



*Native Encampment at Salem, 1840*  
Attributed to Joseph Ropes (1812-1885)

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Salem, MA

Oil on canvas

M8528



### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1830, the Indian Removal Act was passed under the presidency of Andrew Jackson. This act provided funds for the president to conduct land-exchange ("removal") treaties. It is estimated that 100,000 Native Americans eventually relocated in the West as a result of this policy, most of them emigrating during the 1830s. In theory, the migrations were voluntary, but the Jackson administration pressured Native Americans to sign agreements.

It is impossible to know whether the artist, Joseph Ropes, was merely painting an interesting local scene, or whether there is a political position expressed here. There is evidence that some voices in Massachusetts protested against Jackson's Native American policies. For example, Massachusetts Senate President Leverett Saltonstall penned a document he titled "Indian Affairs 1831." In it he raised questions about the validity of negating treaties between the United States and Native Americans, as the state of Georgia proposed to do with the support of President Jackson. Also in the 19th century, benevolent societies acting on the behalf of Native Americans organized in Salem.

### ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The painting might be understood in a variety of ways. Does it depict Native Americans (probably Penobscot) in harmony with the industrializing city pictured beyond the Beverly-Salem railroad bridge? Or are we to understand that the Penobscot, in their summer encampment where they would sell baskets and other wares, are "vanishing" as industrial progress takes hold (notice that the sun shines over the city while clouds hang over the encampment)? Either way, the artist clearly separated the social and physical worlds of the city and encampment through the use of the railroad and a large tree, both of which segment the canvas. Without knowing more about the artist or owner's sentiments, it is difficult to determine any one intended meaning for the artwork.

### SAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Describe what you see in this scene. Do you recognize it as Salem?
- Divide your worksheet and the painting into fourths. For each area of the canvas answer the following questions.
  - List what is there
  - Does the artist seem to have positive or negative feelings about what is there? What makes you think that?
- Does the Native American "area" seem to have more space than the city "area" on the canvas?
- Is there anything else that would suggest the artist's feelings about the relationship between the city, the people, and the landscape in this image?
- What does this suggest to you about the feelings the artist (a white man) had regarding the way Native Americans in Salem were viewed?
- Why might the artist have painted this image? Who might have wanted to own it?

### SUGGESTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- After observing this painting, ask students to read both the "Indian Removal Act" (1830) and Leverett Saltonstall's "Indian Affairs 1831" document. Have students look again at the painting to see if their interpretation of the artwork's meaning has changed. A transcription of Saltonstall's document is on-line at <http://www.saleminhistory.org/ImmigrationMigration/VanishingIndian/1831-transcript.html>

2003 Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Frameworks: 1.8, 4.15, 5.34, USI.23, USI.26, USII. 4, USI.27