

SILVER SPRING CHURCH

A \$90,000 Blessing Almost Sent Out With the Trash

By HAMIL R. HARRIS
and PAUL RICHARD
Washington Post Staff Writers

For years, members of Christ Congregational Church in Silver Spring have wanted to fix up the old brick farmhouse they use for retreats and summer camps.

But they held off on repairs to the West Virginia building because money was tight.

Now the church will be able to pay for the renovations thanks to a stroke of luck: the discovery of a valuable oil painting at first thought to be trash.

Last month, at the end of a bidding war at Weschler's auction house on E Street NW, that long-neglected canvas — identified as "View of Mt. Katahdin From the West Bank of the Penobscot River" (1870) by Virgil Macey Williams — sold for \$90,000.

The canvas shows an untroubled landscape, a man and his dog in a canoe, the tints of autumn foliage, and a peaceful rippling river set against the backdrop of a mountain in the sun.



BY SUSAN HILL

Church members and volunteers found the painting while cleaning out a West Virginia farmhouse in 1973.

The dusty painting was found by church members and volunteers cleaning out the farmhouse in Yellow Springs in 1973. Mary Ann Peterson, a member, thought the painting might be worthless, but rather than toss it, she took it home and slid it under her couch.

That same year, Peterson's husband, curious about the painting, took it to the Smithsonian Institution in hopes of learning more about the piece and its creator.

William H. Truettner, a specialist in 19th-century American paintings, was able to authenticate the painting.

It turns out the painting was created by Williams (1830-86), who was not a major artist, although he was a busy one. And, as the curator had recognized, Williams's view of the wilds of Maine tied the painter to a telling episode in American art history.

At a time when the painters of Paris were leaving their city studios to paint in the forests near Barbizon, their more conservative American contemporaries were doing much the same, departing Boston and New York to find inspiration in the untouched lands of Maine.

Many important artists — Frederic Edwin Church, his teacher Thomas Cole and, most famously, Winslow Homer — made the journey. After the Civil War, when Virginia's contribution to the founding of the nation seemed to bear the stain of slavery and rebellion, the hard granite of New England and all that it represented (the Mayflower, the Pilgrims, the first Thanksgiving) was preferred as the rock on which the nation was built. Wil-



COURTESY OF WESCHLERS

Virgil Macey Williams's view of an Indian canoe in Maine's untouched wilderness is part of a telling episode in American art history.

liams's view of an Indian canoe in Maine's wilderness reflects that change in the national narrative.

Williams was a member of New England's art establishment. He had studied at Brown University and in Paris and Rome, and, after returning to Boston, had taught drawing at Harvard University. His pictures of Italian scenes are much less sought after than his American landscapes. The year after he painted "Mt. Katahdin," he moved west to direct the new San Francisco School of Design, where he left a distinct mark on California landscape painting.

With the knowledge that they had a "real" work of art on their hands, church members paid Robert Scott Wiles at the Corcoran Gallery of Art \$1,000 to clean

and conserve the 26-by-40-inch canvas. The church then donated it to Truettner's museum, now the Smithsonian American Art Museum, where it was displayed among the New England landscapes until 1996, when the museum, no longer having space to display it, returned it to the church.

From the American Art Museum, "Mt. Katahdin" went to the Mansion at Strathmore in Rockville, where it was exhibited for 10 years before the church decided to sell it last month.

Wechsler's pre-sale estimate was \$30,000.

"It was amazing," said the Rev. Sandy Dodson, associate minister of the 700-member congregation. "We almost threw the painting away."

"People love what America looked like back in the 19th century," said Virginia Weschler of the auction house. The bidding was high, she said, because the painting "had a little history and had been on display at the Smithsonian for 22 years."

"Much to our delight, the bidding went up and up," Weschler said. "It was wonderful, because we know that the church will put the money to wonderful use."

The auctioneers charge an 8 percent commission. After that deduction, the Retreat House Restoration Fund received \$82,800.

The buyer, who wished to remain anonymous, told one church member that the painting would be donated to the Colby College Museum of Art in Maine.