



## Smithsonian American Art Museum

June 2012



### *The Speculator*

1852

**Francis William Edmonds**

Born: Hudson, New York 1806

Died: Bronxville, New York 1863

oil on canvas

25 1/8 x 30 1/8 in. (63.7 x 76.4 cm.)

Smithsonian American Art Museum

Gift of Ruth C. and Kevin McCann in affectionate

memory of Dwight David Eisenhower, 34th

President of the United States

1976.114

Smithsonian American Art Museum

2nd Floor, East Wing

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

***Researcher Liz wanted to find out more about the architecture and objects depicted by Francis William Edmonds in The Speculator.***

Francis William Edmonds (1806-1863) was not only a painter but also enjoyed a prosperous career as a banker in New York City. Edmonds served from 1839 to 1855 as “cashier” of the Mechanics’ Bank—essentially, he was the bank’s treasurer (Clark, 21).

In *The Speculator*, Edmonds shows a nattily-dressed man holding up a map labeled “1000 Valuable Lots,” along “Railroad Avenue.” Railroads were expensive to build, so the railroad companies lured investors with promises of great returns. Shady individuals such as Edmonds’ speculator urged farmers to buy lots near the railroad to facilitate shipping their farm produce to urban centers. Expansion of railroad lines also meant that people could live in the country and commute into Manhattan. Individuals such as John Jacob Astor amassed fortunes through real estate speculation, buying land in northern Manhattan cheaply and then selling it at a profit as the city expanded northward. Such “[Railroad Avenues](#)” were constructed adjacent to railroad lines in the ever-expanding suburbs, as I discovered through searching the digital collections of the New York Public Library.

## **Was Edmonds involved with the railroads?**

Perhaps Edmonds identified himself with the speculator due to his own involvement in railroads. I learned from Nichols Clark's exhibition catalog that Edmonds served on the board of the [New York and Erie Railroad](#) in 1843 and assisted in the reorganization of the company after the railroad went into bankruptcy in late 1842. In 1845, the State of New York ultimately forgave the railroad its debt and authorized the issuing of \$3,000,000 in bonds so that the railroad could be completed (Clark, 74, 102 and Gordon, 101-102). Edmonds also was a board member of the Harlem Railroad—the only line at the time that provided passenger and freight service between Manhattan Island and the mainland.

## **I also wondered about the unusual fireplace that Edmonds depicted in the painting.**

Edmonds was born in [Hudson, New York](#) in Columbia County on the east bank of the Hudson River, not far from where artist [Frederic Church](#) would build his home, [Olana](#). Through looking at the website for the [Columbia County Historical Society](#), I learned about the influence of the Dutch settlers on the county's architecture and material culture. The historical society owns the Luykas Van Alen House (built c. 1737) in Kinderhook, N.Y., one of the few surviving examples of a Dutch-style farmhouse. I wondered if the interior of such a farmhouse might have inspired Edmonds in painting the *Speculator*. Yet when I saw the photographs of the Van Alen House's interior, the house's fireplace looked nothing like the one in *The Speculator*.

I contacted the historical society and curator Diane Shewchuk responded right away. Ruth Piwonka, an art/architectural historian of the Hudson River Valley, was visiting that day so Shewchuk showed her the image of Edmonds' painting. Neither Shewchuk nor Piwonka had ever seen a fireplace of this construction in Dutch houses. Piwonka noted that the pegboard on the right-hand wall was typical of rural homes of the region. She referred me to her colleague, Roderick Blackburn, and he responded that the fireplace was not Dutch but a “loose rendering of a late 18<sup>th</sup> c. English type (jambed) fireplace.” He added that the chimney was “corbelled” to the right in order to line it up with the roofline of the house. Positioning the chimney's opening near the roofline allows water to flow down the roof *away* from the “flashing” around the chimney, thus preventing moisture erosion of the chimney mortar.

## **Are the household objects in *The Speculator* based upon things Edmonds might have seen in Columbia County?**

Edmonds repeatedly painted genre paintings showing domestic interiors and depicting household objects in finely-observed detail. On a visit to Europe in 1840, Edmonds admired the works of seventeenth-century Dutch genre painters such as [Gabriel Metsu](#) whose paintings he saw in the Louvre in Paris (Clark, *American Art Journal*, 75-78; Mann, *Francis William Edmonds: Mammon and Art*, 62).

Diane Shewchuk also observed that the wicker basket in *The Speculator* resembles the Taghkanic baskets that were made by forty families over a period of 150 years in Columbia

County. The [basket-makers](#), country folk who were derided by county residents as “Bushwhackers,” lived near the village of West Taghkanic, N.Y., next to Lake Taconic and descended from early Dutch settlers and Palatine Germans. Shewchuk referred me to Martha Wetherbee’s book on the baskets. Edmonds’ basket exhibits the wide rim that is characteristic of Taghkanic baskets but does not exhibit the “double lashing” visible on the rim of the basket in the Columbia County Historical Society. Based on this evidence, it is difficult to say definitively that Edmonds has shown a Taghkanic basket.



**Taghanick basket with loop handles,  
Collection of the Columbia County Historical  
Society, Kinderhook, New York**

Shewchuk mentioned that the basket could also be Shaker-made. I did not realize that there had been a Shaker community in New York, but I learned from the [Shaker Museum and Library’s](#) website of the [Shaker village at Mount Lebanon](#) in the northern part of Columbia County inhabited from 1785-1947. Both men and women lived celibate lives in the community and shared common property. The Mount Lebanon community made furniture, baskets, and clothing; grew fruit and vegetables for sale; and also manufactured medicines. (Rieman)

Shaker baskets look quite similar to Taghkanic baskets although they usually have a more “finished” look to them without the bumps and irregularities of the weave of the latter. Shaker basket-makers were also more likely to choose materials for their baskets that matched in color and quality while Taghkanic basket-makers used whatever materials they had readily at hand (Wetherbee and Taylor, 44-45).

Edmonds included other objects in *The Speculator* resembling those made by the Mount Lebanon Shakers. Since the Shakers sold their products outside their community, local farming families would purchase these for their homes. The farmer’s [wicker-seated chair](#) looks like a Shaker chair. The farmer’s [vest](#) also resembles clothing made at Mount Lebanon. Through

Charles Flint's catalog of the Mount Lebanon Shaker Collection, I found pegboards, men's hats, and fireplace tongs that looked very much like those in *The Speculator*.

Many of the Old Masters (whom Edmonds so admired) included objects and situations in their genre scenes which evoked proverbs (popular and often moralistic sayings) in the mind of the seventeenth-century Dutch. The scale balance hanging on the fireplace behind the farmer and the saw suspended from the pegboard over the speculator invite interpretation as some sort of visual pun. **Did Edmonds include some of these details to refer to the proverbs and anecdotes of his day, and if so, what are they?**

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