



**ARKANSAS HISTORIC  
PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

# Arkansas Post Offices and the Treasury Department's Section Art Program, 1938-1942

By Sandra Taylor Smith & Mark K. Christ

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*The Chosen Site* by E. Martin Hennings, Van Buren Post

Cover photo: National Archives Photo No. 121-CMS-1A-38

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## Origins

American interest in art grew steadily in the three decades prior to the Great Depression. Investments in art museums increased from \$15 million in 1910 to \$58 million in 1930. In 1930, there were 167 art museums in the United States - 56 percent more than in 1920. These gains led scientific, industrial and general museums over the same period. (The New Deal for Artists) The commercial art market likewise flourished, especially in large cities such as New York and Chicago.

This renaissance of American art was effectively ended by the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing nationwide economic depression. Widespread closing of commercial art galleries left the artistic community in despair. Indeed, a 1933 Presidential commission report concluded “for the overwhelming majority of the American people the fine arts of painting and sculpture...do not exist.” (The Public as Patron, p.10)

While President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s various New Deal programs provided relief for unemployed workers of most occupations, specific assistance for unemployed artists was more difficult to obtain. On May 9, 1933, the artist George Biddle wrote his former college classmate, President Franklin Roosevelt, requesting government assistance to organize a group of muralists, sharing common social and aesthetic ideas, to decorate a public building. Biddle hoped that this would garner wide publicity and spur more artistic interest from architects and the public. Biddle had been inspired by Mexican murals of the 1920s that were sponsored by President Alvaro Obregon.

In the Mexican model, young artists were paid a small salary to decorate the walls of public buildings with murals expressing the ideas of the Mexican revolution. The combination of social ideals, artistic freedom and monetary assistance produced what some critics have acclaimed as the greatest national school of mural painting since the Italian Renaissance. (The New Deal for Artists, p.5) Biddle hoped for similar results in the United States.



*“How Happy Was The Occasion,” Mary Purser’s 1939 mural, still hangs in the Clarksville Post Office in Johnson County. (AHPP Photo)*

Roosevelt, who had employed needy artists when governor of New York, was receptive to Biddle's suggestion and directed him to meet with Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Lawrence W. Robert, who served as custodian of federal buildings. Robert and Biddle proposed to decorate the new multi-million dollar Department of Justice Building in Washington, D.C., with murals since the original monies appropriated to embellish the building had not been spent due to depression-induced budget cutting.

Although their plan gained the support of several key federal officials and the first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, it was opposed by the National Commission of Fine Arts, the presidential advisors on art since 1910. (*The New Deal for Artists*, p.6) This commission insisted that the classical architecture of the Capitol be matched with classically inspired art. Biddle's proposal appeared doomed when the President declined to challenge the Commission.

Undaunted, Biddle continued to look for bureaucratic loopholes and in November 1933 found an eager ally in another Treasury Department official, Edward Bruce.

Although hired by the Department of Treasury in 1932 as an expert on silver and monetary policy, Bruce had an extensive background in art, having studied under the American painter Maurice Sterne in Italy for six years before a successful 10-year stint as an artist. Biddle and Bruce secured the



*The Osceola Post Office in Mississippi County, built during the Great Depression, held a mural that was later destroyed by fire. (AHPP Photo)*

backing of Charles L. Borie, the architect of the Department of Justice Building and the person who would normally choose the decorating artist for the building. Ironically, the Treasury Department refused to allocate funds for the project, so Biddle and Bruce approached Harold L. Ickes, the public works administrator, for a small amount of the \$400 million relief allotment. Ickes was persuaded after a 20-minute conversation and sent a memorandum to Relief Administrator Harry L. Hopkins requesting funds be diverted to the Treasury Department for a project to employ artists. (The New Deal for Artists, p.9)

Confident that the money Ickes had promised would become a reality and he would soon begin painting the Department of Justice Building, Biddle relaxed his lobbying efforts and Edward Bruce emerged as the chief proponent of government patronage of the arts. Unlike Biddle, who initially wanted assistance for a self-appointed group of muralists to express the social ideals of the Roosevelt administration, Bruce envisioned federal involvement as a catalyst that would create a nationwide demand for art. He predicted, "If we can create the demand for beauty in our lives our slums will go. The ugliness will be torn down and beauty will take its place." (The New Deal for Artists, p.10)

The new relief project, named the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), was allocated \$1,039,000 from the new Civil Works Administration (CWA), which had been created to administer the \$400 million transferred from the Public Works Administration. Although under the supervision of the Treasury, the PWAP was bound by CWA policies and regulations. (The New Deal for Artists, p.10)

Under the administration of Edward Bruce, the PWAP provided relief for 3,750 painters, sculptors and printmakers that produced over 15,000 works of art before funds were exhausted in June 1934. (The Public as Patron, p.10). In September of that year, George Biddle reflected upon the positive impact of the program he helped create and noted that the PWAP had "made America art conscious as never before...It has made the artist conscious of the fact that he is of service to the community, that he fills a necessary function in our society." (The Public as Patron, p.10) Ironically, Biddle never painted for the PWAP. Government lawyers ruled that relief money could not be used for the Department of Justice Building murals since funds for the decoration of that building had already been separately approved by Congress.

As part of the first national work relief effort, the CWA, the Public Works of Art Project was meant only as short-term emergency relief. When the depression continued, support for new, more permanent programs increased. Consequently, the New Deal spawned several new arts projects. The Federal Art Project (FAP) operated under the supervision of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) from 1935 to 1943. As the largest of the new government arts programs, the Federal Art Project primarily focused its efforts in the larger cities (where the majority of artists resided) and employed artists already on relief rolls to produce art for state and municipal governments and institutions. (Democratic Vistas, p.6) The Treasury Department directed another relief program for the decoration of 1,900 nearly artless federal buildings, which, at that time, were built and administered by the Treasury. Funded by a grant from the WPA, the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) sought only "good" artists on relief and was subsequently dubbed "the Ritz" of relief programs by Time magazine. (The Federal Presence, p.372) From 1935 to 1939, TRAP artists completed 89 murals, 65 sculptures, and 10,000 easel paintings and prints.

Before TRAP had been conceived, however, an important new nonrelief art program was created by the Treasury Department: the Section of Painting and Sculpture.

## The Section

The Section of Painting and Sculpture, known simply as “The Section,” did not originate exactly as planned. Toward the end of the PWAP, Edward Bruce proposed that a permanent “Division of Fine Arts” be established within the Treasury Department and requested President Roosevelt to reserve one percent of the construction costs of each new federal building for their art decoration. (Democratic Vistas, p.6) In addition, an initial seed grant of \$100,000 would be allocated from the PWA for the division to produce a pictorial record of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps, PWA projects, national parks and the Tennessee Valley Authority. (The New Deal for Artist, p.36)

This proposal never materialized, largely because of a rift between Henry Morgenthau and Ickes precluded funding from the PWA, and the somewhat less ambitious Section was organized by Secretary of Treasury Morgenthau on Oct. 16, 1934. (Democratic Vistas, p.6)

According to Morgenthau’s official announcement, the formal mission of the Section was:

*To secure suitable art of the best quality for the embellishment of public buildings;*

*To carry out this work in such a way as will assist in stimulating, as far as practicable, development of art in this country and reward what is regarded as the outstanding talent which develops;*

*So far as consistent with a high standard of art, to employ local talent;*

*To endeavor to secure the cooperation of people throughout the country interested in the arts and whose judgement in connection with art has the respect of the Section in selecting artists for the work to be done and criticism and advice as to their production;*

*In carrying out this work, to make every effort to afford an opportunity to all artists on the sole test of their qualifications as artists, and, accordingly, to encourage competitions wherever practicable, recognizing the fact, however, that certain artists in the country, because of their recognized talent, are entitled to receive work without competition. (Public as Patron, p.12)*

The new Section was appended to the Office of Supervising Architect, which prepared drawings, specifications, and cost estimates for new buildings, under the Public Buildings branch of the Treasury. Funding for the project did not come from a guaranteed one percent reservation on the cost of each Building for art as Edward Bruce had hoped, but rather the one percent amount was used only as a guideline. In practice, the Section staff would review new federal building plans and confer with the architect regarding artwork for the building. If both parties agreed to the proposal and it was subsequently approved by the director of the Procurement Division, then the Section would receive a portion of the construction cost, usually one percent, but often less. (The New Deal for Artists, p.37) In cases where the actual construction cost exceeded the estimated cost, no artwork was assigned. Consequently, no buildings were scheduled to receive artwork until 75 percent completed.

Leadership of the Section was comprised of three men, Edward Bruce (1879-1943), Edward Rowan (1898-1946) and Forbes Watson (c.1880-1960). As Chief of the Section, Bruce formulated general policy and constantly lobbied Morgenthau and President Roosevelt for permanent status and funding



*“Wild Life Conservation in Arkansas” by Henry Simon, 1940, DeQueen Post Office, Sevier County. (AHPP Photo)*

within the federal government. Assistant Chief Rowan handled the day-to-day artistic and administrative decisions while Watson functioned as art critic and Section publicist. Otherwise, the staff consisted of 19 people, including secretaries, a carpenter and two photographers. (Democratic Vistas, p.7)

With few exceptions, artists were selected through regional competitions. Once a federal building was selected to receive Section artwork, the Section appointed a regional competition chairman, who then formed a jury and mailed announcements to area artists. Competitions were also advertised in the Section’s free Bulletin, which reached over 8,500 artists by 1941. The artists submitted anonymous sketches, which were judged on the regional level and then submitted to the Section for the final decision. Runners-up could also receive commissions in this system.

Advantages to the competition system included the discovery of new talent and preliminary quality control- “poor” artists were eliminated before they could do bad work. Disadvantages were revealed when many well-known artists refused to compete, contending that their previous work and reputation testified to their abilities. Other criticisms centered around the considerable time and cost of materials expended by the majority of artists who never received commissions. Still, the competition system proved successful from the Section’s viewpoint. From 1934 to 1943, 190 competitions yielded 850 commissions.

Artists who received commissions had to sign a contract requiring several stages of preparatory work. In the first stage, the artist submitted black-and-white sketches and a color sketch on the scale of one inch to one foot. Next, the artist submitted a “cartoon”, a black-and-white drawing of the same size as the finished work. The third and last stage involved finishing, installing and photographing the mural. A third of the commission was paid at each of the three stages. (Democratic Vistas, p.120-121) In the last stage, the postmaster was asked to report if the mural was satisfactory, and the final payment was made only after his recommendation. (Public as Patron, p.17)



Artists were encouraged to visit the town and post office to develop suitable designs. Unfortunately, the combination of a relatively small commission, the staggered payment schedule, and distance between artist and post office made such visits improbable. Indeed, Ludwig Mactarian of Manhattan, New York, did his research for the Dardanelle, Ark., post office mural in the photo files of the New York Public Library. In a letter to Rowan, Mactarian explained, "I should like to go out there to do some study, but, unfortunately, I haven't the money for the train fare." (Wall-to-Wall America) In these cases, the artist would normally speak or correspond with postmasters, newspapers and local historians to ensure the authenticity of the mural.

H. Louis Freund of Conway, Ark., was able to easily visit his assigned post office in nearby Heber Springs, Ark. Still, local research could be quite exhausting as Freund recounted, "It has meant going to the Heber Springs area several times, interviewing many of the old citizens, searching here, there and yonder for accurate costumes, leafing through the files of old magazines, digging about in all that vast collection of photographs, advertisements, and other source material which any artist must collect and file away for future reference." Freund's resulting mural was titled "From Timber to Agriculture." (Democratic Vistas, p.18)

This contract system resulted in reams of correspondence between the artists and the Section. Assistant Chief Rowan critiqued proposed artwork at every stage. Correspondence between Rowan and Bertrand Adams regarding the Siloam Springs, Ark., post office mural is illustrative of how the Section influenced not only the final appearance of the mural but also the artist. Adams, a native Iowan, had difficulty settling on a theme for the mural, and his first three idea sketches were rejected for not meeting the standards of quality. When his redesigned two-inch scale color sketch was



*H. Louis Freund applies the finishing touches to "From Timber to Agriculture," his 1939 mural that still hangs in the old Heber Springs Post Office in Cleburne County. (Courtesy of Shiloh Museum of Ozark History)*



*“Lumbering in Arkansas,” 1940, Siloam Springs Post Office, Benton County. (AHPP Photo)*

refused because of color, drawing, composition and depth, Adams contemplated forfeiting the commission. A letter from Rowan on June 27, 1939, encouraged Adams to continue, and a successful design, “Lumbering in Arkansas,” was eventually installed. Rowan’s constructive criticism and encouragement was responsible for Adams, a part-time painter and part-time farmer, to pursue painting as his sole career. (Public As Patron, p.24)

While the Section ostensibly promoted the artist rather than a particular school of painting, there were in fact only a few styles that were acceptable to the section for murals. According to “The Public As Patron,” Contemporary Realism -- also known as American scene painting -- was the only truly acceptable style, and the subject matter had to realistically interpret local history, post office scenes past and present, or “vignettes of daily life.” (p.14) A related movement, Regionalism, was also associated with the mural program. Regionalism, led by artists such as Grant Wood, John Stuart Curry and Thomas Hart Benton, celebrated American scenes that had universal appeal such as local agriculture, industry and family. The Section also sought to instill national ideals and values; however, local citizens could often not see beyond inaccurate details in murals depicting their history, and the Section came to realize that people cared most about their local environment. (Democratic Vistas, p.19)

Without any direct ties to the local community, the “Air Mail” mural in Piggott, Arkansas, represents the national ideal of mail delivery, which was appropriated by the New Deal and tied to the idea of democracy. Artist Dan Rhodes commented on the mural, “I feel the Air Mail is of unusual significance to the smaller and more isolated community, linking them as it does with the most distant centers. I have tried to convey the sense of stream-lined power which is behind the mail service.” (Democratic Vistas, p.61) While it is doubtful that any new DC3s, the craft depicted in the mural, ever touched down in Piggott or Northeast Arkansas, local citizens were still reminded that behind the mail service was the streamlined power of the federal government.



*Detail from “Threshing” by Joe Jones, a 1938 mural in the old Magnolia Post Office in Columbia County, which now houses a regional library. (AHPP Photo)*

The majority of the 1,118 Section-decorated buildings were post offices. (The New Deal for Artists, p.66) In Arkansas, most post offices that received murals were small, standardized-plan buildings with the mural or sculpture placed at one end of a long, narrow lobby, in a space about 6 feet by 12 feet above the postmaster’s doorway, which was flanked by bulletin boards. The space was naturally lighted by windows on the side representing the front facade of the post office, and the artwork was often obscured by an entrance vestibule and hanging light fixtures.

In 1938, the Section of Painting and Sculpture was changed to Section of Fine Arts and made a permanent division of the Treasury Department. However, in July 1939 a federal reorganization caused the Public Buildings branch and the Section to be transferred from the Treasury into the new Federal Works Agency, which also contained the WPA and the FAP. This invalidated the Section’s permanent status that had recently been given by Morgenthau, and the Section attempted to increase public awareness of the work. One of the programs geared toward national publicity was the Forty-Eight States Competition. The June 1939 Bulletin announced that one small post office in each state would be selected to receive a mural, and an open competition would be held to select artists. Judging took place in Washington, D.C., where 1,477 entries, the most ever tallied in a Section event, were reviewed by an august committee consisting of national art experts Maurice Sterne, jury chairman, Henry Varnum Poor, Edgar Miller and Olin Dows. The winning designs went on exhibit around the country and were reproduced in Life Magazine in December 1939. The mosaic of 48 postage-stamp-size reproductions of the prize-winning sketches were contained in a three-page spread under the headline, “This is Mural America for Rural America.” (Wall-to-Wall America, p.81)

Problems occurred when a post office was awarded a winning entry intended for another post office in a vastly different geographical and cultural region. For example, the citizenry of Eunice, La., objected loudly to their winning design, that of a deserted army base in Marfa, Texas. In these cases, the sketches were changed to reflect the local surroundings.

In January 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt eliminated nondefense budget spending, and post office art ended the following year. The Section of Fine Arts closed in July 1943 and was not reinstated after the war. Its impact on art in America is difficult to measure. Edward Bruce always referred to an appreciative letter received from Postmaster Basil V. Jones of Pleasant Hill, Mo. Jones had written, "In behalf of many smaller cities, wholly without objects of art, as ours was, may I beseech you and the Treasury to give them some art, more of it, whenever you find it possible to do so. How can a finished citizen be made in an artless town?" (Democratic Vistas, p.72) During its operation, the Section helped make "finished citizens" in 20 Arkansas towns, where 18 murals and two sculptures were commissioned.

### **Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods**

In June 1996, the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program (AHPP) initiated a context-driven survey of United States Post Offices with artwork installed through the U.S. Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture. It was felt that these properties were in danger of insensitive rehabilitation, deterioration or abandonment for new locations on the outskirts of the small towns in which they were located. It was hoped that by emphasizing the importance of these properties to the understanding and appreciation of Arkansas history during the Great Depression, the AHPP could encourage their continued preservation, protection, use, and adaptive reuse, as well as the conservation and preservation of the murals and sculptures that each building contains.



*Not all of the artworks financed by the Section faced bright futures. In Benton, part of Julius Woeltz's 1939 mural "The Bauxite Mines" was painted over and a large section was cut out to provide access for duct work. The mural has since been restored and moved to a new home in the Saline County Courthouse. (AHPP Photo)*

The project involved significant interaction and cooperation between the AHPP's program areas. The AHPP Special Projects staff identified those structures that received Section art and scheduled survey trips to document and photograph each building and its artwork. All phases of the project were coordinated with the National Register of Historic Places staff to determine which of the post office buildings were eligible for National Register recognition. Throughout the course of the project, public input was sought through press releases to media outlets in those areas targeted for survey visits.

The multiple-property listing of United States Post Offices with Section Art is based on a survey of 16 of the 20 post offices known to hold Section art. Of the remaining four, the Siloam Springs Post Office was not surveyed because it was already listed as a contributing structure in the Siloam Springs Downtown Historic District; the mural was removed from the Springdale, Washington County, Post Office and placed in the Shiloh Museum; the mural in the Osceola Post Office was destroyed by fire; and the Pocahontas Post Office mural was removed from the building.

The survey visited 16 post offices with Section art. Eleven of those were considered eligible for inclusion in the context, because they had not been moved, still retained their Section art, and retained at least 51 percent of their original integrity, as determined by the professional historians and architectural historians of the AHPP's Survey and National Register staffs. Of the remaining five, four of the post offices were so seriously altered as to compromise their integrity, and the fifth, in Benton, suffered serious alterations to the building and damage to its interior mural. Integrity requirements were based on knowledge of existing properties and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards of Eligibility to the National Register of Historic Places. For each recorded property, locations were noted on USGS topographical and city maps; photographs, both black and white prints and color slides, were taken of exterior elevations and significant interior details. Computerized inventory forms, complete with plan view drawings, were completed; and research, utilizing primary, secondary and oral history sources was conducted. Any information on research, events or issues not adequately covered in this study should be directed to the AHPP's special projects historian.

The significance of the United States Post Office facilities included in this nomination derives chiefly from their importance as manifestations of the U.S. Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture and its efforts to place works of art in rural locations, as well as the Section's goal of employing painters and sculptors during the Great Depression. Only 20 Arkansas Post Offices received Section Art during that agency's relatively short existence. The art works they brought to towns from Piggott to Lake Village and from Berryville to Paris remain sources of community pride and visual reminders of the heroic efforts the United States government took to provide meaningful labor for all types of workers during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

These properties represent significant physical reminders of an important period in Arkansas history, a time in which the state was struggling through the Great Depression and looked gratefully to the federal relief programs that provided construction jobs and, later, original art works to adorn the new post office buildings. By publicly recognizing the importance of these resources to the understanding and appreciation of Arkansas history through this project and the accompanying media campaign, the AHPP hopes to encourage the preservation, protection, continued use and adaptive reuse of these properties.

## National Register-listed U.S. Post Offices with Section Art

The following sections explore the histories of the U.S. Post Offices with Section Art that were listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The information is drawn from the individual National Register nominations for each property.

### Berryville Post Office, Carroll County

In late 1937, Congress authorized \$70 million for public works projects over a three-year period. The majority of those were post offices, and among four in Arkansas was a new post office for Berryville in mountainous Carroll County. The building was designed in 1938 and erected in 1938-9 by Linbarger and Fraser, Contractors, of Camden, Ark. Louis A. Simon was the supervising architect for the project, Neal A. Melick was supervising engineer, W.G. Noll was superintendent of architecture and J.A. Ackerman was construction engineer.

The new Berryville Post Office opened for business on August 31, 1939, leaving its previous location on the west side of the town square for the spacious new facility on East Madison Avenue. County Agent C.F. Lund, Home Demonstration Agent Carrie P. Taylor and Administrative Assistant Roy Keeling occupied the structure's four basement rooms. A formal dedication was held on Sept. 2, 1939, with Congressman Clyde T. Ellis as the chief speaker.

A total of \$750 was allotted for a mural for the new post office, and on May 31, 1939, the Section of Fine Arts requested and received permission to change the art from mural to sculpture. Inslee A.



*One of three sculptures in Daniel Olney's 1940 work "Man and Woman, Arkansas" in the Berryville Post Office in Carroll County. (AHPP Photo)*

Hopper, consultant to the Section chief, invited artist Daniel Olney on June 7, 1939, to submit designs for the sculpture. "In sculpture projects of this type, we have found that the most successful solution has been arrived at by the sculptors who have considered the end wall of the lobby as an architectural unit and have designed their sculpture as an accent related to both the wall space and the architectural elements," Hopper wrote. "In the opinion of the Section the dimensions of the relief are not as important as the suitability of the form of the sculpture in relation to the space to be decorated."

Olney accepted the commission on June 19, writing: "I think some scene from the Arkansas life, or a family group surrounded by the implements of that life, possibly tied up somehow in connection with the mails would be appropriate. My experience living in that extraordinary country will be a help."

Olney was born in New York City in 1909 and studied sculpture under Gutzon Borglum. He also studied at the Beaux Arts Institute of Design, the Arts Students League, and the Bavarian Art Trade School. Olney received an honorable mention in the Section's 50 States Competition before receiving the Berryville commission.

A formal contract dated Sept. 1, 1939, gave Olney 252 days to complete a three-part plaster sculpture for the space above the postmaster's door. One relief was to be 3'4" high and 2'3" wide, another 3'4" high by 2' wide, and a third 2' wide by 2' high, covering a total of 19 square feet. Olney's preliminary design was accepted on Feb. 2, 1940, and the Section authorized his first payment of \$150.

Among the correspondence in the National Archives are a number of letters regarding installation of the 250-pounds of plaster sculpture. Olney provided detailed cross-section drawings showing how a 3/16" galvanized toggle attached to a brass anchor, brass strap and galvanized iron pipe within the sculptures would affix the heavy pieces to the tile and plaster walls of the post office. Hopper, in a March 19, 1940, letter, recommended that Olney himself install the two flanking elements of the sculpture and arrange with a local contractor for installation of the third. The Section approved Olney's method, provided two anchors were provided for each relief. Olney's second payment of \$250 was approved on March 27.

Olney visited Berryville in late March, and wrote Ed Rowan of the Section on April 9, 1940, regarding the visit. The artist noted that the lighting was fine in the building, but a clock would have to be moved to permit the installation. (This last item precipitated a flurry of memos, all preserved in the National Archives, that resulted in the Berryville Post Office custodian moving the clock from one wall to another.) "I know it will please you to hear that the people I met there seemed to grasp the idea of the sculpture at once, liked it, and liked the idea of having art in their post office," Olney noted in his letter to Rowan.

The sculpture was installed in May, and Olney's final payment of \$350 was approved on May 27. The Section apparently was pleased with Olney's work, since Rowan later provided a letter of support to assist the artist in landing a job with the New York City school system. The Section also selected Olney to provide a sculpture for the Marion, Va., Post Office.

## Dardanelle Agriculture and Post Office, Yell County

“Dardanelle Is To Have New Federal Building,” the *Dardanelle Post-Dispatch* reported on June 25, 1936, saying that Congressman D.D. Terry notified the postmaster for the county seat for northern Yell County that \$60,000 in federal money was set aside for land acquisition and construction of a new facility.

A few months later, on Aug. 13, the paper reported that the U.S. Treasury Department was purchasing five lots on the northeast corner of the intersection of Front and Locust streets for \$5,000. Just under one year later, on Aug. 12, 1937, the *Post-Dispatch* reported that demolition of the 1913 Armour Gray Grocery and Market Building was practically complete, clearing the way for construction of the new facility.

It was more than a month later, on September 23, that the newspaper announced that the Linebarger and Fraser firm, which already had completed new post office buildings at Springdale and Monticello, was the low bidder for the Dardanelle project with a contract price of \$43,323. The new building would be a one-story structure with a basement that “will contain six large rooms for use of federal agencies.” And on June 2, 1938, the *Post-Dispatch* reported that the building, constructed for a grand total of \$44,923, opened for business the previous day. “The new building is of buff brick, with a rustic green baked tile roof. The interior is plastered. The floor is of selected hard maple laid on concrete except for the spacious lobby, which is tile,” the article said. A formal dedication, featuring an address by Congressman Terry, was set for July 27.



“Cotton Growing, Manufacture and Export” by Ludwig Mactarian, 1939, Dardanelle Agriculture and Post Office, Yell County. (AHPP Photo)



Included in the construction costs was \$660 to finance a mural for the new Agriculture and Post Office Building at Dardanelle. On Aug. 20, 1938, Edward B. Rowan, superintendent of the U.S. Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture, invited New York artist Ludwig Mactarian to submit designs for the mural. "It is suggested that you use subject matter which embodies some idea appropriate to the building or to the particular locale of Dardanelle," Rowan wrote. "What we want most is a simple and vital design."

Mactarian accepted the commission in a Sept. 10 letter in which he promised to submit several drawings for consideration. "From what I gather, Dardanelle is a shipping and trading center with the following (sic) industries: Cotton, Cotton Seed Oil, Hardwood Mills, Box & Handle factories," he wrote. "I will do some research on Dardanelle and submit my black and white ideas within two or three weeks." A month later, however, the artist again wrote Rowan complaining of a paucity of information about Dardanelle. "I should like to go out there to do some study, but unfortunately, I haven't the money for the train fare," the Oct. 12 letter says. "I wonder if you can arrange for an advance to cover the cost of transportation." Rowan replied on Oct. 18 that "there is no way that we can" provide an advance, but urged Mactarian to contact the Dardanelle postmaster, public library and others for images of the Yell County town.

The artist apparently proceeded without local photographs, and on Oct. 20 mailed Rowan a rough sketch for the Dardanelle mural, "the theme of which, is the three phases of the cotton industry—cotton growing, manufacture and export." The Section approved the sketch on Oct. 22 and gave Mactarian permission to proceed and two months later acknowledged receipt of his two-inch scale color sketch of the mural. For some reason, Mactarian's contract was not completed until Dec. 15, prompting a terse Jan. 9, 1939, letter to Rowan, saying: "I wonder what's holding up my contract for the Dardanelle, Arkansas Post Office mural job - also the money due me at this time. ... Due to considerable expense I have at this time buying materials and paying for models, I need some money to go on with the work. Please let me hear from you real soon." A first payment of \$200 was approved on Feb. 3, 1939.

On May 27, Mactarian wrote Rowan that the Dardanelle mural would be completed by the end of June, and he submitted a photo of the full-sized cartoon. "I am confident that painting the mural will go smoothly and that I shall endeavor making it the best piece of painting I have ever done." However, Section personnel found Mactarian's proposed canvas to be of inferior quality. In a June 10 letter, Mactarian explained to Rowan that the canvas "was supplied by N. Rabinowitz and he was so reassuring about the quality of the material and how it had already been approved by the section on numerous occasions that I didn't hesitate in buying it. ... Being pressed for time, I had gone ahead with the painting without waiting to hear from you and I have finished underpainting the entire design. ... Will you please let me know as soon as possible whether (sic) I ought to go ahead painting on this canvas or start out again on a different one." No further correspondence regarding this imbroglio exists in the National Archives materials regarding the Dardanelle post office, but Mactarian's second payment of \$200 was approved on June 12 and nine days later the artist received approval to install the completed mural, so it can be assumed that the canvas passed muster.

On July 5, Mactarian notified Rowan that he and John Robertson, who painted a mural for the new Nashville, Ark., Post Office, were heading south to install their works. He next wrote Rowan from Dardanelle on July 29: "Everything went well on the installation of my mural at Dardanelle. The townspeople seem pleased and interested in the decoration and think the subject most appropriate as they live and die by cotton here. I would appreciate it if you would manage to get my voucher and

check through as quickly as possible as I will reach New York broke.” Dardanelle Postmaster Joe D. Gault followed up with an August 5 letter confirming installation. “We greatly appreciate this splendid addition to our new building, and would like to extend our compliments to Mr. Mactarian and your Department,” he wrote. “We have received many favorable comments from our patrons here concerning the mural ... .”

Mactarian again contacted Rowan in an August 16 letter pleading for his final payment: “I would greatly appreciate your help in speeding up this matter for me as I am dead broke.” His final payment of \$260 was approved two days later.

Mactarian’s mural remains an integral part of the Dardanelle Agriculture and Post Office, a building that in the early 1990s was threatened with closing in favor of a new facility outside of its historic downtown location. Happily, the post office remained in this building. The alterations it underwent to remain in service are relatively minor, and certainly do not affect its National Register eligibility or its historic associations with the U.S. Treasury Department’s Section Art program.

### **DeWitt Post Office, Arkansas County**

In late 1937, the U.S. Congress approved a \$70 million emergency construction fund appropriation to finance the building of post offices around the country. Among the projects was a \$75,000 appropriation to build a new post office in DeWitt, the county seat for the southern district of Arkansas County in Southeast Arkansas. The proposed site for the new post office was surveyed in November 1937, but the first round of bids were rejected in December 1938. The Feb. 2, 1939, *DeWitt Era-Enterprise* announced that the successful candidate in the second round of bidding was H.A. Ivry of Atlanta, with a low bid of \$50,350. The article said the first floor would house the county extension service and other agencies, and “there will also be quarters for the janitor and special private offices for the post master and his assistant.” Work began soon after.



*“Portrait of Contemporary DeWitt by William Traher, 1941, DeWitt Post Office, Arkansas County. (AHPP Photo)*



*Detail from "Portrait of Contemporary DeWitt." (AHPP Photo)*

On Jan. 8, 1940, Treasury Department Fine Arts Section assistant chief Edward B. Rowan wrote William Traher, a Denver, Co., artist, offering a \$750 commission to execute a mural for the DeWitt facility "on the basis of competent designs submitted in the 48-State Mural Competition." Traher responded four days later that he was "delighted with the opportunity to decorate" the new building, adding that he would visit the town to "make sketches, study the locality." The plan met the approval of Rowan, who wrote "we find in dealing with the public that such works of art have more meaning if the subject matter is related to or reflective of the locale."

Traher went to DeWitt in May 1940. He wrote Rowan on May 14 that "I have come here with no preceived ideas, preferring to find what I need in subject material and inspiration in this locality. When this is done, I'll return to Denver and put this material into mural form." He ended up living in DeWitt for three weeks.

In a remarkable July 5, 1940, letter to Rowan, Traher outlined his vision for the mural to be titled "Portrait of Contemporary DeWitt." The letter illustrates not only the artist's visions, but some of his prejudices as well.

Traher wrote that DeWitt "is a placid place — more so than most small towns because it is southern, more so than most southern towns because it is in Arkansas. ... Even the dogs respect this mood, 'ah do decleah'. ... No dramatics, no sweeping rhythms, struggling forms, nor violent contrast of design belong in a portrait of DeWitt. The extremely literal minded citizens will fail to understand and resent obvious distortion or simplification.

"I chose the three panel form only after experimenting with many others. Each panel is a composite one, combining elements of several viewpoints. They represent: left, the negro quarter; center, the

rice fields in flood; right, residential section. Long lines of washing everywhere is characteristic of 'Darktown.' The pigs feeding beneath a rose bush is a clue to the character of the place — and the race. Wells for flooding the rice fields are shown in the central panel, and in the extreme distance, the towers and smoke of our country's biggest rice mill. The right panel contrasts the town's handsomest and most historic house [the Halliburton House, NR 11/05/74] with the old barn, woodpile and Jersey cow to be found in every back yard. It also suggests the town is a good place to raise children."

Rowan replied on July 10 that Traher's "explanation of the selection of subject matter and approach is entirely logical and I am pleased to tell you that the designs were regarded as extremely interesting by the members of the Section." A formal contract was issued on July 15, 1940, for production of the mural. The only change from Traher's original plan was that vehisote replaced a hard wood base as the "canvas" for the murals "since this office has no guarantee that the latter will not warp unless thoroughly cradled." Traher's preliminary design was approved on Oct. 9, and he received his first payment of \$150 on Oct. 21. The Section approved the full-sized cartoon of the proposed panel on Jan. 13, 1941, and the artist received a \$250 payment on Jan. 25.

On April 23, 1941, Traher wrote Rowan that he had installed the mural and "the whole town has agreed that it's 'pretty.' More sophisticated critics might have better words to describe a work of art they like, but would not know how to be more pleased or appreciative. ... They have paid me their highest compliment in sparing me that sly ridicule for which these Arkansas people are famed and feared — that ridicule for things pretentious and artificial." The *DeWitt Era-Enterprise*, in a May 1, 1941, article, said simply: "These murals are fine specimens of workmanship."

Traher's final payment of \$350 was approved May 23, 1941. Though the artist went on to complete murals for Cole Junior High School in Denver and Williams Field, Ariz., "Portrait of Contemporary DeWitt" was his only Section commission for a post office facility.

### **Lake Village Post Office, Chicot County**

In August 1937, Congress passed an appropriation bill providing a \$23 million lump sum for construction of public buildings. Included in the allocation was \$75,000 for a new post office for Lake Village, the seat of Chicot County, Arkansas's southeasternmost county. Though details of construction could not be located, the building apparently was completed by 1939.

On Aug. 21, 1939, Edward B. Rowan, assistant chief for the U.S. Treasury Department's Section on Fine Arts, wrote Artist Avery Johnson of Denville, N.J., and invited him to "submit designs for a mural decoration for the Lake Village, Arkansas, Post Office on the basis of competent work [previously] performed under the Section." Johnson, who was working on designs for the 48 States mural competition, wrote Rowan on Sept. 27 to accept the invitation.

Johnson was among the winners of that competition, which apparently delayed the Lake Village project. He did not submit information needed to prepare the contract for the mural until December of 1940. The final contract called on Johnson to create a mural 12' wide by 5' 3" tall, covering a total area of about 63 square feet. Johnson was to receive \$750 for the work, which was to be executed in oil on canvas.



*“Lake Country Wildlife” by Avery Johnson, 1941, Lake Village Post Office, Chicot County. (AHPP Photo)*

Johnson submitted two color sketches as proposals for the Lake Village mural. Rowan informed him on Jan. 17, 1941, that “the one with the cypress trees in the center is preferred. This has the standing deer on the right.” Johnson’s first payment of \$150 was approved on Feb. 3, 1941.

While the Lake Village mural was not visited with the local controversy met by some Arkansas mural proposals, the location of a clock in the area where the mural was to be located elicited a flurry of no less than seven letters and memos between Washington, D.C., Lake Village and Denville, N.J. Lake Village Postmaster John F. Mulligan informed Rowan on Dec. 20, 1940, that the clock “can be moved easily to the center of the Public Lobby directly in the rear of the Vestibule and over the Parcel Post and Stamp Window. This will place same in the most central location possible in the Lobby.” Rowan requested permission of the supervising architect on Jan. 4, 1941, for the clock to be moved; bids were accepted and Mr. M.L. Rhodes of Lake Village was hired on Feb. 24, 1941, to relocate the clock, a task for which he was paid \$35.

In March 1941, Johnson submitted a full-size cartoon of the mural to the Section. “I am also forwarding a print to the local committee down there and will await the approval both of your office and this committee before proceeding with the finished painting,” he wrote in a March 3 letter to Edward Bruce, Fine Arts Section chief. Both apparently were approved, and Johnson was issued a \$250 payment on April 1, 1941.

The finished mural was approved for installation on July 23, 1941, and Johnson sent it for installation by a Mr. Purser, who had installed another of the artist’s murals in the Leland, Miss., Post Office previously. The mural was hung on Sunday, Aug., 10, 1941. An Aug. 15, 1941, article in *The Chicot Spectator* includes a lengthy interview with the artist, noting that Johnson “was especially interested” in the area’s heavy deer population around Lake Chicot “and the deer were consequently made the most prominent element in the design.” Postmaster Mulligan reported the mural safely installed as of Sept. 29, 1941, and Johnson’s final \$350 payment was approved on Oct. 29.

The Lake Village commission was one of six Johnson received for post office murals through the Section. The others were located at Bordentown, N.J., Mareilles, Ill., Liberty, Ind., North Bergen, N.J., and Catonsville, Md.

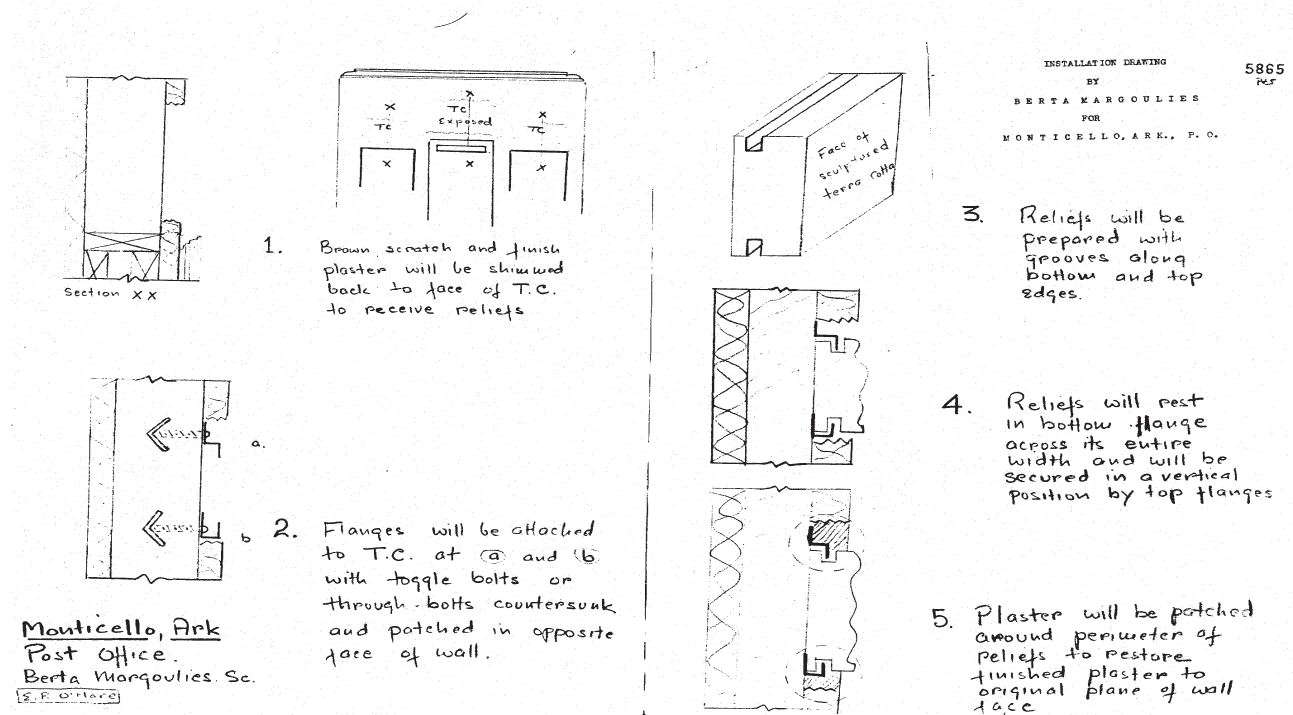
Despite the 1967 addition, the Lake Village Post Office remains a remarkably intact expression of Depression-era Colonial Revival design in a government building. Its historic value is only enhanced by Avery Johnson's "Lake Country Wild Life," a mural that celebrates both the natural bounty of Southeast Arkansas and the Depression-era drive to put all Americans, including artists, to work.

### Monticello Post Office, Drew County

Construction began on the Monticello Post Office in early 1937, with the *Advance Monticellonian* reporting on Jan. 28 that "work on the new post office began in earnest last Monday morning." The blond-brick structure "will be of the same material and color as the [adjacent] Municipal Building, and upon completion will add much to the latter," the article said.

Two years later, Monticello Postmaster Guy Stephenson requested in a Nov. 3, 1939, letter to the Federal Building Administration Department of Fine Arts "consideration by your Bureau of having a 'MURAL' painted on the Walls of our New Post Office Building which was completed here two years ago, and in which the citizens of Monticello and Drew County take much pride and interest.

"This informal request is made with the presumption that such 'Pictures' are being placed in Federal Buildings over the country, and with the knowledge that such have already been placed on the Lobby Walls of several Post Office Buildings in Arkansas," Stephenson wrote. The postmaster's request was



*Sculptor Berta Margoules provided detailed instructions for installation of her sculpture "Tomato Culture" in the Monticello Post Office. (National Archives)*



*“Tomato Culture” by Berta Margoules, 1941, Monticello Post Office, Drew County. (AHPP Photo)*

a departure from the normal process by which Section art was acquired in the state; in virtually every other case, such art was written into the initial building specifications and the Section took the lead in seeing that murals or sculptures were placed in the structures.

A week later, Stephenson’s request was followed by one from Rep. W.F. Norrell, Arkansas’s Fourth District congressman and a Monticello native. “It is my understanding that your Administration is in charge of this work and I am extremely interested in obtaining such a painting for Monticello,” Norrell wrote. “Monticello has a new Post Office building and a Mural would be very attractive in this building. Monticello, long a center of culture and home of the Arkansas A. and M. College would appreciate the value of such a contribution to this community.”

The Section quickly discovered that \$881 remained from the Monticello Post Office construction budget and requested that \$750 be set aside for art for the building. On Dec. 6, 1939, the office of the Commissioner of Public Buildings notified Norrell that the \$750 was authorized for “the decoration in question.”

Inslee A. Hopper, consultant to Section Chief Ed Rowan, wrote New York artist Berta Margoules on March 11, 1940, inviting her to submit designs for a sculpture for the Monticello building. Margoules, a Polish-born sculptor trained at the Academie Julian, Ecol des Beaux-Arts in Paris, accepted the commission a week later, calling it “a nice surprise.”

Postmaster Stephenson remained an active participant in the project, writing the Section on April 12 that “it is desired that you inform me with further reference to this decoration, if I am to take any action in regard to the matter, or to know if this decoration will or should have any reference to local history or some eventful illustration connected with this section. ... In case local citizens including

myself are to have an opportunity to make suggestions as to what particular decoration may be used, we would like to know about this in time to avoid a selection (sic) that might have an objectional setting.”

Though materials in the National Archives pertaining to the Monticello Post Office art are sketchy regarding the matter, there appears to have been some conflict between Margoulies and the people of Monticello. There is a four-month space in the National Archives documents pertaining to the Monticello art between Hopper’s April 16 forwarding of Stephenson’s request and the next letter in the file, a terse Aug. 6 note from Hopper saying: “We received an inquiry today if it would be possible to cancel the funds for sculpture on the Monticello, Arkansas project. I have postponed this pending word from you on how soon you can undertake the work and complete it.” Margoulies replied on Aug. 9 that she planned delivery of sketches for the proposed sculpture on Sept. 15 and installation of the work in December or January, but added that “personally, I should not much mind ‘trading’ the Monticello assignment for another not less remunerative, should this be a possibility advantageous to the section.” She included with the letter “a rather interesting collection of local suggestions and sketches assembled and forwarded by the postmaster.”

Hopper, responding on Aug. 16, noted that the local suggestions “certainly make up a fairly inclusive history of Monticello” and suggested that Margoulies “explain to the Postmaster the limitations of sculptural relief vs a panoramic mural.” A “trade” of projects was not possible, Hopper added, “and I hope you are satisfied to continue the project.”

If there was tension between Monticello locals and the New York artist, a happy medium apparently was reached with her choice of subject matter. In a Sept. 14 letter accompanying her sketches of the proposed sculpture, Margoulies wrote that “since Monticello is known as the ‘Tomato Capital of Arkansas’ and the community apparently takes great pride in its ranking industry, I have chosen tomato culture as the subject matter.” The three-panel sculpture, to be executed in terra cotta, included a 4’3" wide by 2’4" high center panel and two flanking panels measuring 2’3" wide by 2’6" high.

A Dec. 7, 1940, letter from the artist reveals some of the complications inherent in creating large, wall-mounted sculptures (each of the pieces in “Tomato Sculpture” weighs some 220 pounds). In submitting photographs of the central piece, Margoulies notes that the sculpture is cut in half, “necessary for firing such a large terra cotta.” However, the cut is located in an “overlapping of forms, and will not be noticeable at all when the relief is fitted into the wall, both because the two parts will come closer together when placed and because retouching will be done if at all necessary.”

The Section approved her first payment of \$150 on Dec. 9, 1940, but the check apparently was delayed, as Margoulies wrote Hopper on Dec. 17 that “I cannot proceed with the firing until I receive some payment on the job. I am already obligated considerably and cannot even begin to plan such a costly trip as one to Arkansas to install the work until I have received some funds.” The check apparently cleared soon after, and Margoulies wrote Hopper from Monticello on Dec. 24 that she was ready to install the sculpture. Postmaster Stephenson confirmed installation in a Dec. 31 letter, noting that it took five days to hang the three-piece work and that he was “pleased to state that so far as I can see or understand the project is completed in good condition and fully complies with the photographic outlines and specifications.” Margoulies’ second payment of \$250 was approved on Dec. 31.



Margoulies mailed in a photograph of the installed sculpture — “taken by the town’s best photographer - (\$5’s worth)” — on Jan. 7, and her final payment of \$350 was approved Jan. 18. She later submitted a listing of “costs attendant to execution of terra cotta sculpture reliefs for U.S. Postoffice at Monticello, Arkansas” totaling \$305.56 and ranging from 90 cents for studio supplies to \$25 for rental of a station wagon to transport the sculpture to the Drew County town. There is no record of any reimbursement for those costs.

A final pair of letters in the National Archive files signal the end of the Section Art program. Margoulies wrote Hopper on June 18 noting that “I haven’t been getting routine literature from the Section. Didn’t get the last bulletin announcing ... sculpture competitions. How come? I’d hate to have a nice letter telling me of a commission go astray for instance.” Hopper’s June 17 reply concluded: “Unfortunately jobs are fewer rather than more and the prospect [is] not very encouraging.”

### **Morrilton Post Office, Conway County**

On Jan. 16, 1936, the *Morrilton Democrat* reported that Morrilton was included in a group of seven new post offices to be built in Arkansas. “The Morrilton building will be a one story and basement at a maximum cost of \$68,000,” the article said. “Each post office will provide work for an average of 25 men for 10 months.”

Bids for the new building were due by May 12, 1936, and the specifications called for it to be 66 feet wide and 117.5 feet deep; the lobby was to be 14 x 52 feet and feature five service windows.

A. Farnell Blair of Petersburg, Va., won the contract with a low bid of \$52,157 and it was to be built within 250 days. Construction began on June 25, 1936, with Gray Brothers of Morrilton given the contract for the excavation work; H.A. Ivey was the resident superintendent for the Blair firm.

The building was dedicated on Dec. 29, 1936, and U.S. Rep. D.D. Terry was the featured speaker.

Five months before the Morrilton Post Office was completed, the Treasury Department’s Section of Painting and Sculpture requested that \$590 be set aside to finance production of a mural for the new building. The request was approved by the director of procurement on May 29, 1936. For some reason, however, more than two years would pass before Section chief Ed Rowan asked permission to invite artist Richard Sargent of Cambria, Va., to submit designs for the Morrilton building “on the basis of the merit of [Sargent’s] design ... in the Hagerstown, Maryland Competition.”

On Aug. 20, 1938, Section chief Ed Rowan wrote Sargent and invited him to submit designs for the job, which would pay a total of \$590. “It is suggested that you use subject matter which embodies some idea appropriate to the building or to the particular locale of Morrilton,” Rowan wrote. “What we want most is simple and vital design.” Sargent enthusiastically accepted the commission in an Aug. 26, 1938, letter, offering to make a trip to Morrilton; Rowan replied that the artist would be wiser to receive suggestions on subject matter from the local postmaster since Sargent would already need to make a trip to Morrilton to install the mural after completion.

Sargent initially submitted two possible designs, one depicting a country fair and the other concerning the legend of Petit Jean -- a beautiful French girl who disguised herself as a cabin boy to follow her fiancé to the New World. The girl, called Petit Jean by the crew, fell ill at what is now called Petit



*“Men at Rest” by Richard Sargent, 1939, Morrilton Post Office, Conway County. (National Archives Photo #I21-CMS-IA-30)*

Jean Mountain outside Morrilton and her identity was discovered. She was carried up the mountain in hopes that the clearer air would aid her recovery, but she died and was buried at a point overlooking the Arkansas River. Of the two designs, the Section favored the country fair concept, but were concerned that it did not reflect life in Morrilton. “The importance of having the subject matter of the design one with which the people of Morrilton are thoroughly familiar is to be considered,” Rowan wrote Sargent on Oct. 1. “The caricature of the preliminary design is entirely amusing, but it would hardly be appropriate for the larger decoration as it is too insistent and there is the danger that the people of Morrilton might feel that the artist was poking fun at them.”

Sargent, concluding “that my ‘Country Fair’ would hardly be appropriate for Morrilton,” went back to the drawing board and submitted five additional sketches titled “The Whistle,” “Arkansas Traveler,” “Building the Little Rock and Fort Smith,” “The Builders,” and “Thirsting Men.” The Section selected the latter, ultimately titled “Men at Rest,” and a contract was executed on Nov. 1, 1938.

Sargent submitted a color sketch of his proposed design on Nov. 13, which Rowan accepted. He urged the artist to “please make every attempt to retain in the finished work the subtle charm of color harmony and fine arrangement and approach that is indicated in this sketch.” The artist submitted photos of the full-sized cartoon for the mural on Dec. 13, and Rowan again expressed concern for the sensibilities of Morrilton’s residents, writing that “you have made the center figure so obviously obese we fear the people of Arkansas might have the feeling that you are poking fun at them. I think it would be well for you to restudy this figure with the idea of reducing it somewhat in mass.” Sargent’s first payment of \$200 was approved on Dec. 27, 1938; the second, for \$150, was processed on Jan. 7, 1939.

On Jan. 10, 1939, Sargent submitted a “word account” of his mural, its name now officially changed from “Thirsting Men” to “Men at Rest”: “‘Men at rest’ is my conception of a scene that is familiar to anyone who has worked in the sun and a scene which I believe will strike a sympathetic note in the

heart of any one who has ever done a good day's work. It is a picture of three stout men whose existence depends almost entirely upon the good earth so I have presented them in the presence of the sun and the fields and all those things that are so important in their lives. The incident is simple and refreshing." The artist added that he did not "have any great lesson to teach neither do I have any thought of the ever present class struggle. I only want to make a big decoration which people will enjoy looking at."

The mural was installed by April of 1939, and according to the *Morrilton Headlight* was well accepted. However, the newspaper editor noted that those local residents with whom he talked "could not ... refrain from voicing their disappointment that the Treasury Department rejected the sketch of Petit Jean Mountain or some other scene that would have been representative of Conway County." Sargent and his wife — "two amiable young persons"— attended the dedication of the mural, the editor noted, and "were favorably impressed with the city of Morrilton and seemed especially desirous of having the painting meet with general approval of its inhabitants."

Two problems arose after the mural was installed. First, it was discovered that the post office's lighting fixtures hung too low and obscured the mural. The building custodian received a four-dollar contract to shorten the light rods and improve the setting for the artwork. Sargent was also taken to task for leaving a ragged border on the wall surrounding the mural; the artist hired a local sign painter, a Mr. Dow, to repair and repaint the wall.

Sargent received his final payment of \$240 in April 1939.

### **Nashville Post Office, Howard County**

On June 26, 1936, *The Nashville News* reported that the Howard County seat was selected as the site of a new United States Post Office facility under a \$60 million federal emergency construction program. Site proposals were requested four days later and on Sept. 18 the *News* reported that the J.R. Hill lots on North Main Street were tentatively selected at a purchase price of \$10,000. The proposal was formally accepted in October, the local paper said, but it was not until June 8, 1937, that the deal was closed. The Algernon Blair construction company of Montgomery, Alab., was the winning contractor with a bid of \$40,793, and the *News* reported on July 30 that construction was about to begin, with completion expected by Jan. 1, 1938. "All local labor will be used, as far as possible, and materials will be bought locally," the paper reported, which doubtless was good news for Depression-strapped Howard County.

On New Year's Eve, 1937, the newspaper quoted Postmaster Roy Milwee as predicting the new facility would open "within the next few days," but it was not until Jan. 11 that the *News* reported the building's grand opening. "The Nashville post office has one of the most efficient forces to be found in the postal service, and with the splendid new equipment and the conveniences provided in the new structure, will be able to more nearly serve the public perfectly than heretofore," the paper reported with hometown aplomb.

Included in the original specifications for the Nashville Post Office was a \$660 line item for a mural for the new building. In August 1938, Edward B. Rowan, superintendent of the U.S. Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture invited John Tazewell Robertson of Millington, N.J., to submit designs for the project. Robertson enthusiastically responded on Aug. 26, adding that he



*“Peach Growing” by John T. Robertson, 1939, Nashville Post Office, Howard County. (AHPP Photo)*

had conducted research on Arkansas “folk lore and romantic legend and I should very much like to do something in this vein rather than the conventional depiction of post office routine or historical battle.” Adding that “the other alternative of eulogizing local industry or agriculture is in my opinion too often done also,” the artist proposed using the legend of “The Arkansas Traveler” as the basis for his mural. “I feel it is rich in graphic possibilities and that it is a vital part of the local and national heritage left to us,” he wrote.

Rowan wrote Postmaster Milwee on Sept. 2 that Robertson was hired for the mural project, and the artist apparently wrote him soon after, resulting in a change of subject matter for the mural. In an Oct. 7 letter to Rowan (written on the letterhead of the Art Students League of New York, of which Robertson was secretary), the artist wrote that Milwee “finally replied that he felt the people of Nashville would much prefer something to do with the Peach Industry (which it seems is the most important business in that section),” thus ending Robertson’s intent on using “The Arkansas Traveler” as his mural subject. Rowan praised Robertson for consulting with Nashville, writing on Oct. 12 that “it was excellent of you to have procured the reaction of the Postmaster to the subject matter at this stage and I would think that the peach industry would offer you fine opportunities for a good decoration.” The formal contract was prepared on Nov. 15, 1938.

On Nov. 7, Robertson submitted a preliminary sketch of the Nashville mural, writing that “I have been most fortunate in getting basic information about peach growing...from the New York Public Library, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and last but not least I was able to find a fairly extensive Peach Orchard near Bernardsville, New Jersey where they were most co-operative in showing me about and in answering my numerous queries.” Rowan replied on Nov. 19 that the sketch was approved, but suggested several alterations, such as moving a kneeling figure who was “materially” cut by the postmaster’s door. Robertson, in a Nov. 25 letter, agreed, writing that “as soon as I had sent off

the preliminary sketch to you I became painfully aware from my other sketches that the door cutting into the kneeling figure was bad ... and not at all necessary.” In making the corrections for his color sketch, Robertson also noted that Postmaster Milwee requested that the artist incorporate an image of the late Bert Johnson, “who it seems was the father of the peach industry in Arkansas,” into the mural. “He has furnished me with photographs (not very good ones ... too much retouched) but I shall endeavor to oblige him.”

Robertson submitted a color sketch in December, and Rowan replied on Jan. 6, 1939 with suggestions that some of the figures be moved and more color be incorporated into the mural, noting that “there is the danger of a design low in key becoming a hole in the wall.” Robertson wrote on Jan. 10 that Rowan’s suggestions “will make for a decided improvement in the mural.” The Section approved his first payment of \$200 on Jan. 24, 1939.

On May 19, Robertson submitted a photograph of a full-sized cartoon of the Nashville mural. His explanation of the delay in the project is illustrative of the hectic life of an artist in the Great Depression: “I had expected to have this finished long before this but some months ago I lost my W.P.A. job on the Board of Education illustrations project (not being a Union member) and have been obliged in the meantime to scramble around with some free lance work. My immediate needs are taken care of and I will be right on this until completion now. I have my canvas stretched and ready for work.” His second payment of \$200 was approved on June 2.

The artist requested a four-week extension on June 5, explaining that he wanted to give the mural adequate time to dry before delivering it to Arkansas. The Section approved the extension on June 10.

Coincidentally, Robertson ran into artist Ludwig Mactarian in New York in late June and learned that Mactarian was completing a mural for the Dardanelle Post Office. Ever mindful of finances, Robertson wrote Rowan on June 30 that he and Mactarian “discussed the angle of going down together to make installation on the two jobs which would eliminate the necessity of employing unskilled labor to assist” as well as offering them an opportunity to visit other post offices along the way with an eye on submitting designs for the Section’s upcoming 48 States Competition.

The mural was installed in late July, and the journey was a good one for Robertson. “At last it’s up,” he wrote Rowan on July 26. “We arrived here two days ago and everyone has been perfectly marvelous to us from the Postmaster on down. Our experience here and the reaction of the people to the work has compensated more than anything for the work I have done on this.” Robertson was still worried about money, asking Rowan to “relay the information that the job is installed to the accounting department because we’re going to be pretty flat when we reach Millington in a week.”

Robertson’s mural was well received in Nashville. An undated clipping from the *News* found it “most appropriate and fitting by the artist that a portrait of the late Bert Johnson was incorporated into the design as a memorial to the man who was instrumental in the development of this section as a peach country. The kneeling figure planting the peach stock is a portrait of Mr. Johnson developed from a photograph taken the day of Mr. Johnson’s death” in an automobile accident.

In addition to the mural, Robertson provided guidance on its care and revealed a folk secret in his directions to the Nashville postmaster. “Some years ago I was advised from some source that the best method for cleaning oil painting was to slice a raw potato and rub lightly the surface of the painting

with this raw potato until clean ... then sponge off with a series of moist rags,” he wrote in his cleaning instructions. “I have used this method for years with some success. It sounds like medieval witchcraft but it has always worked so satisfactorily for me that I use nothing else.”

The Section approved Robertson’s final payment of \$260 on Aug. 17, 1939. His mural “Peach Growing” remains the focal point of the Nashville Post Office, a reminder of a time when the U.S. Treasury Department spread art across the United States and a tribute to Howard County’s peach industry and its “father,” Bert Johnson.

### **Paris Post Office, Logan County**

In August 1937, Congress passed an appropriation bill providing a \$23 million lump sum for construction of public buildings. Included in the allocation was \$75,000 for a new post office for Paris, the seat of the eastern district of mountainous Logan County. A month later, Postmaster General James A. Farley and Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau officially allocated the money for site acquisition and construction. Specifications called for a corner lot measuring 120 feet wide and 170 feet deep or an interior lot with a 145-foot frontage and 170-foot depth. Twelve bids on nine different sites were received by the Oct. 4, 1937, deadline.

In mid-November, First National Bank of Paris received notice that its proposed sale of all of Block 11 of the Lyvissa Waddill addition, across from the Methodist-Episcopal Church, South, was accepted as the site of the new post office. John H. Harris of Fort Smith, the assistant U.S. district attorney, delivered a \$6,250 check to seal the deal in April 1938.



*Joseph Vorst’s original concept for the Paris Post Office mural received immediate, negative reactions from town boosters and an Arkansas Congressman. (National Archives Photo#121-FES-292)*



*“Rural Arkansas” by Joseph Vorst, 1940, Paris Post Office, Logan County. (National Archives Photo #121-CMS-1A-33)*

In August 1938, the post office department notified the J.J. Fritsch Construction Co. of Dallas, Texas, that their bid of \$47,000 for construction of the Paris Post Office was accepted, that they were to begin construction immediately, and that the building was to be completed within 240 days. Work began within two weeks under the direction of Joseph E. Millett of Laplace, La., a construction engineer for the Treasury Department.

The building was completed during the week of April 20, 1939, with postal employees occupying the top floor and the county extension service office occupying the basement area. The *Paris Express* described the new building for its readers: “The Entrance vestibule and lobby have a terrazzo floor with marble wainscot. The postmaster’s private office has a hardwood floor and has a natural oak finish. Above the vault is the spy room for the postal inspector [which] can only be entered through the postmaster’s office [and] has a view of every part of the work room.”

The new Paris Post Office was selected as the location for a mural through the Treasury Department’s Section on Fine Arts through that agency’s “48 States Competition.” The winning selection, by German-born Joseph P. Vorst, of St. Louis, Mo., was to be the most controversial in the Section’s activities in Arkansas.

Vorst’s winning sketch is described by Karal Ann Marling: “The sketch showed a mean, bleak home place, as familiar in its way as a typical Iowa small town. Beneath a glowering sky, a ragged Negro, rooted to the soil by his ponderous boots, listlessly cultivates a scrap of scrubland with a manual tiller. A couple of spavined mules can barely muster enough energy to watch. His cabin, listing toward the dirt road that marks the central axis, is a ramshackle hovel, roofed in peeling tarpaper. As

if to comment on domestic blight, the birdhouse in the yard lolls at a crazy angle on its pole, sounding a note of picturesque decay heightened by the piquant gaiety of a clump of sunflowers blooming nearby. The branches of a dying tree claw at the heavens like desperate fingers.”

Reaction to the selection was fast and negative, exemplified by an Oct. 28, 1939, letter from *Paris Express* editor John Guion to U.S. Rep. Fado Cravens: “Arkansas has been the butt of jokes for many years, I do not believe in perpetuating this attitude by placing a painting of this type upon the walls of our most prized building, the post office. Every citizen contacted has expressed an opinion conforming to my own.”

Cravens, noting in an Oct. 31 letter to Fine Arts Section Director Ed Rowan that “other similar protests have been received from citizens of Paris,” asked “if you would advise me if it is not possible to have the present award set aside and a new selection made.”

Rowan diplomatically broached the subject with Vorst in a Nov. 6 letter in which the bureaucrat wrote that he “felt at liberty to state that the selection was based primarily on artistic achievement and that therefore you [Vorst] would be willing to reconsider subject matter appropriate to the locale.” Vorst responded five days later that he “frankly ... was a bit surprised myself” by the reaction to his drawing. “Although, truthfully, whether the Arkansas Parisiens wish to admit it or not, I made the sketch from life during my recent visit to Paris and it is authentic.” Vorst added that he was in contact with the Paris postmaster and wrote that “steps are being taken to please the Paris citizens, but not, I may added, at the sacrifice of genuine Art. Naturally, if restrictions are too great, or unreasonable demands too insistent I will not be able to do the work. After all, I came to this country partly to attain artistic freedom.”

Rowan supported Vorst’s stand for artistic integrity in a Nov. 16 letter in which he pledged that “this office, under no circumstances, wishes an artist to undertake work which is not consistent with his aesthetic convictions.”

Vorst traveled to Paris and met with a “committee of leading citizens, including the Postmaster, Editor, and Banker” and “they were all very happy over the gathering and we parted very good friends.” Vorst apparently held no hard feelings over the controversy. In the Dec. 15, 1939, letter in which he described his meeting with the Paris elders, the artist exulted: “Experiences like these make me love this country of ours more and more. Where else in the World could one find the earnestness, the serious interest shown by one and all in every move of the government, local, state, and Federal, even in the choice of a subject for the village Post Office. Everyone has a voice and uses it. May we never lose our Democracy!”

A second letter 13 days later described Vorst’s new sketch for the Paris Post Office: “At the left is an up-to-the-minute stock farm, in the center a cotton gin, at the right the process of weighing cotton, at right background picking cotton, at central left background a mine.” This scene, Karal Ann Marling notes, is the antithesis of the original drawing: “The mural is packed with houses, barns, stables, and gins, all of them spanking new, freshly painted, and soundly roofed. ... Of the fourteen figures shown in the painting, thirteen are intensely busy, including the Negro weight recorders who are working despite the fact that their designated angle of space adjacent to the postmaster’s door jamb forces them to lie down on the job. The potbellied foreman is the one exception. And he, like the proud Paris committee beaming with pleasure at their new, up-to-the-minute post-office mural, is assessing



the panorama of accomplishment spread before him.”

The new design passed muster in Washington; a contract to pay Vorst \$740 for creation and installment of the Paris mural was prepared on Jan. 2, 1940. Vorst’s preliminary design was accepted on Feb. 5, a full-sized “cartoon” was approved on Feb. 20 and by March 5 installation was cleared with the local postmaster. Vorst submitted photographs of his completed work for Section approval on March 29; Rowan sent approval, with a few considerations for minor improvements, on April 3, 1940.

Vorst notified Rowan on May 17, 1940, that the mural was successfully installed, and Rowan authorized final payment to the artist on July 3. Vorst’s painting, “Rural Arkansas,” “has gloriously met with the approval of all the citizens of this city,” Paris Postmaster W.F. Elsken informed Rowan in a June 27 letter.

The Paris Post Office remains a remarkably intact expression of Depression-era Colonial Revival design in a government building. Its historic value is only enhanced by Joseph P. Vorst’s vibrant painting “Rural Arkansas,” a tribute as much to the spirit of compromise that led to its successful completion and installation as to the 1930s boosterism that crafted its subject matter.

### **Piggott Post Office, Clay County**

Construction on the new Piggott Post Office was 73 percent complete as of Nov. 1, 1937, leading the U.S. Treasury Department’s Section of Painting and Sculpture to seek permission to commission a mural for the Northeast Arkansas building. According to a Dec. 17, 1937, memo from the Section to the director of procurement, \$57,400 had been obligated for the post office. As of Dec. 13, \$4,522.37 remained unexpended, and \$700 of that was reserved for mural production. The memo was stamped approved on Jan. 5, 1938.

Based on the merits of a design submitted for a post office in Ames, Iowa, Ed Rowan, superintendent of the Section of Painting and Sculpture, invited Iowa artist Lowell Houser to submit designs for the Piggott Post Office on Aug. 20, 1938. Houser, who had moved from Iowa to California, accepted the Piggott commission in a Sept. 25 letter to Rowan in which the artist explained that he was also teaching at San Diego State College and designing sculptural panels for the Bankers Life Building in Des Moines. “However,” Houser wrote, “I should be able to work up the sketches for a mural ... and to paint it within the following six months.”

It was to take far more than six months. Correspondence between Rowan and Houser show delays in submitting the initial sketch, though the artist did conceive of a mural that would have portrayed the turn-of-the-century change of Piggott’s economy from a lumber to an agricultural base, titled “The Forests Give Way to the Fields.” It was nearly a year after the initial invitation before an actual contract was signed and approved. On June 13, 1940, House sent another letter to Rowan, explaining that family obligations had caused him forget the date of the contract and requesting that the document be nullified. “If this is not possible, then I will make every effort to complete the color sketch and complete the painting during this summer vacation,” Houser wrote. “I could do this with a three month extension of the time limit.” His patience apparently at an end after nearly two years of delays, Rowan replied on June 17 that the contract would be nullified and that another artist would be invited to prepare the Piggott mural. (Houser apparently did no further work for the Section. “Who



*“Air Mail” by Dan Rhodes, 1941, Piggott Post Office, Clay County. (AHPP Photo)*

Was Who in American Art” credits him only with the Ames, Iowa, mural and, mistakenly, with the Piggott mural.)

Rowan turned to another Iowan, Dan Rhodes, who in addition to Piggott painted post office murals for Glen Ellyn, Ill., Clayton, Mo., Marion, Ia., Storm Lake, Ia., and the Navy Building in Washington, D.C. Rhodes agreed on Aug. 21, 1940, to submit a design, which he did on Nov. 4. “As you will note, I have chose as subject matter the Air Mail. I feel the Air Mail is of unusual significance to the smaller and more isolated community, linking them as it does with the most distance centers,” the artist wrote to Rowan. “I have tried to convey the sense of stream-lined power which is behind the mail service.” Karal Ann Marling, in *Wall-to-Wall America*, found that Rhodes’s “image of flight had an almost purely symbolic significance for Piggott in any case. Rhodes’s aircraft bore a striking resemblance to the new DC-3, the first airliner to turn a profit on passenger service without dependence on federal mail contracts; the DC-3 rarely touched down in the northernmost corner of Arkansas.” However, she noted, “Streamlined power was justification enough for painting a futuristic phoenix arisen form the ashes of the Depression.”

In any event, Rowan found Rhodes’s subject matter “excellent,” though he had a few suggestions for improving the proposed mural’s balance. The official contract is dated Nov. 18, 1941 and Rhodes received his first \$150 payment on the \$700 job on Jan. 22, 1941. A second payment of \$225 was authorized on Feb. 6, the same day Rhodes received permission to install the mural in Piggott.

Rhodes experienced difficulty in sending Rowan the requisite 8 x 10 negative of the installed mural, explaining in a Feb. 22, 1941 letter that “no photographer in the region of Piggott has equipment to take an 8 x 10 negative.” The artist instead submitted a smaller photograph. Piggott Postmaster Ralph McNiel wrote Rowan on March 11, 1941, that the mural was both satisfactory and installed, but

complained that “the molding around the mural has not been painted; and the wall surface between the decoration and bulletin boards is somewhat soiled, the same having been done while the surface was being cleaned for the proper installation of the mural.” The mural was pictured in the March 11, 1941, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, a clipping of which was enclosed in McNiel’s letter.

On March 25, 1941, Rhodes was paid the \$325 balance due on his contract, ending the more than three-year effort to place a mural in the Piggott Post Office. The mural remains there today, in a building that retains virtually all of its original character.

### **Van Buren Post Office, Crawford County**

On Nov. 1, 1935, the *Van Buren Press Argus* announced that a plot of land on the corner of South Seventh and Webster streets would be the site of a new city post office. Postal engineer R.J. Evans visited the town two weeks later to do survey work preliminary to the release of bids. A March 13, 1936, *Press Argus* article noted the completion of plans for the new structure, and an April 17 article announced that Charles H. Barnes of Logansport, Ind., was the low bidder. However, all bids, including that of Barnes, were rejected in July because the postal service “considered the bids to high for the work,” according to the newspaper. Barnes again submitted the low bid in August and in September received the \$54,223 contract to build the new facility. Among the planned amenities, the *Press Argus* reported on Sept. 11, were “a mezzanine floor on which will be a room for carriers and employees to rest during off-working hours.” A Dec. 11 article notes that mild weather placed construction a month ahead of schedule. (Though no articles were located regarding the building’s opening, it presumably was held in 1937.)

Included in the plans for the new Van Buren Post Office was a \$590 allotment for a 12' by 5' mural to hang above the postmaster’s door. In August 1938, Section chief Edward B. Rowan invited artist E. Martin Hennings of Taos, N.M., to submit designs for the proposed mural. Hennings never responded, so a follow-up letter was mailed on June 8, 1939, seeking to ascertain the artist’s interest in the project. Hennings responded on June 23, saying he never received the earlier letter, noting that “I would have been very interested in making sketches for the mural then, as I am now.” A month later, Hennings received blueprints of the wall on which the mural would be hung, and the artist pledged to submit sketches of mural subjects for consideration. On Sept. 7, Hennings mailed Rowan a selection of three pencil sketches in which he “restricted myself, in subject, to the early settlers of Arkansas.” The Section chose a concept titled “The Chosen Site” and prepared a contract on Oct. 2, 1939.

Hennings and the Section experienced a number of difficulties in bringing the mural to fruition. The artist submitted his first color sketch on Nov. 22, portraying a pioneer family before a team of oxen pulling a Conestoga wagon. Rowan responded on Dec. 2 that a Section committee found the concept “too sweet for mural decoration,” noting that an image of a kneeling mother and child were “particularly disturbing” and “the men are in need of more convincing virility.” Hennings responded with a terse Dec. 29 note in which he pledged to make “such changes as I feel will improve the vitality of the mural.”

A move to Houston, Texas, delayed submission of a new sketch until March 4, 1940. This too was greeted with some concern, particularly a figure of a young man “as he does not seem either to be standing up or sitting down” and a feeling among Section personnel that “the general color of your design does not seem as happy as that of some of your previous paintings.” Regardless, Rowan on

March 28 approved a first payment of \$150 to Hennings.

Hennings agreed to make the corrections, and on April 16 sought and received permission to expand the 12' by 5' painting to 14' by 6'8" "to fill the entire space" above the postmaster's door. Rowan approved the expansion on April 20, but warned that "blue prints cannot always be relied on for the correct dimensions and it is always well to check this with the space in the building."

Hennings submitted a photograph of his drawing on canvas on June 15 and, noting that "the work has been going a bit slower than anticipated," requested an extension on his contract, which was due to expire June 30. A second payment of \$150 was approved on June 18, and Hennings' contract was extended to Sept. 30 to allow him time to complete and install the mural.

On Sept. 13, Hennings wrote that "I have finally finished my painting 'The Chosen Site' for the Post Office of Van Buren, Arkansas." Rowan gave permission for installation on Sept. 23, and a month later the artist supervised its installation by Van Buren decorator J.B. Davidson. "It does look splendid in place, and all who have seen it, seem to like it." Hennings' assessment of the local reaction appeared to be correct, according to an undated *Press Argus* article mailed to Rowan by Van Buren Postmaster E.W. Deering. The author notes that "Mr. Hennings was greeted with cordial praise for his work that depicts a pioneer family that has found its site for a new home." The article also notes that the model for the mural's adult male figure was Taos gas station attendant Tony Martinez, whose "Mexican features, of course, were Americanized on the canvas." A final payment of \$290 was approved on Nov. 26, completing the process of what was apparently Hennings' sole work for the Section.

### **Wynne Post Office, Cross County**

On Sept. 28, 1935, the *Wynne Daily Star Progress* reported that a lot on Merriman Avenue was picked as the site of a new post office for Wynne. Post Office Inspector Floyd Elliot recommended the location, and the Department of the Treasury paid Mrs. Lizzie Collins \$6,000 for the property.

A Jan. 10, 1936, article noted that a cap of \$65,000 was placed on construction costs of the structure, projected to be a one-story structure with a basement. Though the January article predicted a swift beginning to construction, it was summer before work began. An Aug. 19 *Star Progress* article quoted construction superintendent C.W. Saffell of the Farnsworth Construction Company of New Orleans as saying the building would be ready for occupancy by the first of the year. This proved a bit ambitious: a Dec. 31 article said interior plaster work was just beginning and that Wynne Postmaster Clarence Coffin was hoping to move into the new structure in late February or early March. Ultimately, the building did not open until late April, a delay ameliorated in part by a decision to keep the new building open until 7 p.m. each night instead of closing at 6 p.m.

The original specifications for the Wynne Post Office included a \$560 allocation for a 12' by 4'6" mural above the postmaster's door. On Aug. 5, 1938, Section chief Ed Rowan invited Ethel Magafan of Colorado Springs, Col., to submit designs for the Wynne structure "on the basis of the merit of the design [Magafan] submitted ... in the Fort Scott, Kansas Competition." Magafan accepted the commission in a Sept. 12 letter, pledging to "go to Wynne at the end of this month" to seek inspiration for the mural.



*“Cotton Pickers” by Ethel Magafan, 1940, Wynne Post Office, Cross County. (National Archives Photo #I21-CMS-1A-39)*

On Jan. 5, 1939, Magafan submitted two pencil sketches “using the theme of negro cotton pickers” for the Wynne post office. The Section deemed a sketch of workers in a cotton field as “the most interesting,” Rowan wrote on Jan. 16, adding that “the need, however, of the same type of penetrating observation which you brought to bear on the Auburn, Nevada mural is felt in proceeding with this design and I trust that you will be able to authenticate this work in the same convincing manner.” Magafan replied on March 5 that “when I was in Arkansas the negroes were picking cotton. I made many sketches of them at work, and also have done research on the subject. I hope to make my Wynne, Arkansas mural as convincing as the Auburn, Nebraska mural.”

By early June, Magafan submitted the required 2" color sketch of her mural proposal. Rowan noted one figure with a disproportionately small head and a male figure “which does not seem entirely realized,” but accepted the work. The Section released Magafan’s first payment of \$150 on June 27, 1939.

On Oct. 26, Rowan notified Magafan that arrangements were complete for her to install the mural in the Wynne Post Office. Magafan wrote Rowan on Nov. 8 that she was “very anxious to install it immediately and would appreciate it if you would wire me collect if it meets your approval.” The next message from Rowan, dated Dec. 2, was a terse note reading: “ON YOUR VISIT WYNNE ARKANSAS DID POSTMASTER APPROVE COTTON SUBJECT MATTER.” Magafan replied on the same date that Rowan’s telegram left her “a wee bit bewildered as to why there is any discussion about the cotton as subject matter. Upon arriving at Wynne, I discovered there were fields of cotton on all sides as far as I could see. When I visited the Postmaster I naturally asked about the crops and things of importance in Wynne. About all the Postmaster could suggest was orchards and cotton. As he himself suggested cotton I took for granted he approved of it.” Rowan’s next telegram, dated Dec. 6, read simply: THANKS LETTER DECEMBER SECOND EXPLANATION SATISFACTORY PROCEED INSTALLATION FIRST CONFERRING WITH POSTMASTER RELA-

TIVE CONVENIENT DATE ACCOUNT HOLIDAY RUSH". Her second payment of \$150 was approved on Dec. 13.

Magafan installed the mural around the first of the year in 1940, writing Rowan on Jan. 3 that "the Postmaster and his crew were pleased with it and the local people seemed very interested, although some of them didn't even know the meaning of the word mural." Postmaster Coffin notified Rowan on January 15 that the mural "seems to be satisfactory, we have had numerous compliments on the work." Coffin enclosed an undated *Star Progress* clipping noting the installation of the work by Magafan and her twin sister, Jenne. Magafan is quoted on her inspiration for the work: "When I was here last year I made many sketches of the negroes at work and found that your landscape here offered much interesting material for an artist to use ... I was very interested in negroes at work in the fields and thought it would make good subject material for a mural." The Section approved the final payment of \$260 on Jan. 29.

In addition to the Wynne and Auburn, Neb., murals, Magafan's work was also featured at postal facilities in Madill, Okla., and at the South Denver Branch, proving her a prolific and popular Section collaborator.

Ethel Magafan's mural "Cotton Pickers" remains the centerpiece of the Wynne Post Office nearly 60 years after its installation. It is, unfortunately, deteriorating and is in need of conservation work.

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**ARKANSAS HISTORIC  
PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

# Arkansas Post Offices and the Treasury Department's Section Art Program, 1938-1942

By Sandra Taylor Smith & Mark K. Christ

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