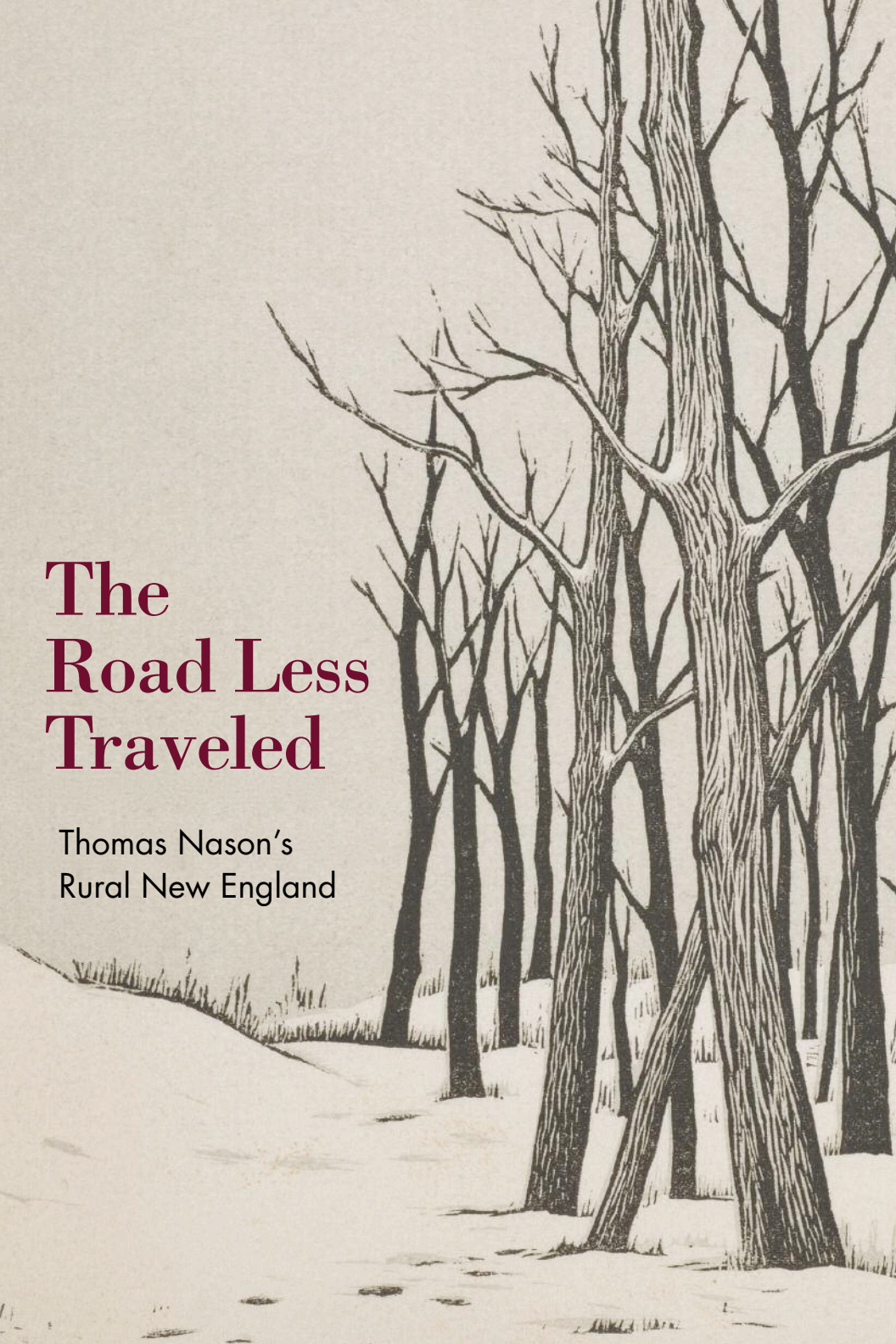
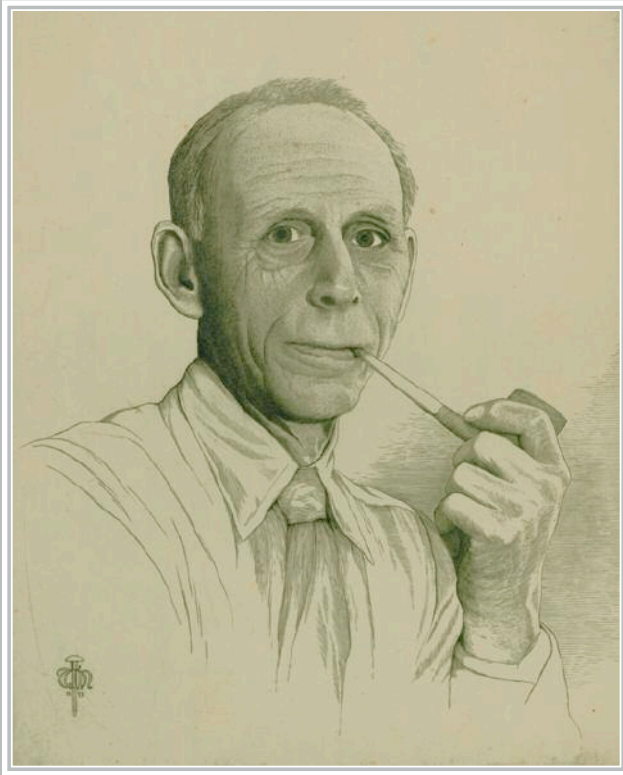


# The Road Less Traveled

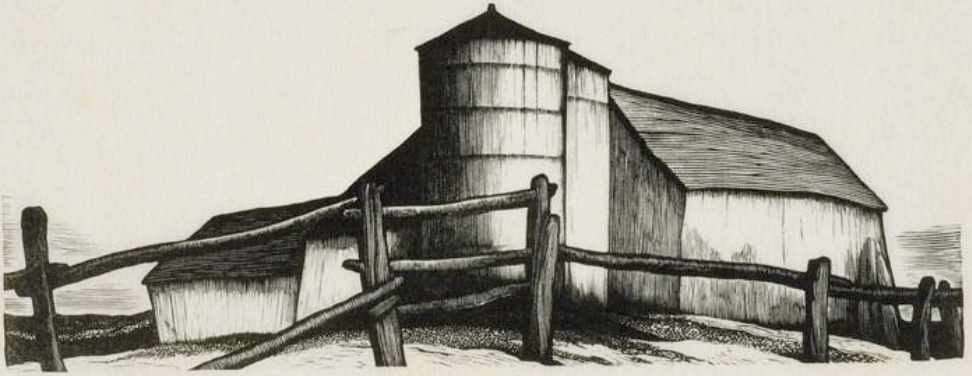
Thomas Nason's  
Rural New England





## The American printmaker Thomas W. Nason

(1889–1971) responded to common criticisms of the diminutive scale of his work with a powerfully concise statement: “*It is better to be exquisite than to be ample.*” The simplicity of his words reveals one of the keys to understanding Nason’s body of work. He held himself to his own standard of craftsmanship, one that was often higher than the demands of dealers, critics, and the market. In so doing he positioned himself as an independent, outside the mainstream of the modern art world. His reputation has, for years, followed this outsider’s path, rarely bringing Nason’s work into comparison with the broader scope of American art,



*Farm Buildings, 1930*

especially Modernism. His independent ways, however, do not mean that Nason was out of touch with developments in the art world. Surveying his body of work reveals the ways in which this independent New England artist adapted elements of Modernism to suit his individual style.

Nason took the less traveled road toward becoming an artist. Born and raised in a family he described as “a practical lot of Yankees,” he did not immediately embark on a career in the fine arts.<sup>1</sup> After finishing school in Billerica, Massachusetts, Nason left his family farm for work in industry at Lowell and later Cambridge, Massachusetts. After taking the Civil Service exam he found a position with the Standard Oil Company in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. He was transferred to the Philippines at the age of 21, where he coded and decoded cables from Washington, D.C. From there he traveled to Hong Kong, Trieste, Venice, Paris, and London *en route* back to the United States in 1913. He took a series of office jobs in Boston, which led him to California and Chile. Finally in 1916, he enlisted in the Army and shipped off to France, where he once again worked in codes.

After his discharge from the Army in 1919, he married Margaret Warren and moved back to Cambridge, where he

discovered Goodspeed's Bookshop and other retail print distributors nearby. Art was more of a pastime for him in 1921, when he made his first attempt at recreating the kinds of prints he saw for sale, having had no formal training in the field. Instead, Nason taught himself the workings of various presses and a range of print techniques through books and observation. A visit to the Boston Public Library, where he read an 1838 treatise on wood engraving, introduced him to the medium on



*Engraving a Block, 1941*

which he would base his artistic career. Working out of his home studio in the evenings after his office job, Nason honed his technique. By 1923, he presented his first works for sale at Goodspeed's and found his first critical success with *In New Hampshire* (1925).

By 1929, his work had begun to sell, and with the death of his employer in 1931, he decided to leave the business world and make a go of it as a printmaker, a risky chance to take in the early years of the Great Depression.

Nason continued to develop professionally, venturing into copper plate engraving in the early 1930s, teaching himself the technique. Unhappy with the expense of commercially available presses, he again demonstrated his independent spirit when he decided to build his own press. This expansion of media allowed him to enter professional societies of etchers, and their competitions, previously closed to him as a wood engraver. He was a member of several major arts organizations, including the National Academy of Design, and was recognized nationally and internationally for the skillful application of his burin. Over the course of his career virtually every American print club commissioned an edition from him. Nason continued on, living a relatively obscure life in rural Connecticut for the next four decades. Hindered somewhat by advancing age he experimented more



*Midsummer, 1954*

with painting at the end of his career. Nason suffered a heart attack in his Lyme studio in March 1971, but from his hospital bed his final thoughts were of his studio, asking his wife to take care of the tools he had unwillingly abandoned.

Carl Zigrosser, a print connoisseur and curator, was among many who identified a poetic metaphor in Nason's prints. "As the poet works with words, with sound and rhythm, to achieve his aim, so the artist works within the convention of his craft . . . a sonnet in pictorial form."<sup>2</sup> With his landscape engravings, Nason paid tribute to the great accomplishments of the genre throughout history, absorbing and learning from the masters of bygone centuries. Through his study Nason experimented with ways to imbue his scenes not just with a sense of place, but with an emotional quality or mood. The somber attitude of most of Nason's landscapes suggests not just the poetic contemplation of his motif but an elegiac form. The handling of his favored subjects, the quaint pastures of New England farms, weatherworn

regional architecture, and vignettes of coastal scenes, all honor a way of life in decline.

The parallel between Nason's engravings and poetry is expressly stated through the numerous illustrations he made for the poet Robert Frost. Beyond the illustrations, however, Nason and Frost shared a similar sense of despair about the fate of rural New England in their respective arts. Frost's poem "Directive" laments:

There is a house that is no more a house  
Upon a farm that is no more a farm  
And in a town that is no more a town.<sup>3</sup>

These lines could also be used fittingly to describe the property Nason and his wife Margaret discovered in Lyme in the summer of 1931. The couple was visiting Connecticut from their home in Boston when they came across an abandoned farm on Shippee Hill along Joshuatown Road. There was nothing left of the early eighteenth-century structure but a massive stone chimney and the surrounding foundations. They purchased this backcountry property and slowly came to inhabit the spot, finally finishing their house in 1938. Soon, however, they were displeased by the "progress" encroaching upon their old-fashioned surroundings as nearby roads were paved and electricity brought into the area.

Although he preferred to physically dwell in the New England of the past, Nason's prints bear witness to his adoption of some of the formal elements of Modernism. His ability to observe and process the work of historical artists, demonstrated in his more traditional landscapes, prepared him to subtly assume the stylistic traits of his contemporaries. Like Frost, Nason is traditionally viewed as operating outside, rather than participating in, their shared cultural moment. As with the narrator in Frost's "The Road Not Taken" we interpret Nason's independent nature as evidence of an admirable, even heroic, American individualism. Considering Nason as a willing participant, curious about



A Deserted Farm, 1931

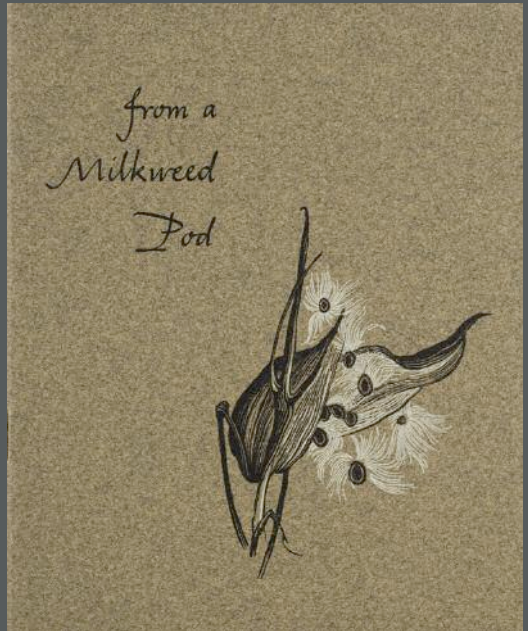
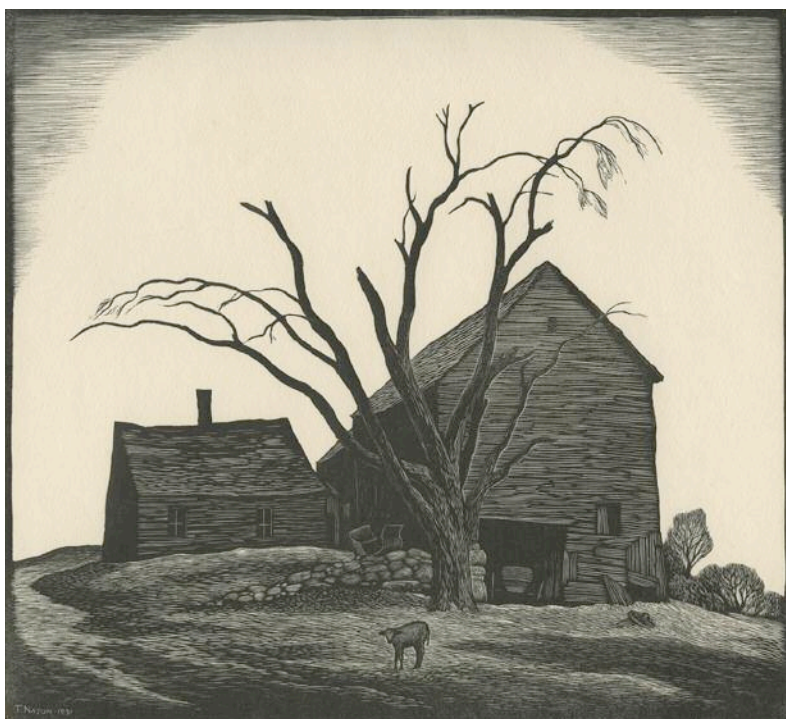


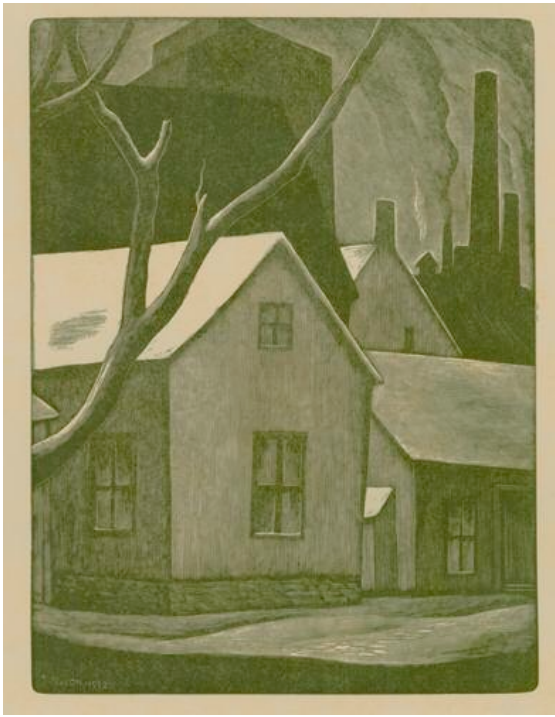
Illustration for Robert Frost's *From a Milkweed Pod*, 1954



*Back Country*, 1931

twentieth-century aesthetic developments, runs counter to his more conventional reputation. Interpretations of American Regionalists like Grant Wood have similarly been revised, doing away with the perception that these artists are anti-modern.

While his works are not radically abstract, Nason adeptly maintains the somber, elegiac mood of his prints as he experiments with a more modern visual language. He utilizes expressionistic techniques and subtle abstractions from nature to convey his meaning even more clearly than literal realism might. Several of his prints show an interest in geometrically stylizing or simplifying his subjects in ways that make them more expressive. The negative space of the flat open sky in *Back Country* (1931), for example, looms over the dilapidated farmstead. A decimated tree silhouetted in the center of the composition brings the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romanticism of nature into the modern era with its streamlined



*Factory Village*, 1931

form and abrupt cropping of limbs. The overall effect communicates the starkness and desolation of the scene more sincerely than faithful obedience to visual reality.

In reconciling the two aspects of Thomas Nason's prints, the poetic traditionalist and the experimenting modernist, the artist's technical mastery remains a constant. Nowhere do all these elements combine so seamlessly than in the 1932 wood engraving *Factory Village*. While a departure from his more pastoral subjects, *Factory Village* depicts the intersection of the modern and rural worlds in this bleakly industrial scene. In it Nason eulogizes not simply the passing of agrarian ways, but the demise of the New England mill village. While acclaimed Modernists Charles Sheeler and Diego Rivera celebrate American manufacturing in their images of the auto industry, Nason uses a similar layering of geometric forms, simplified and



*Maine Islands (Offshore Islands), 1941*

smoothed over. Distant chimneys replace the billowing clouds of his pure landscapes with flat sooty smoke as the black factory block itself further darkens the sky. In the foreground, a minimal forked tree branch leans in, visually disconnected from its trunk and roots. The varied array of tones in the print is achieved not with the multi-color chiaroscuro process Nason perfected, but with perhaps the finest lines he ever incised. The overall effect resembles lithography more than traditional wood engraving. This print summarizes how Nason's approach to the craftsmanship of his printmaking paralleled his personal life. While he ensconced himself in the poetic hillsides of rural New England in life and in art, Nason also made unexpected forays into the wider, modern world.

AMANDA C. BURDAN, PH.D  
Catherine Fehrer Curatorial Fellow  
Florence Griswold Museum

1. Thomas Nason, Letter to Francis Comstock, 1966.
2. Carl Zigrosser, "Near Lyme, Sunset." The Woodcut Society, 1945.
3. Robert Frost, "Directive," *Steeple Bush* (Holt, 1947).

**T**HE FLORENCE GRISWOLD MUSEUM takes great pride in preserving the legacy of Thomas Nason, as an artist and as an interpreter of the American scene. The current exhibition affirms our ongoing commitment to maintain and broaden the artist's reputation. In Nason's own lifetime he was commissioned to create an engraving of the Florence Griswold House and, following his death, the Museum organized the exhibition entitled *Thomas W. Nason, A Personal View of New England*. When the opportunity to purchase a substantial collection of Nason material arose in 1989, the Museum made a significant investment in the artist's work. The dividend of that investment came in 1991, when Nason's niece Janet Eltinge donated the contents of Nason's studio, including tools, blocks, prints, papers, and personal possessions to the Museum. Ms. Eltinge's generous gift, given in honor of Nason's wife Margaret, was marked by the 1993 exhibition *Thomas W. Nason: American Printmaker*. The forethought of our board, donors, and staff in assembling an unrivaled collection of prints and archival materials has made the Florence Griswold Museum the leading repository of Nason's work.

**ALL ILLUSTRATIONS ARE BY THOMAS W. NASON**

**FRONT COVER:** Illustration for Robert Frost's *The Wood-Pile* (detail), The Spiral Press, New York, 1961, Lyme Historical Society Archives, Florence Griswold Museum; **INSIDE FRONT COVER:** *Self-Portrait*, 1955, copper engraving, Florence Griswold Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Saxton Ziemer; **PAGE 1:** *Farm Buildings*, 1930, wood engraving, Florence Griswold Museum, Purchase; **PAGE 2:** *Engraving a Block*, 1941, wood engraving, Florence Griswold Museum, Purchase; **PAGE 3:** *Midsummer*, 1954, wood engraving, Florence Griswold Museum, Gift of Janet Eltinge; **PAGE 5 TOP:** *A Deserted Farm*, 1931, wood engraving, Florence Griswold Museum, Purchase; **PAGE 5 BOTTOM:** Illustration for Robert Frost's *From a Milkweed Pod*, The Spiral Press, New York, 1954, Lyme Historical Society Archives, Florence Griswold Museum; **PAGE 6:** *Back Country*, 1931, wood engraving, Florence Griswold Museum, Gift of Janet Eltinge; **PAGE 7:** *Factory Village*, 1931, wood engraving, Florence Griswold Museum, Purchase; **PAGE 8:** *Maine Islands (Offshore Islands)*, 1941, copper engraving, Florence Griswold Museum, Gift of Mr. Roger Martin; **BACK COVER:** *Fence Post and Rail*, 1934, wood engraving, Lyme Historical Society Archives, Florence Griswold Museum



Published on the occasion of the exhibition  
*The Road Less Traveled: Thomas Nason's Rural New England*,  
January 17–April 12, 2009. The exhibition and brochure  
were made possible through the support of  
the Nika P. Thayer Exhibition and Publication Fund.

FLORENCE GRISWOLD MUSEUM  
OLD LYME · CONNECTICUT