



Autumn Reflections—Sugar Run

Artist's Passion for Nature Inspires Activism

Brian Keeler has a zeal for the bucolic. The Ithaca, N.Y., resident maintains a studio in his hometown of Wyalusing, Pa., and devotes much of his time to painting landscapes. He uses one of his works, *Crepuscular Light—Sugar Run Pa.*, to call attention to the fact that future plans for the area may include a natural gas plant just beyond the Susquehanna River, where he paints.

By Stephanie Kalina-Metzger

Brian Keeler has been at odds with a proposed Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) project since he learned about New Fortress Energy's intention to invest \$800 million to develop a liquified natural gas facility along the Susquehanna in the quiet community of Wyalusing. If permitted to move forward, the LNG complex will span 260 acres, obliterating open fields and woodlands.

Nature-inspired art

Keeler's passion for art manifested early in life, and later led him to Keystone College near Scranton, then to the York Academy of Arts. After graduation, he studied under accomplished realist painters Dan Green, Everett Kinstler, Jack Beal and John Shanks, before going on to win numerous awards. In the spring of 2004, he was honored with a retrospective of

own work, along with his father William Keeler's paintings, at the Everhart Museum in Scranton. Keeler wrote a book memorializing his father's work titled, *The Art Work of William Keeler—Pennsylvania Regionalist Painter* (River Light Press, 2004). Keeler's work can be seen in museums and galleries throughout the United States.

For years, Keeler has focused on the beauty of the Susquehanna, incorporating the river into many of his oil, pastel and watercolor paintings. The artist underscores the fact that time spent on the river is an important part of the painting process, so the LNG project hits close to home. His passion is palpable when he uses one simple word to describe the project: "abomination," and adds an exclamation point when he says the project is a "260-acre desecration of the natural beauty of the Susquehanna at the exact spot where I painted."

But it's not just aesthetics which concern Keeler. He's also worried about what fracking, the process of injecting liquid at high pressure into subterranean rocks, boreholes, etc., to force open existing fissures to extract oil or gas, will mean to the small town of Wyalusing, a community of less than 600 people.

Behind the scenes

A *Forbes*' article, published in 2018, states that babies born within about two miles of a fracking site are more likely to suffer from poor health. "The largest impacts were to babies born within a half mile of a site, with those babies being 25 percent more likely to be born at a low birth weight," the article reads.

Beyond the health effects are the impacts on infrastructure. "There will be thousands and thousands of trucks coming in, pipelining it like a spider web throughout the northern tier of Pennsylvania," said Keeler, who participates in Sierra Club and Bristol-based Delaware River Keeper Network activities to exert pressure on the industry. He cites the "safety aspect" as an alarm bell.

"There is a good reason why trains transporting this stuff are referred to as 'train bombs.' One estimate is that each train coming out of Wyalusing will contain the equivalent of four Hiroshima nuclear bombs. What could go wrong?" he asks rhetorically. Keeler is referring to the risk of vapor cloud explosions associated with transporting LNG.

Keeler is also concerned with what he says is a history, on the part of New Fortress Energy, of bulldozing historic sites. He cites French Azilum, a settlement built in 1793 in Bradford County, Pa., for refugees fleeing the French Revolution, which could fall if the LNG plant gets the green light.

The artist also fears that *Friedenshutzen*, a resettled ancient Native American town, may be in the crosshairs. An entry on *pa-roots.com* reads, "On the east side of the Susquehanna River, about a mile and a half below the mouth of the Wyalusing creek, and directly opposite the present village of Sugar Run, was situated an Indian town called *M'chwihusing*, which the whites shortened to Wyalusing. When the town was rebuilt on higher ground under the supervision of the Moravian missionaries,



Crepuscular Light—Sugar Run, Pa

the name was changed to *Friedenshutzen*, signifying 'huts of peace.'"

Keeler references a letter in the *Rocket Courier* written by a gentleman by the name of Bob Fuhrman, which minimizes the historical importance of *Friedenshutzen* by stating that the settlement existed for less than a decade. "If this is the measurement of relevance, we could argue that the Battle of Gettysburg, or Antietam, should not be hallowed sites of respect as part of our national heritage," said Keeler.

Katie Faull, a professor at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, said that *Friedenshutzen* is world-famous in some ways. "Johann Wolfgang von Goethe composed a poem about the Susquehanna at this location, even though he'd never been here," said Faull.

Where it stands

Keeler continues his campaign, even as opponents mention the upsides of fracking, from production of cheap energy, to job creation and other economic benefits along with national security benefits such as energy independence. "People need to see the bigger picture," contends Keeler.

For now, he's just glad the project is stalled due to COVID-19 and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission has ordered New Fortress to submit a new application, which may or may not halt the project altogether. Only time will tell.

Meanwhile, Keeler will continue to fight. "This crisis has awakened me to qualities of soul in myself and my hometown and the land that I love. I hope my brethren do not sell their souls," he said, with a sigh. ★

Stephanie Kalina-Metzger is an award-winning writer, whose work can be seen in dozens of publications across the United States.