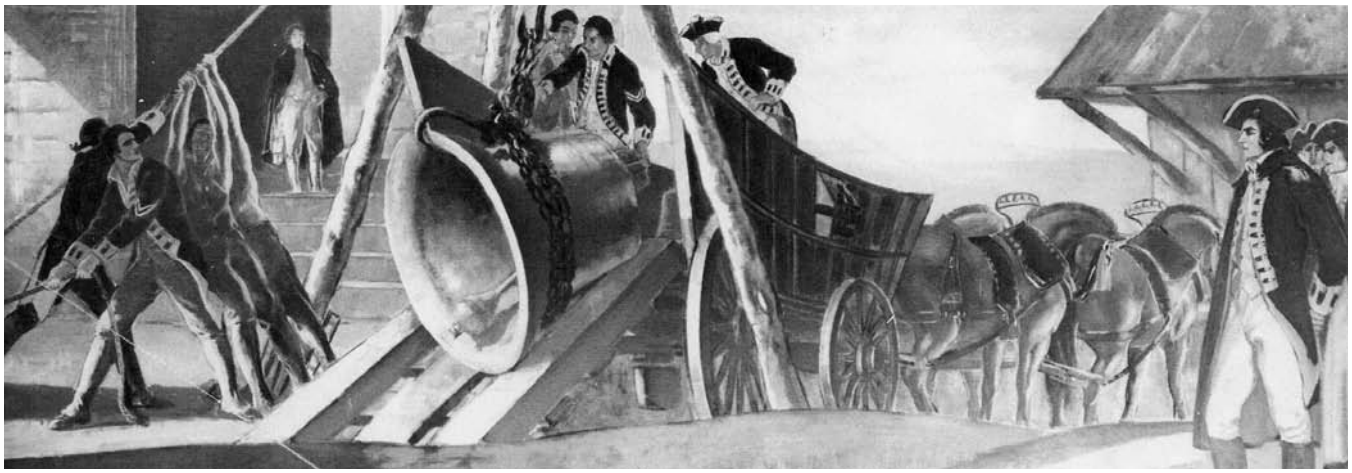
Allentown Post Office

442 West Hamilton Street
Allentown, PA 18101

MURALS
Title: various (ten mural panels)
Artist: Gifford Beal
Date: 1939
Medium: Oil on canvas



The Liberty Bell. *Black and white photo of color study, courtesy of the National Archives.*

The typical post office artwork consists of a single mural or sculpture, usually mounted over the postmaster's door. Since the money available for embellishment was based on one percent of the funds appropriated for a building project, the larger the project, the more money for art. The appropriation for the monumental Allentown Post Office was $820,000, but only $3,700 was spent on the murals. This amount was less than one-half of one percent, however far more than the usual artwork commission.

Artist Gifford Beal painted ten mural panels which were mounted throughout the post office lobby. For subject matter, Beal depicted scenes of Allentown and Lehigh County in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Three murals feature important historical events:

1) *The Liberty Bell* shows the bell arriving in Allentown for safe keeping. In 1777, while the British occupied Philadelphia during the Revolutionary War, the Liberty Bell was moved to Allentown's Zion Reformed Church.

2) *The Walking Purchase* depicts the 1737 agreement in which the Lenape Indians agreed to sell to the proprietors of Pennsylvania, all the land that a man could walk in a day and a half. Rather than walk a trail, three runners were hired to run on a path cleared for the "walk." They covered about 70 miles rather than the 40 that the Lenape had anticipated. Through this agreement, Pennsylvania acquired all or most of Pike, Monroe, Carbon, Schuylkill, Northampton, Lehigh and Bucks counties.

3) Departure of the Jordan Rifles depicts the a group of Civil War volunteers. They are leaving for Harrisburg being led by the Allentown Band.

Four murals depict the area's important industries. Two murals feature the early iron and cement industries. *Kimmett's Lock* and *Transportation* suggest the importance of the Lehigh Canal system for commerce and pleasure travel. *Trout Hall* depicts wealthy Allentown residents during the early days of the town's founding. The two smallest panels, which are located above doorways, show Pennsylvania German barns with hex signs and Riflemen during the Revolutionary War.

About the artist: Gifford Beal (1879–1956) was born in New York City and began painting with William Merritt Chase at the age of twelve. He later studied at the Art Students League in New York. Beal's work was popular in the first half of the 20th century. His early work was

The Walking Purchase. *Black and white photo of color study, courtesy of the National Archives.*

Departure of the Jordan Rifles (First Defenders) from Allentown. *Black and white photo of color study, courtesy of the National Archives.*

impressionistic reflecting the influence of Chase. In mid-career, he adopted a more realistic style and somber palette to depict the rugged life of coastal villagers in New England. Later in his career, his subjects were the theater and circus. Beal's art is in the Whitney Museum, the Metropolitan Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC.

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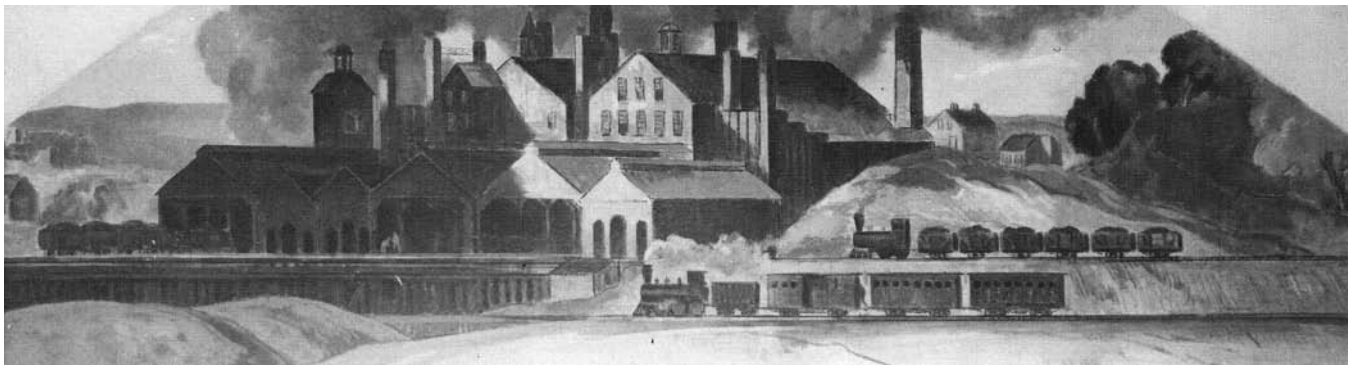
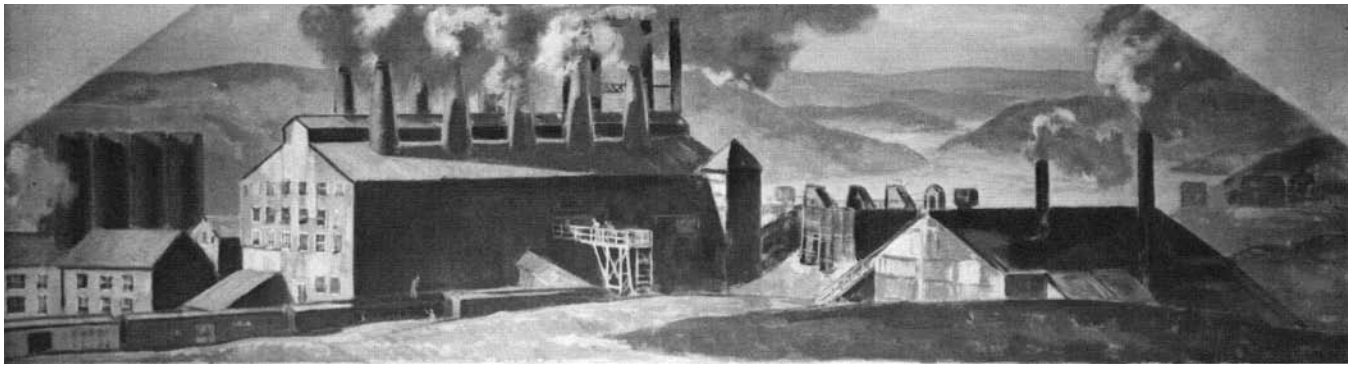


Iron Industry in Lehigh Valley. *Black and white photo of color study, courtesy of the National Archives.*



Cement Industry. *Black and white photo of color study, courtesy of the National Archives.*

Kimmett's Lock. *Black and white photo of color study, courtesy of the National Archives.*

Transportation. *Black and white photo of color study, courtesy of the National Archives.*

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Lehigh County Barn Signs.
Black and white photo of color study, courtesy of the National Archives.

Pennsylvania-German Riflemen.
Black and white photo of color study, courtesy of the National Archives.

Trout Hall. *Black and white photo of color study, courtesy of the National Archives.*