



WPA murals back where they belong

By [Kathryn Carse/Staten Island Advance](#)

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Michael Dressler, Staten Island Museum senior registrar and collections manager, and Amanda Straniere, Borough Hall's tourism and cultural affairs liaison, take a look at one of the Axel Horn murals in "The Economic Pursuits of the Early American Settlers." (Staten Island Advance/Kathryn Carse)

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. - ALL SHORES
- Swaddled and lying on their sides in the conservation studio of the Staten Island Museum, murals created for the Farm Colony at Sea View by the Works

Progress Administration are one step closer to a permanent home back on Staten Island. Just a glimpse of Axel Horn's vibrant colors and brush work on the large-scale canvases heightens anticipation of seeing them, again, on public display.

"I am simply ecstatic that the murals are at the Museum and that eventually they will be restored and displayed in the courthouse. They will be secure there and visible to everyone," said Jane Lyons, a former executive director of Sea View Hospital Rehabilitation Center and Home. Her persistence has led to the plan to have the murals on exhibit in Richmond County Supreme Court in St. George.

Part of the Health and Hospitals Corporation (HHC) collection, the six murals by Horn and five by Charles Davis, interpreting the theme "Americans at Work," pay homage to workers and their accomplishments. They were first hung in the craft room at the Farm Colony to inspire indigent people who lived there raising crops or employing other skills they had.



Staten Island's Sea View WPA murals WPA murals are delivered to the Staten Island Museum in preparation for installation at the Richmond County Courthouse. [Watch video](#)

Mrs. Lyons grew concerned when the murals, which had been relocated to Sea View Hospital when the Farm Colony closed in the mid- 1970s, disappeared from public view at Sea View about eight years ago. She had been requesting an explanation ever since.

Last year, inquiries made by the Advance and contact by Elizabeth Egbert, the CEO and president of the Staten Island Museum, with the HHC yielded results.

Mrs. Lyons, Virginia Allen, a former nurse at Sea View Hospital, Ms. Egbert, and other museum staff were invited to view the murals which were being stored in two locations, in Manhattan and Long Island City. Preparations were made for their transfer to Staten Island.

"The museum is happy to serve as a broker. This is about Staten Island's cultural heritage, the history of Sea View and the Farm Colony. It's part of the museum's mission to preserve these stories," said Ms. Egbert.

She has been joined in her role as facilitator by Borough Hall and the court system.

Mrs. Lyons, Ms. Allen, Ms. Egbert and Assemblyman Matthew Titone (D-North Shore) approached Judge Judith McMahon, administrative judge for Richmond County's Supreme Court, for space in which to display the art work.

"They're magnificent," said Judge McMahon, pleased to be part of saving the historic Staten Island paintings from getting "lost in the shuffle."

She, in turn, made a pitch to the state Court Administration, and got permission to hang them in the courthouse at 18 Richmond Terrace.

As it happens, next door to Supreme Court, in Borough Hall, there is a collection of 13 WPA murals, one of the largest of its kind that is publicly accessible. With the opportunity to nearly double the collection in St. George, Borough President James Molinaro has allocated \$50,000 for the installation of the 11 Sea View murals.

"By bringing the Davis and Horn murals to the Courthouse, residents and visitors will be able to enjoy these historically significant and beautiful works of art, and be just steps away from the Frederick Charles Stahr murals in Borough Hall." said Amanda Straniere, the Borough President's tourism and cultural affairs liaison.

"It is exciting to have different branches of government working together in order to preserve a piece of Staten Island history for present and future citizens of Richmond County," said Judge McMahon.

"So when people come to do their civic duty and get to see a piece of history, how much better can it get than that? I am very excited," she added.



The signature of Charles Davis on one of his murals in storage at the Staten Island Museum's Snug Harbor location. Davis painted a series entitled "Progress of American Industry." Commissioned by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1939, the Sea View WPA murals first hung in the Farm Colony on Staten Island. (Staten Island Advance/Kathryn Carse)

STEEPED IN HISTORY

That history is a rich one. The Farm Colony had been established in the early 19th century. The WPA murals, painted in 1939, celebrated both agricultural and industrial workers and recognized the enriching role of public art. Sea View Hospital, opened in 1913 to treat tuberculosis patients, also incorporated beautiful design and art work such as unique Delft tile friezes into the healing process.

Woven into the history of Sea View Hospital is the role of African-American nurses who cared for patients when others feared the disease. Their employment gave rise to an African-American middle class that settled mainly in Meiers Corners, many of whom, including Mrs. Lyons and Ms. Allen, became community leaders.

Fittingly, one of the artists, Davis, was African-American. The cure for tuberculosis was developed at Sea View, leading to its transition from a hospital, to a home for seniors and for rehabilitation.

Expecting delivery of the final four murals, Ms. Egbert has set a goal of having them hung by November to celebrate the 100th birthday of Charles Davis (who died in 1967) and the 131st anniversary of the museum of which William T. Davis is a founder.

The museum is seeking to identify funding to repair a slight separation of panels on two of the murals and to remove inactive mold on some of them, but they are, for the most part, in good condition.

They had been refurbished in 1988 for an exhibit in the Tweed Gallery in Manhattan entitled: "For a Permanent Public Art: WPA Murals in the Health and Hospitals Corporations Collection." Then in 1989, when they were returned to Sea View, Ms. Lyons presided over a rededication ceremony that included Mayor Edward Koch.

They were hung in Colony Hall, which became a catering facility, and in a meeting room, a "classically beautiful" meeting room in the former Doctor's Residence Building, according to Ms. Lyons