

# INDIANS CEDE THE LAND

by George Melville Smith



# History of the Artist and the Mural



***Indians Cede the Land***, by George Melville Smith, a 6' x 20' mural created for the Park Ridge Post Office through the Depression era Treasury Relief Art Project, is a rare treasure from the city's heritage.

Between 1934 and 1943, approximately 1,100 murals and sculptures were commissioned by the U.S. Treasury Department under the Treasury Relief Art Project and later the Section of Fine Arts of the Public Buildings Administration Program, to decorate federal buildings across the United States. Whereas the Federal Arts Project, administered under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), provided funding for art works to artists in financial need, the Treasury Section held regional and national Mural competitions in order to commission 'high art' from the best artists available.

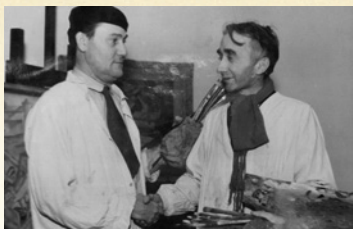
George Melville Smith was one of a handful of artists who were awarded multiple mural contracts through the Treasury Section. He was selected to produce murals for post offices in Crown Point, IN, (1938), Elmhurst, IL, (1938), and Park Ridge, (1940). Smith was paid approximately \$2,000 for each mural.



All of Smith's Murals portray recreations of historical events in American History that occurred within the local area. Our mural is believed to be an imagined scene rather than a specific single treaty signing. Smith's work shows elements from the wilderness and Native American environment as well as the arriving wave of American pioneers who would re-shape the landscape to their own purpose.

Smith was born in Chicago in 1879. His only known Chicago address was 672 North Rush Street in 1922. At just 14 he studied as an architect's apprentice. At 17 he attended the Art Institute of





Chicago's evening school and worked during the day as a commercial artist to help support his parents. He then studied in Paris under Andre Lhote from 1925-26 and painted across France, Spain,

England and Italy. He was a winner of the Chicago and Vicinity Show held at the Art Institute in 1932 and also displayed there in 1933 and 1937, as well as at the Federal Art Project exhibit that the Institute hosted in 1938. He displayed his work at the General Exhibit Building at the Century of Progress in 1933. Smith became the supervisor of the applied arts project for the WPA in 1936 and created a mural for Chicago's Schubert Elementary School in 1938. He was a member of the Arts Club, the Chicago No-Jury Society of Artists and participated in the Forty-Eight States Competition in 1939. He became the fifth president of the Chicago Society of Artists.

*Indians Cede the Land* was installed in the former Park Ridge Post Office at 164 South Prospect Avenue, on June 20, 1940, when the building was just three years old.



In 1970 the Post Office building was sold to Park Ridge-Niles Community Consolidated School District #64 to serve as the District's headquarters, now known as the Raymond Hendee Service Center. Renovation plans

called for the mural to be discarded to make way for renovation. Learning of its plight, Paul Carlson, a long standing history teacher at Maine East High School, and a founding member of the Park Ridge Historical Society, endeavored to rescue it with the help of two students, Tom Musolf '70 and Debbie Milling '71. The mural was first sprayed with \$25 worth of varnish to set the surface and then pried from the wall.

Upon his death on August 19, 2008, Mr. Carlson's family, friends and colleagues carried out Mr. Carlson's wish to return the mural to the citizens of Park Ridge. On September 20, 2008, 38 years to the day that the mural was rescued, the mural was delivered to the Park Ridge Public Library with the hope that it could eventually be restored and put on permanent display. ■

# Restoration of the Mural



Upon receiving the mural it was determined that it could not be displayed in its fragile condition. Library staff obtained quotes for the restoration and then applied for several grants. Parma Conservation, a company that specializes in restoring murals and other art, offered to store the mural at their facility until funds were available to begin the restoration.

Unable to obtain grant funding, the mural remained in storage until three members of the Library Board of Trustees decided to take on the task of raising funds for the restoration. Dr. Anthony Borrelli, Patricia Lofthouse and Dick VanMetre partnered with the Park Ridge Historical Society to form the Mural Restoration Committee with the goal of raising \$38,000. A Piano Play-a-Thon under the direction of music teacher Heidi Mayer launched the fund raising campaign in June of 2010.

In addition to the many individuals and organizations that generously contributed to the restoration fund, special note should be taken of a matching grant from the Park Ridge Historical Society and two grants from the Park Ridge Cultural Arts Council which helped the Committee to complete the restoration and provide for the custom frame that holds the mural in place.

The Park Ridge Post Office Mural *Indians Cede the Land*, was unveiled to the public on February 22, 2013 during the Park Ridge Public Library's 100th Anniversary year. ■

## **MURAL RESTORATION COMMITTEE**

Dr. Anthony Borrelli  
Richard VanMetre  
Jeff Caudill  
Nancy Pytel

Patricia Lofthouse  
Paul Adlaf  
John Murphy



# The Subject the Mural Depicts



Although the artist George Melville Smith recreated historical events in his paintings, he may well have been thinking of the ceding of Native American lands for what later became the City of Chicago and its contiguous suburbs, most especially Park Ridge. We know from documentation of his other murals that he was encouraged to visit the locale where the mural was to be located and to research the history of the area.

The Great Treaty of Greenville of 1795 relinquished many sites along important rivers across the Midwest to the United States government to allow it to legally operate forts. After the U.S. government bought the land as far west as the Mississippi River from Emperor Napoleon of France in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, it still had to work out treaties with the Native American tribes who recognized neither the American or French claims to their territory.

The Treaty of St. Louis of 1816 created the Indian Boundary Lines of Chicago-land that are still important roads today. This cessation of land allowed the establishment of the cities, villages and towns of our area.

The mural suggests some of the geographic elements present in the area at the time the Native Americans signed treaties to give up their claims to the land. It is an area fed by two river corridors, the Chicago and Des Plaines Rivers, with the wilderness of the original woodlands about to be replaced by settlement. The mural reflects our historical actions as well as our changing social thought in regard to our Native American heritage and sacrifice.

**To read more about the Mural and the history that it depicts, visit the Library's website – [www.parkridgelibrary.org](http://www.parkridgelibrary.org).**

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Many thanks to the Park Ridge Historical Society for its financial and community support.



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