

George Snow Hill:
A WPA Artist and His
Contributions to Florida and Tampa Bay
by

Diane M. Craig

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Liberal Arts
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida St. Petersburg

Co-Chair Gary Mormino, Ph.D., Co-Chair Susan Fernandez, Ph.D.
Mr. James Schnur, M.A.

Date of Approval:
November 5, 2012

Keywords: St. Petersburg, murals, mural art, public art, Federal Arts Project, Florida
Federal Arts Project, Polly Knipp Hill, Great Depression, Art Club of St. Petersburg,
Sunshine City, Joe Waller, US Coast Guard-Bayboro, Garden Cafeteria, Clearwater,
Eva Fuller, *SS Morro Castle*, *SS Fuego Castle*, *CG Cutter Bear*, Morean Art Center

Copyright © 2012, Diane M. Craig

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No one ever achieves his or her dreams alone. Pursuing a master's in my early sixties made that crystal clear. Without the encouragement, support, and flexibility from so many wonderful people, however, the pursuit would have been long and lonely.

The grad school staff at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg, including Eric Douthirt, Sue Ryan, Donna Knudsen, and Jennifer Woroner in HR often worked miracles on my behalf. The Florida Studies Program staff, faculty, and students proved to be the best support group a grad-school candidate could have. My graduate advisor, Dr. Gary Mormino who, over countless cups of coffee, offered valuable counsel and support, wisdom and encouragement, and who introduced me to George Snow Hill. Jim Schnur, archivist extraordinaire, lifted the veil on the mystery of research, and taught me the value of ephemera. Drs. Ray Arsenault and Susan Fernandez regularly showed me what great teaching looks like, and challenged me every step of the way. Dr. Fernandez, as one of my committee members, proved to be both an incredible resource, and an insightful editor. FSP students and staff, Daun, Frank, Cathi, Chris M., JT, Cynthia, Caroline, Chris K., Dara, Jason, Debs, Lynne, and more were always there to motivate and support. When both my parents passed away during one semester, no one could have asked for better friends.

When I started my studies, I was working forty-plus hours with the *Tampa Bay Times* (formerly *St. Petersburg Times*) and, when it became clear my studies required I consider part-time status, management and staff worked with me to make it possible.

Kerry O'Reilly, Chris Galbraith, Nikki Life, Marti Galloway, Janeen Andrews, and the designers and supervisors I worked with were my biggest cheering section, and never wavered in their commitment to allow me to pursue my dream.

Enee Abelman, who generously offered her time, and support, was of enormous help in unlocking some of the mystery behind George Snow Hill.

My entire family, especially my sister Marie, my brothers Phil and Bob, nieces Tara and Kristine, and my dear Florida friends – Nina, Lane, Bill and Greg, Anthea, Anne, Carrie, Patti C. and Patti E. – never let me down when I needed a boost, a pal, a shoulder, a glass of wine, or a swift kick. And my parents, whose encouraging cards and phone calls were a constant reminder of their love and pride in their daughter's pursuits, and whose loss adds a poignant note to the journey's end.

The pursuit of a master's degree is a lonely path. I will be forever grateful to those who traveled it with me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	ii
FOREWORD	iv
ABSTRACT	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE	3
<i>Feed the Nation, Feed the Soul</i>	
CHAPTER TWO	12
<i>Groomed for Tourism – Florida and the Great Depression</i>	
CHAPTER THREE	23
<i>Murals and the St. Petersburg Connection</i>	
<i>The Man from Munising – George Snow Hill</i>	28
<i>Bathing Beauties – The Clearwater Mural – 1934</i>	34
<i>Banyans and Monkeys – The Garden Cafeteria Mural – 1934</i>	43
<i>A Visual History – Bayboro’s USCG Mural – 1936</i>	48
<i>Flight and Imagery – 1938</i>	52
<i>Piers, Picnics and Controversy – The City Hall Mural – 1940</i>	56
CONCLUSION.....	64
BIBLIOGRAPHY	68
APPENDIX.....	72

LIST OF FIGURES

<p>Figure 1. Polly Knipp and George Snow Hill in their Parisian Studio @ 1926. Private Collection of Enee Abelman, St. Petersburg, Florida. Used with permission.....</p>	73
<p>Figure 2. Polly Knipp Hill and George Snow Hill in St. Petersburg, Florida @1933. Private Collection of Enee Abelman, St. Petersburg, Florida. Used with permission.</p>	74
<p>Figure 3. “Artist Objects to Fight Over Bathing Suit Scene,” <i>St. Petersburg Times</i>, August 5, 1934, artist’s personal clippings file. <i>In author’s possession.</i></p>	75
<p>Figure 4. George Snow Hill’s Garden Cafeteria mural (now demolished), photo of fresco showing banyan tree on west wall from east entrance. Photograph by Tara Craig, 2009 and used with permission. <i>Photo in author’s possession.</i></p>	76
<p>Figure 5. Photo of flora, east-facing wall of George Snow Hill’s Garden Cafeteria mural (now demolished). Photograph by Tara Craig, 2009 and used with permission. <i>Photo in author’s possession.</i></p>	77
<p>Figure 6. Section of George Snow Hill mural in wardroom at St. Petersburg’s USCG Bayboro station, @1937? Photo courtesy of <i>Tampa Bay Times</i> photo archives. Used with permission.</p>	78
<p>Figure 7. Section of George Snow Hill mural in wardroom at St. Petersburg’s USCG Bayboro station. Photo taken by author, 2012.</p>	79
<p>Figure 8. A section of Hill’s USCG mural showing the ship’s name <i>SS Morro Castle</i>. St. Petersburg’s USCG Bayboro station, @1937? Photo courtesy of <i>Tampa Bay Times</i> photo archives. Used with permission.</p>	80

Figure 9.
Section of Hill’s USCG Bayboro mural showing a different name
– *SS Fuego Castle* – on the ship the artist had painted as the *SS Morro
Castle*. Photo taken by author, 2012.81

Figure 10.
Photo, seventh panel of “Legacy of Flight,” by George Snow Hill,
depicting the arrival of a 1914 trip from St. Petersburg to Tampa piloted
by Tony Jannus. Photo taken by author, 2011.82

Figure 11.
“Long Staple Cotton Gin,” mural by George Snow Hill for U.S. Post
Office, Madison, Florida. Photo courtesy of *Tampa Bay Times* photo
archive. Used with permission.83

Figure 12.
George Snow Hill shown at his mural, “Fishing at the Pier,” in progress.
Courtesy of *Tampa Bay Times* photo archive. Used with permission.84

Figure 13.
Photo of George Snow Hill’s mural for St. Petersburg City Hall,
“Picnicking at Pass-a-Grille.” His depiction of two black musicians
as minstrels playing for a white gathering of picnic-goers set off a
firestorm of controversy in 1966, and resulted in the mural’s
destruction. Photo courtesy of *Tampa Bay Times* photo archive.
Used with permission.85

Figure 14.
Photo showing Omali Yeshitela (Joe Waller, center left with
sunglasses) and other black activists with George Snow Hill’s disputed
mural, on the streets of St. Petersburg, December 29, 1966. Photo
courtesy of *Tampa Bay Times* photo archive. Used with permission.86

FOREWORD

Considered for decades one of the city's most notable painters, the professional career of St. Petersburg artist George Snow Hill essentially ended in 1966, when young black activists ripped a mural of his from its wall in City Hall, and paraded it down Central Avenue. The young men were protesting Hill's depiction of two black musicians in the mural "Picnicking at Pass-a-Grille," depictions that could only be described as highly caricatured minstrels. A *St. Petersburg Times* (now *Tampa Bay Times*) reporter interviewed the artist the day after the mural was torn down, and reported on the artist's confusion over the incident. Hill claimed the entire mural was reminiscent of pleasant Sunday afternoon picnics, where "troubadours, ... traveled from Pass-A-Grille northward, playing at the various picnic shelters along the beaches ... playing what the people wanted to hear."¹ He said the relationship between the picnic-goers and the musicians was one an affectionate one.² It was not the first time an artist of one generation was challenged by succeeding generations, and it is easy to imagine how this attitude may have come across to the black community of the mid-1960s, a community finding its political voice after decades of oppression. It is also not too difficult to understand, either, how Hill's explanation may have added more fuel to the controversy. Whatever the reason, it was the last time Hill's name appeared in print until his obituary in 1969, three years later.

¹ Fred Wright. "City Hall Mural Artist Confused by Row." *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, "December 30, 1966.

² Ibid.

During America's Great Depression of the 1930s, George S. Hill joined thousands of the nation's artists as part of the Federal Arts Project, one of many job programs created by the New Deal, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's massive government initiative. Public art created for the masses, Roosevelt's administration believed, would provide an opportunity for down-on-their-luck Americans to feel better about themselves. Images of familiar places and faces, pleasures and vices, and labor and leisure vividly portrayed on walls and canvasses across America would offer opportunities to help heal the nation's badly damaged spirit. Did it work? Did art created through the Federal Arts Project fulfill the administration's vision of making us feel good about ourselves, and what are we to think when it did not?

All of George Snow Hill's known surviving public murals appear to have met the goal of the administrations' noble cultural experiment. His paintings of white men and black men working a cotton gin, or a cedar mill – familiar to Floridians of the 1930s and 1940s – continue to provide connections with our collective past and, with them, a sense of historical pride. However, Hill's mural, "Picnicking at Pass-a-Grille," and the artist's portrayal of two black musicians – an unlikely occurrence in the area at that time – as highly caricatured minstrels, provides a dilemma: Did Hill's racially charged imagery mirror the times in which it was painted, or did it reflect his own reality, and his views on race? Research tells us it most assuredly did *not* make the black population feel good about itself, and made even a few white people uncomfortable.

Further study of Hill's work may help explain why a WPA muralist would stray from the goal of the Federal Arts Project with a mural that – rather than enlighten and uplift – would offend and anger.

For better or worse, the mural incident at City Hall came to define one of St. Petersburg's most prolific artists, and the career of a man whose artistic endeavors directly link the city, and the state, to the 1930s and President Roosevelt's New Deal. That link – to a program in America's Depression-era history that paid artists to paint publicly accessible uplifting art – is worth another look.

ABSTRACT

Artist and muralist George Snow Hill was St. Petersburg's only known link to the Work Progress Administration's Federal Arts Project, an innovative program that paid citizens to creatively chronicle 1930s America. Perhaps Florida's most prolific New Deal muralist, Hill, and his many works, have remained virtually unknown to most Floridians, and to many in his adopted city. Undoubtedly defined by a charge of visual racism in 1966, Hill's cultural contributions to the St. Petersburg's art community have drifted into obscurity. Through a review of his work, especially his murals in Pinellas County, ephemera that included personal correspondence, and newspaper clippings, and in conversations with those who knew the family, this paper has attempted to illuminate Hill's life, and provide context and texture to St. Petersburg's link to FDR's noble experiment of art for the masses.

INTRODUCTION

Once, as a twelve-year-old student in Detroit, Michigan, I went on a field trip to the Detroit Institute of Arts, where I saw for the first time Mexican artist Diego Rivera's mural, "Detroit Industry," an exquisite fresco that fills the walls of the museum's Great Hall, from floor to ceiling. I remember the power I saw in the images, and the pride of being a child of the Motor City, because that was my city on those big walls, filled with large men and even larger machines fusing heat, iron and sweat to make the cars we drove. I have loved mural art ever since.

As an adult, I was intrigued with the 1930s, and the social programs of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. Americans who neither grew up during America's Great Depression nor had parents or grandparents who did, seem to have little, if any, understanding of the profound effect the government had on the everyday lives of the American people. I knew the 1930s was a period in America's history I wanted to study and, ultimately, teach. I shared that desire with Dr. Gary Mormino during my first Florida Studies class and he suggested I look up St. Petersburg's "WPA muralist, George Snow Hill." I never looked back.

Hill, and to a lesser degree, his talented and artistic wife Polly Knipp Hill, were local and vital links to the Works Progress Administration's Federal Arts Project; his murals typifying what Holger Cahill, the director of the government's Federal Arts Project, meant when he spoke of a "democratization of art." Researching Hill's murals,

however, and the man behind them, often presented more questions than answers. Several of his past works have disappeared, and those that remain are shrouded both in controversy and mystery.

By no means is this an exhaustive study of the artist. The Hill estate of paintings, sketches, and ephemera was dispersed of years ago, some of it preserved in the hands of local and state collectors, and fine art appraisers, while other pieces appear on art auction sites around the country. It may, therefore, be impossible to anticipate just how much of Hill's work remains in existence, nor know the intimate details of the man who started his career in Bohemia Paris, only to see it end in St. Petersburg, Florida, with a charge of artistic racism. What I hope this paper does, however, is stimulate the curiosity of those future academicians who may wonder about the missing mural at City Hall, or the huge painting of Icarus and his wax wings in E Terminal at Tampa International Airport's Airside E, and be curious enough to uncover more about the man behind them who provides an intimate connection between our region's current artistic reputation, and its artful past.

CHAPTER ONE

Feed the Nation, Feed the Soul

When America elected Franklin D. Roosevelt president in 1932, he assumed the leadership of a people who had hit rock bottom. An economic downturn that started with the stock market crash of 1929 under President Herbert Hoover had grown to a staggering twenty-five per cent overall unemployment rate, and the American psyche was under emotional assault. No longer able to feed their families, men stood in bread lines waiting for whatever handouts were available. Faced with merciless drought, a generation of dust bowl families left their homes with little possessions and traveled the country in search of work. Despite doing more than his presidential predecessors may have in similar circumstances, Hoover had little to say to the hundreds of out-of-work Americans, war veterans among them, who camped outside the White House in ‘Hooverilles.’ Before FDR’s landslide victory, services for down-on-their-luck Americans were virtually non-existent, underscoring, perhaps, the common myth that the American populace was invincible: self-determined, hardworking, resourceful people able to pick itself up by its bootstraps in true Horatio Alger fashion. If individuals failed, family members, communities and the state would provide. It was not until the Great Depression that the federal government would emerge as the ultimate safety net.

America’s sense of itself was shattered in the years after the Market’s crash and, by the time F.D.R. was in the White House, a general malaise gripped the country. The new president had an immense task before him: rekindle America’s work force, and restore America’s grit.

Roosevelt's energy, charm, and wit carried the relatively unknown east coast patrician to a landslide victory. Unknown to the population that had just elected him, their new president was crippled with polio – an affliction that, according to his wife, both imbued him with a profound humility, and gave him a unique connection to those who suffered. It was a lesson that would serve Roosevelt well as he faced a nation holding its breath about the future.³

As the country waited, Roosevelt assembled an inner circle of innovative thinkers whose purpose was to craft programs that would provide some relief, recovery, and reform to thirty million Americans who had lost their primary sources of income. Even as FDR faced a looming banking crisis, he understood the nation was nearing exhaustion, and people needed to eat. As layoffs continued, and unemployment rose, the President saw that solutions to restoring citizens' self-esteem were in short supply. Further, there was a genuine sense of unrest in the country. Hoover's lackluster attempt in 1931 to provide some form of relief with the creation of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) proved to feed a nation's discontent more than it's stomachs. In *The Great Depression: America, 1929–1941*, Robert S. McElvanie suggests that Hoover's strict adherence to a free enterprise system, coupled with an apparent disinterest in – or inability to relate to – the poor's plight, enabled him to push for the establishment of the RFC at the same time he severely limited the budget for public works.⁴ Any attempt to provide relief for America's suffering population that involved federal government intervention was anathema to everything Hoover and his financial cronies believed.

³ David McCullough, "FDR," *The American Experience: The Presidents*, 1994, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/fdr/>

⁴ Robert S. McElvanie, *The Great Depression: America, 1929–1941* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009), 69.

However, short of accomplishing nothing, the RFC temporarily saved the collapse of country's banking system, primarily because Hoover believed that confidence in business was central to recovery, and that credit was central to confidence. As such, he had no trouble supporting the purpose of the RFC: to extend government credit to financial institutions, including banks, with the belief that they (banks, etc.) would then loosen credit throughout the country, and bring about recovery.⁵ Essentially, Hoover's ideology was one of 'trickle down.'⁶ Perhaps the most extreme reaction to the RFC's initial focus on financial institutions at the expense of the people, however, came in June 1932, five months before the presidential election when the RFC loaned the Central Republic Bank of Chicago ninety million dollars. The bank's president, Charles G. Dawes (Calvin Coolidge's vice-president, 1925-1929) was also president of the RFC. In June, Dawes left his post with the RFC and returned to Chicago to save the bank from going under, and the only way he believed he could do that was with assistance from the federal government. Unfortunately, two weeks before the Central Republic Bank of Chicago received its loan, the mayor of Chicago led a delegation to Washington, D.C. asking for money from the RFC to pay Chicago's city workers, and teachers. With no power to make such a loan, the RFC denied the request. Thus, though the ninety-million-dollar loan to Dawes' bank may have been a wise economic move, the RFC's actions proved to the American people that the federal government preferred to bail out banks, rather than pay city workers.⁷

There was no denying the unrest in the country. Faith in Hoover's economic relief efforts for the American people were in shambles, and many – politicians and journalists

⁵ Ibid., 89.

⁶ More than once during the course of research for this paper, I have been amazed at the similarities between the espoused economic policies of the 1930s, and America's in the 2000s.

⁷ McElvanie, *The Great Depression* ..., 90.

among them – believed that if industry did not change its ways and give its employees a fair share of the profits, a revolt among the nation’s population was possible.⁸

What became a nightmare for the Republican incumbent, however, proved an opportunity for the Democratic candidate. FDR believed Hoover’s economic policies ignored the plight of struggling Americans, a topic he addressed in his “Forgotten Man” radio speech.⁹ In it, Roosevelt articulated his belief that a strong economic future must work from the bottom up, not the top down, and he invoked Napoleon’s Battle of Waterloo as an example:

It is said that Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo because he forgot his infantry--he staked too much upon the more spectacular but less substantial cavalry. The present administration in Washington provides a close parallel. It has either forgotten or it does not want to remember the infantry of our economic army.¹⁰

Though some voiced objection to the “The Forgotten Man” radio address (some claimed it was delusional to think the government should spend money on the unemployed rather than on those who created jobs), Roosevelt went even further in a second radio address five days later. In what became his Jefferson Day address, FDR called for a “community of interest,” and “common participation,” and made a plea “not for class control, but for a true concert of interests.”¹¹ Throughout the presidential campaign, Roosevelt had increasingly aligned himself with the mood of the American people, and in so doing, helped move the Democratic party toward a stark alternative to

⁸ Ibid., 91.

⁹ Ibid., 125.

¹⁰ Franklin D. Roosevelt. “Works of Franklin D. Roosevelt, “The Forgotten Man,” April 7, 1932, The New Deal Network. Accessed on October 24, 2012, <http://newdeal.feri.org/speeches/1932c.htm>. Reprinted in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Vol. 1, 1928-32, (New York City: Random House, 1938), 624.

¹¹ McElvanie, *The Great Depression ...*, 125.

the failed ideology of Hoover and the Republicans: "... a party of liberal thought, of planned action, of enlightened international outlook ... [and of] democratic principles."¹²

Following his landslide victory, Roosevelt knew he had to act fast if he was to take advantage of the confidence the American people had shown in him. He had reason to be concerned. A letter from Farmers' Union President John A. Simpson sent to the president-elect in January, 1933 made it very clear that swift action was needed: "... unless you [Mr. Roosevelt] call a special session of Congress ... and start a revolution in government affairs there will be one started in the country. It is just a question of whether or not you get one started first."¹³ Fortunately, the president had a largely freshman Congress, many of whom were elected in reaction to Hoover's disasters, and a full fourth elected in 1930. This Depression-era Congress with public sentiment on their side, and the winds of change at their backs, gave the new president an unprecedented legislative accomplishment "pass[ing] eleven key measures in ... special session with only forty hours of debate."¹⁴

With Congress willing to act, Roosevelt's long-time confidante Harry Hopkins (who had headed up relief efforts in New York) encouraged the president to ask for creation of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) to funnel federal grants to the states. Appointed by the president to direct the FERA, Hopkins embraced the position with great enthusiasm. Driven by a strong desire to help others, and not content with simply working out the details, his methods involved spreading the money around as quickly as possible, reportedly spending \$5 million within the first two hours on the job.

¹² Ibid., 127.

¹³ Ibid., 147.

¹⁴ Ibid., 146, 47.

Though the program's initial allotment was \$500 million, Hopkins saw the amount as merely "priming the pump."¹⁵ It was one thing to put money in the hands of the unemployed; it was quite another, however, to create jobs. That task fell to the Public Works Administration (PWA), under the direction of Harold Ickes. The focus of the PWA, created under Title II of the National Industry Recovery Act, was to expand the government's public works projects, with the intent of stimulating the economy, and providing jobs. As a result, the PWA, with its \$3.3 billion appropriation, proved in 1933 and 1934 to be an effective tool in the administration's fight against the Great Depression.¹⁶ Ickes, whose sour attitude was in stark contrast to the affable Hopkins, saw the PWA not merely as a means of bringing about recovery, but as a way of providing Americans with meaningful projects, projects that would benefit the greater public. Ickes set out to create "the perhaps unattainable ideal of administering the greatest fund for construction in the history of the world without scandal."¹⁷ By all accounts, the PWA achieved that goal and, in the process, created an impressive legacy that included the construction of municipal buildings, sewage systems, and hospitals, as well as rebuilding the causeway from Florida's mainland to Key West, ensuring its continued connection to the state's mainland. Further, the PWA was responsible for nearly seventy percent of new schools built in the U.S. between 1933 and 1939.¹⁸ Unfortunately, as most of the agency's money went for materials and skilled labor, and private contractors did the bulk of the work, many Americans were untouched by the employment the PWA provided.

¹⁵ Ibid., 151, 52.

¹⁶ Ibid., 152, 53.

¹⁷ Ibid., 152.

¹⁸ Ibid., 153.

Consequently, a sizeable population continued to rely upon direct relief. Increasingly, however, members of the administration, including Hopkins, believed that simply putting money in the hands of the unemployed destroyed “their sense of independence and their sense of individual destiny.”¹⁹ Much of this sentiment was fueled by correspondence generated by Lorena Hickok. Hickok, a former journalist and close friend of Hopkins and at his request, traveled the country in 1933 and 1934 as a “confidential observer,” and reported to FERA the effects of the administration’s relief efforts. Her candid letters told of widespread political corruption (she was particularly hard on Florida, suggesting that the state “seems to be chock full of politics and petty graft ...”²⁰), and offered heart-wrenching stories of Americans beaten down in their efforts at finding work of any kind. Perhaps her most important observations, however, were the candid assessments about the people she met: honest Americans embarrassed to be on the dole, ready to work, and for whom federal monies – handouts – did little for their self-esteem.

Providing immediate relief for the destitute, and a sense of hopefulness for the persistently unemployed was proving to be a delicate balance for the administration. Arguing that giving a person something to do and receiving a paycheck in return was good for morale, Hopkins convinced Roosevelt to enact a temporary work relief program, “to tide the unemployed over until ... the PWA got into full gear.”²¹ The result was the Civil Works Administration (CWA) that, within a month, provided jobs to more than four million Americans. The program was phased out the following summer, but not before the impact of ‘working for something’ was absorbed into the zeitgeist of the New Deal.

¹⁹ Ibid., 153.

²⁰ Richard Lowitt and Maurine Beasley, *One Third of a Nation: Lorena Hickok Reports on the Great Depression* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 163.

²¹ McElvanie, *The Great Depression ...*, 153.

Thus, in 1934, Roosevelt sought a \$4.8 billion work relief appropriation, and Congress passed legislation in 1935 that created the Work Progress Administration (WPA). The previous work relief program, while not a panacea for the nation's malaise, provided many Americans with a modest alternative from the debilitating handout. Still, it did not contribute significantly to the overall economic health of the country – a matter of particular concern to the administration. Under Hopkins' direction, the WPA sought to provide meaningful employment (albeit government-created employment) as well as sustain workers' morale, provisos that proved difficult at times to reconcile. On one hand, Hopkins hoped to create jobs that were attractive enough to boost self-confidence, but unattractive enough to keep workers from forgetting opportunities in the private sector. Not the perfect program, perhaps, the WPA was nonetheless innovative government programming, particularly with its support of the arts, an area of great appeal to Harry Hopkins (whose family had summered for years in Woodstock, New York, home to an artists' colony). In fact, some have argued that the most “notable experiment of the work relief program”²² was the creation of Federal One (sometimes referred to as Federal Project Number One). Funded with only a sliver of the large WPA budget, Federal One provided government support for the arts in America by paying artists, writers, and actors to paint, write and perform. The result was a series of specific programs that compensated creative people to create – among them the Federal Writers' Project, the Federal Arts Project, and the Federal Theatre Project. However, the Federal Arts Project may have contributed the most to feeding the soul of America, and lifting the nation's spirits. While McElvanie suggests that Roosevelt “cared much for art for art's sake,”²³ the gentleman in

²² Ibid., 268.

FDR believed the arts contributed greatly to the quality of one's life. His support of the arts was as much about the democratization of American life, as it was about opening the arts to the masses: in fact, FDR saw them as conjoined twins. With the establishment of the Federal Arts Project, the government's support for the arts created an incredible legacy: a visual chronicle of the nation's people, attitudes, and economic needs during the 1930s. Further, it provided states with unprecedented opportunities to celebrate the uniqueness of America – from its pulsating cities to its bucolic farmlands – and the people who struggled to call it home.

²³ McElvanie, *The Great Depression ...*, 25.

CHAPTER TWO

Groomed for Tourism – Florida and the Great Depression

The misery wrought by the Great Depression differed throughout the country. The Dust Bowl migration of impoverished farmers, immortalized in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, contrasted with the growing breadlines in cities of the industrial North. Certainly, there was enough suffering to go around. For southern states, struggling to retain an agrarian culture, the nation's economic downturn looked a bit different and, in many cases, followed a different calendar. While much of north suffered under the ravages of post-crash financial chaos, the 'southernmost state,' whose economic health depended more on the success of tourism and the kindness of Mother Nature, was, at least in the early days of the Depression, still entertaining south-bound travelers.

In the late 1800s and early twentieth century, many wealthy northerners traveled south in the winter to Florida's Atlantic Coast. Enticed by warm climate and exotic geography, well-heeled ladies and gentlemen transformed cities like Miami into seasonal destinations. Prescient developers like Henry Flagler and Henry Plant met winter residents' needs with elaborate hotels, summer accommodations, and, in Flagler's case, a railway connection to the land-estranged southern keys. This development, on both the state's coasts, had a tremendous impact on Florida's growing reputation as a summer holiday, an exotic land away from it all that provided a luxurious respite from the trials of northern living. What it did not provide, however, was a familiar culture. Centers for European art, long a vestige of the rich, were sorely lacking in Florida. For those,

however, who made the state their permanent residence, it became a matter of ensuring the culture they desired was built into the community. St. Petersburg provided a classic example of this.

Early developers to our area, like Walter C. Fuller, and C. Perry Snell, planned and executed new communities resplendent with touches of the romantic, and enhanced them with public art. Snell was one of the many Northern tourists whose vacations in St. Petersburg turned into permanent residency. Born in Bowling Green, Tennessee, he honeymooned in St. Petersburg in 1899 and, with his heiress bride, made the city their home in 1904.²⁴ In 1910, Snell collaborated with Mr. J. C. Hamlett of Crockett Mills, Tennessee, to create an exclusive and restricted community of Spanish and stucco houses, where each home's design and color scheme was rigidly controlled. Developed around Coffee Pot Bayou, it was known as Granada Terrace, and home to both Crockett and Snell for many years.²⁵ Snell took his inspiration for the development from his frequent trips to Mexico, Spain, and Italy, where he often salvaged and sent home large amounts of antique and rare marble: such inspiration was reflected in his insistence that all homes conform to the preferred Spanish/stucco style. Nonetheless, his home was to be "three floors high, [with] the top floor ... an art gallery, and the lower floor including the loggias and terraces ... tile floors."²⁶ As the city began to feel the early pinch of the nation's economic downturn, however, Snell managed to hang on. He filled his Snell Isle home with statuary, built a miniature Stonehenge in one of his parks, and broke ground for a building in downtown St. Petersburg – a building that would be first a thing of

²⁴ Raymond Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream, 1888 – 1950* (Virginia Beach: The Donning Company, 1988), 137.

²⁵ The Snell Island Property Owners Association, *Snell Island St. Petersburg, Florida*, 1996, 13-14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

beauty, and only second, an investment.²⁷ Built at a cost of \$750,000, the Venetian-inspired Snell Building, billed as one of the South's most beautiful office buildings, and appointed with statuary and ornate antiques, was one of its most excessive.

When the country's economic downturn finally began to infringe on his dreams, Snell mortgaged his office building to fulfill obligations to the homeowners of his beloved Snell Isle. Architect Winfield Lott, who had worked with Snell on several projects, praised the developer's continuing desire to dream big. "...when the rest of the country were [sic] giving up ... he was still trying."²⁸ After years of disagreements with Snell, Fuller²⁹ acknowledged the contributions the man made to the city, even as he "deliberately impoverished himself in pursuit of Beauty."³⁰

The short-lived boom of the twenties left a lasting impression on the culture of the St. Petersburg. Various developments that enhanced the city also gave it a perceptible style. The Mediterranean revivalist architecture, with its serpentine-tiled roofs and stucco columns and walls, provided a sense of "romantic frivolity that solidified the city's identification with leisure."³¹ It also meant, for better or worse, that the future of St. Petersburg was forever to be tied to tourism, and those who continued to travel to its beaches and resorts expected the same cultural amenities they enjoyed up north.

As St. Petersburg developed as a seasonal destination, women's organizations began to fill not only a cultural void, but a civic and social one as well. Perhaps because

²⁷ *Snell Isle*, 13-14.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁹ Fuller is often cited as the originator of St. Petersburg's land boom from 1911-1914, and was responsible for turning Jungle Terrace, on the city's west end, into a prime tourist destination.

³⁰ *Snell Isle...*, 15.

³¹ Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and ...*, 252.

they came from wealthy families, or were married to wealthy men, well-to-do women often had the time to devote to pet projects – from city beautification to social and environmental issues. According to Walter P. Fuller’s history of the city, *St. Petersburg and its People*, the “matriarch of all clubs in St. Petersburg, ... [and] the greatest voluntary association” was the Woman’s Town Improvement Association.³² Formed in 1888, the Association’s home on First Avenue North was a “fountainhead of most of the principle cultural, civic and public social events of the city.”³³ The Audubon Society founded in 1909 by Mrs. Katherine Tippitts, played a major role in protecting the area’s natural beauty, and the St. Petersburg Women’s Club (1913) engaged in social and charitable work (and still holds its annual Community Clothes Closet event that provides clothes for needy children).³⁴ For Mrs. Florence L. Goldie, however, it was art. A native of Buffalo, and a trained artist, Goldie (nee Conger) arrived in St Petersburg in 1890 with her uncle, A.H. Frank, a wealthy manufacturer of lumber machinery. Her appreciation of the arts, undoubtedly fueled by her European art training, found a welcome home in the city. Though she opened an art school, she is perhaps best known as the driving force behind the Art Club of St. Petersburg, a local group that nurtured appreciation of the arts and artists, and supported them, became a focal point for creativity, and for lovers and collectors of art objects. With its painting classes for northern visitors, exhibitions of visiting artists and of its members, the Art Club of St. Petersburg became the hub of the city’s growing artistic energy.

³² Walter P. Fuller, *St. Petersburg and its People* (St. Petersburg: Great Outdoors Publishing Co., 1972), 337.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 344.

In 1925, the Soreno Hotel hosted a collection of the works of Mark Davis Dodd, a well-known artist of the time who had an art studio just outside New York City. His portraits of East Coast socialites and paintings of well-known and familiar scenes around St. Petersburg highlighted the art season.³⁵ Across the Bay, in Tampa, members of the Women's History Foundation were preparing to break ground for a most ambitious project: construction of a replica of the Taj Mahal, to serve as a home for the Tampa Art Colony and provide residency for hundreds of noted artists, writers, and leaders of women from around the world.³⁶ At the annual meeting of the St. Petersburg Art Club in 1927, C. Perry Snell shared his collection of 231 miniatures and small paintings, among them a group of Italian primitives: Snell's collection was considered the only of its kind in Florida, and one of the best in the American South.³⁷ In 1930, Art Club president Walter P. Fuller formally opened the season with a Florida Federation of Arts exhibition that included ninety-six works by thirty-eight artists from around the state – artists who represented similar clubs from Palm Beach, Jacksonville, Tampa, and Rollins College in Winter Park. Local artist Mark Dixon Dodd (the son of Mark Davis Dodd) was in charge of the program.³⁸

Dixon Dodd, who designed homes in a section of St. Petersburg's southeast corridor he called Driftwood, was a fine artist who painted extensively. He created scores of paintings of St. Petersburg's waterfront, and of his favorite subject – Bayboro Harbor. As the rest of the country began to feel the economic constrictions of the Great

³⁵ "Art Display During Week: Paintings By Well-Known Artist Will Be On Exhibition At Hotel," *Evening Independent*, March 2, 1925.

³⁶ "Tampa to Get \$25,000,000 for Art Colony," *Tampa Morning Telegraph*, March 3, 1926.

³⁷ "Large Crowds View Exhibit at Art Club," *St. Petersburg Times*, April 27, 1927.

³⁸ "Pictures of Florida Folk to be Shown," *St. Petersburg Times*, December 10, 1930.

Depression, artists in St. Petersburg were living seasonally and painting locally, creating the perfect environment for a program that would forever change America's relationship with its art, and ultimately create a unique culture of expression.

The economic noose continued to tighten around America's working classes, and President Roosevelt looked increasingly to his cabinet and administration, including his wife Eleanor, for creative solutions to the country's growing unemployment. The Works Progress Administration was part of a veritable alphabet soup of funding sources – Civilian Conservation Corps, the Federal Theatre Project, Federal Writers' Project, and the Federal Arts Project (FAP). When asked why a program to employ artists and writers was a consideration when so many others were out of work, Harry Hopkins, WPA's director, purportedly replied, "Hell, even artists have to eat!"

Roosevelt, Hopkins, and Holger Cahill, who served later as director of the Federal Art Project (FAP), believed art was central to the core of a democracy. When Roosevelt accepted the Democratic Party's nomination in 1932, he summoned his fellow citizens – sculptors and muralists among them – to join him in a covenant of service. Observed Roger G. Kennedy in *When Art Worked: The New Deal, Art and Democracy*: "Artists were among the many who needed work in 1932, and the nation needed the work artists could do."³⁹

Cahill, who recognized that art had long been the largesse of the wealthy, oversaw the program that funded the development of community art centers throughout the country. His reasoning was simple: Within a nation of millions, there were many artists, perhaps undiscovered or untrained, who could rival anything Europe had produced. He

³⁹ Roger G. Kennedy, *When Art Worked: The New Deal, Art, and Democracy* (New York: Rizzoli Publications International, 2009), 21.

believed artistic pursuits were good for the soul – of an individual and a nation. In addition to paying artists to produce work that told the story of their community, from historical murals to detailed renderings of flora and fauna, the FAP encouraged communities to provide art classes to whomever was interested, and paid artists a modest salary to teach. The only demand was that the centers also serve as exhibition venues, ensuring that students' works received exposure, and thus provide a platform for real talent to emerge. Communities like St. Petersburg, which already had a viable arts organization, quickly mobilized, and took advantage of FAP opportunities. From Jacksonville to St. Petersburg, Miami to Maitland, art centers sprung up across Florida. In January 1932, George Pearse Ennis, then considered one of the best among America's younger painters, and the head of the art faculty at Sarasota's Ringling School of Art, presented a lecture on 'Art in Florida' before a capacity crowd at the Art Club of St. Petersburg. An ardent supporter of the state's possibilities, he told the attendees that Florida "is an ideal place for making canvases, both as to beauty and to climate. And if [Florida] seriously decides to become the art capital of America, it will be strong enough to accomplish this envied position."⁴⁰ During the same lecture, Ennis echoed the federal government's thinking on the importance of art to the nation, while adding his own vision of Florida's contributions to the national discussion:

No country can become truly great without art in its surroundings, whether this art is painting, building, sculpture, or home furnishings. ... America is more keenly alert than ever before in its history, to the attainment of a more beautiful standard of surroundings and in this one fact alone lies Florida's great artistic advantage, for it has natural beauty and ideal living conditions.⁴¹

⁴⁰ "Art Club Presents Geo. Pearse Ennis," *Evening Independent*, January 9, 1932.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Whether a young George Snow Hill was among those in attendance that night is unknown, but “Florida’s great artistic advantage” may have been one of the reasons why Hill, and his wife Polly, moved to St. Petersburg in 1932, where they would spend several decades contributing to the artistic culture and sensibility of the state, and St. Petersburg specifically.

The effects of the New Deal’s attention to the arts were profound. Beyond the obvious remuneration, the call to create art in the national interest stimulated the American public on an emotional level. Whether it is the sweet sounds of a concerto, the rich texture of an oil painting, or the transcendent power of the written word, art has always moved humans at some deep, soulful level. As the Depression continued unabated into President Roosevelt’s second term, the malaise that had gripped the country darkened. Direct relief efforts may have kept Americans from starving, but they did little to ameliorate their blues. The limited success of the Public Works Arts Project (PWAP) suggested that art created in—and for—the national interest could provide an emotional outlet for a depressed population. FDR may not have supported art for art’s sake, but he did support the arts for the nation’s sake.⁴² If art could provide the American people with an opportunity to *express* themselves, perhaps they would *feel better* about themselves. And if they felt better about themselves, perhaps they would feel better about their country. It was no accident then that Harry Hopkins and Edward Bruce, each with deep interests in the arts, were instrumental in encouraging the administration’s embrace of federally-funded art programs. The more than 3,000 artists who participated in PWAP produced over 10,000 works of art, many of them while working at wages slightly better

⁴² Kennedy, *When Art Worked* ..., 25.

than direct relief payments.⁴³ Artists who participated in the programs often expressed pride in their ability to contribute to the national good, and the use of their talents to affect the country's well being. As one of those 3,000 artists, George Hill may have felt that connection when he complimented the owner of St. Petersburg's Garden Cafeteria for the courage in providing her dining patrons with a lovely environment. Perhaps, too, that pride was behind his impassioned response – and the community's response – to the controversy over a Clearwater mural he created as part of the federally-funded government arts program. If one artist in a small west Florida city could connect his art to the nation's well being, it cannot be a stretch to appreciate the impact a well-funded national arts program may have had on the American people. Federal One, considered the “most notable experiment of the [administration's] work relief programs for its federal support of the arts,”⁴⁴ made culture available to the masses and was – through its efforts to include a broad spectrum of America – consistent with FDR's desire to democratize American life.⁴⁵

In 1935, that democratization plan took the form of a massive public relief effort with the launch of the administration's Emergency Relief Appropriations Act that appropriated four billion dollars for the continuation of relief. Federal One, a collection of five targeted programs – Music, Art, Theatre, Writing, and Historical Records – provided employment for forty thousand men and women; at its zenith, the Federal Arts Project, under Cahill's direction, employed over 5,000 artists. Not restricted solely to professional artists targeted in Edward Bruce's PWAP, Cahill's Federal Arts Project

⁴³ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁴ McElvanie, *The Great Depression*, 268.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 269.

(FAP) provided creative opportunities to great segments of American society. Through a series of community projects that often utilized existing art organizations, the FAP brought art to the masses, and provided an unprecedented opportunity for America to express itself and, in the process, discover its own identity. No longer was art appreciation the purview of wealthy Americans. Instead, for the first time in American history, anyone who wanted to could become involved in the creative process.

Communities like St. Petersburg, with its decades-old arts organization, were poised to take full advantage of FAP monies, and it would make sense that the Art Club of St. Petersburg benefited from the program. Of course, it may have helped that Florida's state director for Cahill's noble experiment, Mrs. Eve Fuller, was a past president and member of the local organization, and that her husband, Walter P. Fuller, was also a public figure in the art community, his father one of St. Petersburg's early developers. A Financial Report of Florida's Federal Art Galleries, dated November 4, 1936, lists eight people employed, four Relief and four Non-Relief employees, and \$460 as monthly labor expenditures.

Whomever the club employed with federal funds, it was likely limited to the white population. While photographs in the state's archives suggest that African American children took part in FAP art classes in Jacksonville and West Palm Beach, no such evidence appears to show St. Petersburg's black population participated in federally funded community art projects. This is not suggest that there was an absence of black artists in St Petersburg, or that black students were denied access to art education. On the contrary, *within the black community* at least one artist, Lewis A. Dominis, held some prominence. Historical scrapbooks of the Morean Arts Center (formerly the Art Club of

St. Petersburg) contain a large 1948 *Evening Independent* clipping that shows Mr. Dominis presenting one of his paintings to the head librarian at the James Wheldon Johnson branch of the St. Petersburg Public Library system, the only facility available for the city's African American population. Mr. Dominis passed away in 1977 and his obituary lists him as organizer of Pinellas County's first black band at Gibbs High School, and an art teacher for more than twenty years. It also notes he was a muralist, having painted murals in seven of St. Petersburg's black churches. Could he have been employed as one of the lucky artists, able to work at what he loved and still get paid for it? Perhaps, but any suggestion that the FAP provided creative opportunities to whoever sought them, must be reconciled with the strict segregation that existed in the Jim Crow South of Roosevelt's New Deal.

It would be interesting to learn if George Hill was employed by St. Petersburg's Art Club and, if so, employed as Relief or a Non-Relief? However, whether or not Hill needed the financial support of the government's programs is unknown. What we do know is that Mr. Hill kept busy, and he and Polly continued to remain in the public eye.

CHAPTER THREE

Murals and the St. Petersburg Connection

*Eleanor Roosevelt once observed that her husband particularly liked pictures in which he could recognize people. "If he could recognize people, so could other people. Then from recognition could come relevance, and from relevance could come reform."*⁴⁶

To many Americans, murals represent the art produced during the Great Depression. Whether it is because we have seen them in our post offices, our county buildings, our libraries, or our museums, mural art is the image of Depression-era publicly funded art. We are attracted to it, stimulated by it, often angered or annoyed by it, but we are always engaged with what the artist has shown us. Perhaps our attraction stems from the people depicted in the murals, who often appear actively in some form of physical labor. Certainly, I remember feeling in awe of Rivera's burly men building America's cars when, as a young girl, I first saw his mural at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Perhaps it is the larger-than-life imagery that draws us in, while for others it may be the nuances, the symbolism the artist has embedded in the work. For some, it may be the hint of a political agenda the artist is attempting to convey. Whatever the reason, murals have the ability to grab our attention, and make us look at what the artist has painted. It makes sense, then, that mural art would occupy such a large number of workers employed by the

⁴⁶ Kennedy, *When Art Worked* ..., 67.

Federal Art Project – 900 out of 2,500 Project Workers employed in the Fine Arts – were engaged in mural creation.⁴⁷

Roosevelt’s New Deal had provided food, employment, and through the Federal Arts Project, “hope grounded in a common purpose.”⁴⁸ This idea of creating art that reflected a shared ideal was born during FDR’s four-year tenure as the governor of New York (1928–1932), when the Depression had already begun to affect the economy and unemployment was on the rise. A New York neighbor and former schoolmate, George Biddle, himself an artist,⁴⁹ encouraged Roosevelt to bring together government and artists in a “covenant of a public service.”⁵⁰ Harry Hopkins, before leading the nation’s Work Progress Administration under the New Deal, served as Governor Roosevelt’s administrator of work relief. At the governor’s request, Hopkins earmarked money to brighten dreary settlement houses in New York, and funded artists to create public works that would “help restore the fabric of society as a covenant of participating citizens.”⁵¹ The program was so successful, Biddle wrote in 1934, that the New Deal had made “America art conscious as never before ... and the artist conscious of the fact that he is of service to the community.”⁵²

The idea of serving something greater than oneself may have been one of the defining characteristics of New Deal programs. The construction of bridges and schools

⁴⁷ Employment and Activities Report, Federal Arts Project, WPA, Total Employment as of November 1, 1936.

⁴⁸ Kennedy, *When Art Worked*, 26.

⁴⁹ George Biddle was one of dozens of American art students who traveled to Mexico in the 1920s and ‘30s to study the work of its painters, among them Diego Rivera. *Ibid.*, 68

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

through the WPA, the creation of state and national parks through the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), free theatrical presentations by professional actors in small towns across America, or large colorful murals created in public places were evidence that the malaise that gripped the country at the depth of the Depression had given way to uplifting expressions of what it meant to be an American, and who we were as a people.

Mural painting was a perfect match for the zeitgeist of the 1930s. With the continuation of devastating unemployment, and a diminishing faith in the economic system, the outlook for Depression-era America was bleak, and looking bleaker. The government's decision to include a populist art form – mural painting – in its relief programming provided a visceral opportunity to rekindle a sense of pride in a shattered people through powerful imagery. By painting a community's history, a state's industry, or a nation's legacy, American muralists were able to spark imagination, tell a story, create awareness, and embellish public places with approachable works of art. That many of those works have lasted more than three-quarters of a century is a tribute, I believe, not only to the art form itself, but to the idea that the murals painted by American artists in libraries, court houses, city halls, and schools continue to inspire.

A hallmark of the Federal Arts Project was its encouragement of American artists. Director Holger Cahill, like many in Roosevelt's cabinet, believed it was time for America to depend less on the art dictates of Europe, and more on what might be possible within its own population. A better-known American muralist, Thomas Hart Benton, and Mexican-born Diego Rivera were two of the nation's most prolific muralists of the Depression years. Rivera, fueled by the politics of his country's Revolution, and

Missourian Benton, who embraced a popular political pragmatism, painted the America they saw, and often what they saw was unflattering.

Rivera's penchant for mural art likely grew out of post-Revolution Mexico and an ideology that encouraged public art for the masses. Author Dawn Ades in *Art in Latin America* notes that Mexico had a long tradition of mural projects: a tradition embraced by the post-Revolution regime that promised a "commitment to public art – mural art – with no direction from the government."⁵³ Further, that:

[s]uch ideas, in bringing the visual arts to the fore, helped to establish the cultural and political framework by which muralism as a national art was established and promoted, ... did not necessarily coincide with the muralists own conception of their role, nor with the social message their arts conveyed ... Rather than aim at the cultural fusion ... muralists demanded, at least in principle, the eradication of bourgeois art (easel painting), and pointed to the native Indian tradition as their model for the socialist ideal of an open, public art: 'a fighting educative art for all.'⁵⁴

Influenced by a culture that encouraged politically charged public art no doubt influenced Rivera's creative sensibilities. His Marxist philosophy and idealization of the working class blended well with depression-era America, and his murals became powerful displays of the nation's industry, and its workers, though they often caused conflict with the benefactors who provided the majority of his U.S. commissions.⁵⁵

Born in Joplin, Missouri, Thomas H. Benton was at the forefront of a movement that focused on realism in art. Unlike Rivera, who painted larger-than-life human forms often working with even larger machinery, Benton's murals depicted rural America with

⁵³ Dawn Ades, *Art in Latin America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 153.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ On a mural created for the Rockefeller Center's RCA Building in New York, Rivera inserted an image of Lenin, provoked the benefactor, and created a firestorm of controversy. The mural was ultimately removed.

images of regular looking folks participating in typical American activities. Like George Snow Hill, Benton occasionally was criticized for his imagery. When Benton painted a mural chronicling the social history of the state of Indiana for the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, he ran afoul of state officials for daring to include a panel that depicted Ku Klux Klansmen in white robes, and a burning cross.⁵⁶ Benton did not take kindly to criticism of his work, from either side of the political spectrum, and at one point defended his inclusion of the KKK by admitting that "not all that is shown in this mural is pretty, but it is real. The Klan was active in Indiana whether we like to admit it or not."⁵⁷ Benton may have felt emboldened to challenge the status quo because, unlike Hill, he was not dependent on a local art community for his connections, or his commissions.

⁵⁶ Justin Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton: A Life* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2012), 229-31.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 231.

The Man from Munising – George Snow Hill

George Snow Hill was born in 1898 in Munising, Michigan, a small community on the south side of Lake Superior in the Upper Peninsula. His parents, George Richard Hill and Mabel Snow Hill, apparently felt it would be in their son's best interest to spend his formative years in boarding schools. He attended the Episcopalian-based St. John's School, in New York, and completed his high school years at Mercersburg Academy, a private boarding school in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. Hill pursued Naval Engineering and Naval Architecture at Lehigh University before attending the Crouse College of Fine Arts at New York's Syracuse University.⁵⁸ He took courses that included Portrait 2, Art Anatomy 2, Sketch 2 and Still life 2, and earned a Bachelor's of Painting, election to Phi Kappa Phi, and an August Hazard Fellowship for Foreign Study. It was 1923. He chose Paris.

Post-World-War-I Paris was a hub of Bohemia. Writers, artists, and expatriates converged on the City of Lights in the 1920s and 1930s and created a cultural salon where the likes of Hemingway, Picasso and Dalí experimented with art, Absinthe, and the pursuit of their dreams. It was an exciting, nurturing environment for a blossoming painter, and the young man from Munising adapted quickly. By 1924, a year after he arrived in Paris, one of his landscapes was included in an exhibition of the combined *Société des Artistes Français* and the *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts in the Grand Palais*.⁵⁹ A year later, Hill achieved a level of notoriety for a painting called "The

⁵⁸ Biographical information from "A New Concept in Art Exhibition," pamphlet by George Snow Hill, November, 1954.

⁵⁹ "Many Americans in the Paris Salon: Painters and Sculptors Well Represented in the Show of the *Nationale and Artistes Français*," *The Art News*, May 24, 1934.

Balcony” which earned him a showing at the annual *Salon des Artistes Français*, then housed in the temporary barracks of the Tulleries Gardens.⁶⁰ In a dateline Paris, 1925 *St. Petersburg Times* story, he was identified as George Snowden Hill, alias “Whiskers,” and apparently cut quite a figure in the city’s Latin Quarter, distinguished by his long, thick black beard. Living in a studio with a long view of the city, Hill painted what he saw on Parisian rooftops: men on scaffolding, women hanging their wash, or watching the streets below – all were subjects of his work. Single, accompanied only by a large white cat, Hill was beginning to master the delicate coloring, subtle tones, and an eye for the commonplace that would influence much of his later work. Unbeknownst to those in his circle of friends, however, Hill was not to remain single for long. In the fall of 1925, the artist greeted Polly Knipp at the dock in Paris, and in November, without telling a soul, they married. Hill had known his new bride as a fellow student at Syracuse University, and Knipp would later say she was attracted to him because “he was the most talented student and I was the second most talented.”⁶¹

With financial help from Hill’s father, the newlywed couple established themselves in a large, comfortable apartment on the top floor of *120 bis Boulevard Montparnasse* in the well-traveled Latin Quarter, and set up a studio. (Figure 1) Polly had left New York, and a career as an illustrator, to live with George, and to further their art studies in Paris’ liberal atmosphere. For the young American couple, those opportunities included courses at the *Académie de la Grand Chaumière* for George, and for both of them, *Académie Colarossi*, where, with assistance, Polly explored her knack for etchings,

⁶⁰ Attempts at determining the whereabouts of this work have proved unsuccessful.

⁶¹ Lynn Barstis Williams Katz and Enee Abelman, “Polly Knipp Hill: Marking a Life Together Through Etching,” *Georgia Museum of Art Bulletin* Volume 23 (2012): 24.

a talent she ultimately parlayed into a long and distinguished career. Over the next few years, the Hills found time to travel throughout France, and visited Spain, Africa, Belgium – any place that offered visual cues for their work, and kept journals of their sketches and travels. Twice, in 1927 and 1928, the Hills returned to America for exhibitions of their work in New York, Boston, Memphis, and Louisville, Kentucky.⁶² Unfortunately, the 1929 stock market crash was not kind to George’s father, and his financial support was no longer available to the couple. Without that cushion, George and Polly moved back to the states in late 1929, and rented a top floor apartment with two studios in Manhattan. She went back to illustrating, and he painted, but the early depression years were unkind to the two struggling artists in New York. They had to move again to a much smaller, more constrained space, which was not conducive to their individual creativity. Still, in early 1930, they each managed to get an exhibition of their work.

After nearly three years in New York, and a bad spell of influenza, in 1933 George and Polly moved to St. Petersburg, Florida, where he thought the weather would be better for his health, and the climate more accommodating to their artistic pursuits. George’s father once again offered the couple assistance. That support took the form of a low-roofed Spanish bungalow at the end of a winding dirt road in Lakewood Estates, where George and Polly set themselves up as resident artists and teachers.⁶³ (Figure 2) The Art Club of St. Petersburg, while not the Bohemian salons of 1920s Paris, nonetheless provided the artistic couple with the company of other creative individuals

⁶² Ibid, 26-27.

⁶³ Personal knowledge about the Hills’ finances and family life in St. Petersburg was gained through several conversations and e-mails exchanged with Ms. Enee Abelman, a schoolmate of George and Polly’s son, George J. Hill, who had named Ms. Abelman’s father-in-law executor of the family estate.

who had come to call the Sunshine City home. Though the Great Depression still gripped the nation, and unemployment figures were staggering, Roosevelt's New Deal had started to offer opportunities for artists through the CWA, and George Snow Hill proved to be a prime candidate.

By 1934, the Art Club of St. Petersburg hosted an exhibition of the couple's European work at the organization's gallery on Beach Drive, an exhibition that charmed columnist Alma A. Wiley of the *St. Petersburg Times*:

The sense of the everlastingness of conditions is strikingly felt in Mr. Hill's pictures.⁶⁴ They breathe a repose, a settled calm, an archaic leisure, a primitive simplicity that makes them very restful. This artist knows how to give an old-world touch to old-world subjects. His color scheme is grateful to the eye so often blinded by (momentarily) by a vociferous ultra modern palette. He never mistakes crudity for tone, or rawness for originality.⁶⁵

Shortly after the move to St. Petersburg, Hill received word that his painting "Surf Fishing" received an honorable mention in the Pine Arts Exhibition of the Tenth Olympic Games. A letter from the secretary of the American Federation of Arts and General Director of Art, Olympic Exhibition, dated 4 August 1933, offered congratulations, and included a hand-written note that the painting was "much admired."⁶⁶ It was, however, the letter from Edward Bruce, director of the CWA,⁶⁷ informing Hill of his participation in the "Public Works of Art Project," that would ultimately provide the artist with a local

⁶⁴ Sadly, Hill's work was not to be everlasting: By the end of the twentieth century, several of his works had disappeared, were destroyed, or demolished.

⁶⁵ Alma A. Wiley, "George Hill's Exhibit gives 'Little Journey to France' Writer Says," *St. Petersburg Times*, Feb. 11, 1934.

⁶⁶ Letter to George Snow Hill, from Leila Mechlin, August 4, 1933. In author's possession.

⁶⁷ Edward Bruce was the National Director of the Civil Works Administration (CWA) from December 1933 through June 1934. The CWA furnished work for unemployed artists who created decorations for public buildings and parks. Artists were selected on the basis of their need, and their professional ability.

legacy. In a form letter with Hill's name and address typed in, (an early form of mail-merge), Bruce articulated the government's selection process; its creative and political expectations of the participants and what each artist was expected to do to further the program.

My dear Mr. Hill,

I was delighted to see that you were one of the artists who has gone to work on our Public Works Art Project.

Too much has been published in the newspapers about this Project being a relief measure. It is not a relief measure except to the extent that the money is to be spent where it will do the most good, i.e., among artists who are out of employment; but the prime test in selecting artists for this work is their qualification and ability as an artist, and it should be, as I am sure it is, a source of pride to you that you have qualified as an artist in the opinion of your local committee.⁶⁸ When the story is written the twenty-five hundred artists employed under this Project will form the honor roll.

Personally [sic] I feel that every artist in the country ought to get behind this work. Where they can afford to do so they should give their time to it, and where they can afford to do so, they are eligible for employment. It is the finest gesture that this or any other country has ever made to its artists. It is a challenge to us to prove that we have something to say which is worth saying and which will make the life of America richer and finer.

I am sure that you are approaching the work with a feeling that we all have down here, that you are going to give to it the finest that is in you and help make of this work not only a record of which our country may be proud but to sell to the American people that art is and should be an integral part of our civilization which, I think, is a little higher than anything we have had before. This art project is a very significant demonstration of that setting-up.

I know that the artist is an individualist and he [sic] should be an individualist. If he didn't believe in his own pictures he shouldn't be painting. But, on the other hand, we should all recognize that art is an expression of national

⁶⁸ It has been difficult to determine exactly how Hill was initially chosen for participation in the federal arts programs. It may be safe to assume, however, that his membership in the Art Club of St. Petersburg, of which Mrs. Walter P. Fuller was involved, may have played a part. Fuller went on to direct Florida's Federal Arts Project.

culture and that it takes all artists of all schools and types to make this expression a rounded one. It is time that all of us forget ourselves and our individual interests and personal preferences for the sake of a great cause. We can not let this movement degenerate into a squabble between schools and cliques, and I am expecting you and every other artist who is working on this project to preach this idea.

There are going to be scoffers and doubters and critics galore of this movement among people who do not see it in its true significance or realize that the art of every country remains, in the last analysis, the true measure of its civilization.

Cordially yours,
Edward Bruce [signature]⁶⁹

Bruce's letter made it clear that, in addition to employment, the federal government expected participating artists to do their best, to put aside ideological differences, and to contribute the nation's culture. In a small, stapled note at the top of the letter, Bruce anticipated the political controversy artists would face creating government-sponsored art. Signed "E.B.," the note suggested that if the artist agreed with Bruce's position, he "should emphasize the project to ... friends and take the trouble to write a personal letter to your Congressman and Senators telling them what it means to you."

Whether or not George Snow Hill communicated with his elected representatives is unknown, but he did heed Bruce's request to contribute to the nation's culture. Soon the artist from Munising would begin receiving commissions to paint murals throughout the state of Florida. In so doing, Hill contributed to a body of public work that changed the nation's relationship with art.

⁶⁹ Letter addressed to Mr. George Hill, St Petersburg, Florida, from Edward Bruce, Secretary, Treasury Department, Washington, Advisory Committee to Treasury on Fine Arts, 20 January, 1934. Letter in author's possession.

Bathing Beauties – The Clearwater Mural – 1934

George Snow Hill was ready to get to work. With what may have been his first CWA project, he received a commission to paint a mural for the Pinellas County Courthouse in Clearwater. The painting, described as “a sincere, idealized picture of Pinellas County’s products and sports,”⁷⁰ was to hang behind the bench in the Circuit Court. Photographs of the courtroom and preliminary sketches were sent to Atlanta, Georgia, the CWA’s regional office. Hill’s initial set of sketches, however, were judged to be too conventional, the design too “hackneyed ... sordid and dull,”⁷¹ and were sent back to the artist with suggestions that the work be a living picture of what actually existed in the area at the time. Once Hill’s new designs were accepted, he went to work creating his homage to Pinellas County. Under the direction of Mrs. Eve (Walter P.) Fuller, the sub-committee chair of Florida’s Public Works and Arts Project, the painting would cover fifty feet of wall at a depth of about fifteen feet. Hill’s decision to paint five different murals provided an opportunity to symbolize local events, and illustrate the county’s greatest industry, the sun.⁷² The center pane depicted Florida’s chief asset with a Sun King sprinkling rays of sunshine over a group of young girls in bathing suits. A scene depicting Ponce de Leon’s arrival in Florida included two naked Indians (a man and a woman) standing at the water’s edge looking out at the explorer’s ship. In yet another section, Hill featured a sponge diver standing near a spear fisherman, recognizing

⁷⁰ *Times* Staff Correspondent, “Work of Hanging Bathing Girl Picture in Courtroom Halted as Judge Bird Makes Protest,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 4, 1934.

⁷¹ “Artist Objects to Fight Over Bathing Scene: Circuit Judges, Commission to View Mural Called Inappropriate,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 5, 1934.

⁷² *Times* Staff Correspondent, “Work of Bathing Girl Picture in Courtroom Halted as Judge Bird Makes Protest,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 4, 1934.

the local fishing and sponging industry. Florida's fabled citrus was featured in the fourth panel, and the fifth represented recreation with images of popular sports of the 1930s.⁷³

By August 1934, the mural was completed and ready for hanging. A report in the August 4 *Tampa Morning Tribune* noted that Circuit Judge John U. Bird, in whose chambers the mural was to be placed, protested the depiction of "sun bathers in brassiere type bathing suits."⁷⁴ The judge made it clear that while he was not criticizing the picture as a work of art, he felt it inappropriate for a courtroom that "must have a degree of dignity."⁷⁵

The judge's invocation drew sharp reaction from both the artist, and Mrs. Fuller, who claimed the center panel depicting a group of young women in bathing suits presented "no suggestion of either levity or bad taste," and made it clear that none of the paintings would be available for display unless all five were included. Further, Fuller reminded the judge that Hill's work had been commissioned by a national agency carried out in eighteen regions across the country, and all designed to provide employment to artists struggling to support themselves, and that "[a]ll of the work ... was to be placed in public buildings such as courthouses, libraries and federal buildings."⁷⁶

The artist bristled at the judge's language, and objections to his imagery. "The thing that burned me up," Hill related in the *St. Petersburg Times*, "was for anyone to speak of the paintings as lewd and indecent." They were neither, Hill emphasized, claiming they were "a colorful painting ... entirely representative of Florida ... [and] just

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ "Judge Bars CWA Girl Art From Court," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 4, 1934.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

the kind of painting the government demanded all over the country.”⁷⁷ Hill expressed concern over the apparent ban against hanging the mural – or any paintings – in the courtroom and saw Bird’s resistance as a form of artistic censorship, that the disposition of his mural might be considered a precedent, and a threat to artists everywhere.⁷⁸ Hill also chastised the judge for his small world-view, suggesting that if he doubted the propriety of the paintings, precedent for them was all over Paris. Hill, who had lived in the City of Lights for six years, was married in a civil ceremony in a courtroom “upon whose walls hung beautiful paintings like [his] – not bathing beauties, perhaps, but [he] distinctly remember[ed] one dancing scene.” Perhaps most revealing was Hill’s rebuke of Judge Bird’s notion that the imagery of bathing beauties would be inappropriate for anyone facing trial. Calling it “unreasonable and high-handed,” Hill said the French consider such decorations entirely appropriate and that the presence of such imagery provide a stark contrast to the “morbid and unpleasant found in courts of law.”⁷⁹

Following the judge’s objections, Commissioner C.R. Carter, the official who had accepted the murals from Mrs. Fuller, ordered the installation stopped until a group of commissioners met.⁸⁰ Their goal was to determine whether or not the murals were appropriate, particularly the “Picture in Dispute.” (Figure 3) Bird took his case to the people, or at least the Kiwanis Club. In an informal address, reported August 8 in the *St. Petersburg Times*, Judge Bird explained that he had not wanted to cause any confusion with his objections, but that the murals were not appropriate for a courtroom, where “the

⁷⁷ “Artist Objects to Fight Over Bathing Scene,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 5, 1934.

⁷⁸ “Artist Cites Paris Courts in Defending Bathing Mural,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 9, 1934.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ “Artist Objects to Fight Over Bathing ...,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 5, 1934.

atmosphere is even more solemn than in a church.” The judge explained, “[i]n a church, love and charity are shown, but a court is a place of stern justice where it is the solemn duty of the court to pass upon the life, liberty and property of fellowman.”⁸¹ The judge further insisted that the mural would prove difficult for jurors to keep focused on the case at hand “with bathing girls directly in front of him with the God of the sun hovering over them ... [i]t would even work a hardship on the judge.”⁸²

When the county commissioners met to render a decision, several sided with Judge Bird. Some did not. At least one commissioner, E. H. Hartwick, argued the paintings “were representative of the new deal which is trying to get away from the hackneyed ideas of old,” and offered that if the murals were installed, they could be covered during court sessions.⁸³ Unconvinced, the commissioners voted to deny Hill’s work any courtroom space. On hearing the decision, Judge Bird suggested that no pictures of any kind should hang in courtroom. He did, however, leave the door open for other possibilities: “I would suggest, if they must have pictures, that they have paintings of famous court scenes or famous lawyers,” and concluded that if Hill’s paintings had been hung in the courtroom “this county would be the laughing stock of the country.”⁸⁴

An *Ocala Star* reporter wasted no time weighing in on the controversy:

St. Petersburg judge doesn’t think that a prisoner about to be sentenced should gaze on a bathing scene with sunkissed lassies in scanties sporting on the beach. Mebbe not, but it

⁸¹ This source is from a collection of clippings belonging to the Hills. Many clippings have no dates, nor identify the newspaper from which they came. It appears, however, the sources originate from the *St. Petersburg Times*. Henceforth, information gathered from these unidentified clippings will be referenced as *Publicity*, the name on the envelope that contained them. In author’s possession.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ “Board Turns Down CWA Paintings for Courtroom,” August 8, 1934, *Publicity*.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

would serve to remind wrongdoers what a pleasant world they are leaving behind.⁸⁵

While the debate over the Clearwater mural may not have made the county a laughing stock of the country, it did provoke intense community debate. The *St. Petersburg Times* held a series of interviews with “art conscious” citizens, and reported the findings.⁸⁶ One citizen suggested that the “... whole scheme is to advertise Clearwater Beach”; another, acknowledging that the judge has a right to his opinion, offered that “nice pictures of good-looking girls would be just the thing to have in a courtroom.” A local artist and photographer expressed sympathy with Hill’s plight: “I’m glad this has all come up. It will give Hill good publicity and it shows that the American people don’t appreciate art as it should be appreciated.” At least seven of those the paper interviewed sided with Judge Bird. One, a secretary to a leading business establishment, wondered whether the CWA should financially support such work. “With people starving and so much unemployment it seems a needless waste of government funds to spend them on art.”⁸⁷ In the same paper, an editorial suggested that the courtroom might not have been the best place for Hill’s work initially. A better home for it would be “where the public goes—a chamber of commerce building ... an auditorium, library building or something of that character—where they would be seen and enjoyed by everybody—by everybody, that is, by all who enjoy beauty and art.”⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Undated clipping, *Publicity*.

⁸⁶ Carolyn West, “Some Citizens Think Bathing Girl Picture Okeh [sic] for Court, Others Agree With Judge Bird,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 10, 1934.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ “The Error,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 19, 1934.

The controversy engaged the community for the next several months. Public officials debated where the mural should ultimately hang, and there was no shortage of suggestions, or public commentary. Not surprisingly, the Art Club of St. Petersburg took a public stance in favor of the artwork, and the CWA's decision to place it in the circuit courtroom chambers, and passed a resolution affirming its position. The Resolution expressed dismay that "work being done at the behest of the people of this county of Pinellas and paid for by them from money received for that purpose from our federal government" was delayed, as "not only contrary to the will of the sovereign people of this county, but [has caused] irreparable harm to the interests fostered by this club and also to the profession of fine arts throughout the whole nation ..."⁸⁹ The Art Club also formed a committee to determine if the murals might find a place in the artist's hometown. The group traveled to Clearwater to view the paintings, and measured them for possible placement at St. Petersburg's recreational pier.⁹⁰ Ultimately, the committee found "with regret ... no suitable space for the placement of the murals on the recreation pier."⁹¹ One reader to the *St. Petersburg Times* suggested that the federal building of the Soldier's Home be considered "brightening the lives of the men and their attendants and add to the attractions of the visitors,"⁹² while the city manager of Bartow, Florida, put in an offer for consideration.⁹³ In a copy of a letter to the editor of the *St. Petersburg Times*, the artist

⁸⁹ "Art Committee Seeking Place for Pictures," Undated clipping, *Publicity*.

⁹⁰ Members of the Art Club of St. Petersburg committee included Dr. J. Braden Quicksail, Theodore Zeidler, and Aloysius Coll. They joined T.M. Griffith and Mayor Bob Blanc, C.F. Sharpe, city manager, Mrs. Walter P. Fuller, the artist George S. Hill, and Henry L. Taylor, an architect called upon for space considerations to view the mural.

⁹¹ "No Space Here For Paintings, Group Decides," Section One, August 25, 1934, *Publicity*.

⁹² A.M.C. "Why Not Soldiers' Home for Murals," Letter to the Editor, Undated clipping, *Publicity*.

⁹³ "Plenty of Bidders For Murals Heard; Decisions Due Soon," *St. Petersburg Times*, August 30, 1934.

himself offered his own thoughts on the controversy. Hill's language in the letter indicated he agreed with the CWA in its placement decision of the county courtroom, that he understood the importance of public art to a community, as well as the role he played in putting it there. He chided the Commission that initially approved of the mural's placement then bowed to a "County employee," and took a few swipes at the "gloomy judge." It is not known whether the artist's letter was published in the local paper, nonetheless, it provides a sense of how Hill felt about the controversy, and reveals a man committed to the charge of the Public Works Art Project.⁹⁴

After weeks of wrangling, and with the approval of Mrs. Fuller, director of Florida's Federal Arts Project, the Clearwater city commission agreed to accept Hill's murals for their new municipal auditorium, and to pay all costs for their installation.⁹⁵ Finally, and with much fanfare, the murals were unveiled before a large crowd on January 30, 1935. Mr. Hill expressed his appreciation to the government for making such works of art possible, and Mrs. Fuller explained in detail the operations of the public works art project throughout the country.⁹⁶

Pinellas County's first CWA public art project may have gotten off to a rough start, but the controversy over the 'bathing beauties' appeared to have galvanized the public behind the new project, and allowed George Snow Hill a level of notoriety. Whatever else may be said, the publicity surrounding the Clearwater mural was quite a

⁹⁴ Carbon copy of letter from George Snow Hill to Editor of the *St. Petersburg Times*, dated August 27, 1934.

⁹⁵ *Times* Staff Correspondent, "Murals Taken by Clearwater: Hill's Paintings Accepted by Commission; To Be Hung in City Auditorium," September 8, 1934, *Publicity*

⁹⁶ "Hill's Murals Are Unveiled: Large Crowd Attends Ceremony in City Auditorium at Clearwater," January 30, 1935, *Publicity*.

public relations boon for a struggling artist in the Depression years, and it may have also endeared him to many in his adopted city.

The fame that means money came to most renowned artists long after they were dead, and others got the money. But isn't it just possible that a fame is even now coming to the work of Artist Hill of St. Petersburg that will enable him to mop up much sooner than that.⁹⁷

Art Out of Luck

Too bad, no space for Art in town,
The city censors turn it down;
The beauty of great murals shown
We could have made our very own.

There is no room out on the pier,
'Tis said our city fathers fear
To hang them on the walls out there
It matters not however fair.

Go where you will always find,
Aspiring souls among mankind,
But in this doubtful atmosphere,
Reward for artist none is here.

Though well he thought and planned and toiled
His hopes by critics have been foiled.
How sad and lonesome he must be
While gazing o'er the wide blue sea.

C.J. Maurer.⁹⁸

Sadly, the current fate of Hill's homage to Pinellas County remains a mystery. In 1983, reporter Jeanette Crane wrote the tale of the Clearwater mural controversy and wondered what had become of the notorious paintings. "Someone probably has the answer," she wrote. Crane also made a case for a renewed appreciation of the art created

⁹⁷ Undated clipping, *Publicity*.

⁹⁸ Letter to the Editor, Undated clipping, *Publicity*.

by Depression-era government programs. “The time for reconstructing local art history and compiling an inventory of community art is ripe to overripe.”⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Jeanette Crane, “The courthouse hangin’ mystery: Where did controversial cuties go after the judge ordered them out?,” *St. Petersburg Independent*, June 30, 1983.

Banyans and Monkeys – The Garden Cafeteria Mural – 1934

Within a month of the CWA's beginnings, 2.6 million workers were hired and, by January 1935, that number swelled to more than four million. Artists across America were able to feed their families; George Hill was among them. In an address to the U.S. Treasury on Fine Arts, and introduced into the *Congressional Record* January 17, 1934, Edward Bruce shared the sentiments of several appreciative artists, and provided a glowing account of the program's success. "In this project a great democracy has accepted the artists as a useful member of the body politic and his art as a definite service to the state. It is ... a recognition that things of culture and of the spirit contribute to the well being of the Nation."¹⁰⁰ Bruce reaffirmed that the Public Works art project was not a handout program, and that the 2,500 artists employed were not "cluttered with the names of Sunday painters, amateurs, and avocationists," but represented some of the country's best painters and sculptors. The remarks from the employed artists, however, were what Bruce was eager to share, comments that spoke to a program that struck at the heart of the government's response.

"... The governmental gesture is splendid and most helpful for the future of art in America. This move by the United States Government is indeed a noble gesture and will bring many excellent pieces of work by men who never had a chance ... I am heart and soul behind you."

I am deeply appreciative of the opportunity I am being given and the plan has been a tremendous boon at a time when our projects are at their lowest ebb. Associates of mine also working in the project feel as I do."

¹⁰⁰ "Public Works Art Project," Address of Edward Bruce, Secretary to the Advisory Committee to the Treasury on Fine Arts, Printed in the *Congressional Record* of January 17, 1934, 3-4.

Bruce recounted dozens more stories from participating artists across the country, who voiced appreciation for the opportunity to create at a time when surviving as an artist was difficult to impossible. Despite the fact that the Public Works Art Project, as such, was short-lived, there can be no doubt that it ignited a paradigm shift in the way government viewed its responsibility to the nation's culture. Bruce held that conviction, to be sure, but he also attributed the program with even loftier goals.

If we can, through this project, develop the love and the wish for beauty, an intolerance for the ugliness in our lives and our surroundings, a demand for slum clearance, a hatred of the utter drabness of the average city and village in this country, especially its outskirts, we may be building better than we know, not only spiritually, but materially. It may form the stimulus and create a demand for an America beautiful and such a demand is what everyone is seeking to lift us out of the depression.¹⁰¹

It may have been that “love and the wish for beauty” that Edward Bruce spoke of that prompted Hill, in 1934, to create art in a downtown St. Petersburg cafeteria. Self-service cafeterias provided an efficient way to feed St. Petersburg's growing population, particularly its seasonal visitors. In 1934, Holsum Cafeteria at 445 1st Avenue North advertised a ‘Holsum Breakfast’ of “1 day-old egg, 2 Armour bacon strips, 2 buttered toast, grits and gravy, jelly and coffee” for fifteen cents.¹⁰² The Spanish-style Tremor Cafeteria, located at 119 Fourth Street South, and built in 1924, served both food and entertainment, and was the site of canteen dances during the World War II years. With its tile floors and painted ceiling, the Tremor was a unique architectural setting for self-service dining. Currently underutilized, and for sale or lease by its owner, the *Tampa Bay*

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰² Classified ad, *St. Petersburg Times*, November 1, 1934, Section 1.

Times, the Tremor served for years as the cafeteria for *Times* employees. However, the Garden Cafeteria was the only downtown self-serve eatery that could claim a fresco mural by a well-known area artist. Incorporated July 6, 1934 the Garden Cafeteria was owned by George T. and Alice E. Bates and, while I could find no announcement of an official opening, the cafeteria became a mainstay for locals and tourists alike in the city's downtown.

Early in November 1934, George S. Hill entered into an agreement with Alice E. Bates to "paint murals on certain walls."¹⁰³ Though not a sanctioned CWA mural, Hill nonetheless approached the project with a desire to celebrate the area's beauty. The Garden mural, unlike the Clearwater art project, was a fresco (painting done quickly on wet plaster so the colors both penetrate and endure), a style Hill perfected during his earlier years in Paris; it may also have represented one of the few frescos Hill created stateside. Sadly, the mural was destroyed in August 2012, when the city ordered the building's demolition. Attempts over the years to preserve the building, or develop the property and retain (and refurbish) Hills' frescos were not enough to halt the structure's decay and, with it, Hill's paintings of Florida's flora and fauna. What the city destroyed was impressive. On the building's west wall, Hill had painted a huge banyan tree reminiscent, perhaps, of the large banyan in nearby Straub Park. (Figure 4) To the left of the tree was a large peacock, to the tree's right, several monkeys scampered about, and a flamingo took flight behind them. The murals on the building's east-facing walls were airier, with muted-toned, vine-entwined palms and several species of flowering plants

¹⁰³ A copy of the contract between Hill and Mrs. Bates, dated November 8, 1934, specifies that \$200 was to be paid to Hill with the first \$50 at the end of the first full week's work, \$50 at the end of the second, and \$100 on or before January 15, 1935.

that covered the entire area. (Figure 5) The effect was reminiscent of a lush, tropical garden, designed to create an enjoyable environment for the cafeteria's patrons.

The artist had less than three months to complete the mural (and he provided his own supplies, including scaffolding), but it was to be a full year before he was to receive his full compensation. The initial agreement was to provide Hill his final payment of \$100 upon completion of the project, which was to be on or before January 15, 1935. However, perhaps because of the nation's continuing economic conditions, a letter dated January 24 from Alice E. Bates, acknowledged a final payment of \$20, included a "ticket to be used at your convenience," and concluded with the admission that they "have had many complimentary remarks about the work."¹⁰⁴ Hill's gracious reply, in which he acknowledged receipt of the \$20, also mentioned that he had done some supplemental mural decoration work in the Cafeteria.¹⁰⁵ In perhaps a veiled reference to the addition of art in a public facility, Hill closed with an appreciation of the owner's courage "in undertaking the splendid project of beautifying your lovely place."¹⁰⁶

Preservation of the Garden Cafeteria – a 1920s tan stucco Spanish Mission-style building at 232 Second Street North, and designed by Edgar Ferdon, St. Petersburg's first professional architect¹⁰⁷ – had proved unsuccessful over the years. When I visited the building in 2009, a private contractor was in the process of gutting the interior to make

¹⁰⁴ Letter to Mr. G. S. Hill from Alice E. Bates, Manager & Treasurer Garden Cafeteria, January 24, 1936. Letter in author's possession.

¹⁰⁵ This is significant only because additional decoration above the initial murals appear to be in a different style than the originals. Some have speculated that Hill's art students painted the additional decorations. It is not known whether Hill's mention of 'additional work' reference the decorations in question, or other additions.

¹⁰⁶ Letter to Mrs. Betty Bates from Hill Studios, George S. Hill, January 30, 1936.

¹⁰⁷ Staff, "The Garden Cafeteria: Preserving the Past in St. Petersburg," *Tampa Tribune*, May 19, 2007.

way for an upscale nightclub.¹⁰⁸ Plans to retain the mural, even restore it, were included in the renovation's plans. However, like so many others before it, nothing became of development. Now, with nothing but an empty lot remaining of the site where Hill's only known American-painted fresco once stood, one can only speculate that the perception of Hill's tainted reputation from the 1966 mural incident at St. Petersburg's City Hall may have proved too daunting for any developer's restoration dreams.

¹⁰⁸ Barry Flaherty, General Contractor, December 1, 2009.

A Visual History – Bayboro’s USCG Mural – 1936

In early 1936, Hill received a contract to paint wall murals on a U.S. Coast Guard Station (USCG) that was under construction in St. Petersburg.¹⁰⁹ His initial design, approved by USCG headquarters in Washington, D.C., called for renditions of *all* outstanding feats in the annals of Coast Guard history.¹¹⁰ Instead of portraying the entirety of the Guard’s heroics, however, the artist painted two memorable rescues, a vision of Davy Jones’ Locker, and a USCG sea craft on the wardroom’s walls. An element of Hill’s sea craft design was to give visitors the illusion they were “actually riding in a large, tilting seaplane with windows on one side presenting the waters of Tampa Bay with pelicans and seagulls in evidence [while the] opposite side ... will disclose nothing except blue sky.”¹¹¹ I am not convinced the final work presents that illusion. Hill’s historical elements include scenes from the Coast Guard (CG) *Cutter Bear*, and rescue efforts for the *SS Morro Castle*. (Figure 6) The other two walls include [1] a depiction of Davy Jones’ Locker that features a brass diving suit-clad sponge diver, (a likely reference to nearby Tarpon Springs), and [2] a Coast Guard seaplane named *Regulus*, that illustrates the working crew of a seaplane performing rescue operations, and radio communications. (Figure 7)

¹⁰⁹ “George S. Hill To Paint Coast Guard Murals: Work of Local Artist Given Formal Approval for New Air-Base Buildings,” *St. Petersburg Times*, February 25, 1936.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

In U.S. Coast Guard history, the rescue efforts of the *CG Cutter Bear* are legendary. According to CWO4 Anne E. Visser USCGR (Ret) 112, every ‘Coastie’ learns about the ‘*CG Bear*.’ Although familiar with the wardroom, having eaten there for years, Visser never looked closely at the paintings on the room’s walls. She also knew of the *SS Morro Castle*’s history but never realized that it, too, is depicted in Hill’s murals. There may be a reason for the unfamiliarity of the *Morro Castle*. A portion of an archival photograph of Hill’s original mural (Figure 8) distinctly shows the name *SS Morro Castle* on a life preserver holding a survivor, and on the boat itself.¹¹³ A visit to the wardroom in June 2012, however, revealed a different name on the life preserver: *SS Fuego Castle*. (Figure 9) A brass plaque on the wardroom door indicates that G. Theodore Nightwine, of the John and Mabel Ringling Museum in Sarasota, restored the mural in 1989. Was the ship’s name changed before the mural’s restoration; did Brandywine change the name, or was it altered after the restoration? According to FS1 Michael Lynch, USCG, assigned to Bayboro in August 2012, the *SS Fuego* is a fictional name, and no record of it appears in Coast Guard rescue history. The *SS Morro Castle*, however, is well documented in USCG history. Attempts to locate Mr. Nightwine were unsuccessful. After the author pointed out the discrepancy of names, staff at Bayboro’s Coast Guard station promised to look into the ship’s name change, but for now the mystery of when the ship’s name was altered, and why, remains. One more thing: the center mural in Figure 6 is missing, likely removed when a hood for the fireplace was installed. There has been some speculation that it was cut away from the wardroom wall, and transported to Clearwater when the

¹¹² The Coast Guard Station at St. Petersburg is a secure government facility. CWO4 Visser accompanied me to the station so I could take photographs, thus enabling my entry into a secure facility.

¹¹³ *Tampa Bay Times* photo archives. Undated.

USCG moved its airbase to the St. Pete/Clearwater airport. Both questions have the Coast Guard looking for answers.

It is unclear if Hill received his Coast Guard commission through the Federal Arts Project, or directly through the U.S. Coast Guard. What is clear is that the artist's depiction of brave men, battling the elements for the betterment of humankind, represents one of the primary goals of New Deal art projects: the portrayal of America's unsung heroes. In the Coast Guard murals, Hill's penchant for thorough research is evident, particularly in his execution of the history of the Alaska-bound *USCG Cutter Bear*. Perhaps more important, however, is the connection the contemporary Coast Guard has with Hill's murals more than seventy-five years after the artist painted them. While 'Coasties' may not know much about Hill, or any of his other works, they know their history, and they see the walls in Bayboro's wardroom as a proud tribute to the bravery of those who went before. Artwork that still engages the public in a celebration of civic pride three-quarters of a century after it was painted may be one of the best testimonials to Roosevelt's desire for accessible, American-focused art.

By 1936, George and Polly were the faces of the local art community. They were everywhere. Reports in the local press detailed their latest artistic achievements and their exhibitions with the Art Club. Lengthy feature stories focused on their personal lives, their home and, at least in one story, how Hill dealt with boredom and fatigue. In a 1934 article in the *St. Petersburg Times*, Mr. Hill debunked the notion of an obsessed artist who worked hours, even days, on one project in search of perfection. According to the article, Hill apparently never spent more than an hour on any one project at a time, and credits *The Craftsman's Handbook*, written by the Italian artist Cennino Cennini in the

late 1390s for that schedule. “I’ve found by experience that doing my work this way brings better results and keeps me from getting tired,” he explained.¹¹⁴ As busy as Hill was at the time, this regime must have worked for the sought-after artist. In addition to the Coast Guard murals, Hill was commissioned by the Federal Arts Project to create several more paintings. Over the next three years (1936-1939), he painted murals for Florida Post Offices in Perry (“Cypress Logging”), and Madison (“Long Staple Cotton Gin”), and created a mural celebrating the St. John’s River for the Florida Building at the 1933 World’s Fair. While the artist experimented with many media, including clay and stained glass, he enjoyed murals the most, painting many on site at his studio in Lakewood Estates, where the couple also conducted art classes.

The support of public art was not the only project that benefitted from New Deal monies in Depression-era St. Petersburg. In fact, the 1930s were very good to the Sunshine City. Between 1933 and 1941, St. Petersburg received more than ten million dollars in federal monies – a tidy sum for such a small city. The relief took many forms, and provided much-needed sustenance, and hope, for the community’s most destitute. Residents built several public projects, among them a new city hall, a hospital addition, and a new beach water system.¹¹⁵ However, none generated controversy like George Snow Hill’s murals.

¹¹⁴ “St. Petersburg Artistic Couple Find Inspiration for Efforts in Picturesque Spanish Bungalow Studio: George S. Hill Has Own Philosophy in Avoiding Boredom and Fatigue,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 9, 1936.

¹¹⁵ Raymond Arsenault, *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream, 1888 – 1950*, (Norfolk, Virginia: The Donning Company, 1988), 260–61.

Flight and Imagery – 1938

Long considered a form of political art, murals often served as vehicles to convey the message behind FDR's social programming. Roosevelt especially liked the intimacy with subjects that murals could provide. He believed that if enough people could recognize other people in the murals, the art would be relevant, and ultimately lead to reform.¹¹⁶

Murals provided those opportunities for familiarity, particularly in their subject matter. Florida artist Denman Fink's 1941 mural "Law Guides Florida Progress" portrayed the state's bounty, and featured likenesses of scientist Dr. E. V. Hjort, head of University of Miami's chemistry department, and Phineas Paist, the architect of the Federal building on Florida's east coast which was to house Fink's mural.¹¹⁷ To find that intimate connection with a commission commemorating Tony Jannus' historic flight across Tampa Bay, Hill scoured newspaper files for details of the flight, and followed them as accurately as possible.¹¹⁸ Originally created for Tampa's Peter O. Knight Airport, and depicting the history of flight, Hill came to consider it his greatest artistic achievement. The murals were to pay homage to the history of aviation – from the myth of Icarus, to the first hot air balloon ride, the Wright Brothers success at Kitty Hawk and the first commercial flight – a 1914 trip from St. Petersburg to Tampa piloted by Tony Jannus, the arrival of which is the exuberant subject of the seventh and last panel. (Figure

¹¹⁶ Kennedy, *When Art Worked*, 67.

¹¹⁷ John A. Stuart and John F. Stack, Jr. Eds., *The New Deal in South Florida: Design, Policy, and Community Building, 1933-1940* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), 136.

¹¹⁸ "Airport Murals Trace History of Aviation," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, June 9, 1938.

10) Whereas Fink identified specific people, Hill was more general in his depictions – a generality that, at least on one occasion, caused a bit of a stir. Following a series of bitterly fought and corrupt elections in Tampa, Snow’s portrayal of Jannus shaking hands with “an officious fat man with a red face and ‘go-getter’ attitude, [and] wearing a frock coat – the conception of the kind of man who usually functions on such occasions”¹¹⁹ – raised the hackles of Tampa’s politicians. Hill later admitted he had no idea who actually greeted the history-making aviator, and, in the end, replaced the figure in question with faces of 1938 Tampa notables: Mayor R.E.L. Chancey, Postmaster J. Edgar Wall, *Tampa Tribune* editor E. D. Lambright and architect M. Leo Elliott.¹²⁰ During World War II, Drew Field was re-commissioned, and replaced Peter O. Knight Airport as a primary hub for commercial flight. The airport was temporarily abandoned, and the mural slipped out of controversy, and into obscurity. After decades of neglect, it took \$300,000 and a year to restore “Legacy of Flight,” and, in 2002, the mural was installed at Tampa International in the second incarnation of Airside Terminal E.¹²¹

For all their ability to create a sense of familiarity, murals also have the capability of creating controversy. Perhaps because they offer a way for an artist to tell a story, or create an environment, or parlay a political ideology, murals hold the potential of being misunderstood, even destroyed. Nearly every mural Hill created in Pinellas County, with the exception of the Garden Cafeteria, caused some sort of a stir. The Clearwater mural was criticized for being in poor taste and unsuitable for a courtroom. When the Coast Guard mural was unveiled, some objected to a nearly naked female victim lifelessly

¹¹⁹ Leland Hawes, *Tampa Tribune*, December 25, 1988.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Lennie Bennett, “A legacy takes flight,” *St. Petersburg Times*, October 13, 2002, Floridian.

afloat in one of the ship's life preservers, her breast exposed. Eventually, artistic license prevailed and the matter died down. However, several of Hill's other projects created controversy years after they were painted, often over the issue of race.

In Florida's Panhandle, Hill's mural "Long Staple Cotton Gin," (Figure 11) depicts strong black men working alongside white workers in a cotton mill under the supervision of a suited white man; outside, field workers pick cotton turning their haul over to a white inspector. Several years ago, a new African-America postmaster worried that some might consider the mural racist, and wanted to remove it for fear of upsetting local residents. Local protests in favor of keeping the mural for its historical significance prevailed, and the mural still prominently hangs in the Madison Post Office. In the Madison mural, black men are shown as strong and hard working as their white co-workers: just the way local residents remember it. Therefore, its historical significance is personal to the people of the area.¹²² It is doubtful, though, that one of his more obscure murals, "Building the Tamiami Trail," would gather much public support. Currently held by the Wolfsonian Museum in Miami, Hill's imagery in the 1938 mural is disturbing and, apparently, only slightly accurate – unusual for a man who had a reputation for painstakingly researching his projects. In 2003, a reporter and a photographer for the *St. Petersburg Times* drove the Tamiami Trail (Highway 92) and spoke with a few people who actually worked building the trail. According to one, men of all races slogged through mud, heat, and mosquitoes in the slow-moving process to build the state's first main road through the Everglades.¹²³ In Hill's mural, five long-legged thin black men in

¹²² Mallory McCane O'Connor, "Desperate Times Inspire the Art of Hope," *FORUM: The Magazine of the Florida Humanities Council* Volume XXIX, No. 3, Fall (2005), 18.

¹²³ Jeff Klinkenberg and Scott Keeler, "The Tamiami Trail," <http://www.sptimes.com/2003/webspecials03/trail/>.

convict-striped shorts strain to pull a heavy cart over planks placed across standing water. Though prisoners were among the work crew and, more than likely, black convicts as well, it seems a bit disingenuous to characterize all the workers as black. The fact that they are so physically different from the black men Hill painted in the “Cotton Gin” mural also represented a curious shift for the artist.

Piers, Picnics, and Controversy – The City Hall Mural – 1940

America was a racially divided country in the 1930s. Jim Crow laws in the South kept blacks and whites rigidly separate, demonizing any attempts at integration. In Florida, where vacationers sought refuge from harsh winters on miles of beachside communities on both of the state's coasts, resident black populations were routinely barred from most municipal swimming pools, or confined to 'colored-only' beaches. Given the charge of painting America as the artists saw her, did the federally sponsored art of the 1930s reflect the nation's racial disparity, or did the artists present an idealized vision of American life?

New Deal art projects represented the first time American artists were paid to focus their subject matter on the common man (or woman), rather than the immortalization of the nation's heroes. A noble effort that provided economic opportunity for artists of the Depression years, the FAP also had the potential to spark controversy. In a review of Florida's own WPA legacy, Professor Mallory McCane O'Connor described that potential for controversy as:

... the same problems faced by public art before and since—issues such as the interaction between artist and patron and between artist and public, and the sensitive and sometimes eccentric nature of local politics, questions of censorship, and legal issues regarding the maintenance and removal of the art.¹²⁴

Pro-active procedures established by the FAP, however, attempted to offset any hint of controversy even before the mural was painted. Before the first brush of paint was

¹²⁴ O'Connor, "Desperate Times Inspire ...," 16.

left to dry, the decision of what was to be painted followed a rigorous approval process. Every idea required collaboration between the artist, the community where the work was to reside, and the federal government. Representatives of the state's Federal Art Project, the artist, and local representatives had to agree on the subject matter, and whether it met the Project's goals: What was distinctive about the community? Did it have a recognizable industry, geography, or history? Would it contribute to a better understanding of the area? Not all artists who applied for, and received commissions were familiar with the area. Some learned local history through research and correspondence, while others, like the Hills, made the state their home.¹²⁵ Arguably, those who lived in the state generally had a better understanding and appreciation of a region's people, its history, and local culture than outsiders. It is, perhaps, his familiarity with the state, and especially with St. Petersburg, that makes the controversy over Hill's City Hall mural so difficult to understand.

Originally conceptualized in three parts, Hill set out to create a visual representation of life in and around St. Petersburg. He received approval for his design under the FAP in April 1940, and federal money was allocated for the project, which was estimated to take a year to complete.¹²⁶ However, World War II abruptly ended funding for the public arts program, and the city found itself unable to follow through with its financial commitment to the artist. Undaunted, Hill volunteered to complete the murals at his own expense, a process that would take him another five years. In 1945, Hill made a gift of the murals to St. Petersburg "as his cultural contributions to [the city's] cultural

¹²⁵ Ibid., 18.

¹²⁶ "Municipal Buildings Will Get Murals, *St. Petersburg Times*," April 7, 1940.

life,”¹²⁷ and plans were prepared for their installation. By 1946, two seven-by-ten feet murals, created (and ultimately paid for) by St. Petersburg’s preeminent muralist were installed on the landing between the city hall’s first and second floor, placing them where they would be the most visible to visitors to the city’s municipal building.

Hill’s city hall murals were, in some ways, typical of his work throughout the state: well-sculpted bodies in various stages of activity familiar to the area. In “Fishing at the Pier,” Hill painted in muted shades of greens, blues and tans, using the city’s Municipal Pier as a backdrop. (Figure 12) Keeping with the theme of familiar images, he included fishermen unhooking fish, the bay, a telescope, a tin of small pink crabs and, in a sly jab at northern winters, a newsboy hawking papers with a headline that referenced the cold weather up north. For the most part, however, this mural proves a departure from his previous work. Instead of depicting Floridians engaged in acts of physical labor, the scene in “Fishing at the Pier” is one of leisure, not too surprising, given St. Petersburg’s reputation as a winter refuge. In fact, unlike his other commissioned works, the primary images in the “...Pier” mural are a white couple sitting on a bench—she, relaxed, languidly draped over her partner’s back; he, bent over a third woman who appears to be paying attention to one his feet. In the partner mural, “Picnicking at Pass-a-Grille,” the activities are, again, leisurely. Hill’s painting of a white family at a sandy beach about to enjoy a meal that included fried chicken, watermelon, and pie¹²⁸ created a scene of abundance, relaxation, and pleasure. In this mural, Hill’s figures include two exquisitely formed male bodies in the foreground that are reminiscent of his earlier labor-focused male bodies.

¹²⁷ Geraldine Daly, “George Hill Murals Acquired for City Hall,” March 3, 1945.

¹²⁸ Fred Wright, “City Hall Mural Artist Confused By Row,” *Evening Independent*, St. Petersburg, December 30, 1966.

The focus of the painting, however, is a large watermelon in the center of the feast. The scene also includes two musicians, at the top of the mural, playing for the picnickers.¹²⁹ However, those two musicians – two *black* musicians – painted with elongated bodies, and overly large lips, playing fiddle and guitar to a gathering of picnicking white folks, lit a firestorm of controversy. (Figure 13) To many, Hill's representation of the musicians was offensive, and inappropriate for a city that was struggling to get past its segregated history. Did Hill know his minstrels would be perceived as racist, or was he so removed from the sensitivities to race in his adopted hometown that he was oblivious to the reaction his images might evoke? Five years had passed since the City of St. Petersburg first commissioned Hill to paint the murals, to their completion, and six years until their installation in city hall. During the five years he took to complete the murals, Hill lost federal funding and, with it, any required adherence to the Federal Arts Project's guidelines to create art that uplifted, and offered a sense of civic pride. Might Hill, in choosing to fund the project's completion himself, have chosen a more personal interpretation of life in and around the Sunshine City, with little regard to how it might appear to the community at large?

From what we can glean from his personal life, his father financially supported Hill for most of his adult life. Perhaps living a life surrounded by others like him gave

¹²⁹ I have studied a photograph of the mural, and find much of Wright's explanation simplistic. In the mural's foreground a well-sculpted bare-chested man (seen from behind) seems to be wearing a headpiece of some kind and filling a cup from a substantial pitcher; a young ethereal-looking woman with windblown hair prepares to cover a table with a cloth, and several bare-chested young men toss a ball on the beach behind the musicians. However, two particular images are most intriguing: a young child of color and an older man. The man is dressed in heavy clothes (for the beach), and the child (who appears to be focused on the child, both occupy a section of the mural's mid-right border. What is most curious about the man is the clarity of his face. Very often in murals, the majority of subjects' faces are more generic, with artists including more finely drawn faces on persons they mean to point out: a politician, businessperson, educator, etc. (see previous reference to Florida's Denman Fink). It provokes the question: was the man someone Hill knew, and who was the young child?

him few opportunities to mingle with people of color, certainly not in any social setting. The art scene at the time was a segregated community. Though black artists produced works of art within the city, they never appeared as members in the City's prominent artisan society.¹³⁰ Perhaps Hill's only knowledge of professional blacks – other than as laborers – was as entertainers providing enjoyment to the white community. Whatever the artist meant to convey, the reaction of some within the city was that Hill's minstrels were offensive, and racist.

As early as 1959, a member of the St. Petersburg Council on Human Relations, Ruth MacLellan, and her husband complained of the mural's imagery to the city council. Others lodged complaints (including a gentleman who would later become a city council member and chose to avoid the stairs, and the mural, whenever he attended council meetings), and the mural soon became a focal point for the black community.¹³¹ Leaders of the black community repeatedly met with city officials to request the mural's removal, to no avail. Among the city's black activists, however, there was a greater sense of urgency. Though no plans appear to have been made to actually remove the mural, several often ironically joked that if they dressed in black laborer overalls (and thus 'invisible' to the white community) they could remove the mural during the day and no one would be the wiser.¹³² Years of complaints that fell on too many deaf years, however, erupted December 29, 1966 when six young black activists, provoked by the mockery directed against an older black woman on the steps of city hall, tore the mural from its

¹³⁰ Research into the history of the art and artists St. Petersburg's black community would, I believe, make a very worthwhile project.

¹³¹ Anita Richway Cutting, "From Joe Waller to Omali Yeshitela: How a Controversial Mural Changed a Man" (B.A. Honors Thesis, University of South Florida, 2007), 24.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 25.

place on the landing, and paraded it through downtown St. Petersburg. (Figure 14) The next day Hill, who was recuperating from a heart attack and released from the hospital the day before the mural incident, was confused and deeply hurt by the vandalism. For him, the “troubadours” (as he called them) were in no way intended as racist. “There was no feeling of anything but affection for [them],” Hill explained, and his depictions were “painted from memory – memor[ies] of scores of pleasant Sunday picnics such as this.”¹³³ When he referenced the musicians, Hill recalled that: “there were several groups of them then, [that] would travel from Pass-a-Grille northward playing at the various picnic shelters along the beaches.” According to Hill’s memories the “musicians played what the people wanted to hear and work[ed] their way up the beach.”¹³⁴ There was an affectionate relationship between the people – the picnickers and the musicians, he said. “It couldn’t be construed any other way.”¹³⁵ Nonetheless, it was.

In the wake of the incident, the *St. Petersburg Times* reported on a meeting of the city’s ‘Negro’ leaders, city officials, and representatives from the state’s NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). The city’s NAACP leaders lamented the forceful removal of the “despicable mural” from City Hall, and offered that “another method could have been employed to accomplish similar results.”¹³⁶ While the statement may have attempted to strike a conciliatory note, state field director of the NAACP, Marvin Davies, was less kind when he spoke of Hill’s depiction of the musicians, suggesting it was “inconceivable” the city council would have allowed a

¹³³ Wright, “City Hall Mural Artist ...” Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ “NAACP Says Mural Incident Unfortunate,” *St. Petersburg Times*, December 30, 1966.

mural depicting the “bombings and killings caused by American bombs in Japan in World War II.”¹³⁷ Davies made it clear the NAACP believed Hill’s portrayal of the two black musicians was offensive: “Until the attitude of the general public is ready to accept the Negro history as a natural development in American history, we will continue to oppose this type of stereotype.”¹³⁸

In the same article, St. Petersburg Mayor Herman Goldner¹³⁹ admitted the act had racial overtones. Still, he chastised the activists for their “irresponsible act,” promised the city would prosecute the crime like any other crime and, with hindsight that can only be perceived as condescending, spoke for the city’s black community: “I am sure that the vast majority of our Negro citizenry are as ashamed of these persons who committed this act as we are.”¹⁴⁰ In fact, though many of St. Petersburg’s ‘Negro citizenry’ may not have approved of the mural’s destruction, they had plenty to say on the issue of racial equality, and many stood with the leading black activist of the group that tore down the mural – Joe Waller. Waller had returned to Florida in 1963, after serving in the U.S. Army. While stationed in Germany during the Freedom Rides of the early sixties, he kept track of the racial uprisings in America. When the young black soldier was reassigned to Fort Benning, Georgia he returned to the U.S. angry, and ready to challenge the nation’s segregated system. Unable to bear the overt racism on base, Waller applied for, and received a general discharge from the Armed Forces, and came back to St. Petersburg

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Curiously, the (presumably white) mayor was the first person quoted in the article, even with a headline that begins “NAACP...”

¹⁴⁰ “NAACP Says Mural Incident ...”

ready to challenge the racism of his hometown.¹⁴¹ The mural at City Hall provided a perfect rallying point. Perhaps the activists did not mean to destroy the mural. Perhaps they just meant to remove it, take it out of view in a public place. However, in the heat of that December moment, at the end of a tumultuous year, and after years of oppression, something snapped, anger surfaced, and art was destroyed.¹⁴²

Without the artist to explain his intent, or provide a better understanding of his politics, it is difficult to know exactly what Hill intended beyond what he explained in the press. Did black musicians travel the beaches north of Pass-a-Grille playing the requests of white picnic-goers along the way? It seems unlikely, given the tenor of the time. Why portray them as minstrels? Instead of black men, might they, in fact, have been white men in blackface, a common form of entertainment in the early twentieth century? Knowing that his portrayals of men of color in other works do not bear the same type of characterization, was the artist so out of touch with the political sentiment of the time that he had no appreciation of the controversy such a portrayal might provoke? Admittedly, Hill completed his work in 1945, and racial tolerance was not in the air. Whatever explanation the artist provided the public following the mural's destruction did nothing to deflect the wave of scorn and criticism that followed. The legacy is in the memory: Many may not know of George Snow Hill, nor his history as St. Petersburg's prolific WPA muralist, but they know of the 'mural incident at City Hall.'

¹⁴¹ Cutting, "From Joe Waller ...," 15, 6.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 23-4.

CONCLUSION

George Snow Hill deserved better than he got. As St. Petersburg's only known connection to the Federal Arts Project, the prolific muralist is invisible in his adopted city. Mention his name, and be met with blank stares. The 'mural incident at City Hall' is better known, but not the artist who created the controversy. The local art community does not appear too interested in doing much to celebrate his contributions, sadly, apparently preferring to let his story slip away. I suspect some of the resistance to commemorating the contributions both Hill and his wife made to the city's artisan culture stems from the publicity surrounding the destruction of his mural "Picnicking at Pass-a-Grille" that stoked the city's historically tenuous relationship with its African American population. This, and the fact that the activist most associated with the incident at city hall, Omali Yeshitela (Joe Waller in 1966), remains active within the community. No doubt, some believe that any public attention paid to Hill's many works, here, and throughout the state, would ultimately return to the city hall incident. The term politically unwise comes to mind.

It is certainly understandable why no one would want to revisit the incident, and face the issue of whether art was destroyed for political purposes, or try to answer the question, however nuanced, whether Hill's depiction of two black minstrels playing for a white beach-side audience was racist. In a city that still sits uncomfortably between its racist southern past, and its progressive, artsy present, why would anyone want to stir the proverbial pot?

The answer, I propose, is this: The work Hill produced was part of something much larger than one artist, and was certainly larger than one mural, however controversial. Hill's connection to the federal government's innovative program to *pay artists* to create public art is, I believe, worth *at least* a footnote note in the city's history. Instead, Florida's most prolific WPA muralist is virtually unknown, and the disposition of several of his works, including one the largest murals ever painted for the Federal Arts Project, remains unknown. Rumors surround the final destination of the infamous city hall mural; a section of a mural in a secure building is missing, another painted over with historically inaccurate information; and the recent destruction of the only known fresco work Hill is known to have done in America, however, seem to indicate little local interest in preserving his work.

To be sure, Hill did more than create murals and controversy. After the Federal Arts Project monies ceased, Hill continued working, though murals do not appear to be among his creations. He, along with his wife Polly, were committed to art education, both from their studio in Lakewood Estates and through their curriculum, "Courses in Art: Basic and Advanced, a course approved for Veterans' Training."¹⁴³ A 168-week certificate course the Hills developed in 1950 provided for a broad study of styles, and, according to the materials, would have earned the dedicated student a certificate as a commercial illustrator, a commercial muralist, or a commercial ceramicist. The primary purpose of the course, according to Hill, was to "develop and preserve the individual expression of the pupil, ... and to prepare him in such a way that he may be able to realize compensation, or income from his work at the earliest possible moment."¹⁴⁴ Unique to

¹⁴³ Original course curriculum in author's possession.

Hill's coursework (at least according to the artist) was the inclusion of courses in preservation and restoration of artwork, and stained and leaded glass. Whether the preservation and restoration class offering may have been in response to the decay of his "Legacy of Flight" mural makes for interesting conjecture. The stained glass offerings, however, are no surprise. Hill had cultivated an acute interest in the art form, and had organized, at one point, what he believed to be the only stained glass industry south of North Carolina, and the first in St. Petersburg. His large, round stained glass window created with 693 pieces of glass as a gift from a wife to her late husband, still catches the light at St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church (now on 34th Street South in St. Petersburg).¹⁴⁵

Researching Hill's life, and his work, proved an incredible challenge. With an estate so scattered, and a life so (apparently) private, piecing together a profile of the man left much to be desired. What we do know is that he and Polly had one son, George Jr., who never married, and who took care of his mother after his father's death in 1969, until her death in 1989. Upon young George's death, the Hill's work at Lakewood Estates was discovered to be virtually untouched since the death of both his parents: George's studio and Polly's studio had each been sealed after their passing, with everything left as it was when they died. When George Jr. passed, the estate was divided, sold, and shared with friends. Some have said a portion of it may have ended up in a dumpster. Consequently, it is difficult to know just how much art George Snow Hill created in his thirty-five years in St. Petersburg. What we do know he created, and what remains is, I believe, not only worthy of preservation, but of discussion, as well.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Undated clipping.

During my graduate studies, I had the opportunity to reread Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, a book I first read as an awakened social activist in the late 1960s. Moved by his prosaic description of poverty, and of being black in America, I often referred to it in presentations to young white high school students. In the 1970s, as I evolved into a feminist activist, my focus turned to Cleaver's philosophy that raping white women was a way to get back at 'the Man,' and my love of his work turned to outrage. Reading *Soul on Ice* again forty years later, I was able to understand my previous reactions to his work in the context of the time, and focus, instead, on the work as a piece of historical literature. I would hope, seventy-five years later, the community would look at the body of Hill's work as a link to a moment in American history, indeed in Florida's history, that is, as historical art, worth preserving.

The legacy of murals painted under the New Deal's Federal Arts Project is undeniable. From San Francisco to New York, Joplin to Detroit, Miami to Madison, larger-than-life images of 1930s America still inspire. On post office walls, in city halls, and museums throughout the country, murals remind us of the vision of the WPA's Federal Arts Project: accessible art for the masses. Perhaps, with the perspective of time, we can come to a better understanding of George Snow Hill as St. Petersburg's link to that vision.

End

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ades, Dawn. *Art in Latin America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
- A.M.C. "Why Not Soldiers' Home for Murals." Letter to the Editor, Undated clipping, *Publicity*.
- Arsenault, Raymond A. *St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream: 1888–1950*. Norfolk: The Donning Company, 1988.
- "A New Concept in Art Exhibition." a pamphlet by George Snow Hill. November, 1954. Information courtesy of Myers Auction Gallery, St. Petersburg.
- "Airport Murals Trace History of Aviation." *Tampa Morning Tribune*, June 9, 1938.
- "Art Club Presents Geo. Pearse Ennis." *Evening Independent*, January 9, 1932.
- "Art Committee Seeking Place for Pictures." Undated clipping. *Publicity*
- "Art Display During Week: Paintings By Well-Known Artist Will Be On Exhibition At Hotel." *Evening Independent*, March 2, 1925.
- "Artist Cites Paris Courts in Defending Bathing Mural." *St. Petersburg Times*, Aug. 9, 1934.
- "Artist Objects to Fight Over Bathing Scene: Circuit Judges, Commission to View Mural Called Inappropriate." *St. Petersburg Times*, August 5, 1934.
- "Artist Objects to Fight Over Bathing Scene." *St. Petersburg Times*, Aug. 5, 1934.
- Bennett, Lennie. "A legacy takes flight." *St. Petersburg Times*, *Floridian*, October 13, 2002.
- "Board Turns Down C.W.A. Paintings for Courtroom." August 8, 1934. *Publicity*.
- Carbon copy of letter from George Snow Hill to Editor of the *St. Petersburg Times*, dated August 27th, 1934. Letter in author's possession.
- Classified ad, *St. Petersburg Times*. November 1, 1934. Section 1.
- Clipping. Undated. *Publicity*.

- Copy of contract between Hill and Mrs. Bates, dated November 8, 1934, specifies that \$200 will be paid to Hill with the first \$50 at the end of the first full week's work, \$50 at the end of the second, and \$100 on or before January 15, 1935.
- Cutting, Anita Richway. "From Joe Waller to Omali Yeshitela," B.A. Honors Thesis, University of South Florida, 2007.
- Crane, Jeanette. "The courthouse hangin' mystery: Where did controversial cuties go after the judge ordered them out?" *St. Petersburg Independent*, June 30, 1983.
- Daly, Geraldine. "George Hill Murals Acquired for City Hall." *St. Petersburg Times*, March 3, 1945.
- "Employment and Activities Report: Total Employment as of November 1, 1936." Federal Arts Project, WPA.
- Enee Abelman, emails and texts to, and conversations with the author, March through October, 2012.
- Flaherty, Barry. General Contractor. Interviewed onsite by author, Tuesday, December 1, 2009.
- Fuller, Walter P. *St. Petersburg and its People*. St. Petersburg: Great Outdoors Publishing Co., 1972.
- "George Snow Hill to Paint Cost Guard Murals: Works of Local Artists Given Formal Approval for New Air-Base Buildings." *St. Petersburg Times*, February 25, 1936.
- Hawes, Leland. *Tampa Tribune*, December 25, 1988.
- "Hill's Murals Are Unveiled: Large Crowd Attends Ceremony in City Auditorium at Clearwater." January 30, 1935, *Publicity*.
- "Judge Bars CWA Girl Art From Court." *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 4, 1934.
- Katz, Lynn Barstis Williams and Abelman, Enee. "Polly Knipp Hill: Marking a Life Together Through Etching." *Georgia Museum of Art Bulletin*, Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia, Volume 23 – 2012.
- Kennedy, Roger G. *When Art Worked: The New Deal, Art, and Democracy*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc, 2009.
- Klinkenberg, Jeff and Scott Keeler. "The Tamiami Trail." An online interactive narrative: www.sptimes.com/2003/webspecial03. Accessed July 8, 2012.
- "Large Crowds View Exhibit at Art Club." *St. Petersburg Times*, April 27, 1927.

Letter addressed to George Snow Hill from Leila Mechlin, August 4, 1933. In author's possession.

Letter addressed to Mr. George Hill, St Petersburg, Florida, from Edward Bruce, Secretary, Treasure Department, Washington, Advisory Committee to Treasury on Fine Arts, 20 January, 1934. Letter in author's possession.

Letter to Mr. G. S. Hill from Alice E. Bates, Manager & Treasurer Garden Cafeteria, January 24th, 1936. Letter in author's possession.

Letter to Mrs. Betty Bates from Hill Studios, George S. Hill, January 30, 1936. Letter in author's possession.

Letter to the Editor. Undated clipping, *Publicity*.

Lowitt, Richard and Beasley, Maurine. *One Third of a Nation: Lorena Hickok Reports on the Great Depression*. University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 1981.

"Many Americans in the Paris Salon: Painters and Sculptors Well Represented in the Show of the *Nationale and Artistes Francais*." *The Art News*, Saturday, May 24, 1934.

McElvaine Robert S. *The Great Depression: America, 1929–1941*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009.

"Municipal Buildings Will Get Murals." *St. Petersburg Times*, April 7, 1940.

"NAACP Says Mural Incident Unfortunate." *St. Petersburg Times*, December 30, 1966.

"No Space Here For Paintings, Group Decides." August 25, 1934, Section One, *Publicity*.

O'Connor, Mallory McCane. "Desperate Times Inspire the Art of Hope." *FORUM: The Magazine of the Florida Humanities Council*, Volume XXIX, No. 3, Fall, 2005.

"Pictures of Florida Folk to be Shown." *St. Petersburg Times*, December 10, 1930.

"Plenty of Bidders For Murals Heard; Decisions Due Soon." *St. Petersburg Times*, August 30, 1934.

"Public Works Art Project." Address of Edward Bruce, Secretary to the Advisory Committee to the Treasury on Fine Arts, Printed in the *Congressional Record*, January 17, 1934.

Publicity. The name for a collection of clippings that belonged to the Hills. Many clippings have no dates, nor identify the newspaper from which they came. It

appears, however, the sources identified originate from the *St. Petersburg Times*. Information gathered from these unidentified clippings are referenced by the name on the envelope that contains them. In author's possession.

Roosevelt, Franklin D. "Works of Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Forgotten Man, April 7, 1932." The New Deal Network. Reprinted in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Vol. 1, 1928-32. New York City: Random House, 1938. <http://newdeal.feri.org/speeches/1932c.htm>. Accessed on October 24, 2012.

"St. Petersburg Artistic Couple Find Inspiration For Efforts in Picturesque Spanish Bungalow Studio: George S. Hill Has His Own Philosophy in Avoiding Boredom and Fatigue." *St. Petersburg Times*, August 9, 1936.

Staff, "The Garden Cafeteria: Preserving the Past in St. Petersburg." *Tampa Tribune*, May 19, 2007.

Stuart, John A., and John F. Stack, Jr. Eds. *The New Deal in South Florida: Design, Policy, and Community: 1933-1940*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008.

Tampa Bay Times photo archives. Undated. Used with permission.

"Tampa to Get \$25,000,000 for Art Colony." *Tampa Morning Telegraph*, March 3, 1926.

"The Error." *St. Petersburg Times*, August 19, 1934.

The Snell Island Property Owners Association. *Snell Island St. Petersburg, Florida*, 1996.

Times Staff Correspondent. "Murals Taken by Clearwater: Hill's Paintings Accepted by Commission; To Be Hung in City Auditorium." September 8, 1934. *Publicity*

Times Staff Correspondent. "Work of Bathing Girl Picture in Courtroom Halted as Judge Bird Makes Protest." *St. Petersburg Times*, August 4, 1934.

West, Carolyn. "Some Citizens Think Bathing Girl Picture Okeh for Court, Others Agree With Judge Bird." *St. Petersburg Times*, August 10, 1934.

Wiley, Alma A. "George Hill's Exhibit gives 'Little Journey to France' Writer Says." *St. Petersburg Times*, Feb. 11, 1934.

Wolff, Justin. *Thomas Hart Benton: A Life*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2012.

Wright, Fred. "City Hall Mural Artist Confused by Row." *Evening Independent*, December 30, 1966.

APPENDIX



Figure 1: Polly Knipp Hill and George Snow Hill in their Parisian studio @1926.
Photo courtesy of Enee Abelman. Used with permission.

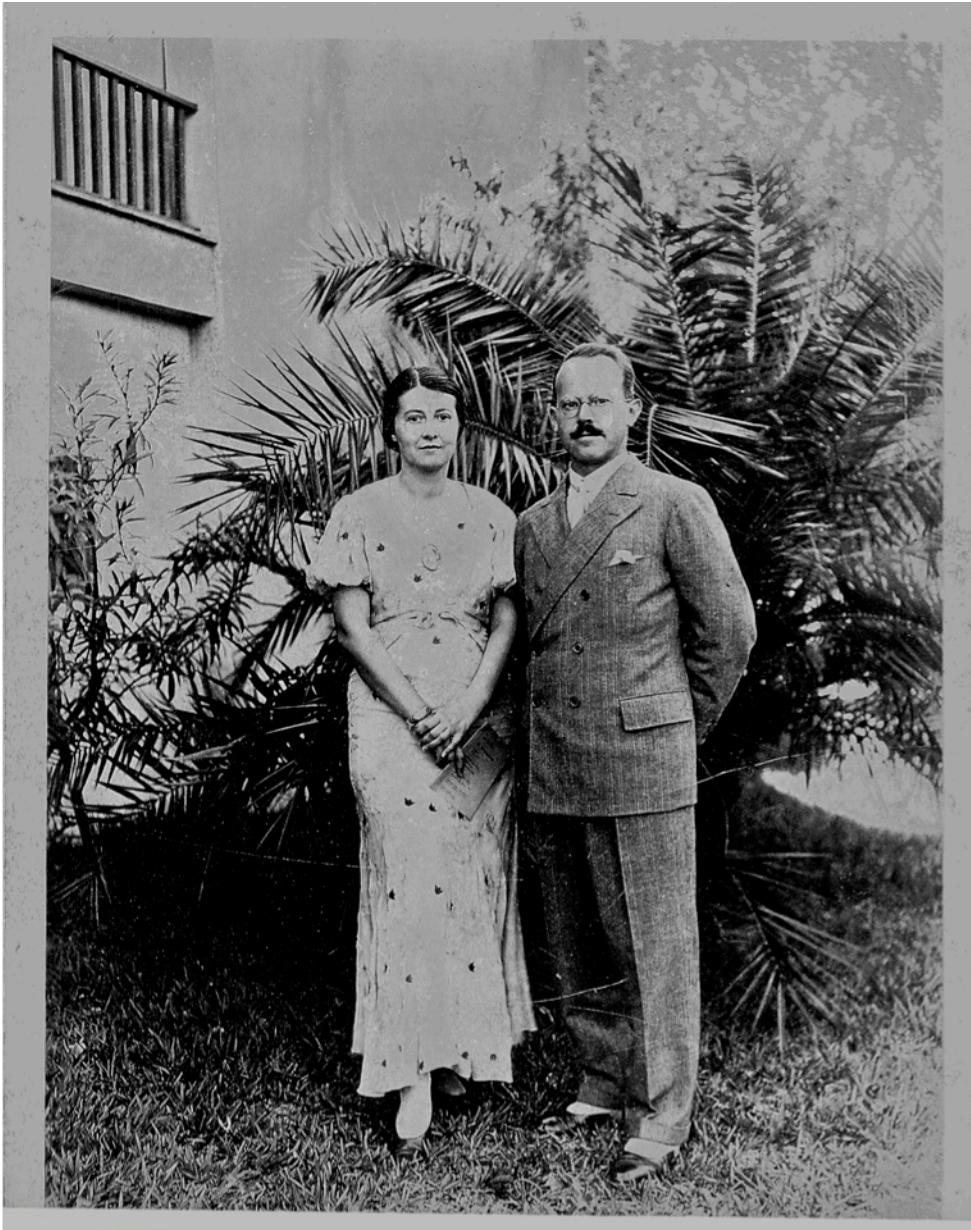


Figure 2. Polly Knipp Hill and George Snow Hill in St. Petersburg, Florida @1933. Photo courtesy of Enee Abelman. Used with permission.



Figure 3. "Artist Objects to Fight Over Bathing Suit Scene," *St. Petersburg Times*, August 5, 1934, artist's personal clippings file. *In author's possession.*



Figure 4. George Snow Hill's Garden Cafeteria mural (now demolished), photo of fresco showing banyan tree on west wall from east entrance. Photograph by Tara Craig, and used with permission. *Photo in author's possession.*



Figure 5. Photo of flora, east-facing wall of George Snow Hill's Garden Cafeteria mural (now demolished). Photograph by Tara Craig, 2009 and used with permission. *Photo in author's possession.*



Figure 6. Section of George Snow Hill mural in wardroom at St. Petersburg's USCG Bayboro station, @1937? Photo courtesy of *Tampa Bay Times* photo archives. Used with permission.



Figure 7. Section of George Snow Hill mural in wardroom at St. Petersburg's USCG Bayboro station. Photo taken by author, 2012.



Figure 8. A section of Hill's USCG mural showing the ship's name *SS Morro Castle*. St. Petersburg's USCG Bayboro station, @1937? Photo courtesy of *Tampa Bay Times* photo archives. Used with permission.



Figure 9. Section of Hill's USCG Bayboro mural showing a different name – *SS Fuego Castle* – on the ship the artist had painted as the *SS Morro Castle*. Photo taken by author, 2012.

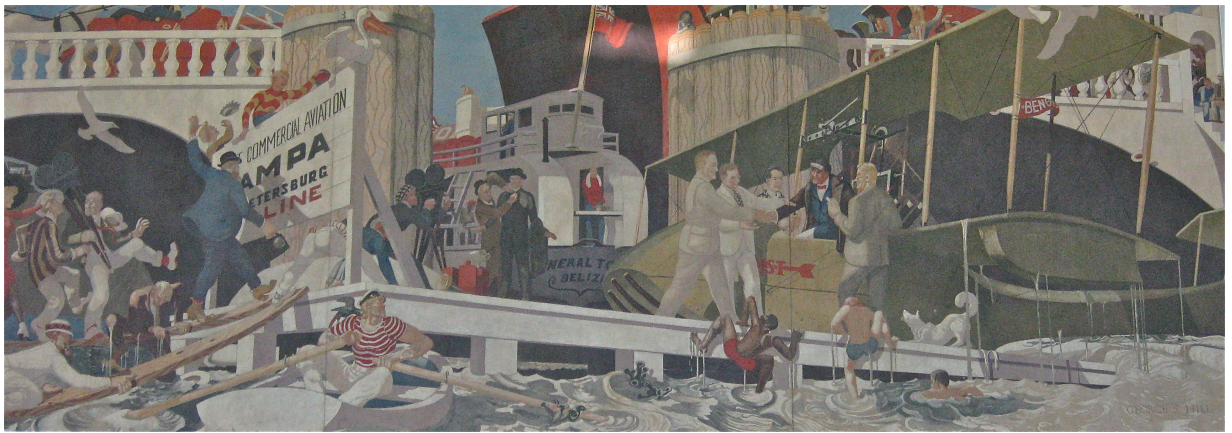


Figure 10. Photo, seventh panel of “Legacy of Flight,” by George Snow Hill, depicting the arrival of a 1914 trip from St. Petersburg to Tampa piloted by Tony Jannus. Photo taken by author, 2011.

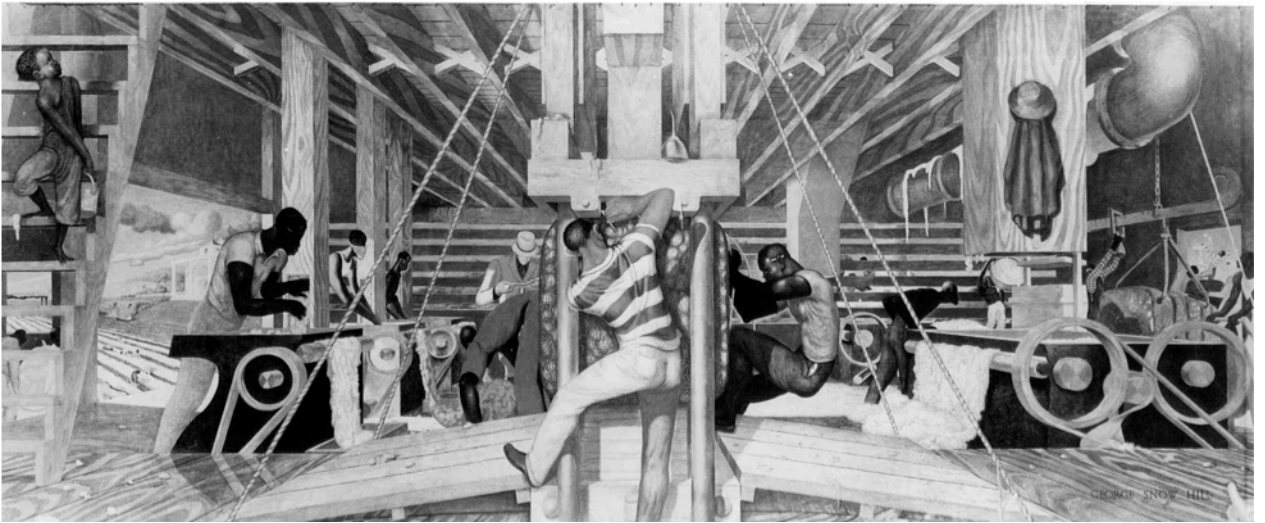


Figure 11. “Long Staple Cotton Gin,” mural by George Snow Hill, for U.S. Post Office, Madison, Florida. Photo courtesy of *Tampa Bay Times* photo archives. Used with permission.



Figure 12. George Snow Hill shown at his mural, "Fishing at the Pier," in progress. Courtesy of *Tampa Bay Times* photo archives. Used with permission.



Figure 13. Photo of George Snow Hill's mural for St. Petersburg City Hall, "Picnicking at Pass-a-Grille." His depiction of two black musicians as minstrels playing for a white gathering of picnic-goers set off a firestorm of controversy in 1966, and resulted in the mural's destruction. Photo courtesy of *Tampa Bay Times* photo archives. Used with permission.



Figure 14. Photo showing Omali Yeshitela (Joe Waller, center left with sunglasses) and other black activists with George Snow Hill's disputed mural, on the streets of St. Petersburg, December 29, 1966. Photo courtesy of *Tampa Bay Times* photo archive. Used with permission.