

Pittsburgh Post Office Squirrel Hill Branch

1800 Murray Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15217

MURAL

Title: *History of Squirrel Hill*

Artist: Alan Thompson

Date: 1942

Medium: Oil on canvas



History of Squirrel Hill, left half of mural.

A popular compositional device in many post office murals was the combination of the past and present. *History of Squirrel Hill* shows the 1940s Pittsburgh neighborhood on the left half of the painting, while the town's early days are imagined on the right. A Daniel Boone-like frontiersman, rifle in hand, straddles the center. He surveys the contemporary scene, linking the violent past with the bustling present.

The streetscape features about a dozen figures engaged in a variety of everyday activities. Local stores and buildings form the backdrop of this tableau. Artist Alan Thompson was an illustrator as well as a painter, and has an eye for humorous detail. The crying baby in the carriage looks out at the viewer as its mother, cigarette in hand, is engrossed in conversation. The dog on the leash eyes a fire hydrant. Behind it, a man angrily shakes his fist at the red streetcar. At the time, Squirrel Hill was a predominantly Jewish neighborhood and

Thompson includes a bearded man in the traditional Orthodox black coat and hat.

The right half of the mural purports to show the early settlement that would become Squirrel Hill. In the background, men are engaged in farming activities: plowing, sowing, and felling trees. A family is in the foreground. The woman makes thread at the spinning wheel, while her husband works a mortar-like pole in a hollowed log. Between them are their daughter and baby in a cradle. Two muscular Native Americans are at the far right: one wielding a tomahawk, attacks an older settler. Very little is actually known about the founding of Squirrel Hill and there are no records of hostilities between settlers and indigenous peoples in the area. However this version of history went unquestioned by contemporary residents as though felling trees and fighting Indians was the inevitable path to civilization.

Pittsburgh Post Office Squirrel Hill Branch



History of Squirrel Hill, right half of mural.

About the artist: Alan Thompson (1908–?) was born in England and later moved to Pittsburgh. He studied at the Carnegie Institute and the Pittsburgh Art Institute. He worked in a realistic style and painted scenes in and around Pittsburgh.