

Pages from the Past, 1959

Bernard F. Chapman (1908–1993)

DRAFT

In 1959, the Woman's Club of Durham donated a 16-panel mural to the Durham Post Office, titled "Pages from the Past." The mural offers snapshots of the town's history as imagined by artist Bernard Chapman, a 1930 graduate of the University of New Hampshire.

On the adjacent wall, from left to right:

The first three panels of the mural — "Venturesome Courage," "Enduring Hope," and "Natural Majesty" — depict the area's natural resources and its first English settlers, who arrived in 1623.

The next panel, "Cruel Adversity," shows a Native American poised to attack a garrison. Settlers constructed fortified wooden structures, called garrisons or blockhouses, for use as protection during attacks. *For more information, see "Durham's Native American History in Perspective," below.*

The next three panels of the mural — "Resourceful Vigor," "Industrial Growth," and "Parish Friendliness" — show logging, a lumber mill, and the importance of the church to the town's early social life. The first meeting house was built on the south bank of the Oyster River in 1655.

The final panel on this wall, "Patriotic Valor," depicts a surprise raid by the colonists on the British Fort William and Mary near Portsmouth in 1774. The colonists confiscated the fort's gunpowder and arms and secreted them upriver to Durham, for later use in the Revolutionary War.

On the opposite wall, from left to right:

The first two panels on the opposite wall reflect the importance of early transportation routes to the town. "Gracious Hospitality" shows a stagecoach stop in Durham along the Boston–Dover route, which was established in 1792. "Technical Skill" shows the Piscataqua Bridge, which connected Durham with Newington. The half-mile long bridge was an engineering marvel when built in 1794.

The next two panels — "Scholarly Diligence" and "Daily Custom" — highlight the importance of education and communication to the town. The town's first public school was built in 1797. In 1795, Benjamin Thompson was appointed Durham's first Postmaster.

"Native Ingenuity," the next panel, shows a gundalow (or gondola), a type of flat-bottomed boat developed by settlers to haul cargo by river. "Relentless Progress," the following panel, heralds the arrival of the railroad, which revolutionized travel in the mid-19th century.

The final two panels of the mural highlight the continuing importance of religion and education to the town. "Steadfast Faith" depicts the Community Church of Durham, built in 1848. "Advancing Horizon" shows Thompson Hall, built in 1893 on land donated by Benjamin Thompson, Jr. It later became part of the University of New Hampshire.

Durham's Native American History in Perspective

Native Americans lived in present-day New Hampshire for countless generations before the arrival of Europeans. They were commonly called the Wabanaki, or "people of the dawn."

The Wabanaki were not a single tribe, but were many groups with similar customs who spoke dialects of the Algonquian language. In the warm part of the year, they lived in villages along rivers and lakes where they farmed and fished. In the winter, they broke into smaller family groups and traveled to hunt for food.

English settlers arrived in the region in the 1620s, soon after a series of deadly epidemics had devastated the Wabanaki. Initially, the settlers and surviving Wabanaki lived in relative peace and shared and traded resources. But as the colonists' settlements expanded, disputes over land use and ownership multiplied. Social, economic, political, and religious differences led to confusing confrontations. Profound cultural and language barriers impeded understanding. Escalating tensions erupted into sporadic warfare from 1675 to 1760, characterized by a complex web of shifting alliances among colonists, Indians, and Indian leaders. It involved not just the Wabanaki and the English, but also their traditional rivals, the Iroquois and the French. From the start of King Philip's War in 1675, to the defeat of New France in 1760, periods of relative peace were punctuated by bloody skirmishes and surprise attacks.

These were difficult and cruel times, with atrocities committed by all sides. In 1676, Major Richard Waldron of Dover called for a peace conference with the local Wabanaki. Hundreds answered his call — he arrested them all. About 200 Indians were sent to Boston; some were executed, while others were enslaved. Waldron's treachery fueled the cycle of attack and reprisal. In 1694, around 250 Wabanaki warriors, encouraged and aided by the French, attacked the colonial settlements near present-day Durham, killing or capturing about 100 people and setting fire to homes and crops. It was the most devastating Indian raid in New Hampshire.

Further reading:

Colin G. Calloway, editor, *Dawnland Encounters: Indians and Europeans in Northern New England*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1991.

Kenneth M. Morrison, *The Embattled Northeast: The Elusive Ideal of Alliance in Abenaki-Euramerican Relations*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984.

Alden T. Vaughan, editor, *New England Encounters: Indians and Euroamericans Ca. 1600-1850*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1999.