

The Newtonite

◆ Tuesday, Sept. 5, 2017 • Volume 96

Newton North High School, 457 Walnut St., Newtonville, Mass. 02460

Newly restored, historic “Citizenship” murals displayed

BY SOPHIA ZHOU

Take a walk on Main Street and you are bound to notice the large new mural hanging next to the cafeteria entrance. Stroll a little farther down towards the theater entrance and you will find two more smaller murals on display outside the auditorium.

Together, they are the “Citizenship” mural, which originally hung in the library of Newton High School.

The larger center panel is titled, “Education,” depicting a family of four alongside Newton students against a background of skyscrapers and rural fields. The two side panels are titled “Industry” and “Commerce,” which respec-



Check out page 8 for more photos of the mural and its restoration.

tively depict a scene of heavy metal work and a large cargo ship being unloaded. “Citizenship” was painted in dedication to former Newton High School student Lt. Stafford Leighton Brown (Class of 1915) in 1936 by Dutch artist Maurice Compris as a part of Franklin Roo-

sevelt’s Works Progress Administration (WPA) in his New Deal.

The mural was originally commissioned for Newton High School. There was no room for the entire 45-foot-wide mural when the transition was made to the old Newton North High School building in 1964, so the two smaller side panels were rolled up and put in storage and only the center panel was put up in the cafeteria.

Now, with funding from the Newton Community Preservation Committee, all three panels of the mural are finally back on the walls of Newton North after a year of restoration in Pennsylvania. However, they are hanging in different areas as the two side panels were

not found until after the new Newton North building was designed, so no space was designed to fit the full mural.

According to former North principal Jennifer Huntington, who organized the restoration, the mural tells two stories. “One is the dedication of the man who it’s dedicated to and the other is the time when the United States was in deep depression—the 1930s.”

The first story Huntington spoke of is that of Brown, who graduated from Newton High School in 1915. After only a year at Dartmouth college, he chose to leave and join the war.

“I think that people love to find ways to have some excitement in

their lives and the opportunity to [fight] what they saw as a real challenge to democracy in the world,” said Huntington. “I think that, you know, he thought it would be more exciting for him to do it.” As the United States had not yet joined World War I, Brown went to France, where he drove ambulances from the frontlines to the hospital.

“Then, in 1917, just before the United States entered the war, he decided he had enough of driving ambulances and he joined the French Escadrille Flying Corps, which was a very elite group,” said Huntington. Once the United States joined the war, Brown continued to fly for the corps as a lieutenant.

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Reinstalled mural shows a Newton that never was

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In September of 1918, six weeks before the war ended, Brown was killed in the line of duty when his plane was shot down and crashed.

Years later, the “Citizenship” mural was painted in honor of Brown and the 51 other Newton High School graduates who died in the war.

A scholarship was also established in Brown’s honor and in an interesting twist of events, Travis Emenaker ‘17, last year’s winner of the Brown scholarship, happened to be in school at the time and helped install the “Citizenship” mural.

“It looks great and I hope the students learn about the history of the mural as they will soon see it every day,” said Emenaker. “It was incredible to know that I was honoring Lt. Brown’s life by learning about his sacrifices and helping put

back up a mural dedicated to him and other soldiers.”

The mural was funded by Franklin Roosevelt’s WPA, which is part of the second story that Huntington spoke of.

“The artist who was chosen to paint this mural was paid with money from the federal Works Progress Administration and so it links it to a time when artists didn’t really have jobs,” said Huntington. “In fact, all around the country there are murals on post offices, on public buildings, painted by artists who basically owed their lives to the federal government because they kept them employed. So that’s part of the story.”

Yet, there’s also a distorted element to the mural that poses a question of intent. “Education” portrays a Newton family and Newton students but “there is absolutely no diversity—all the people are white,

even though there was a thriving African-American community in Newton at the time,” said Huntington.

The less than accurate depiction continues with the two side panels, “Industry” and “Commerce.” According to Alice Ingerson, the Newton Community Preservation Committee program manager, “it’s not like Newton didn’t have commerce and industry which are the names of the two paintings, but those are not paintings of Newton.”

Huntington added that the types of industry and commerce shown in the murals don’t “have a place in Newton, either then or now.”

Ingerson notes that despite the inaccurate portrayal of the Newton community, special care seems to have been taken to show gender equality.

“There’s an exactly equal number of men and women and I can’t

believe that’s accidental. Somebody must have cared about that,” she said. “They didn’t care about representing our ethnic, economic diversity, but they cared about gender equality.”

Looking to shed some light on the reasons for this misrepresentation, the preservation committee searched through all the archives they could think of for information regarding the instructions given to the artist, but none were found.

Huntington offers up a possible explanation. Perhaps “part of the WPA work was supposed to be about getting people back to work, because so many people were unemployed,” she said.

Regardless of what the actual story is, Ingerson urged students to also share their own thoughts and ideas about the mural. “It would just be really interesting if we could ever find out, and in the meantime,

since we can’t find out, it would be interesting to see what students think the message is.”

All in all, Huntington hopes the mural will spark conversation about art and the financial situation of the Great Depression as well as the lives of all the former students who fought for our country.

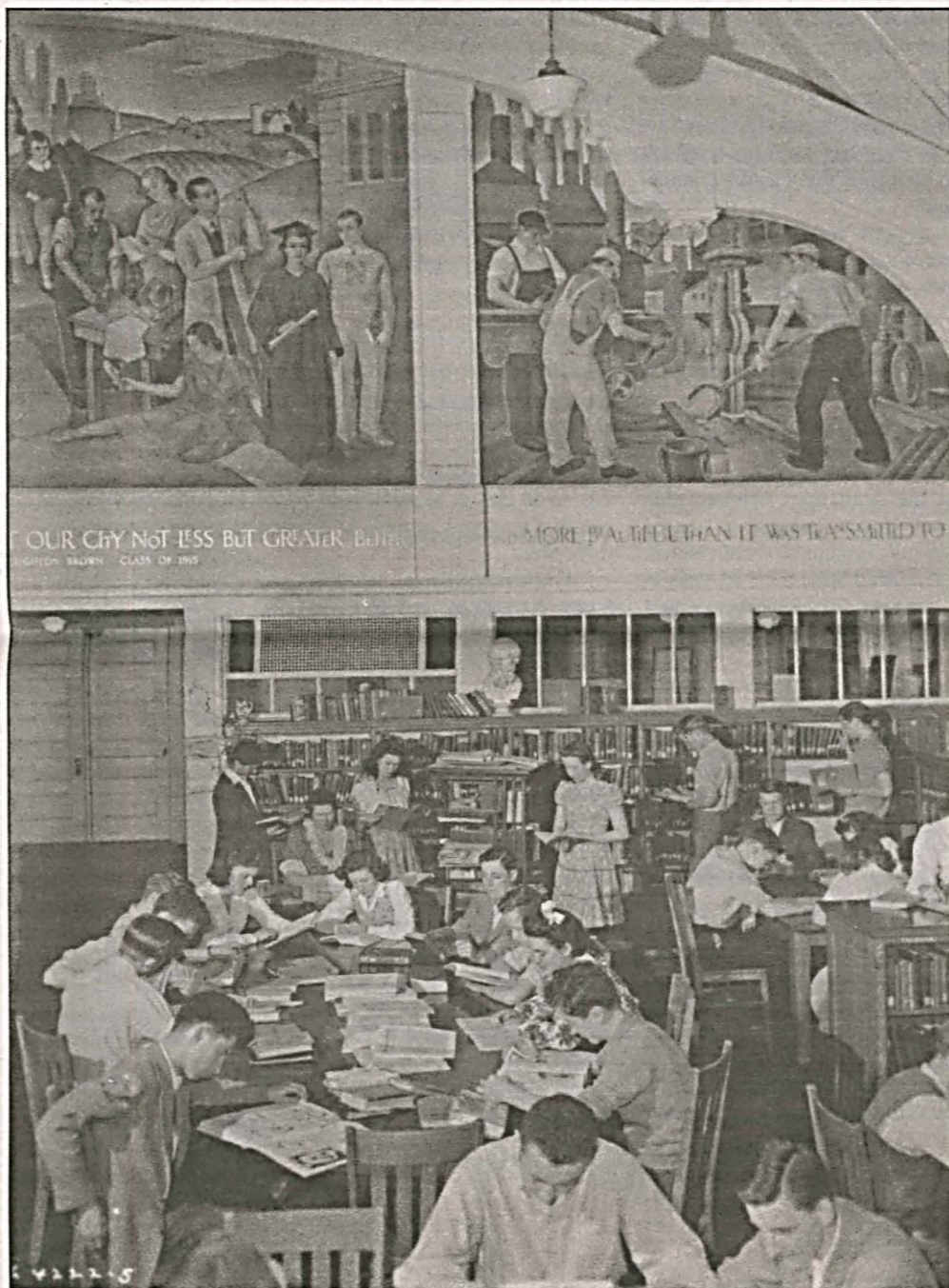
“What was it like to be an artist in the 1930s and suddenly there was this federal money, what do you do to try to get that money and get that job? So I think that’s one conversation for artists and for people interested in art history,” she said, “Another conversation is we have here, 51 men we know from Newton High School who died in WWI. What were their stories? They all are from Newton.”

A rededication ceremony for the mural will be held Thursday, Nov. 9 at 1:30 p.m.

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Two of Maurice Compris's murals hang at their original location, the library of Newton High School.



The "Education" mural, painted in 1936, is cleaned before being hung up at North.



The edges of "Commerce" are examined in June 2016 as part of its restoration.

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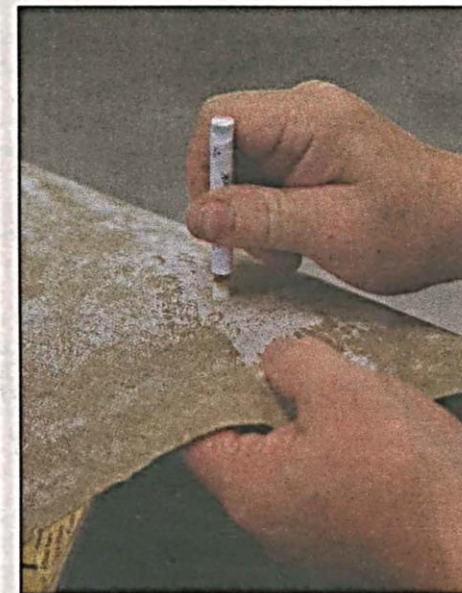
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The “Commerce” and “Industry” panels are mounted on the wall outside North’s auditorium.



The mural “Education” is placed on display outside North’s cafeteria.



A lead test is performed on the murals to ensure that they do not contain lead-based paint.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JENNIFER HUNTINGTON