

## **Burning of Center Bridge, 1923**

**Edward W. Redfield (1869-1965)**

oil on canvas

H. 50.25 x W 56.25 inches

James A. Michener Art Museum, acquired with funds secured by State Senator Joe Conti, and gifts from Joseph and Anne Gardocki, and the Laurent Redfield Family



### **Biography**

*The Pennsylvania school born in the Academy at Philadelphia or in the person of Edward W. Redfield is a very concise expression of the simplicity of our language and of the prosaic nature of our sight. It is democratic painting—broad, without subtlety, vigorous in language if not absolutely in heart, blatantly obvious or honest in feeling. It is an unbiased, which means, inartistic, record of nature.* —Guy Pene du Bois

Among the New Hope impressionists, Edward Willis Redfield was the most decorated, winning more awards than any other American artist except John Singer Sargent. Primarily a landscape painter, Redfield was acclaimed as the most “American” artist of the New Hope school because of his vigor and individualism. Redfield favored the technique of painting en plein air, that is, outdoors amid nature. Tying his canvas to a tree, Redfield worked in even the most brutal weather. Painting rapidly, in thick, broad brushstrokes, and without attempting preliminary sketches, Redfield typically completed his paintings in one sitting. Although Redfield is best known for his snow scenes, he painted several spring and summer landscapes, often set in Maine, where he spent his summers. He also painted cityscapes, including, most notably, *Between Daylight and Darkness* (1909), an almost surreal, tonalist painting of the New York skyline in twilight. Blessed with a long life, Redfield painted until the age of 84, when he began to lose the vigor he needed for his physically demanding artistic practices.

Drawn to the natural beauty and artistic freedom of Bucks County, Edward Redfield settled in Center Bridge in 1898 with his French wife, Elise Deligant. Although Redfield was regarded as the dean of the New Hope art colony, he did not consider himself part of this group, and consequently declined to exhibit with them. Because of his reclusive tendencies, Redfield seldom actively mentored the younger New Hope artists who were influenced by his work, such as Walter Elmer Schofield, Walter Emerson Baum, John Fulton Folinsbee, or Charles Rosen. Among this younger generation of painters, George Sotter enjoyed the best rapport with Redfield because the older artist appreciated how Sotter, as the only male in his 1902 summer art course, “saved his life.” Redfield continually affirmed his commitment to the arts of Bucks County, at the end of his life practicing traditional Pennsylvania crafts, such as woodworking and making hooked rugs.

**Sound the alarm! Where are the firefighters?**



*“Sound the alarm! Center Bridge is burning! As I stand on the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware River, I can see people clustered around watching as the bridge that connects Pennsylvania with New Jersey (link to map) is consumed in a raging fire. It is the summer of 1923 and the wooden supports of this old bridge are burning bright red against the midnight sky. Why isn’t anyone doing anything to prevent total destruction? I look around and I can make out the huddled silhouettes of my friends and neighbors. I sketch this historic and horrible event but I don’t have anything but this old envelope. That will have to do!”*

*—Edward Redfield*

### **Who is covering the story?**

**Reporter:** *I got here as quickly as I could. The newspaper just called in the fire and I have had to travel from New Hope. It’s worse than I imagined! The sky is filled with spectacular smoke and fire, glowing, red hot—almost as if someone had set off fireworks. It’s terrible! As a reporter, though, I need to keep my story accurate and informative. Let me see, I think I will interview one of the bystanders as I make my way over to a firefighter.*

**Reporter:** *Excuse me, ma’am, can you tell me anything about this tragedy?*

**Fern Coppedge:** *Well, the alarm sounded near my home at Cuttaloosa around ten o’clock this evening and my guests and I rushed down River Road to see what all the fuss was about. I was afraid it might have been the house of my neighbor and friend, Professor Daniel Garber. Luckily, it was not. I have painted this view many times.*

### **Wasn’t Redfield the artist who painted snow scenes?**

Edward Redfield is best known for painting hundreds of large-scale snow scenes, most of which were made within a few miles of his home along the Delaware River north of New Hope. Redfield worked outdoors, directly from nature. This painting technique is called “en plein air”. He would often tie his canvas to a tree and work right through a snowstorm. He painted quickly (as you can imagine!), using thick, broad strokes and rarely bothering to make a preliminary sketch. Redfield usually completed his painting at “one go” or during one outing, and he described his painting technique in this way: “I wanted to go outdoors and capture the look of a scene, whether it was a barn or a bridge, as it looked on a certain day.”

### **What’s beautiful about a raging fire?**

Edward Redfield believed in painting what he saw. *The Burning of Center Bridge* is almost like a newspaper photograph that tells a story about something that actually took place. Imagine Redfield saying, “This is what it really looked like when the bridge burned down.” Many people were standing by the riverbank and the canal with their hair and bodies outlined by the firelight. Large pieces of the bridge were still burning after they fell into the river. Firefighters sprayed water onto the main part of the fire as the smoke and embers floated into the night sky. This dramatic scene must have excited Redfield, since he made a quick sketch on an old envelope and then went back to his studio to paint a small version of the scene. On July 24, 1923 he made a much larger version of the painting (his personal favorite), and it can be seen at the James A Michener Art Museum today.



### **What is an “American artist?”**

Among the New Hope impressionists, Edward Willis Redfield won more awards than any other American artist except John Singer Sargent. An influential art critic, Guy Pene du Bois, called Redfield an “American artist” because his painting style was energetic, individual, and boldly direct. His style was very different from that of many of the famous French impressionist artists, including Monet and Renoir. Redfield continued to paint in this style throughout his long life while the international art world became interested in new forms of style and representation, such as modernism, post-impressionism, and abstract expressionism.

### **Learn More**

Try a news reporter’s approach to a painting in the below activity, “Newsflash! What’s the Story?”

### **Nature starts a fire.**

What do you think started the fire in this painting? It was lightning! The bridge at that time was a 112 year-old wooden covered structure that burned easily. Read about it in a 1999 press release at [www.tfaoi.com](http://www.tfaoi.com).

### **Wow, lightning must get very hot! How hot do you think it gets?**

Lightning is hotter than the surface of the sun, which has a temperature of 10,000 degrees F! Its temperature is not even close, however, to the inside of the sun, where the sun is producing its energy. The ignition point of wood, the point at which it catches fire, is about 350 degrees F. so the lightning was able to start a fire. To learn more about all the different kinds of lightning and watch Nova programs about weather, go to [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org).

### **Who is fighting the fire?**

The men were probably volunteers who trained together to put out fires in their neighborhood. The earliest firefighters in the US were the colonist who would form a bucket brigade, a line of people passing full buckets of water toward the fire, to fight fires close to their homes. The first organized volunteer company was the Mutual Fire Society formed in 1718 in Boston; they only helped their small group. A much larger group was the Union Fire Company founded in 1736, in Philadelphia by Benjamin Franklin. To see Ben Franklin in his leather firefighter’s helmet, and to learn more, go to [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org).

### **Related Images**

The bridge originally was a covered bridge-one of many for which Bucks County, PA was known. Unfortunately, there are only a few covered bridges left. Can you think of some reasons why the bridges would be re-built, besides fire? Learn more about Bucks County’s covered bridges at [scenicbuckscounty.com](http://scenicbuckscounty.com).

Many Bucks County artists created images of covered bridges, including Sigmund



Kozlow. Look at his 1975 pastel drawing called Covered Bridge at [www.michenerartmuseum.org](http://www.michenerartmuseum.org). Do you see the windows on the side of the bridge in his painting? They allowed light to come into the dark bridge. Do you think it would be hard to walk or drive through the bridge at night?

Today, Center Bridge is very different than the bridge of Redfield's painting. There is a photograph of it on the website of the Center Bridge Inn, [www.centrebridgeinn.com](http://www.centrebridgeinn.com).

Redfield also painted other views of the Center Bridge area. They are in the collection of the Woodmere Art Museum. View his paintings at [www.woodmereartmuseum.org](http://www.woodmereartmuseum.org).

Many of Bucks county artists painted the canal, and a few of them even painted the locks. . June Pfifer Delph's *Smithtown-Tinicum Locks* and shows the locks. View her work at [www.bucksiu.org](http://www.bucksiu.org).

### Related Links

#### **It looks like there are two rivers in the painting? Is this right?**

The water in the foreground of the painting is really the Delaware Canal. The canal went from Easton through Bristol in Bucks County and was very important in transporting goods. Today it is a State Park. Learn more at [www.dcnr.state.pa.us](http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us).

Learn more about the Friends of the Delaware Canal at [www.fodc.org](http://www.fodc.org).

The Cooks Creek and Gallows Run Watersheds are active local community organizations serving the environmental needs of the watershed areas of the Delaware River. Learn more at [www.cooks creekpa.org](http://www.cooks creekpa.org) and [www.grwabucks.org](http://www.grwabucks.org).

Canals operate using a system called a lock. To find out more about locks you can go to the [terrax.org](http://terrax.org) website. Their motto is "*Teaching people about the world in which we live.*" Play their game about locks at [www.terrax.org](http://www.terrax.org).

