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## The Mural in the Squirrel Hill Post Office, Part 1

Helen Wilson

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When you go to the Squirrel Hill post office, do you glance at the mural above the Superintendent's door in the lobby? The left side looks like Squirrel Hill in the early 1940s, bustling with the kind of people the neighborhood's older citizens will remember. But that man in the middle—a frontiersman? Makes you think of Daniel Boone. And the Native Americans menacing colonists clearing the land for farming—was that part of Squirrel Hill history?

Well, the short answer is—yes. Colonists from Europe were settling the area in the 1700s, and the Native Americans rightly felt they were being pushed off their land. Violent attacks ensued.

But back to the mural. It is called *History of Squirrel Hill* and was painted by Alan Thompson in 1942. And it is a very big deal because it is a New Deal post office mural. That means it was one of about 1,150 murals and bas-relief sculptures created between 1933 and 1943 to provide work for artists during the Great Depression as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal program. The program was administered by the U. S. Treasury Department through its Section of Fine Arts. Most of the artworks adorn post offices because the government wanted the art to be accessible to all people. Pennsylvania received 94 commissions, second only to New York. Pittsburgh has four: two (it used to be three) at the County Courthouse, the third at the post office downtown, and the fourth at our own Squirrel Hill post office. Several others are scattered around western Pennsylvania.

Artists who received commissions were encouraged to visit the community that would house the mural and discuss the theme with the postmaster and other community members. Judging from the details in the mural, Alan Thompson most likely came to Squirrel Hill to observe the busy street scenes, see the local landmarks and hear stories about Squirrel Hill's earliest days.

A bit of those early days remains. Tucked into a busy block of Beechwood Boulevard between Browns Hill Road and the Parkway East entrance ramp is tiny half-acre Turner Graveyard with its haphazard collection of old tombstones leaning in all directions. The graveyard is believed to be the second oldest graveyard in Pittsburgh. The oldest tombstone dates to 1816, but burials took place as early as 1795.

John Turner (1755-1840) gave the land for the graveyard to the community. As an infant, he, his parents, and four half-brothers were captured by Indians when they lived in central Pennsylvania. His father was murdered and the rest of the family separated. When the family was reunited ten years later, they settled near the large intersection at the top of Browns Hill Road. By the way, one of John Turner's half-brothers was Simon Girty Jr, who defected to the British during the Revolutionary War. Looking at the mural, it is possible to imagine the frontiersman as John Turner. One reason is that the farming scene to the right of him is placed on a hill above a river with a bend in it—a view that can still be seen today from the 3200 block of Beechwood Boulevard—near where Turner's 143-acre farm was located. Turner and his wife, Susanna, are buried in the graveyard.

In the next article, I'll go into more detail about the Squirrel Hill post office mural and the artist who painted it. Meanwhile, go see it for yourself and take a good look at it. The artist was an illustrator as well as an artist, and the mural is filled with wry humor and wit.