

The Buffalo Courier-Express Mural: A 90-YEAR JOURNEY

By Tom Reigstad



This color photo of the mural in the *Courier-Express* lobby appeared in the paper on November 13, 1955.

When the Buffalo *Courier-Express* published its final edition on September 19, 1982, reporter Sara Solovitch's lead story lamented that the passing of a local artist, Ernest Davenport, six days earlier had seemed like an omen of the death of the 150-year-old newspaper. Davenport and a fellow artist had painted the iconic mural in the lobby of the "new" *Courier-Express* building for its opening in 1930. The mural dominated that lobby for over 55 years.

Now, like the *Courier-Express*, the mural itself may be doomed. Clumsily removed from the lobby in 1987, it has languished in storage ever since. This year marks the 90th anniversary of the mural's creation, an ideal time to examine its significance and survival.



THE COURIER AND THE EXPRESS

The *Buffalo Courier* had its roots in the *Western Star*, Buffalo's first daily newspaper, which originated in 1834. Ownership changed over the next few years until 1846, when it evolved into the *Buffalo Courier*. Legendary Buffalo journalists were affiliated with the paper. Throughout the second half of the 19th century, a succession of newspaper luminaries – Guy H. Salisbury (“The Charles Lamb of Buffalo”), poet-editor David Gray, the notable editor and drama critic Thomas Kean and another poet-editor, Joseph O’Connor – enhanced the paper’s reputation. On May 19, 1897, First Ward boss and shipping tycoon William J. “Fingy” Conners bought the *Buffalo Courier*. Well into the 20th century, Conners’ paper competed with five other English-language daily newspapers in Buffalo: the *News*, *Times*, *Enquirer*, *Commercial* and *Express*. The *Express* was its chief rival since it was the *Courier*’s only morning competition and since the paper had as storied a history as the *Courier*.

The *Buffalo Morning Express* was established in 1846. Twenty years later in 1866, the Express Printing Company, a lucrative subsidiary, was founded. Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain) joined the *Express* soon after as co-owner and managing editor. From August 1869 to January 1871, Twain not only edited the *Express* but also contributed over 100 editorials, feature stories and humorous squibs. Not long after Twain’s departure, James N. Matthews took over sole ownership. His son, George E. Matthews, succeeded his father as publisher. Eventually, a third-generation Matthews – Burroughs Matthews – led the *Express*. The paper gained national recognition for its Sunday *Illustrated Express*, a pioneer in pictorial journalism.

Despite being arch competitors, an unlikely emergency “merger” of the two papers occurred in April 1885, when a fire destroyed the *Express* building at Washington and Exchange streets. The *Courier* generously offered its rival the use of its printing presses so that the paper would not have to cease production. That



A descendant of Buffalo's first daily newspaper, the *Buffalo Courier* was well-established when shipping tycoon William J. “Fingy” Conners bought it in 1897.
NEW YORK STATE HISTORIC NEWSPAPERS



The *Buffalo Morning Express* was founded in 1846. At one time, Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain) was a co-owner and managing editor.
NEW YORK STATE HISTORIC NEWSPAPERS



The *Buffalo Courier* merged with the *Buffalo Morning Express* in 1926 to become the *Courier-Express*.
WESTERN NEW YORK HERITAGE COLLECTION

temporary joint printing arrangement lasted almost a year, until the *Express* facility was rebuilt and operational again.

The actual consolidation of the *Courier* and the *Express* happened in 1926, when Conners bought his competitor and merged it with his own paper. With this move, Conners became chair of the Buffalo Courier-Express Co., controlled all of the new company’s stock and published the first combined edition on June 14, 1926. His son, William J. Conners Jr., became publisher and president, and Burroughs Matthews was named publisher and editor. Legend has it that, for a while, newsstands folded and piled the papers so that *Courier* showed on half of the masthead or nameplate, while another pile was folded to show *Express* on half. Loyal customers would then buy their “favorite.” Another bit of lore holds that shortly after the merger, *Express* readers sat on one side of the trolley car and *Courier* readers on the other side. The Conners family owned the *Courier-Express* until 1979, when it was sold to Minneapolis-based Cowles Media Company.

Conners Sr. soon sought out a new location to build a grand new home for his *Courier-Express*. He bought property at Main and Goodell streets and the Buffalo Housewrecking Company took 30 days in the fall of 1929 to demolish

the old Weyand’s Café, which stood at the site. A year later, the splendid five-story, Art Deco *Courier-Express* building was completed. On Sunday, November 16, 1930, the *Courier-Express* moved from its former quarters at 250 Main Street a few blocks northward, to 785 Main at Goodell.

The elder Conners died several months before the new *Courier-Express* building opened, but not before approving plans for an exterior façade displaying famous printers and printing processes, as well as for the interior, including the breathtaking lobby whose foyer featured a tiled floor inlaid with historic printer’s marks, bronze paneled elevator doors etched with more printer’s symbols and the majestic mural. Before his death, Conners had commissioned two local artists to paint the mural, which was installed before the November 1930 move and viewed by 5,200 guests at the building’s formal dedication in December.

THE MURAL

The mural was imposing. At 20-feet-by-10½-feet, it covered much of the east wall of the lobby. Its colorful scenes depicted the merger of the *Express* and the *Courier*, as well as the city’s rich past and high hopes for its future.



Opened in 1930, the five-story Art Deco *Courier-Express* building was located at 785 Main Street at Goodell.
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The first official photograph of the mural was a black-and-white snapshot taken by staff photographer George Ostertag for a special 48-page rotogravure section of the Sunday, December 14, 1930, paper. In the same issue, reporter George W. Foster's story captured the sweeping visuals of the mural:

The group of three figures at the left center, symbolizes young Buffalo in the guise of a pretty maid of 1850, dividing her attention between the two papers, represented by two young men garbed in the style of that period.

In the foreground is Buffalo of that time with the buildings and harbor in proper relationship.

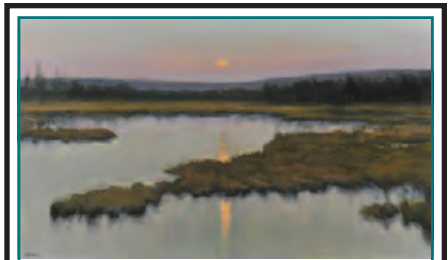
*The dominant grouping in the center of the composition shows Buffalo, Queen City of the Lakes, gazing in rapt attention at a copy of *The Courier-Express* held in the hands of a sturdy pressman, typical of today's great metropolitan newspaper. Around their feet is present day Buffalo with its distinguishing buildings.*

At the right of the canvases, behind the activity of the city's busy industrial life, rises, in lofty perspective, the Buffalo of tomorrow.

Emerging from the clouds at the upper left, is a finely painted figure of Mercury, mythological messenger of the gods, who typifies the gathering of news from all quarters of the globe.

The whole mural is rendered in complementary tones of blue, green and golden brown...

A lengthy caption below Ostertag's full-page rotogravure photograph enhanced Foster's rhapsodic description:



Dennis Sheehan, "Marshland Sunset" oil on canvas

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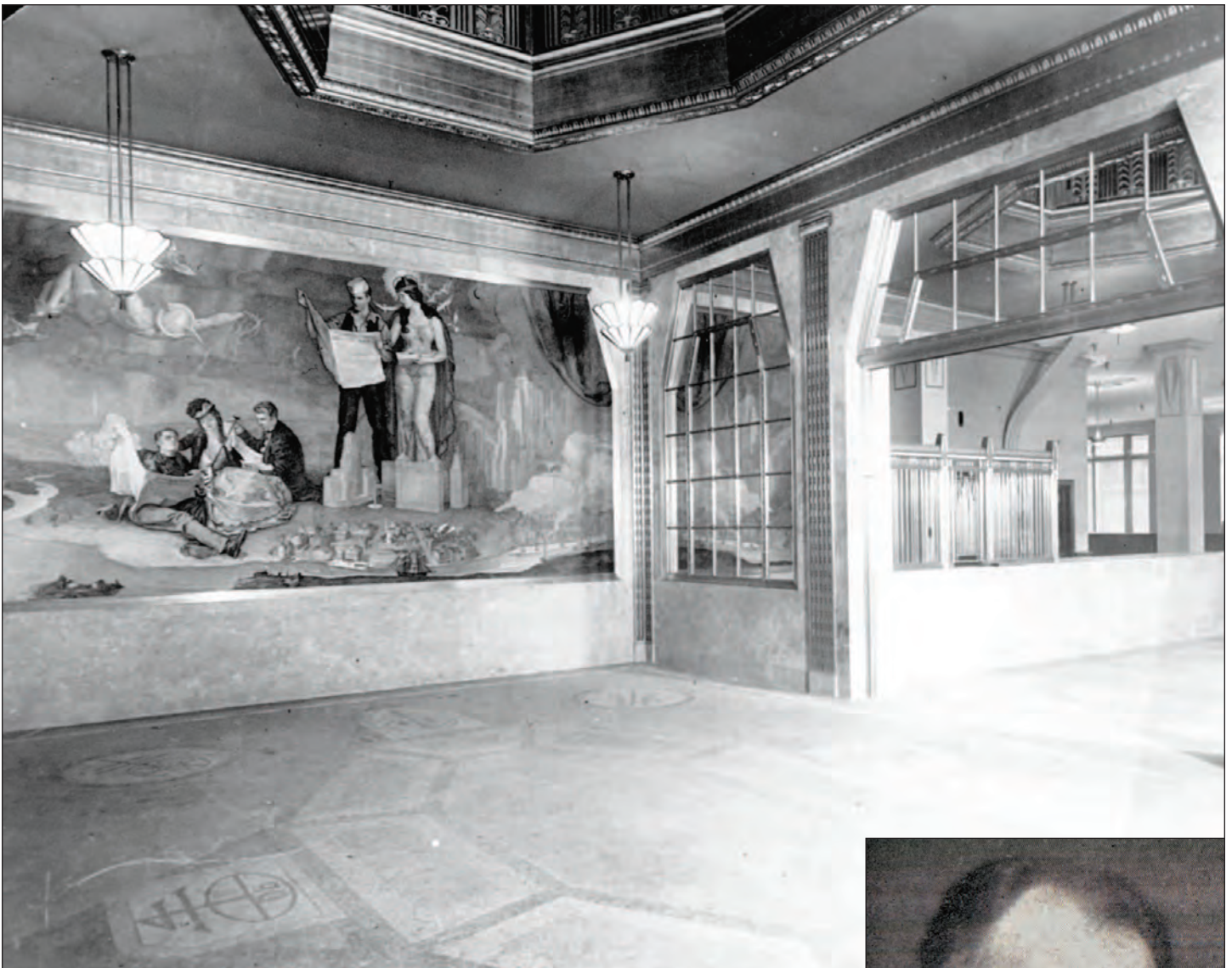
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It also graphically delineates the progress of the City of Buffalo from a tiny village of a few clustered buildings on the banks of Buffalo Creek, to the thriving city of today and gives a prophetic glimpse of its future greatness... Its architectural and historical details are the result of careful research. The painting is the work of Charles Bigelow and his assistant, Ernest Davenport, both artists of this city. The canvases rank high as an allegorical interpretation.

The mural's dual themes of the newspaper merger and Buffalo boosterism formed a consistent narrative for the remaining five-plus decades that the mural graced the lobby of the *Courier-Express* building. However, with each milestone a new interpretive wrinkle or two was offered. A color photograph taken by Edward Gray was published in the Sunday, November 13, 1955, pictorial section, marking the mural's 25th anniversary. It was accompanied by

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The mural dominated the east wall of the *Courier-Express* lobby. This December 1930 photo also shows other elements of the space, including the inlaid printer's marks in the tiled floor and other appointments, including the reverse flower petal shades that flanked the mural and reflected the Art Deco style of the building.

COURTESY BUFFALO STATE COLLEGE ARCHIVES, *COURIER-EXPRESS* COLLECTION

the original 1930 caption, along with an added note observing that thousands of visitors had viewed the mural since the building's opening. The mural appeared in black-and-white photos, with slightly altered captions, in both 1965 and 1970. Finally, at the 50-year anniversary, reporter Harlan C. Abbey's December 28, 1980, story once again celebrated the iconic nature of the mural, depicting "the growth of the *Courier* and the *Express*... along with the progress of Buffalo."

Less than two years later, the *Courier-Express* closed forever, the ultimate casualty in a war between the Buffalo Newspaper Guild and Rupert Murdoch's News America Publishing Company.

THE MURALISTS

Early in 1930, William J. Conners Sr. hired notable Buffalo artists Charles Bigelow and Ernest Davenport to create the mural for the lobby of his new *Courier-Express* building. Bigelow was the lead artist on the project. Born in Buffalo in 1891, Bigelow graduated from Lafayette High School in 1909, where he took drawing classes, and then attended Buffalo Normal School (today's Buffalo State College). His extensive art training continued with studies at the Buffalo Art Students' League under its headmaster



Charles Chase Bigelow, a painter and illustrator, was the lead artist on the *Courier-Express* mural. He helped found the Buffalo Arts Club and was a member of the Fine Arts League of Buffalo and the Buffalo Society of Artists.

FROM *BUFFALO ARTISTS' REGISTER*, 1926, COURTESY BURCHFIELD PENNEY ART CENTER ARCHIVES.

Ernest George Fosbery, a Canadian-born, Paris-trained artist, who later served as president of the Canadian Arts Council. Bigelow was also taught at the College of Fine Arts at Syracuse University from 1910 to 1912, and for the next two years at the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy. His mentor there was David Urquhart Wilcox, the academy's esteemed director and an award-winning painter and illustrator. Bigelow also served in World War I as a corporal in the U.S. Army.

Throughout the 1920s, he contributed illustrations to national magazines such as *Scribner's*, *Collier's* and *Good Housekeeping*, among others. He also completed many paintings, several of them portraits. During the 1920s and 1930s, his works exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the Arts Club of Buffalo, the Buffalo Society of Artists' exhibition and several annual Albright Art Gallery exhibitions by Western New York artists. Bigelow's most prominent solo exhibition – at the Sisti Galleries on Franklin Street in June of 1961 – featured 50 his works. He helped found the former Buffalo Arts Club, serving as president in 1926. Bigelow belonged to the Fine Arts League of Buffalo as well as the Buffalo Society of Artists, which bestowed its Bronze Medal upon him in 1954. Six years later, he designed a medallion for the Fine Arts League, which served as its official symbol.



Ernest Davenport worked primarily in advertising and was an illustrator and muralist. "Come Unto Me," his life-size painting of Christ, is owned by St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church in Tonawanda. COURTESY ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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As a young man, Bigelow lived at 477 West Ferry Street and worked in a studio at 35 West Eagle, but for most of his adult life he lived in a studio apartment on the top floor of a building at 437 Rhode Island Street. Bigelow collaborated with artist William C. Francis on a mural for the ceiling of the Fidelity Branch Bank in the Genesee Building. Francis was one of three artists who, in 1926, completed the murals that still adorn the ceilings of M&T Bank's Fountain Plaza branch. In 1930, Bigelow teamed up yet again with another Buffalo artist, Ernest Davenport, to create the mural for the lobby of the *Courier-Express* building.

Born in England in 1894, Davenport emigrated to Buffalo with his family at the age of 16 and attended the former Technical High School. Like Bigelow, he studied at the Buffalo's Art Students' League before being awarded a four-year scholarship to the Philadelphia College of Art. After serving as a second lieutenant in World War I, he followed a career that paralleled Bigelow's in the commercial and fine arts fields. For most of the 1920s, he was art director at the Remington Advertising Agency of Buffalo (later named Addison Vars). From 1947 to his retirement in 1960, Davenport was art director of Melvin F. Hall Advertising of Buffalo.

After Davenport painted the cover of the souvenir program for the Arts Club of Buffalo's inaugural Frolic and Costumed Dance at the Statler Hotel Ballroom in 1925, the *Buffalo Courier* called him "one of Buffalo's cleverest artists." Like his colleague Bigelow, Davenport also did illustrations for magazines, including the



These black-and-white photos of the mural show details inspired from Greek mythology, speculation about the future and a touch of whimsy. COURTESY BUFFALO STATE COLLEGE ARCHIVES, *COURIER-EXPRESS* COLLECTION

Toronto Star Weekly, and was an experienced muralist, with one of his commissions being for the Canadian Niagara Power Company in Fort Erie, Ontario. Along with Bigelow, Davenport was a founding faculty member of the Art Institute of Buffalo, a product of the Federal Works Progress Administration (WPA), in the 1930s. He also helped found the Patteran Society, a progressive group of artists that broke away from the Buffalo Society of Artists in the early 1930s. Davenport's last work, in 1967, was a life-size painting of Christ, titled *Come Unto Me*, for his church, St. Bartholomew's in Tonawanda. The painting exists today at the church's new site in Tonawanda.

Davenport and Bigelow were both in their late 30s when they teamed up to paint the *Courier-Express* mural. Following the stock market crash in October 1929, unemployment soared. Within that context, Davenport once told an interviewer that he was grateful for Bigelow's offer in early 1930 to assist with the mural for the *Courier-Express* lobby. "Men were standing on the corner selling apples. So, when Big [Charles Bigelow] got the mural job and invited me to join him, I was pleased."

The mural partners set up shop in a large vacant room in a downtown bank and completed the mural in six months. Their research helped them create visual themes based on Greek mythology, the *Courier* and *Express* consolidation, the founding and economic growth of Buffalo and the city's confidently solid stature in 1930. They also added whimsical touches when speculating about Buffalo's unlimited potential.

On one hand, Buffalo City Hall, nearly complete in 1930, sits squarely in the middle of the mural, dramatically symbolizing the city's new seat of power. Yet, the right segment of the mural envisions Buffalo's tomorrow, with futuristic-looking skyscrapers and a fantastic bridge arching into the heavens. Architectural historian John Conlin has suggested that the mural artists may have been inspired by plans being made in the 1920s for an elevated highway bridge project known then as "the Fuhrmann Boulevard High Level Extension." The concept became reality 25 years later with the construction of the Skyway, which bears a resemblance to the mural's visionary soaring structure.

Both artists died in Buffalo's Veterans Hospital after short illnesses. Bigelow,

who died at the age of 71 in 1963, is buried near his parents and his wife, Leona Adeline (Wadsworth), in Springville's Maplewood Cemetery. Davenport, who outlived his mural partner by 19 years, is buried in Tonawanda's Elmlawn Cemetery.

THE MURAL AFTER THE *COURIER-EXPRESS*

Cowles Media Company continued to own the *Courier-Express* building for another three years after the newspaper shut down in September 1982. Although the building was vacant, the lobby mural remained intact during that period.

The following summer, Barry Levinson's baseball movie, *The Natural*, was filmed in Buffalo. Levinson memorialized the *Courier-Express* mural in full cinematic technicolor in a two-second scene, as actor Robert Duvall, playing the role of sports reporter Max Mercy, walks through the *Courier-Express* lobby, headed for the newspaper's "morgue" to investigate the background of mysterious baseball star Roy Hobbs (played by Robert Redford). The scene captures

almost the entire mural, as Duvall – and his shadow – stride past it. Sadly, the scene is only included in the Director's Cut edition, airing at 52 minutes, 32 seconds. Later in 1983, a *Buffalo News* story reported that the University at Buffalo's School of Architecture had entered into discussions with Cowles Media about a possible move from the South Campus to the *Courier-Express* building. Had that move taken place, the mural would most likely be hanging today.

But in April 1985, the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo purchased the building for \$900,000 and over the next year spent more than \$2 million on renovations. The interior remodeling was so extensive that the Diocesan communications director told a *Buffalo News* reporter in 1986 that former *Courier-Express* employees hoping for a nostalgic visit might be disappointed: "I don't think they'd recognize anything, except the lobby."

Well, not quite – the mural was gone.

Around that time, John Conlin entered the lobby of the newly renamed Catholic Center. He wanted to revisit the mural, which he had admired as a kid for its striking transportation and bridge visual elements. As a preservationist, Conlin also wanted to urge the Diocese to keep the mural in the lobby, but it was already gone. A local architecture and engineering firm with family ties to the Diocese had been hired to take down the mural. The workmen rolled it tightly, without support, face inward – anathema to conservationists – and carried it to the basement, where the paper's printing presses used to be. In storage, the heavy roll collapsed under its own unsupported weight and developed pronounced undulations. Conlin soon returned to the Catholic Center with fellow Landmark Society member and chairman Austin Fox to take a look at the mural's condition. When a Diocesan official offered to unroll it on the basement floor, they declined, "fearing further damage to it." Conlin and Fox could see the mural was in rough shape.

Conlin acted quickly to save the mural. The Diocese agreed to give it to the Landmark Society, but Conlin had another idea. He thought that Buffalo State College should have the mural as "it was a natural project for the college's Art Conservation Department." He contacted the college archivist, Sister Martin Joseph Jones, who readily accepted the offer. Even though the mural was

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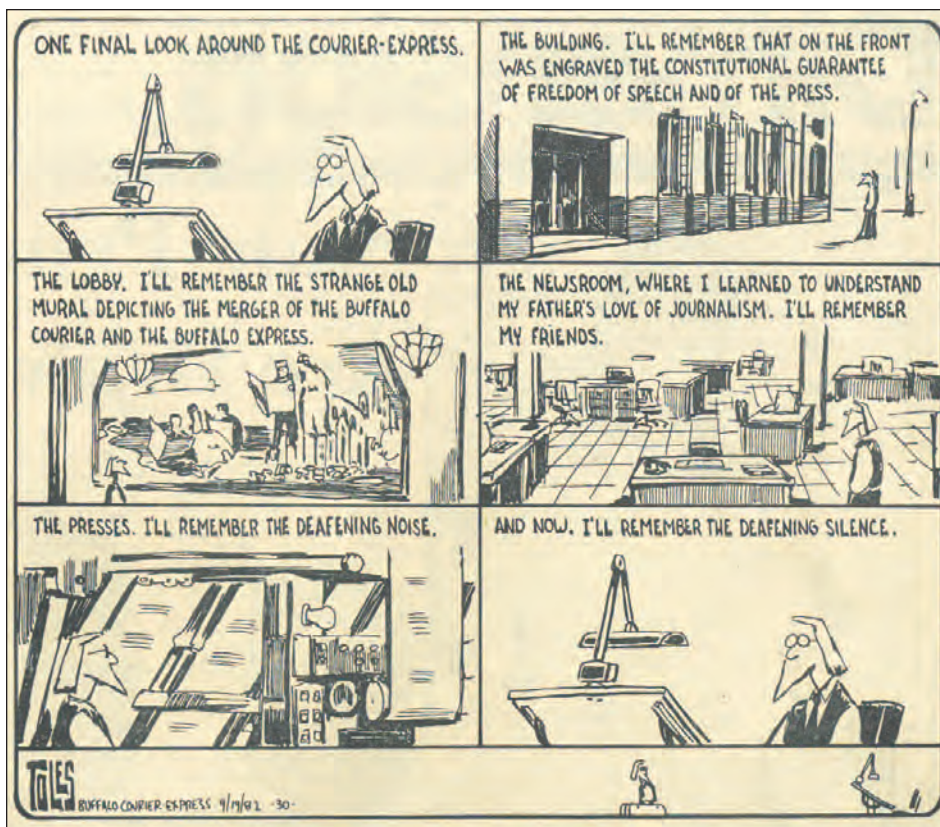
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Tom Toles, staff artist at the *Courier-Express*, drew this cartoon for the final issue of the paper in September 1982. He makes reference to “the strange old mural” in frame three. WESTERN NEW YORK HERITAGE COLLECTION

recorded as donated to the Landmark Society, it was never in the society’s possession. So it was that in 1988, Sister Martin asked her art conservation colleagues for help. This unique program had just moved to Buffalo State from Oneonta State College in the summer of 1987. Conlin’s hunch that the *Courier-Express* mural belonged at Buffalo State had additional merit as well. In 1985, the college had hosted a ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrating the opening of the Buffalo *Courier-Express* library collection, donated to the college and the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society (today’s Buffalo History Museum) by Cowles Media Company. The collection, valued at \$500,000, encompassed every issue of the newspaper and its antecedents dating back to 1834, and included more than 100,000 photographs, about 1 million original news clippings and many other artifacts. The collection was housed in E.H. Butler Library under the direction of Sister Martin. The idea was to restore the mural and install it in Butler Library in connection with the *Courier-Express* library archives.

During the summer of 1988, the Diocese staff unrolled the mural onto a smooth concrete former printing press bed, not to be disturbed by basement traffic. Shortly thereafter, Buffalo State art conservation professors Dan Kushel and James Hamm visited the Catholic Center basement to inspect the newly acquired mural. The first glimpse was not a pretty sight. Kushel remembers seeing “incredible damage.” The huge canvas had originally been adhered to the plaster of the lobby wall in 1930 with a lead white adhesive. According to Kushel, the bulk of the damage was done to the top corners when the mural’s canvas was inexpertly torn from the wall, taking big pieces of plaster, lots of lead white adhesive, paint chips and “just chunks of stuff” with it. The mural, still laid out in the Catholic Center basement, was allowed to flatten for a period of time; the undulations diminished on their own, revealing only a few remaining minor distortions. The removal had caused extensive paint loss and creasing mostly to the upper half of the mural. Otherwise, Kushel and Hamm’s

examination found “little apparent age cracking or other substantive structural deterioration of the paint film.”

In 1989, the two embarked on a multi-stage plan to prepare the mural for transfer to the college. First, they meticulously cleared its surface of the loose plaster, chips and paste debris. Next, they “faced it” with a solution brushed on through pieces of tissue, meant to hold the painting together. Then they slowly rolled the mural, face out, onto a custom-designed metal cylindrical carrier about 20 feet long and two feet in diameter, padding it as they went with large sheets of protective cushioning. Finally, the rolled mural was wrapped in a layer of synthetic polymer.

The last challenge was to get the mural out of the basement and safely to Buffalo State. The Catholic Center freight elevator proved to be a tight fit, but the Buffalo State maintenance crew managed to carefully load it onto a college truck. Its campus destination, Caudell Hall, involved even trickier maneuvering by the college moving crew through narrow doorways, around corners and passages and down to the basement. Once there, the Art Conservation Department expected to unroll it and perform a thorough technical inspection. This examination would include a first look at the entire reverse of the canvas, with all the adhesive and plaster residue still clinging to its back. At some point after the appraisal, it was hoped, faculty and students would treat the canvas and the college would permanently exhibit the restored masterpiece. But these initiatives were not pursued. Instead, the mural remained in storage in the Caudell Hall basement, like a mummy waiting for its next life, for 25 years. Sister Martin Joseph retired in 1995 and Dan Kushel in 2012. Momentum, and with it institutional memory, seemed to fade. Until 2014.

That year, New York State announced a \$27 million capital project to extensively renovate Caudell Hall. Major updates to the 52-year-old building would include a gutting of the interior. This meant the *Courier-Express* mural would have to leave the basement one way or the other, to be relocated or disposed of. In early spring

2014, James Hamm of the Art Conservation Department advocated saving the mural. He recommended transporting it to an off-campus site with ample space (approximately 2,000 square feet) to vacuum remaining debris from the face and reverse; to remove the plaster and white lead, adhering to EPA regulations for hazardous waste and to engage in a variety of surface repairs. Hamm estimated the cost at \$200,000. However, the only action involved Cook Moving Systems of Cheektowaga which, for a fee of \$2,466.40, professionally extricated the mural from Caudell Hall's basement on June 11, 2014. It was then taken around the corner to the Buffalo History Museum's Resource Center on Forest Avenue, where it has been stored for the last six years.

Lately, renewed interest in the status of this historic mural has been rippling at Buffalo State. It is on the radar of Patrick Ravines, associate professor and director of the Patricia H. and Richard E. Gorman Art Conservation Department, and

Daniel M. DiLandro, head of archives and special collections at E.H. Butler Library. There is talk of seeking a modest start-up grant to support an intensive examination of the mural, then perhaps looking for a source of significant funds for its restoration. After that, a permanent exhibition space would need to be found.

Sara Solovitch wasn't the only journalist to cite the mural in the *Courier-Express's* final edition of September 19, 1982. Staff artist Tom Toles contributed a parting editorial cartoon to that closing issue. Toles, who became an editorial cartoonist at the *Buffalo News* and *Washington Post* (where he won a Pulitzer Prize), sketched a wistful look back at his time with the *Courier-Express*. The cartoon's third frame shows a mini-version of the mural along with this commentary: "The Lobby. I'll remember the strange old mural depicting the merger of the Buffalo Courier and the Buffalo Express." Toles' cartoon was the last black-and-white rendering of the grand mural to be printed.

With its colorful visual interpretation of a moment in Buffalo's newspaper history and its vision of the city's past and future, the mural deserves to be preserved and exhibited for upcoming generations of Buffalonians. As John Conlin put it, "It's a great image, and it's worth making it public."

Will the mural's fate be as bright as the hopes were for the city, as depicted in the mural?

For now, its destiny is uncertain. 📺

Tom Reigstad is professor emeritus of English at Buffalo State College and author of *Scribblin' for a Livin' – Mark Twain's Pivotal Period in Buffalo*. He was a part-time and full-time librarian, writer and copy editor at the Buffalo *Courier-Express* from 1969 to 1982. The author wishes to thank the following for their contributions to this story: Jason Aranoff, Adele Becker, Gabrielle Carlo, John Conlin, Dan DiLandro, Heather Gring, Anita Johnson, Len Kagelmacher, Dan Kushel, Amy Pickard, Patrick Ravines and Cynthia Van Ness.

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