



John Morris Dunn

Artist, Janitor, Genius

1887 - 1979

By Donald L. Pierce



John M. Dunn a “grandson of an escaped slave,” grew up in Salem, New Jersey. He was the son of William H. and Elizabeth Dunn of Salem. There is little information concerning his formative years other than he was married and living in Mannington according the 1920 census. His wife was Edith Mary Dunn and he owned his home. While living in Salem he painted a mural on the walls of Pauline’s Bar just off of Market Street, built the Stone house just over the bridge on Grant Street, and painted the portrait of Principal William C. Anderson which hangs in the library of the Salem County Historical Society.

After John graduated from grammar school in Salem his father sent him to Drexel Institute in Philadelphia where he studied stone masonry. He left the trade school in 1907 for formal art training at the Industrial School of Art in Philadelphia. A Painting entitled “Emancipation Proclamation,” and a marble bust called “Symbol of Faith,” won a bronze medal for Dunn at the 1913 exhibition by the Pennsylvania Proclamation Commission in Philadelphia.

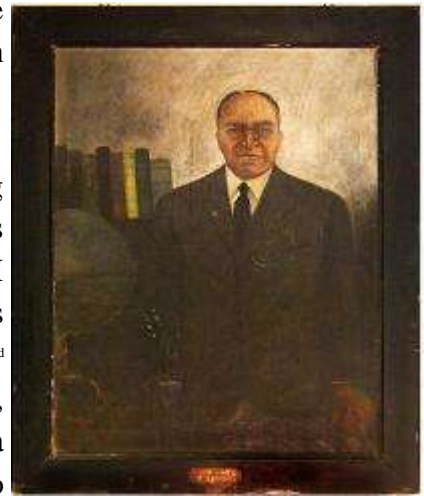
John and his family moved from Salem to Allston, Massachusetts. While there he studied sculpting under Frederick Allen at the Boston School of Art and worked as a janitor for a science laboratory at Harvard University. A Bridgeport, Connecticut, newspaper editor once called him, “a modern Leonardo da Vinci.” Quoting from an article, “While working for a living as a house-builder, gardener and janitor, Dunn has constantly gotten away from such hum-drum pursuits by painting in oils and water colors, sculpting, making violins, grinding lenses and making telescopes, cameras, building radio transmitters and working on a schooner in which he plans to sail to South America.”

The painting of Principal William C. Anderson has a very interesting history. The teachers of

Salem Grant Street School, about 1939, commissioned the painting.

There were a number of fundraisers organized to acquire the painting. One such fundraiser was a play entitled “The Golden Whistle,” staged at Mt. Hope Church. I don’t recall the author.

The play opened in a forest where there were talking and singing animals and birds. I remember my part was to awaken in this forest to see everyone upset over the loss of a golden whistle. I must have been in the 5th grade. I woke up to see two cardinals played by Mickey Giles, 2nd grade, and Lehimire McQuire, 3rd grade, a number of elves, one played by Bobby Dunn, 2nd grade, and a white rabbit played by Billy Cuff, 3rd grade. There were a number of other cast members that I don’t remember. I do remember however that they were all in costumes and I was not.



William C. Anderson Portrait

The Anderson painting hung in the hallway of the Grant Street School until the school was demolished in 1974. Fortunately Mr. William Accoo rescued the painting and placed it on loan to the Salem County Historical Society to hang in the library for a number of years. After the death of Mr. Accoo, his wife Mrs. Ida Accoo recently donated the painting to the Society in Memory of Mr. William Accoo.



John Morris Dunn with a bust of himself he created as a young man.

This Painting is Available for Adoption!

After residing for many years in our library as an object on loan, the John M. Dunn painting of Principal Anderson has been donated to the Society by Mrs. William Accoo. It is an excellent addition to our collection but this treasure needs some restoration. We are offering you the opportunity to help preserve the painting of Principal Anderson by joining our new *Adopt an Object* program. By adopting an object and making a donation toward its cleaning and conservation you will help to preserve a piece of history. In return, you will be listed on a plaque mounted next to the painting and recognized for your contribution in our newsletter, on our website and in our Past Perfect records. You will receive pre- and post-conservation photos along with a conservation report from the curator. Please call the Society for more information about this new and exciting program. (856) 935-5004 Thank You!