THE SPIRIT OF . . .

James R. Fox

Several years ago, Professor Fox began visiting courthouses, looking for artwork he could use to entertainingly illustrate legal concepts. Nearly 300 courthouses later, he has amassed a trove. Some works and their significance are easily explained: pictures of the old courthouse in the new courthouse honor the continuity of the legal system, while portraits of judges honor their memory (although occasionally their identities have been lost). Others, less so. The *Green Bag* is pleased to share a couple of Fox's discoveries with you. Perhaps this article (with others to follow, we hope) will foster a bit of reflection on what role, if any, art performs in the administration of justice. The federal government has apparently concluded that art does have such a role: federal regulations require that federal courthouses contain art.

— *The Editors*

THE PICTURES ON THE NEXT TWO PAGES come from the Fayette County Courthouse in Washington Courthouse, Ohio, where three large murals decorate the upper level of the central lobby. The murals depict three allegorical ladies, who have nothing to do with virtues or vices: "The Spirit of Electricity," "The Spirit of Telegraphy," and "The Spirit of the Mail." Between the pictures and the titles, a clever reader might

James Fox is a professor of law at the Dickinson School of Law, Penn State University.

"The Spirit of Electricity," at the Fayette County Courthouse, Ohio.

guess that the artist also created one of the best-known paintings of Americana, "The Spirit of '76." And the reader would be correct, although hard-pressed to name the artist unless the reader hails

"The Spirit of Telegraphy" at the Fayette County Courthouse, Ohio.

from Wellington, Ohio, where Archibald Willard is the town's favorite son. For many years people visiting and working in the Courthouse did not know the murals were painted by a well-known artist. The paintings' survival probably hinged on a lack of funds to renovate the building.

Willard began his artistic career as a wagon painter and had something of a reputation as a nineteenth century graffiti artist, "making humorous scrawls on barn doors, board fences . . . ."[1]

His talent for making entertaining drawings was spotted by an entrepreneurial photographer, James F. Ryder. Ryder promoted "Yankee Doodle" (as the "Spirit of '76" was originally titled) for inclusion in the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876 and sold thousands of reproductions of the work.[2] Willard's oeuvre included folksy cartoons of children falling from a runaway wagon, patriotic tableaux like "Yankee Doodle," and parodies of that genre, such as "What Columbus Found" (the Native Americans playing baseball).

In 1882 Willard was working for the Cook Brothers Decorating Company, who won the contract to decorate the Fayette County Courthouse. At the time decorative murals in public buildings and private homes were all the rage, and Cook Brothers was one of many companies that did this kind of work.

The connection among the mail, telegraphy and electricity is not self-evident. Even then, the mail wasn't very modern and didn't involve wires. Being in its infancy, electricity was very modern, but is not a method of communications. And why do any of these rate an allegorical figure of a type usually reserved for virtues, vices, nations, or other high-minded ideals? An impressive demonstration of street lights in Cleveland in 1879 may have inspired Willard, but that doesn't explain why the mail and telegraphy were similarly honored. Perhaps the citizens of the county demanded "Spirit of Something" paintings. Was this Archibald Willard's idea of a joke?

[1] Alberta Thorne Daywalt, *The Spirit of '76*, ANTIQUES No. 40 (July 1911), p. 24.

[2] Thomas H. Pauly, *In Search of "The Spirit of '76"*, 28 AMERICAN QUARTERLY 445 (1976).