

Upstate PA's Common Canvas

Northeastern Pennsylvania, the Endless Mountains and the Pocono Mountains are known for their scenic beauty, hometown charm and abundant recreational destinations. The history of this region is tied to the industrial and economic history of America herself. Pennsylvania's lumber industry helped build America's cities. Coal fueled her factories and heated her homes. The railroads brought goods and people together.



In times of economic hardship, Americans need to be reminded of the qualities, which make this country great; the virtues of hard work, pioneer spirit and the ability to take on new and exciting challenges.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt knew this. In the midst of the Great Depression, Roosevelt's New Deal helped put millions of Americans back to work. In 1933, artists were called upon to do their part as well. They created works of art for government buildings, "expressing in living monuments," Philadelphia artist George Biddle explained, "the social ideals the New Deal was struggling to achieve."



These works of art were put on public display in communities across the country, but they didn't hang in galleries. They were on display at the post office. Each mural and sculpture reflected that town's own history and heritage. Eighty-eight such works of art were commissioned throughout Pennsylvania, the second-largest number of any state in the country.

Upstate PA's Common Canvas is a one-hour travelogue exploring the cities and towns of the Upstate PA region in Bradford, Carbon, Lackawanna, Luzerne, Monroe, Pike, Schuylkill, Sullivan, Susquehanna, Wayne and Wyoming counties. Using their post office artwork as historical markers, we will examine the geographic and cultural heritage that binds the region together, as well as the qualities, which make each community unique. We'll also show you some great places to go while you're in town. Come with us on a tour of Upstate PA.



Athens, Bradford County

Allen Jones painted the mural entitled “General Sullivan at Tioga Point,” depicting the construction of Fort Tioga during the Revolutionary War in 1779. Examine other works of art by Jones on display in Athens, and explore a world of Revolutionary War, Civil War and Native American artifacts at the Tioga Point Museum. Afterward, relax in the Victorian elegance of the beautifully restored Failte Inn Bed & Breakfast.

Tunkhannock, Wyoming County

“Defenders of the Wyoming Country – 1778” further depicts the dangers early American settlers faced in the Pennsylvania wilderness. Ethel Ashton’s mural shows both men and women of the Wyoming Valley taking up arms against Iroquois Indians in league with the British. Some of the stately architecture from the lumber boom of the mid 1800s is still in evidence today in the Prince Hotel and Red Lion Inn, and the Berlinghof House. The Wyoming County Courthouse, the Wyoming County Historical Society and the exquisitely restored Dietrich Theater are other prominent architectural examples in Tunkhannock.

Scranton, Lackawanna County

The mural “Nature’s Storehouse” shows the pastoral beauty of the Lackawanna Valley peppered with the various industries, which would take root in Scranton by the 1800s. All of Scranton’s early diversity is still in evidence today. From the Tripp House, the home of Scranton’s first resident, to the architecture of Scranton’s silk mills, to the stately homes of the coal and lumber barons who made their fortunes off the land. The Lackawanna Coal Mine tour and Steamtown National Historic Site preserve Scranton’s industrial past, while Nay Aug Park and Merli-Sarnoski Park in nearby Carbondale provide a perfect contrast of natural beauty. From the Everhart Museum to the Houdini Museum, from Scranton Public Theater to the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre Yankees, Scranton and its surrounding area is a study in contrasts.

Clarks Summit, Lackawanna County

Agriculture and mining are given their tribute in the aluminum relief hanging in the post office in Clarks Summit. But everything about this beautiful small town conveys the feeling of Main Street, U.S.A. Long established family-owned businesses share the downtown with a variety of specialty shops and outstanding restaurants. Community festivals continue to bring together residents whose pride shows in every storefront and every front porch.

Honesdale, Wayne County

The multiple-paneled mural “Canal Boat/Clearing the Wilderness/Coal/Gravity Railroad/Visit by Washington Irving” tells the story of the town considered to be the birthplace of the American railroad. The Wayne County Historical Society Museum is located in the original office of the Delaware & Hudson Canal Company, which moved coal from the Gravity Railroad in Lackawanna County onto canal boats bound for New York. The museum houses a replica of the Stourbridge Lion, America’s first commercial steam locomotive. Climb onboard the Stourbridge Line Rail Excursion, or enjoy the quaint downtown streets, Victorian architecture and scenic parkland of Honesdale.

East Stroudsburg, Monroe County

Not all of the New Deal era post office artwork has survived the march of progress. Marguerite Bennett Kassler's sculpture "Communication" was covered when the post office was remodeled to become the East Stroudsburg Municipal Building. But progress has only served to beautify and enrich the town once known as Dansbury. The Dansbury Depot, a station on the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad line, is still a popular destination for railroad enthusiasts, and the East Stroudsburg Railroad Tower still overlooks the tracks, which once carried the legendary Phoebe Snow passenger train through Pennsylvania. East Stroudsburg University has grown and flourished since its inception in 1893. The nearby Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area attracts five million visitors every year, while the Shawnee Village Resort is the perfect place to get away and plan your outdoor adventures.

Wilkes-Barre, Luzerne County

George Harding's "Anthracite Coal," hanging in the post office in nearby Kingston, provides a composite view of the Huber and Prospect Collieries, two mining operations at work in the Wyoming Valley at the time. With the exception of the Huber breaker, much of Wilkes-Barre's anthracite past has given way to retail development, and entertainment venues like the Wachovia Arena and the F.M. Kirby Center. Prominent educational institutions like Wilkes University and King's College continue to grow and become vital parts of the community. Beautifully restored estates like the Stegmaier Mansion provide a view into Wilkes-Barre's prosperous past, while projects like the Susquehanna Riverfront point to her future, joining Public Square and Kirby Park as places for people to come together and enjoy all that the city has to offer.

Pittston, Luzerne County

Geographic and economic influences went into the creation of Marion Walton's 3-paneled "Indian/Mine Elevator/Campbell's Ledge" installed at the Pittston Post Office. Settled in the 1770s, Pittston has experienced both the prosperity and the tragedies of the coal boom, but the community spirit still shows through in Pittston's local festivals and special events. Campbell's Ledge, in nearby Harding, is said to have gotten its name from a man on horseback who was forced to jump from the two thousand-foot cliff in order to escape a band of approaching Indians. The ledge overlooks Pittston and provides magnificent views of the winding Susquehanna River and the Wyoming Valley.

Plymouth, Luzerne County

In contrast to the hardscrabble view of coal mining life depicted in Kingston's mural, Jared French's "Meal Time with the Early Coal Miners" shows a lighter side to the miner's day enjoying the sunshine and the cool water of the Susquehanna. The anthracite coal industry was said to have begun in Plymouth when settlers first begin shipping coal to skeptical consumers in 1808. Plymouth, and nearby settlements like Forty Fort, were at the center of both the Yankee-Pennamite Wars and the American Revolution. Some of the oldest colonial era buildings still exist here.

Freeland, Luzerne County

When artist John Folinsbee was commissioned to create the mural “Freeland,” the town residents gave him two requirements: it must include the local colliery, and it must include the brewery. The Freeland colliery, at least, made such an impression on Folinsbee that he would later devote an entire painting to it in 1941. Coal was indeed the foundation on which Freeland and other “patch towns” like nearby Eckley and even cities like Hazleton were built in the mid 1800s. Eckley Miners Village still stands as a living display of life in coal country.

Mahanoy City, Schuylkill County

Sculptor Malvina Hoffman, an assistant of Rodin himself, created the piece “Coal Miners Returning from Work” for the post office in Mahanoy City. The coal industry here in Schuylkill County would help shape the American industrial landscape in the late 1800s as a base of operations for the infamous Molly Maguires. The historic Kaier Mansion Bed & Breakfast, built in 1874, offers a turn-of-the-century experience of a much more elegant variety. Mahanoy City is also a short drive from Locust Lake and Tuscarora State Parks. From being the birthplace of Victor Schertzinger, Academy Award-winning film composer, to being the birthplace of cable television, Mahanoy City’s influence is more diverse than you might think.

Upstate PA’s Common Canvas ties together communities throughout northeastern Pennsylvania whose common thread is the land itself, and the industries that grew from it. The artwork on display in these communities, created by regional and international artists, provides a unique look into the history and heritage of these interwoven cities and towns. Visit the Upstate PA region and experience this living mural for yourself.