects of Theosophy which became THE overriding philosophical and artistic theme for Harris in subsequent years. Is it possible that these beliefs originated or were fomented from a summer stay with Lily Dougall in 1915? Is this what brought Harris to Metis in the first place? Did he sketch the next door neighbour’s house as a pleasant diversion from the intense philosophical debates and discussions in which he engaged with his hostess? Alas, we’ll never know.

With the ‘real’ history of the ‘physical’ location so well documented, the story is completed by the fascinating connection to the context of the painting, to the subject, to the artist and, to the place, in time to both past and present. All evidence points to the last real detail that might shed definitive light on the subject.... Who exactly was the mystery woman, the unknown “Mrs. Godfrey”? If that could be answered, it might be the final piece of the puzzle!

It has been interesting and compelling to determine the subject of a significant painting by one of Canada's greatest artists that heretofore was unknown. To confirm with concrete evidence the actual dating of the painting further adds to the provenance and pedigree.

Many thanks to Lisa Christensen, Alexander Reford, Dennis Reid, James King and Charlie Hill, scholars all, for their generous contributions of time and thoughtfulness. I thank too, an old friend, Alan Klinkhoff for his encouragement and guidance. I would be negligent in not also thanking two delightful golden agers, Anne Furness and Sherrill Shaver whose lucid and colourful remembrances really brought life and history to the canvas.