

UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

from the archives of Museums on the Green

Karl Oberteuffer and His Hopeful Dawn

In 1943, Karl Oberteuffer's picture was hung in the Falmouth Post Office—but not for the reasons you might think. The picture in question wasn't a photograph on an FBI poster, but a work of art—a mural that de-



Oberteuffer's "Recapture of Corn Schooner from the British" adorns the lobby of Main St.'s Post Office. Joseph Dimmick is standing at left. Photo by Terry White.

depicted Falmouth's Revolutionary War hero Joseph Dimmick. This tribute to the town's liberty-loving past was commissioned by the federal government, under a New Deal program intended to support artists and to beautify public buildings. The Falmouth mural was one of the last to be installed before the program succumbed to wartime necessities. When we dug into the background of the man who created the picture, we found a whole family of artists who were certainly cosmopolitan, perhaps a little bohemian, yet thoroughly American.

Karl's father George, a Philadelphia native, studied at Princeton and at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts before setting out for Paris in 1905. Within months, he had met and married a Frenchwoman and fellow artist, Henriette Amiard. Their daughter Betty was born in 1906, followed by their son, Karl Amiard Oberteuffer, born in the Breton town of Le Croizic on August 9, 1908. For the next decade, the family's primary residence was in Paris, where Karl attended school and George's art began to attract a following. George's circle included other expatriates such as Henry Ossawa Tanner, an African-American and fellow Pennsylvania Academy alumnus who specialized in painting biblical scenes.

Upon the outbreak of World War I, George went to the U.S. consulate in Havre to register himself, his wife, and children as American citizens. In 1915, the Panama-

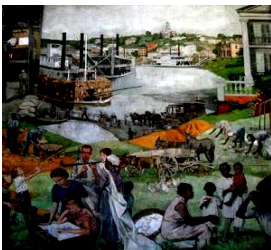
Pacific Exposition in San Francisco acknowledged George for his work as secretary of their organizing committee in continental Europe. (The chairman of their British committee, by way of comparison, was John Singer Sargent.) George served as a captain in the American Red Cross during the war, which came dangerously close to home when the front line advanced to within 43 miles of Paris. After the armistice, in 1919, the Oberteuffers abruptly decided to move to the U.S. An emergency passport application was filed for eleven-year-old Karl, who solemnly swore that even though he had never resided in the United States, he was “a native and loyal citizen” nevertheless. Once back home, George taught at many schools, including the Art Institute of Chicago, which awarded him its Frank Logan medal.

Karl, meanwhile, also studied at the Institute, won its Peabody Prize, and began to build an international reputation as a watercolorist. He married Hingham native Eleanor Edson in New York on February 1, 1935. They would eventually have three children, John Amiard, George Reece, and Anne. In 1940, Karl’s father died, aged 62, in Gloucester, Massachusetts. By then, Karl had already produced his first post office mural in McKenzie, Tennessee. His mother, Henriette, painted a mural for Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1939. In the early 1940s Karl was living on Huntington Avenue in Rox-

bury and giving art lessons. By the spring of 1942, he had won the commission to paint Falmouth’s mural.

When he read early histories of the town, his imagination was kindled by the story of a dawn raid at Tarpaulin Cove, when Joseph Dimmick led a handful of Falmouth militiamen to recapture a shipment of corn from a British privateer. In late May, Karl secured a studio at the McVitty garage on Mill Road, and with his wife took up temporary residence in town. The *Enterprise* noted that “While in Falmouth he will take private pupils.” Karl finished his work in October of 1942, and showed it to Postmaster Charles Morrison and Planning Board Chairman Sumner Crosby. A gun aficionado, Crosby suggested some minor changes to the militia’s weaponry. Federal approval of the picture arrived two months later, but heavy rains in early December leaked into the two-year-old post office, leaving ceilings and walls too damp for mounting fine art. Morrison wrote to Washington requesting repairs, and everybody waited again while the gears of “government machinery” slowly turned. The mural was finally hung on August 21, 1943.

By then, Karl had gone back to his life in the Boston area.

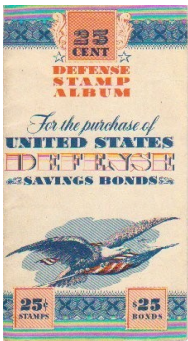


Top: Karl's mural in McKenzie, TN, "Early U.S. Post Village."
Bottom: Detail from Henriette's mural, "Vicksburg: Its Character and Industries." Photos by Jimmy S. Emerson, accessed at www.newdealartregistry.org.

(By a quirky coincidence, in 1944, Karl's family was living at 75 Magazine St. in Cambridge, which made them neighbors of Falmouth's Dr. Bessie Davis, then living at number 21.) For the rest of his too-short life Karl continued to paint, to collect awards, and to teach—at the Modern School of Design and Fashion in Boston, among other places. He also did optical research for the Radio Corporation of America in its Airborne Systems Laboratory. He died on January 9, 1958 in Boston, aged 49.

More than seventy years have passed, and Karl's post office panorama remains arguably the most widely viewed work of public art in town. Though its subject is a Revolutionary War hero, its encouraging message resonated with the World War II generation for whom it was created. Today, it reminds us of the many generations that have struggled for freedom. Karl told the *Enterprise*, "This is Falmouth's mural and I want the town to be pleased." He delivered on that promise.

*Thelma A. Spicer
& Meg Costello*



Learn More

To learn more about Joseph Dimmick, the Revolutionary War in Falmouth, or other artists who have been associated with the town, visit the Conant House Research Library at 65 Palmer Ave., open Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10-2.

For a tour of the museums, including a display of World War II memorabilia, come to the Hallett Barn at 55 Palmer Ave., Tuesday - Friday, 11-4. Saturdays, 11-2.



What's Ahead for *Untold Tales*

Thanks to everyone who has been reading this blog and making it a success! In the weeks to come we'll be adding features such as first-person memoirs, transcripts of letters, mystery photos, and behind-the-scenes glimpses at our work here at the Museums. We'll still publish in-depth articles whenever we have enough background research to warrant one—hopefully, about once a month. Please keep our page bookmarked and visit every Friday! <http://museumsongreen.org/untold-tales-of-falmouth/>