

# ART IN THE ARCHIVES



County Archivist Ned Irwin is seated between the Winter and Fall paintings, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2021.

## THE PEGGY ROOT PAINTINGS

### The Commission

I have always enjoyed art. So, it is no surprise that there is art in the archives. The idea of having art work was easier than obtaining it.

During the renovation of the former bank building to house the county archives, I would sometimes come over and watch the progress. As I saw the plaster go up on the high white walls of what was to become the Reading Room, I noticed a vast emptiness that needed filling. At this same time, Peggy and Tom Root had an art gallery and studio on the other end of Main Street from the archives. I would pass it on my lunchtime walks and enjoyed seeing the paintings displayed behind the large plate glass window. Then one day there was a very large landscape on display. It depicted a dilapidated barn and the most beautiful blue sky held the most beautiful billowy white clouds. I was quite taken with it. Thereafter, I made a point of passing either on foot or driving by on my way home and glancing in its' direction. Gradually, the light bulb went off. The idea came to me that what the Reading Room's walls needed were some large landscape paintings like the one in Peggy and Tom's display window. The painting was called "Henderson Wetlands at Bowmantown."

I went back and spent some time studying the walls and pondering my thought. A support column divides each of the east and west walls of the room evenly in two. This left a space just about perfect for a four-foot by six-foot painting to fit. This was the size the of the painting in the Roots'

window. Four paintings (two on each wall) hung half-way up the walls would break up that great high white vastness. The next thing that popped into my head was the fact that there are four seasons of the year, and a landscape painting depicting each (Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter) was exactly what the Reading Room needed to be complete. I now had my idea of what to fill the space with, as well as the person I wanted to do the work. Peggy Root. She had painted the landscape that first piqued my interest. I liked the style in which she painted. And, best of all, she was a local artist, who lived, in fact, a few houses from my own in Jonesborough. I thought Peggy might go for it. A commission would benefit us both.

But before I approached Peggy Root came the hard part. How to pay for her doing the paintings? Without being assured of the funding, there was no need to approach her. In May 2016, when the renovation was completed, and I moved back into the building, I brought County Mayor Dan Eldridge over to give him a tour of the finished project. I also had an ulterior motive. I wanted to show him those high white blank walls in the Reading Room and pitch my idea about getting paintings to fill the space. Dan, being Dan, listened politely. But he was very non-committal. Finally, as he turned to go, he looked around at the walls and said in his businessman's tone, "Good luck with the fund-raising." I was on my own.

That's the way it stood for some time. I had many other more important things to deal with in the coming months~ getting shelving in the building and then getting records on the shelves, hiring an assistant, collecting volunteers, processing records, etcetera, etcetera. The idea of the paintings was put on the back-burner. But I kept that stove eye on simmer. I wasn't giving up. In fact, in October 2016, I had Peggy visit the archives and discuss the feasibility of a commission. She was agreeable. She liked the space and was not intimidated by the high white walls. I told her I would get back with her when I found the funding.

Then in January 2018, the department received a \$10,000 donation from Sandhi Kozsuch of Atlanta, Georgia. Sandhi and I had been friends in high school. He was interested in honoring his mother, Mildred Kozsuch, by supporting the county archives that she did so much to help get established. Mildred fought the long fight and lived long enough to attend the archives' grand opening on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017. It was then I had the "light bulb" idea of using his donated funds to possibly commission a painting or paintings for the walls of the Reading Room. Sandhi agreed with the idea. An additional \$10,000 gift came from Sandhi for the paintings in May 2018 and another similar donation in January 2019.

Now I needed to approach Peggy Root to determine if she was interested and what it would cost to commission the art work. My first contact was an email to determine if Peggy was still interested in the commission (June 21, 2018). We had originally talked about this in the fall of 2016. She was interested then and remained so now. On July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018, Peggy came by the office, toured the building, saw the high white walls of the Reading Room, and we discussed the paintings that should be hung on them. We agreed on the idea of doing four seasonal scenes of varied locations in Washington County. In the interval before this visit, I had been in discussions with Betty Jane Hylton, president of the Friends of the Washington County Archives, about the proposed commission. She agreed but suggested because of funding issues to break the commission into two parts with the first contract covering the first two paintings (Spring and Summer). The contract was signed for these paintings on July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

A second contract covering the commission for the final two paintings (Fall and Winter) was signed on September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019. The Fall one was to be of a river scene in Washington County. We left it to Peggy to pick a scene for the Winter painting.

On April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Donna Briggs and myself toured the Root's new studio location on Depot Street in Jonesborough. We saw the Spring painting she already had completed about 2014 and which had been accepted as the first of the paintings for the archives. Peggy took us to view the location of the painting on Mill Spring Road. We also saw at this time the partially completed Summer painting from field work done the previous summer. After making some revisions to the Spring canvas, Peggy, husband Tom, and their daughter Gwen delivered the painting to the archives on June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019. It was hung by Tom Root and Marc Kovack of Jonesborough a month later.

The frames for all four paintings were made of locally-sourced poplar milled by East Tennessee Millworks. Ron McLemore handcrafted the frames at his shop. Peggy then did the staining, painting, and gilding seen on the frames.

Peggy had begun the Summer painting in the late summer of 2018. She worked on it throughout the summer of 2019. This painting, with a scene looking out over the former Bert Wolfe farm from Highway 11-E near Telford, was titled "Summer: Queen Anne's Lace Looking North Toward Leesburg". It was delivered to the archives on November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Peggy, Don Muldoon and his brother Jacob installed the painting in the Reading Room on January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

Right after this, the COVID pandemic hit the country. This caused a variety of problems with delaying the completion of the two final paintings (Fall and Winter). These were delivered to the archives by Peggy and son Charles on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2021. The paintings were installed in the Reading Room on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021 by Don and Jacob Muldoon. This completed a project that took almost five years (from October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016 when Peggy and I first met until March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021, when the last two paintings were installed).

## The Artist



Peggy Nichols Root working on location on a preliminary sketch for what would become the painting “Summer: Queen Anne’s Lace Looking North Toward Leesburg”.

Peggy Nichols grew up in Florida, the daughter of an artist. So, she came by her talents and interests rather naturally. Summers were spent in the Smokies, where her father operated a gallery in Fontana in western North Carolina. Despite having a painter for a father, Peggy began her career as a park naturalist in the Great Smoky Mountains. Eventually, she followed her father and became a painter. Then she met and married a fellow artist, the painter Tom Root. Peggy and Tom and their family moved to their present home in Jonesborough in 1994.

Peggy Nichols Root is a plein air (“open air”) painter, one who paints outdoors amidst the scene she is painting. And she does this in all kinds of weather from sun and snow to everything in between. The paintings in the archives were painted in this way. She has been called “the definitive painter of the Southern countryside.” Being a plein art painter allows her to combine her love of painting with her love of natural world.

Early in the commissioning process, Peggy and her son Charles brought the painting I had first noticed in their shop window to the Reading Room, so that I might get a sense of the size of the future paintings and how these would help fill the great open space of the room. The price of this painting though panicked me when I looked on the back. Peggy calmed me. That was the retail price, she said. She would paint our paintings at a significant discount, which would include her contributing back to the community in which she lived and which she loved. For this generosity, as well as the accomplishment of the paintings, we are forever grateful to Peggy.

## The Paintings

1

“Early Spring: Old House, Mill Springs Road”

2014

Dimensions: 4 feet high x 6 feet wide



The scene of this painting is located about a mile outside downtown Jonesborough on Mill Springs Road. Just beyond a large red barn on the left of the road if one is coming from town, one looks down a small ravine and sees the abandoned house by a clump of trees at the edge of a field, a small stream flowing nearby. Peggy Root painted the scene in 2014 with some later revision. In the photographs above, you see on the left how the scene looked in April 2019. Compared to the painting, more trees and undergrowth have developed between the road and the house. The painting was hung in the Reading Room on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019.

“Summer: Queen Anne’s Lace Looking North Toward Leesburg”

2018-2019

Dimensions: 4 feet high x 6 feet wide



The location of the Summer landscape was one chosen by me. I had always found this view looking north from Highway 11-E across the old Bert Wolfe farm to be the most beautiful scene in Washington County. You find the view at the top of the long hill above the site of the flea market (and former livestock market) on the highway before the turn off to Telford. In the distance, one sees Bays Mountain (near Kingsport) center left and Clinch Mountain just over the Virginia line to the right. It was a view Peggy had painted before and really liked herself. Our painting was done over the course of a year beginning in the late summer of 2018 and completed the following summer/fall. It was hung in the Reading Room on January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020.



Peggy Root stands beside her Summer painting, January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

“Nolichucky River (Bumpass Cove) in Autumn”  
2019

Dimensions: 4 feet high x 6 feet wide



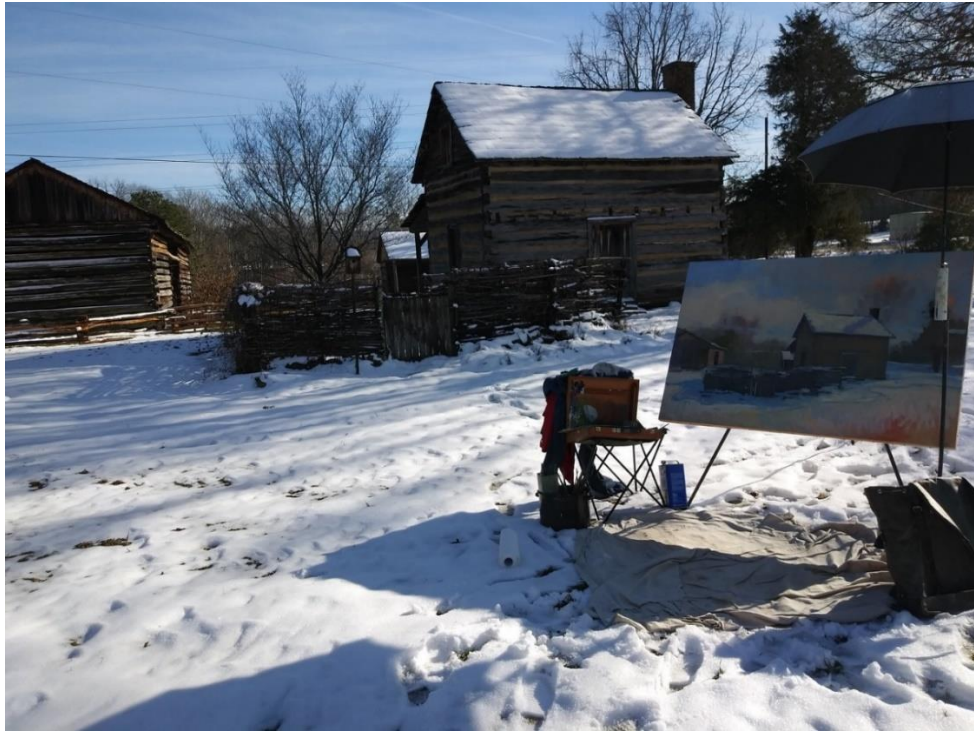
Donna Briggs suggested one of the four paintings should be a river scene, maybe somewhere along the Nolichucky River. Peggy chose a view looking southwestward from the bridge where Highway 81-S crosses the river at Embreeville. And she set the painting for the Fall commission to get the beautiful autumn colors. It was not the easiest location from which to paint because the bridge gave little room in which to maneuver from the highway. This painting was done in the fall of 2019 with later revisions and was hung in the Reading Room on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021.



“Winter Day, Tipton-Haynes”  
2020  
Dimensions: 4 feet high x 6 feet wide

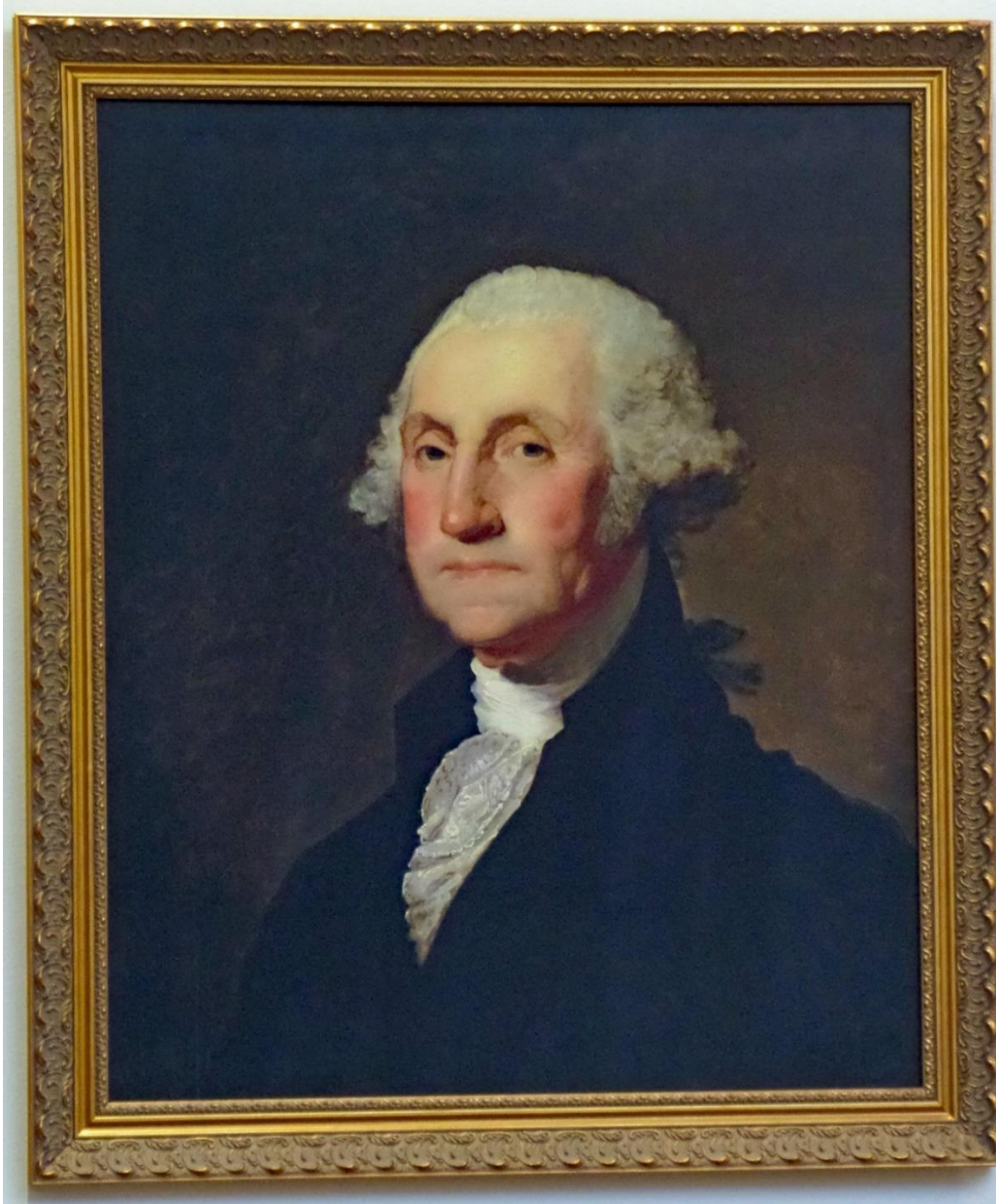


We didn't have a suggestion for the location of a winter scene. Peggy suggested doing a landscape with structures, as the other paintings had been largely devoid of buildings. We agreed and were very pleased when we learned she had chosen to do the painting at Tipton-Haynes State Historic Site in Johnson City. This is one of the most historic locations in Washington County and Tennessee, so it was an ideal choice. The Battle of the State of Franklin occurred here in late February 1788 when this was John Tipton's farm. Pictured in the painting is a cabin and barn at the site with a holding pen in the foreground. As you can see from the photograph below, Peggy painted in the snow in the winter of 2020. The painting was hung in the Reading Room on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021.



Peggy Root's set up in painting the Winter scene at Tipton-Haynes, 2020.

## THE GEORGE WASHINGTON PORTRAIT



It seemed appropriate that the Reading Room, being a public area with visitors from all over the country, should have a painting of the county's namesake, George Washington. There are many images of our first president. I decided that we should pick Washington's most famous image, the one on the dollar bill. This painting was done by the American artist Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828). The original is at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts.



Gilbert Stuart  
Self-portrait, 1778

By the end of his career, Stuart had painted the likenesses of over a thousand notable American political and social figures. But the most famous of all was his painting of America's first president. Most of his Washington portraits are based on the so-called "Athenaeum Portrait," an unfinished painting Stuart created in 1796. It depicts Washington at the age of 65. The painting was never given to Washington. Instead, Stuart used it as a model for 130 copies, which he sold for \$100 each. He called the painting his "hundred dollar bill". When Stuart needed money, he painted a copy of his original. About 60 of these paintings still exist.

Our painting is a reproduction of the original painting, which was purchased from the Museum of Fine Arts by the Friends of the Washington County Archives to hang in the Reading Room, where it was first hung on the wall behind the reference desk in June 2018. So, it was actually the first art work hung in the archives.

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