



# THE BRONX COUNTY BUILDING'S HISTORICAL MURALS

## AN ARTISTIC LEGACY

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PHOTOS BY ROBERT BENIMOFF  
IN COOPERATION WITH  
THE BRONX COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



# **THE BRONX COUNTY BUILDING'S HISTORICAL MURALS**

## **AN ARTISTIC LEGACY**

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June 2018

Dear Friend:

Thank you for taking a moment to consider this publication, “The Bronx County Building’s Historic Murals: An Artistic Legacy.” This joint publication of both The Bronx County Historical Society and my office is an in-depth examination of the artistic value of the historic Bronx County Building, as well as the recently restored murals that depict our borough’s settlement and early growth that hang in Veterans’ Memorial Hall.

This publication would not have been possible without the efforts of The Bronx County Historical Society, which is one of our city’s great organizations. The society’s dedication to both preserve our history and make it accessible to new generations is worthy of considerable praise. I especially want to thank Lloyd Ultan, our borough’s officially historian and the author of this publication, as well as Gary “Doc” Hermalyn and Angel Hernandez for their dedication to this project.

I would also like to thank photographer Robert Benimoff, who for the first time ever captured these historic murals in their whole state, without the obstruction of the pillars that line the edges of Veterans’ Memorial Hall. In recognition of that artistic and technical feat these photos will be donated to the City’s Department of Records, Art Commission and other relevant agencies, where they will be preserved in perpetuity for generations to come.

Great things are happening in The Bronx. Nearly 120,000 more Bronx residents have jobs today than did when I first took office in 2009, and unemployment has been cut by more than half. We’ve created jobs, increased wages, built new homes for all income levels, improved the health and well-being of our residents and provided our schools with much-needed capital funding.

While we are certainly excited about our present success we must not forget our past. What has happened before us informs our plans and provides us with perspective moving forward. Publications such as this one help us engage with our borough’s past while working for a brighter tomorrow.

Once again, thank you for your interest in this publication and in the past and present of The Bronx.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ruben Diaz Jr." with a stylized flourish at the end.

Ruben Diaz Jr.

# THE BRONX COUNTY BUILDING'S HISTORICAL MURALS

## AN ARTISTIC LEGACY

### The idea of a Bronx County Building

It seemed like New York City's Borough of The Bronx was the place to be in the 1920s. Thousands of people poured out of the old, crowded neighborhoods of Manhattan using the new subway lines to wend their way northward to live in the recently built apartment houses with their large rooms, cross ventilation and state of the art appliances. The Bronx was the fastest growing borough of the metropolis reaching a million inhabitants just after the middle of the decade. The rapid pace of urbanization caused an expansion of municipal services. This included the construction of new courtrooms to try larger numbers of both civil and criminal cases.

Meanwhile, the various borough and county offices that had grown with the increased population were housed in rented offices and buildings scattered all over The Bronx. It was difficult for those working in one office to coordinate with those in another. Too often residents had difficulty locating the correct office, spending precious time scurrying from one locale to another. Placing the offices of the Surrogate, the Public Administrator, the County Clerk, the District Attorney and the Borough President in one place would increase their efficiency, save the city money paid for rental space, and also enable the people who required their services to find the proper office easily.

It was with all these goals in mind that public officials and interested parties from New York City began planning for a new Bronx County Building. From the beginning it was decided that the structure had to be monumental, imposing and beautiful at the same time. Some demanded it be in the form of a skyscraper; others thought that a Grecian temple design would be more appropriate for a government center. In the end, aspects of both ideas were embodied in the final result.

In 1928, the land bounded by East 161<sup>st</sup> Street on the north, Walton Avenue on the west, 158<sup>th</sup> Street on the south, and what was then called Mott Avenue on the east was secured by the city as the site for the new building. Then the structure had to be designed.

### Design and construction

Two architects were chosen to collaborate on the design of the Bronx County Building. Joseph Freedlander, born in New York in 1870, was educated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris. He had already designed the Museum of the City of New York in Manhattan and was the co-architect of the Andrew Freedman Home of the Grand Concourse in The Bronx. His collaborator was Max Hausle. Born in Switzerland in 1879, Hausle received his architectural training there before emigrating to the United States in 1897. He worked with Bronx architect Michael Garvin, who had designed the Bronx Borough Courthouse on East 161<sup>st</sup> Street and Washington Avenue. After Garvin's death in 1918, Hausle took over the business and designed three other courthouses in The Bronx, each in an austere classical style.

The two collaborated to design a structure twelve stories high towering over the five and six story apartment houses in the vicinity. A rusticated granite platform around the building upon which it rested made it look even taller. The façade was clad in limestone. The windows rose vertically in ribbons separated by the limestone, while copper and nickel spandrels bearing Art Deco designs separated each window from the one above it; those separating the upper floors displayed the fasces, the ancient Roman symbol of an axe in the middle of a tied bundle of sticks symbolizing authority and government power. Classical style columned porticos marked the entrances to the building.

From the beginning, both the Bronx County Building's exterior and interior were meant to be decorated by masterworks of art. Sculpture marked the exterior. For such a monumental structure, only the most prominent sculptors would do. Rising from the platform flanking each stairway leading to each of the entrances are two massive blocks of pink granite.

They were designed by a team of sculptors under the leadership of Adolph Weinman. Born in Germany in 1870, Weinman emigrated to the United States at the age of fourteen. He attended art classes at night at Cooper Union and worked with other sculptors,

including Daniel Chester French, before embarking on his own in 1904. He liked to be called an architectural sculptor, and his statues adorned several New York City's edifices, including the Municipal Building in Manhattan. He also designed the Mercury Head dime and the Walking Liberty half dollar, both then still in circulation. He worked in the neoclassical style. His figures wore drapery, but were also fluid enough to presage the Art Deco era. He personally carved the two groups flanking the entrance of what was then called Mott Avenue.

Under Weinman's supervision were three younger sculptors. Edward Sanford was born in New York City in 1886 and educated at the Art Students League, the National Academy of Design and in Paris and Munich. He was interested in architectural sculpture and was responsible for the groups flanking the stairs facing East 158<sup>th</sup> Street. Joseph Kiselewski was born in Minnesota in 1901, educated at the Minnesota School of Art, the National Academy of Design and the École des Beaux Arts in Paris. He had already sculpted many works and was considered a rising star at the time. He was given the responsibility for the grouping on the Walton Avenue side of the building. Another rising star was George H. Snowden. Born in Yonkers in 1901, he was educated at Yale University, the Beaux Arts Institute of New York, and in Paris and in Rome. He also studied under Adolph Weinman who recognized his great talent and assigned him to sculpt the grouping at the East 161<sup>st</sup> Street entrance.

Charles Keck, another well-known sculptor was chosen to carve the frieze at the third floor on the façade of the building. He was born in New York City in 1875 and educated at the National Academy of Design, the Art Students League and the American Academy in Rome. He was an assistant to the great American sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens for two years. Keck had already produced a body of monumental sculpture and portrait busts in the Beaux Arts style, but also did work in the classical style that was noted for its dynamism.

All of the sculptural work on and around the Bronx County Building is allegorical and symbolic. Together they represent the positive results of good government, good administration and equal justice. Patriotism and victory are also depicted.

Freedlander and Hausle designed the building as a hollow square. Frosted windows in the upper floors overlooked the interior square airshaft that supplies ventilation and some light to the public spaces. On the main floor, however, that central space is filled with a monumental room designated as Veterans Memorial

Hall. It is decorated with metal plaques at each corner of the space with quotations from American presidents who fought in battle or who led the nation in wartime. Above the north and south entrance are metal letters inserted into the gleaming white stone spelling out quotes from Woodrow Wilson who had led the country during its most recent conflict, World War I. The walls of Veterans Memorial Hall were meant to be filled with four murals.

Construction of the Bronx County Building began in 1931. The cornerstone on the East 161<sup>st</sup> Street façade near the corner of what was then Mott Avenue was laid in 1932. The structure was substantially completed in January 1934 with only some minor interior work left to be done. Nevertheless, the newly elected Bronx Borough President, James J. Lyons, ordered all courts and government agencies to begin moving in.

Reactions to the beauty of the new building were uniformly favorable. The new mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia, came up from City Hall and stated that the structure for which the city paid eight million dollars "reminded me of the palaces of my ancestors—Justinian, Augustus Caesar and Nero. In fact, compared to this they were just pikers. The building is gorgeous." Justice Joseph M. Callaghan of the Supreme Court's Special Term, on the other hand, thought the building was "typically American, not only architecturally, in the rugged simplicity and beauty of its lines, but traditionally." He believed the city should be thanked for "providing this fine edifice." The New York *Herald Tribune* hailed it as a prime example of "Twentieth Century American style," a mixture of neoclassical and modern. Exactly what words could be used to describe the style of the structure has baffled people ever since. It has been labeled variously as neo-classical, Art Moderne and Art Deco.

Struck by the magnificence of the Bronx County Building, the entire Bronx delegation to the city's Board of Aldermen, today's City Council, felt that its legal address, 851 Mott Avenue, was far too simple and prosaic. Such a monumental structure deserved to have a more elegant address. They petitioned the city to change the name of all of Mott Avenue from its beginning at East 138<sup>th</sup> Street to its end at 161<sup>st</sup> Street to the Grand Concourse. The move was supported by business and civic groups throughout the borough. Swift action was taken and the name of the Grand Concourse was extended southward, thus giving the new building its new address.

Meanwhile, the installation of the murals in Veterans Memorial Hall had to wait until all the building's interior details were completed. Like the sculptors, the



artist chosen to design and execute them had reached the foremost rank of his profession. His name was James Monroe Hewlett.

## James Monroe Hewlett

A descendant of an old Long Island family, James Monroe Hewlett was born on the family estate, Rock Hall, in the town of Lawrence on August 1, 1867. Although he wanted to be a decorative artist, that profession was not considered respectable by the members of his social circle. Instead, he studied architecture at Columbia University, graduating from there in 1890. He then went to Paris to study at the École des Beaux Arts and with a decorative painter.

Upon his return to the United States, Hewlett secured a position as a draftsman and apprentice at the leading American architectural firm of the day, McKim, Mead and White. He left in 1895 to form a partnership with Austin Lord and Washington Hull in the new architectural firm of Lord, Hewlett and Hull. The firm designed several buildings in Brooklyn, New York and elsewhere, notably the 121-room mansion of Montana Senator William A. Clark on Fifth Avenue, the Brooklyn Masonic Temple, the Brooklyn Hospital and New York's Second Battalion Armory.

Hewlett was still attracted to his love of art. In 1906, he helped found a group of architects and artists calling themselves the Digressionists. Their purpose was to create works of art outside their usual purview. The works were displayed once a year and a three-judge panel then awarded prizes to the best of them.

Further opportunities to blend his architectural profession with painting presented themselves. Artist and president of the National Academy of Design John W. Alexander suggested Hewlett to theatrical producer Charles Frohman to create the sets for the Broadway production of Edmond Rostand's play, *Chanticleer*, starring Maude Adams, the most popular actress of her day. It gave him the opportunity to experiment and to test his theories. He painted the scene on gauze. In 1912 Frohman asked Hewlett to design the sets for a new production of James M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, also starring Maude Adams. The same year, Hewlett had a hand in creating the sky mural on the ceiling of Grand Central Station. In 1916, he was hired by the Metropolitan Opera to design scenery for *Iphigenie en Touride*. He also designed the scenery for the 1920 Broadway production of Eugene O'Neill's *Beyond the Horizon*.

All of these commissions involved painting large pieces to be seen by people standing or sitting a far distance from the work. It was a step toward a change of direction in Hewlett's life from architecture to mural painting. From 1919 to 1921, he served as president of the Architectural League of New York. By 1920, he became convinced he could make his living as a muralist. He was quickly elected the president of the Society of Mural Painters, serving from 1921 to 1926.

Once he began painting murals, Hewlett was inundated with commissions. Throughout the 1920s into 1930, he managed to paint eight murals for the Bank of New York and Trust Company at 48 Wall Street, ten murals for the National Newark and Essex Bank in New Jersey, and murals found in the Brooklyn Masonic Temple, the Providence National Bank in Rhode Island, the Willard Straight Hall at Cornell University and the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh. He quickly became the most prominent mural painter in the country.

Hewlett's style of painting reflected the age in which he lived. Far from being abstract as art was becoming in Europe under the leadership of Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and others, Hewlett's work was clearly figurative. People, objects and landscape were identified easily by the viewer. Nevertheless, the objects and humans were painted in simple lines with little shading. The coloring was often soft pastels. Other contemporary American artists who used similar techniques were N. G. Wyeth and Thomas Hart Benton.

## Creating the Murals

After James Monroe Hewlett was chosen to paint the four murals destined for the walls of the Veterans Memorial Hall, he conferred with sculptor Adolph Weinman about what scenes they would depict. Unlike the allegorical and symbolic outdoor sculptures, the murals show real people and historic incidents. Because the year 1934 marked the twentieth anniversary of the creation of Bronx County in 1914, and the building was to house the county offices and state courts, it was decided to showcase four significant events in the history of The Bronx. Moreover, to be certain that no area of the borough would be left out, it was further decided that each mural would depict an incident that happened in one of the four corners of the compass.

Hewlett signed the contract in 1931. The designs were approved by William Flynn, Bronx Borough



Commissioner of Public Works, in February 1932, and by the city's Art Commission shortly thereafter. In early 1932 Hewlett received word that he was appointed resident director of the American Academy in Rome, a highly prestigious position with a salary of \$7,500 a year and a stipend of \$500 a year for entertaining. Thus, he occupied this office as he was working on the Bronx murals. Each of the four works was ten feet high and thirty-six feet wide. To be sure that the viewer understood what was depicted and its significance, a strip along the top of each contained a short written account of the event divided into two columns. A government coat of arms relating to the scene was painted at the dividing point between those columns.

## The Arrival of Jonas Bronck

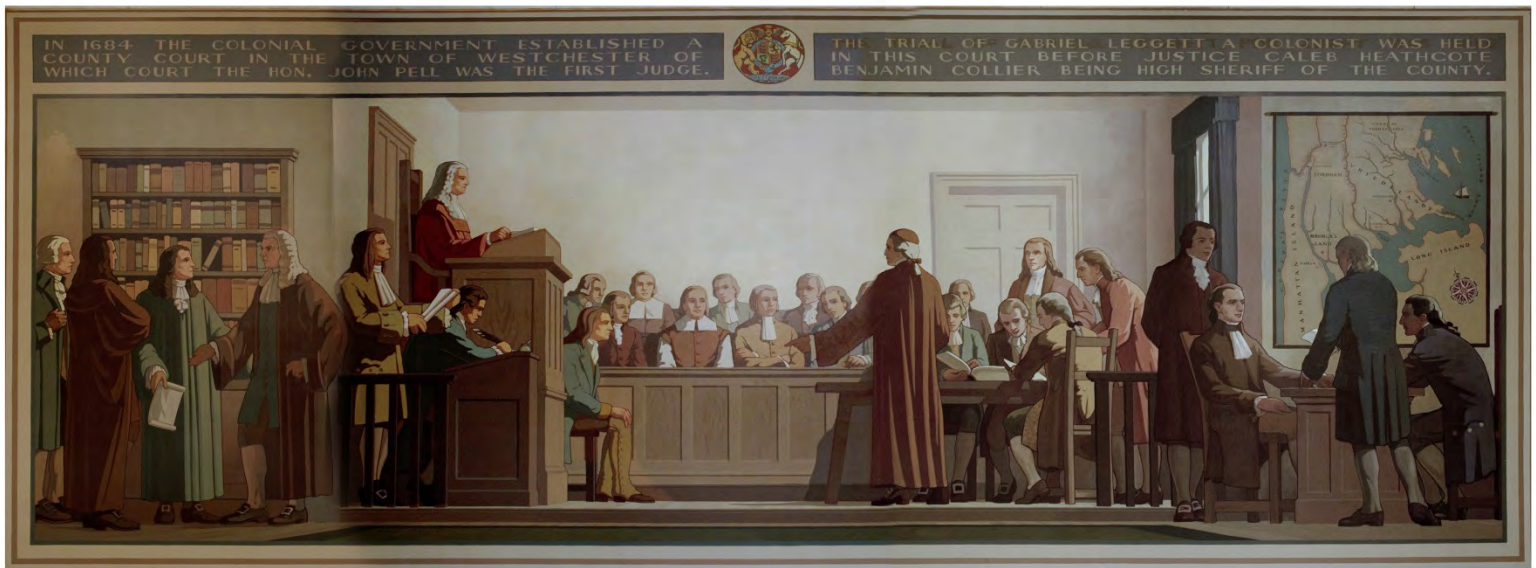
The first mural shows the arrival of Jonas Bronck in 1639 and represents the South Bronx. Historically, Bronck was born on a farm in Småland province, Sweden, in 1600. In Hewlett's day, however, people believed he had been born in Denmark. Bronck eventually moved to Amsterdam in the Netherlands and became a merchant seacaptain plying the Baltic Sea trade. He accumulated enough wealth to marry a Dutch woman in 1638 and then emigrated to the Dutch colony of New Netherland in 1639. In the process, he paid for the passage of a number of others as indentured servants who would repay him in the form of clearing and farming his land for seven years. He and his wife erected a stone house with a tile roof whose interior was decorated with a number of engravings and contained his eleven books, the largest library recorded in New Netherland. Bronck died of natural causes in 1643. His name survived in Bronck's River, later abbreviated to Bronx River, which, in turn,

gave its name to New York City's borough of The Bronx in 1898 and to New York State's Bronx County in 1914.

No one left a record of what happened when Jonas Bronck became the first European settler on the mainland north and east of the Harlem River. No image survives of either Bronck or his wife. Thus, Hewlett had to depend on his imagination to depict the event.

In the center stands Jonas Bronck wearing typical seventeenth century men's clothing and holding a walking stick. Bronck is depicted as clean shaven, although most men at that time wore a moustache and a Van Dyke beard. His young wife grasps his arm with her right hand and holds a reticule bag in her left. Her dress is more reminiscent of those worn in the nineteenth century than in the seventeenth. Behind them across the Harlem River is the village of Harlem in Manhattan. The few buildings shown there are probably too elegant for that time and place at the edge of the frontier of settlement. It is probably also true that two ships depicted in the Harlem River shows much more commercial traffic than existed at the upper reaches of the East River and in the Harlem River at that time.

To the left men climb the slope coming up from the water, laden with packages filled with the couple's possessions. Although other men are preparing to start cutting down the trees in the forest, this activity was unlikely to have happened on the day of arrival. Similarly, to the right of the mural other workmen are busy erecting the stone house that would become the couple's residence. The amount of work already done, with the stone walls reaching beyond the low side of the window is also unlikely to have occurred on the first day. Nevertheless, these portions of the mural



indicate activities that certainly did happen soon after the arrival of Jonas Bronck and his wife. The coat of arms of the Netherlands is at the top center of the mural.

## The First Meeting of the Westchester County Court

The second of Hewlett's murals represents the East Bronx and shows the first meeting of the Westchester County Court with Justice John Pell presiding. Historically, the English colony of New York first created counties in 1683. Then, all of what is now Bronx County was the southern part of Westchester County. The new county seat was the town of Westchester around today's Westchester Square where East Tremont Avenue and Westchester Avenue cross. The town, founded in 1654, was the largest settlement in the new county at the time and gave its name to the county as well. John Pell had arrived from England in 1671 having inherited a huge amount of land from his childless uncle. Today's Pelham Bay Park is only a small remnant of that estate. As the wealthiest inhabitant, and also a man respected for his judicious temperament, Pell was a natural choice to be the first county judge. The court met for the first time in the town of Westchester in 1684.

The subject of the mural was chosen for two reasons. First, the building in which it was displayed was a courthouse with several courtrooms. Secondly, the structure was the Bronx County Building and the convening of the first county court on the soil of a county about to celebrate the twentieth year of its founding in 1914 seemed appropriate.

The central portion of the mural shows a trial in progress. The litigants and the lawyers are around the table to the right. They face Justice John Pell occupying the high seat with the bench in front of him. The members of the jury sit in the seats in the background. A small group of men, probably awaiting the next trial on the docket, confer in an alcove on the extreme left side of the mural. On the extreme right, another group, probably including the man recording the trial, cluster around a table bearing documents. On the wall beside them is a map showing the divisions of the area that is now The Bronx.

Hewlett's image of John Pell is a simplified version of a portrait of the man that has survived. The courtroom, however, is far too large and spacious for the one in which trials were held in 1684. In reality, construction on a building that would house this court did not begin until 1686. The coat of arms of England is at the top center of the mural.

## The Battle of Pell's Point

Hewlett's third mural represents the North Bronx and depicts the Revolutionary War Battle of Pell's Point fought in today's Pelham Bay Park on October 18, 1776. At that time General George Washington and the bulk of the Continental Army were in today's West Bronx and northern Manhattan. The British attempted to end the war quickly by landing in the cove just west of today's Rodman's Neck, march across today's Bronx and lower Westchester County to cut off any possibility of American retreat and to capture Washington and his troops. The British landing was observed by Colonel John Glover, a fisherman from Marblehead, Massachusetts, who commanded 750





Continentalists. Despite a lack of battle experience, Glover immediately positioned his men behind the stone walls flanking a road that still exists in today's park along which 4,000 British troops marched. The battle began in the vicinity of the Split Rock. Each regiment in turn rose up from behind one side of the wall or the other to fire at the British at point blank range. Startled, the British believed they were facing a far stronger force than their own. They retreated a short distance and halted their march to evaluate the situation. Glover and his men then retreated in orderly fashion. By halting the British advance, he upset their plans and gave Washington time to evacuate his troops, regroup at White Plains and continue the war to a successful conclusion.

Hewlett shows the first encounter between the British on the road and Glover's men hiding behind the stone wall and near the Split Rock. The British officer's horse in the center of the mural rears as it is startled by the unexpected American musket fire.

This is probably the most historically accurate of Hewlett's four murals in the Bronx County Building. The figure standing on the far right dressed in leather and a coonskin cap, however, seems out of place. There is no record of participants in the battle other than regular army troops. The seal of the United States of America is at the top center of the mural.

## The Departure of George Washington from the Van Cortlandt House

The West Bronx is represented in Hewlett's fourth mural. It depicts an event in November 1783 when George Washington, New York Governor George Clinton and an entourage of troops and State officials departed from the Van Cortlandt House in today's Van Cortlandt Park to cross the King's Bridge into Manhattan to take possession of New York City from the departing British. It was the last act of the American Revolution. The Van Cortlandt House, built in 1748, is the oldest house in today's Bronx. During the Revolutionary War, Washington used it as his headquarters and slept there on three occasions, 1776, 1781 and finally on this occasion in 1783.

In the mural, Washington is depicted about to shake the hand of his host, Augustus Van Cortlandt, in farewell. Members of the Van Cortlandt family and of the entourage about to leave on the journey to New York City cluster around the building's entrance and to the right of the mural. Behind Washington to the left are Continental troops standing at attention while a young Black servant holds the reins of the Commander's white horse. The elegantly dressed ladies are there to see them off.

Although the historical event occurred in the month of November, Hewlett realized that if he depicted the plants and foliage accurately, the picture would look rather drab. Exercising his artistic license, as he did to



some extent in the other three murals, here he showed trees in full leaf and colorful blooming flowers. He insisted the scene looked better that way.

## Reaction to the murals

The murals in Veterans Memorial Hall were finally unveiled in June 1934, five months after the Bronx County Building was opened to the public. No one remarked that Jonas Bronck was depicted without the beard that was usual in his era. No one complained that the first courtroom was far too large for the time. But the anomaly of trees in full leaf and flowers blooming in November as depicted in the final mural was noted prominently by newspapers on December 14, 1934.

Borough President James J. Lyons was very proud of the new County Building, including its murals. When pressed by reporters he tried to fend them off with humor. He said he thought that the Bronx climate was warmer in 1783, perhaps because the Gulf Stream moved. He said that perhaps Hewlett wanted to show that The Bronx was the flower garden of the state. Lyons summed up the unimportance of the objection by a quip: "When it's apple time in Normandy, it's Wednesday over here."

## The fate of the murals

The historical murals decorated the Veterans Memorial Hall for decades afterward. Most people used the space, with four openings to the square perimeter corridor, as a short cut to dash across from one side of the building to another. A few glanced at

the murals, still fewer stopped to admire them. On occasion, the space was used for official purposes. Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia moved his City Hall office there for three days in 1934 to mark the twentieth anniversary of Bronx County. In 1964, Borough President Joseph F. Periconi and Mayor Robert F. Wagner used the space for a formal meeting of the city's powerful Board of Estimate to mark the county's fiftieth anniversary. Sometimes the space was a convenient place for people to meet. Periodically, auctions of real estate seized by the city took place there with a small handful of realtors and landlords huddled around the auctioneer.

A major change in direction came in May of 1971. Thomas Hoving, the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, wanted to mount exhibits of a few artistic treasures in places outside of Manhattan to stimulate the interest of citizens who had never come to his museum to witness what they were missing. Bronx Borough President Robert Abrams jumped at the chance to make the Veterans Memorial Hall an exhibition space for this effort. Wooden partitions were fashioned to hold the original art works and were erected on the floor space of the Veterans Memorial Hall. A ribbon cutting ceremony, including Hoving, Abrams, Mayor John Lindsay and other dignitaries, was held with a large crowd in attendance. One consequence of dividing the space by wooden panels was to take attention away from Hewlett's murals and to partially obscure them.

When the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibit left, Borough President Robert Abrams did not want to lose the use of the Veterans Memorial Hall for cultural purposes that would enrich all Bronx residents who came there. He reached out to The Bronx County



Historical Society to mount a month long exhibit utilizing the partitions left by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Titled “A Panorama of Bronx History,” it featured maps, engravings, photographs and objects that told the sweep of the growth and development of The Bronx.

Eventually, the space was utilized by the fledgling Bronx Museum of the Arts as its first location. While works of art were shown in changing exhibits in the spacious center of Veterans Memorial Hall, the new museum’s administrators and workers were placed behind desks arrayed along the walls just beneath Hewlett’s murals. As people sensitive to art, they tried to take great care not to tape any paper to the murals or to harm them in any way. Nevertheless, their presence near the murals over the years increased the generation of dirt and grime on Hewlett’s art work.

When the Bronx Museum of the Arts finally found a permanent home on the Grand Concourse and East 165<sup>th</sup> Street in 1982, the space was immediately appropriated by Borough President Stanley Simon. He desperately needed it for his own staff. The people working there had no hesitation using the walls below the murals to store things and to tape up papers, maps and plans. Sometimes, the tape would extend upward and adhere to the extreme bottom of a mural.

In 1988, Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer observed the state of the entire County Building. Fifty-four years after its official opening, the accumulated grime from automobile and bus traffic passing by on two of the most heavily traveled streets in the borough had left a dingy coating on the façade and the statuary. Hewlett’s murals could not be displayed properly in an office setting. He ordered the space vacated. The open nature of Veterans Memorial Hall, however, created

the possibility that anyone with malicious intent could mar the murals unobserved.

Borough President Ferrer secured the funding to clean the limestone façade and the granite statuary outside. The nickel and copper spandrels separating the windows were gilded. Inside, locked double doors made of glass and brass frames topped with a bronze sculpted depiction of the Bronx borough coat-of-arms were placed at each of the four entrances to the Veterans Memorial Hall. This enabled visitors to observe the murals through the glass of the doors, but effectively prevented them from approaching the art. The doors were open to the public only on special occasions, usually when an event was scheduled for the space.

In 2010, repair work was performed throughout the interior of the Bronx County Building. Unfortunately, through carelessness, water began to seep through the walls behind Hewlett’s murals. Parts of the plaster walls also deteriorated. The work depicting the arrival of Jonas Bronck was the most seriously affected. Bubbles appeared behind the canvas and water washed away some of the paint at the top of the panel. Citizens and government officials in the building noted the damage and cried out for the murals to be restored.

Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr. worked to secure the funding for the restoration. The cause of the water leakage was eliminated and the plaster and wall paint restored. The murals were cleaned and new LED lighting was installed in the ceiling area over each mural. In 2017, the restored murals were unveiled revealing four sparkling and immaculately clean artistic representations of the historic legacy inherited by the residents of The Bronx, the city and the nation.

LLOYD ULTAN was born in The Bronx and has lived there his entire life. He is a professor of history at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey. In 1996, he was appointed the Bronx Borough Historian. He is the author of over, 1,000 articles on aspects of the history of The Bronx, and is the author or co-author of thirteen books in the field.

THE BRONX COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, founded in 1955, is a private, non-profit educational and cultural institution chartered by the New York State Board of Regents. The Society is dedicated to the collection, preservation, documentation and interpretation of the history and heritage of The Bronx and its people from the earliest historical references in the seventeenth century to the present. The Society disseminates information by utilizing its collections in exhibitions, historical research, publications and documentaries, educational and cultural programming, the operation of a research library, The Bronx County Archives, the Edgar Allan Poe Cottage and the 1758 fieldstone Valentine Varian House/Museum of Bronx History.

The Bronx County Historical Society is partially supported through funds and services provided by the NYC Departments of Cultural Affairs and Parks and Recreation, the Historic House Trust of New York City, The Bronx City Council Delegation, the Office of the President of the Borough of The Bronx, the Bronx Delegations of the NYS Assembly and the NYS Senate, the H.W. Wilson Foundation, the Astor Fund, the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation, The New York Times Foundation, the Verizon Foundation, the New Yankee Stadium Community Benefits Fund, the New York Public Library, the NYS Library, and the New York Community Trust.



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