



"Lincoln at New Salem, Illinois," mural by John Richard Winters, at the Petersburg Post Office.

## Petersburg's hidden treasures

*Menard County murals by national artists celebrate Lincoln and local lore*

By Mike Kienzler

At age 11, Edward Laning carried a flag at the head of a procession that escorted Menard County's first draftees to the train that carried them off to World War I. More than 50 years later, Laning wrote in *American Heritage* magazine that the war irrevocably changed the county's relationship to the world, and to its own history. Laning's insight also ties together two of Petersburg's most remarkable artworks. That, and the fact that the two murals are perhaps the town's most overlooked historic treasures.

Most area residents are probably familiar with both works, but few of the thousands of tourists who visit Lincoln's New Salem State Historic Site and nearby Petersburg are likely to be made aware of either. *Lincoln at New Salem, Illinois*, a Depression-era mural done by John Richard Winters, is in the quiet lobby of the Petersburg Post Office, 220 S. Seventh St. The other, which seems to have no formal title, was painted by Laning himself; it

hangs behind the teller counter at Petersburg's Alliance Community Bank, 321 N. Sixth Street.

Before the Great War, Laning wrote in his June 1971 *American Heritage* article, Petersburg was an insular, self-contained, "self-righteous" community. Laning (1906-1981) grew up in Petersburg, living with his maternal grandparents, John and Minnie ("Papa" and "Mama") Smoot, after Laning's mother died and his father abandoned him. He described the community then in *American Heritage*:

*It was years after I had left Petersburg, returning only to visit Mama and Papa Smoot, that I came to realize that it was in many ways a southern town. This southern enclave prospered in its isolation until the First World War. The land was fertile and the farmers were rich. Roads were so bad that in the winter and spring it was often impossible to make the twenty-mile trip to Springfield. "The Burg" was the busy center of the county's life.*

*But the war changed everything. ... Down at the Ring Barn, where Ed Shipp's circus had its winter quarters, a little girl in spangled tights sang, "How're you gonna keep 'em down on*

*the farm, after they've seen Patee?" A new, flag-waving patriotism swept the county, and this spirit seized upon the image of Lincoln as its symbol.*

Happily, William Randolph Hearst had, a decade earlier, purchased the property where New Salem village once stood. He turned the land over to a local group, the Old Salem Chautauqua Association, for preservation. So when Menard County belatedly awoke to its importance in history, the site was available for reconstruction. Confirming Laning's timetable, a new organization, the Old Salem Lincoln League, began in 1917-'18 to try to locate buildings that existed at New Salem when Abraham Lincoln lived there from 1831 to 1837. The state of Illinois took over the site in October 1919, and reconstruction began in 1932. (The small museum in the Lincoln's New Salem Visitors Center includes a brief but excellent recap of the reconstruction process.)

Gov. Henry Horner helped dedicate the new Lincoln site on Oct. 26, 1933. "There is no finer, truer Lincoln memorial than this little rebuilt Illinois village of the Thirties," Horner told a crowd huddled in pouring rain. "... The old town of New Salem seems to



have been erected by destiny to receive and mold young Lincoln.” It was only natural that, when Petersburg was designated in 1936 to receive a new U.S. Post Office, the decision was made that the building’s main artwork would revolve around the half-dozen years when Lincoln lived in New Salem.

As one of its Depression-relief projects, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration had directed the U.S. Treasury, which oversaw the postal service, to set aside money – about 1 percent of the total construction cost – for a mural in every newly built post office. The idea was to expose as many people as possible to fine art, and post offices were the federal buildings people most often visited. The Treasury’s Section of Painting and Sculpture, often known just as “The Section,” commissioned 1,100 murals, many of them in post offices, between 1934 and 1943. (Post office murals often are referred to, mistakenly, as “WPA art.” The Section was not part of FDR’s Works Progress Administration, which supported a much larger artists’ work-relief program.)

Under rules set out by The Section, artists were to paint in the realistic “American Scene” style – no abstract or modern art – and choose subjects related to the communities where the post offices were located. Prospective muralists had to submit anonymous sketches; a committee then recommended one artist to The Section for final approval.

Remarkably little information is available about how John Richard Winters (1904-1983) was selected as the artist for the Petersburg mural, but he clearly had the track record for it. Winters, a native of Omaha, Neb., studied and did much of his work in Chicago. Although he worked in other media, including sculpture and block printing, he created five of his six murals in Illinois – at Steinmetz High School and Cook County Hospital in Chicago, at Hatch School in Oak Park, and at the Brookfield Zoo, as well as at the Petersburg Post Office.

Construction of the new post office began in fall 1936, and employees occupied the building on July 1,



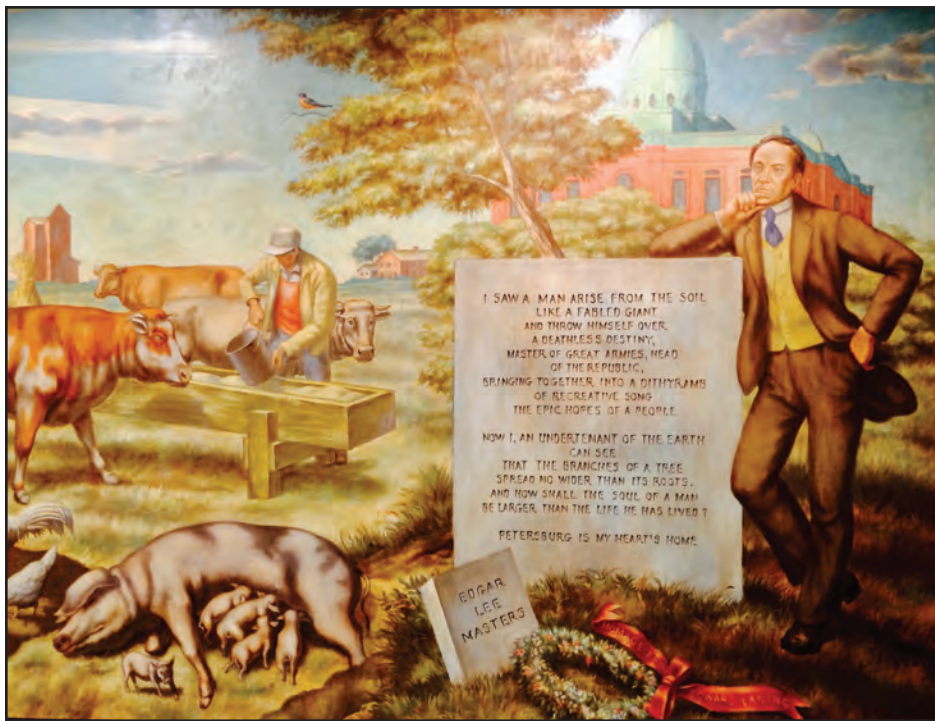
***Edward Laning’s large mural at Alliance Community Bank (formerly National Bank of Petersburg) is the artist’s homage to his memories of Menard County. It is shown in three parts on this page and the next.***

1937. The Petersburg Observer called the new structure “by far the finest building in Menard County and one of the finest Federal Buildings in any small city in the country.” The formal dedication, headlined by U.S. Rep. Scott Lucas of Havana, who represented Menard County in Congress, took place on Sept. 17, 1937.

Winters, however, was still working on his roughly six-by-thirteen-foot mural; his signature and the date, “1938,” are in the painting’s bottom right corner.

A mural artist was supposed to visit the community and talk to residents in order to select an appropriate subject. If Winters visited Petersburg,





he apparently attracted no interest from the local newspaper, the *Petersburg Observer*. More surprisingly, there also seems to have been no news coverage when the mural was installed in the post office. (We do know that Winters was paid \$560, close to the 1 percent guideline mandated by the building's \$60,000 construction budget.)

In the end, Winters didn't just paint Lincoln at New Salem. The mural, in fact, shows *five* Lincolns – an uncharacteristically dapper Abe chatting with a young woman (likely Ann Rutledge) and in other guises as surveyor, avid reader, storekeeper and, naturally, railsplitter. The post office lobby seems to have changed little since 1937, and Winters' choice of a muted palette means *Lincoln at New Salem, Illinois* retains much of its 1930s' feel.

By contrast, nearly 40 years later, a friend counseled Edward Laning when he was struggling to come up with a theme for the mural he had agreed to paint for what was then the National Bank of Petersburg (now Alliance Community Bank). "I hope you won't make it Abe Lincoln!" she said, according to an essay Laning wrote for the mural's dedication. "But what else is there?" I asked."

Laning (1906-1981) was one of the nation's preeminent muralists when he

was asked to paint the artistic centerpiece of the bank's new building. He began work in 1975, and the finished six-by-twenty-foot mural was installed at the bank in 1976. (To preserve the painting during major remodeling in 2014, officials had the entire wall rotated and moved as a unit.)

After graduation from Petersburg High School, Laning studied at the University of Chicago and the Chicago Art Institute, but he got the bulk of his art education at the Art Students League in New York City. His career included some of the nation's best-known murals, including works for the Great Hall of the New York Public Library and for Ellis Island, among others. Laning also did many easel paintings. He was the recipient of Guggenheim and Fulbright fellowships and, over the years, taught at the Art Students League, Cooper Union, Pratt Institute and the Kansas City Art Institute. Laning spent five years as president of the National Society of Mural Painters.

**M**enard County historian Raymond Montgomery says he thinks the late John Schirding, whose family founded the bank in the early 1900s, persuaded Laning to create the mural. The Laning family also had longstanding

ties to the institution, and Laning was fond of his home town. But another factor probably was Laning's late-breaking respect for the beauty of his childhood surroundings, as Laning explained in his dedication essay, which is included in a brochure available at Alliance Community Bank. As a young man, Laning wrote, he agreed with poet William Cullen Bryant, who visited central Illinois in 1832. "I am sure it is the most fertile country I ever saw," Cullen wrote in his journal of the trip. "(A)t the same time I do not think it beautiful." "I remembered that when I was growing up in Petersburg I did not think of it as particularly beautiful either," Laning said.

*Then one day I was asked to come back to Petersburg and paint a picture of an old farmhouse north of town. I sat in the pasture there, sketching, when I had a sudden revelation. "Why," I said to myself, "the place where I grew up is absolutely beautiful." It was a sense born of a thousand memories. But it came to me in the words of Edgar Lee Masters, "Where the West wind blows over the fields from Atterberry."*

Masters (1868-1950) lived in Petersburg as a boy and is buried in Petersburg's Oakland Cemetery. As an adult, however, Masters seldom visited the town, many of whose residents objected to his thinly disguised profiles of them in *Spoon River Anthology*. Masters was long gone from Menard County when Laning grew up there, but the two became friends when Masters lived in the Chelsea Hotel in New York City. Laning wrote in *American Heritage* that, despite his estrangement from the town, Masters "loved Petersburg, and it was of Petersburg that we talked."

So Masters wound up at one end of Laning's bank mural, leaning on an allegorical stone engraved with a few lines from his poetry. The mural also shows a tombstone bearing Masters' name, with a funeral wreath and pink ribbon declaring "Homage from Edward Laning."



At the other end is a young Abraham Lincoln in his surveying years – using, as he reputedly did, a grapevine instead of a chain. “Old surveyors claimed that a grapevine was as accurate as the old iron chains, whose links sometimes wore away to such an extent that they became several inches too long,” Benjamin P. Thomas wrote in *Lincoln’s New Salem* (1934).

The centerpiece of Laning’s mural, however, is a horse – Peter McCue, foaled in 1895 on a farm owned by “Red Sam” Watkins west of Petersburg. Peter McCue was phenomenally fast – he was clocked at 21 seconds flat for the quarter-mile – and he went on to be successful at stud, as were many of his offspring. As a result, Peter McCue is considered one of the founding sires of today’s American Quarter Horse. “That horse,” says Raymond Montgomery, “is almost as famous as Lincoln.”

Surrounding Peter McCue and in

the background of the mural is Laning’s depiction of his belated realization of the beauty of Menard County: farmers harvesting wheat and feeding cattle, suckling pigs, the gently rolling Sangamon River landscape, and, in the distance, a barn and grain elevator and the dome of the Menard County Courthouse.

Laning concluded his dedication essay by quoting Robert Frost: “The land was ours before we were the land’s,” adding:

*The pioneers may take possession of the land, but it is through the poets that the land takes possession of us. These fresh savannas have been fertile in all ways; they have produced poets too, like Vachel Lindsay and Edgar Lee Masters. And think of that other enigmatical writer of poetry and his ironical words, “The world will little note nor long remember what we say here.” Ironical, because what Abe Lincoln said there is all we do remember of Gettysburg now. And*

*through his poetry we became at last the children, not of a County or Section only, but of a Nation.*

**Acknowledgments:** Thanks to: the Menard County Historical Society, especially Sue Elliott; Raymond Montgomery, who turned 96 four days after being interviewed for this article; Rodney Dimmick, for remembering and providing a copy of Edward Laning’s *American Heritage* essay; and the staff at Alliance Community Bank, who not only went out of their way to find copies of Laning’s mural brochure, but obligingly took a tape measure to the painting, whose dimensions otherwise seem to have been unrecorded.

Mike Kienzler, a former editor at The State Journal-Register in Springfield, edits *SangamonLink.org*, online encyclopedia of the Sangamon County Historical Society. A recent member of the ISHS Advisory Board, he lives near Athens.

## UIS Lunch and Learn Series

Spring 2019

Feb. 26 | Mar. 27 | Apr. 30

Time: 11:30 a.m. – 1:30 p.m.

Location: UIS Student Union

Parking: Lots F, G, J

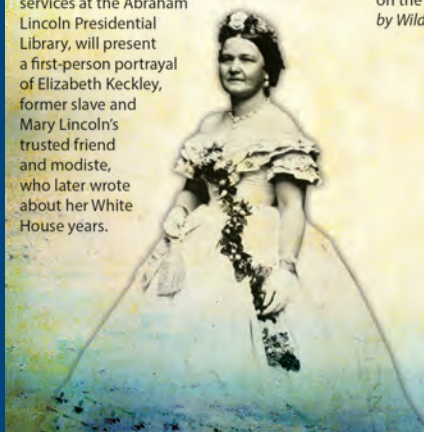
Cost of \$23/person includes a hot lunch. Discounted series subscription rate is \$60/person. Registration deadline is one week prior to each event.

Register online at [go.uis.edu/LLspring2019](http://go.uis.edu/LLspring2019) or call (217) 206-6058

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### Lincoln on the Circuit & Mary Lincoln in the White House February 26

Guy Fraker, J.D., retired attorney, author and Lincoln historian, will discuss Abraham Lincoln’s 20-plus year career as a lawyer and part-time judge on the 8th judicial circuit. Kathryn Harris, immediate past president of the Abraham Lincoln Association, and former director of library services at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, will present a first-person portrayal of Elizabeth Keckley, former slave and Mary Lincoln’s trusted friend and modiste, who later wrote about her White House years.



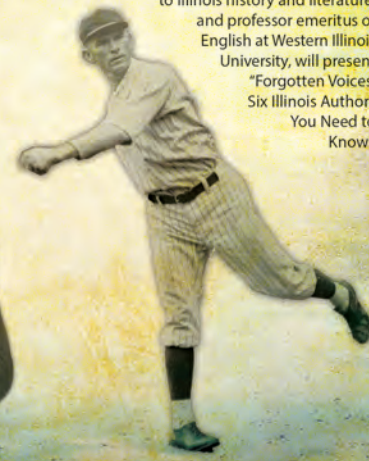
### Irish Heritage & History March 27

In celebration of Irish heritage in Illinois, Dr. Eileen McMahon, professor and chair of the History program at Lewis University, will discuss her research on the parish communities found along the Illinois and Michigan Canal, and the Irish immigrants who built this vital passageway. Dr. Theodore Karamanski, professor of History and Public History Director at Loyola University Chicago, will present on the Irish in the Civil War. *Live music by Wild Columbine.*



### Three-I Baseball & Forgotten Voices of Illinois April 30

Bill Kemp, archivist and librarian at McLean County Museum of History, will explore the Three-I professional baseball league (Illinois-Indiana-Iowa League) and how it shaped the history of professional sports in the Midwest from 1920-1940. Dr. John Hallwas, award-winning author and editor of more than two dozen books related to Illinois history and literature, and professor emeritus of English at Western Illinois University, will present “Forgotten Voices: Six Illinois Authors You Need to Know.”



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