

## Is Mural A Step Back Or Work In Progress?

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PLANT CITY - Betty Briggs remembers the morning, some 30 years ago, when City Manager Nettie Mae Draughon summoned her husband, John, to make urgent repairs to the new train mural he'd painted on the side of a downtown building.

During the night, someone had defaced "Reflection of a Town," which featured familiar Plant City faces; among them, Albert Keys, a deaf, mute man who was a fixture at Union Depot, helping passengers with their baggage for much of his life.

White paint had been sprayed over the image of Keys' black face, along with the letters "KKK."

"Nettie Mae said to John, 'Please go down and fix that right away. We can't have that,'" recalled Betty Briggs, a columnist for the Plant City Courier & Tribune.

Now, a controversy surrounding a new mural unfolding on a wall in the downtown historical district comes with a distinct sense of déjà vu.

"It just kind of has shades of what happened back then," Briggs said. "It really makes you wonder how far we've come in 30 years."

This time the controversy centers on the image of a black woman initially included on a mural being painted by two Plant City brothers who are deeply involved in the Ybor City arts community.

### Members Of Community Critical

Blake and James Emory, long admirers of the Briggs mural, said they wanted to pay tribute to it and to their hometown after the wall that displayed the famous train depot scene was demolished last month to make way for a parking lot.

The woman in the Emorys' mural sparked criticism from the outset by some members of Plant City's black community.

Art, it is said, is in the eye of the beholder. And what Henry Davis saw was a racial stereotype.

"When I saw that bandana on that lady's head, she looked like Aunt Jemima. I thought, 'Oh, not those people - here we go again,'" said Davis, a member of the board of the Improvement League of Plant City.

However, what Davis saw and what was there were not one and the same. Upon closer inspection, the woman more closely resembled an elderly schoolmarm, wearing eyeglasses, her hair pulled into a neat

gray bun. There was no bandana, which might have given her the air of a 19th century plantation slave.

"Maybe I mis-saw the picture," Davis said. "I thought it was a bandana. I really did."

Some people might argue, "So what if it was - maybe that's how the women of the time dressed," said Henry Johnson, president of the Improvement League, a group that promotes minority rights. "Folks other than African-Americans - some don't understand why we would find that degrading. You have to have been there to understand that."

Within days, the woman had disappeared from the wall - removed not by some random vandal, but by the artists who created her. The Plant City grapevine thrummed with the news that complaints prompted the Emory brothers to rethink their mural on the building at 101 E. J. Arden Mays Blvd.

Not so, Blake Emory said. "I could paint anything and there is going to be a percentage of people who hate it and love it."

The mural, he said, is a work in progress. "I throw things up, take things down. I piece it together piece by piece."

Emory points out that he not only painted over the black woman, but also a bearded white man in a top hat that had been painted into the scene facing Collins Street, behind Espresso Yourself Coffee 101, whose owners commissioned the mural.

"I prematurely put those people up there," he said. "I needed sky and clouds. I needed room for horses and plows and berry fields."

"As long as I know I'm doing good things, the more controversy that gets raised, the more people that will get involved."

### County No Stranger To Controversy

Hillsborough County has seen its share of controversy over displays of public art.

There is an aluminum sculpture that has come to be known as "the exploding chicken," which roosts beside a skyscraper on Ashley Drive; a huge white "Slinky" stretched along Bayshore Boulevard; and a sensual green goddess known as "Lady Justice," whose bare feet rest atop a pedestal in front of the county courthouse in downtown Tampa.

All have drawn praise as well as jabs from critics who lament the aesthetics of the objects d'art and the public money used to commission them.

Plant City's public displays differ in that respect. The most visible art in this city of murals is painted on the walls of various businesses. It is grounded in real people and places. It costs taxpayers nothing.

Briggs' "Reflection of a Town," was long embraced by most residents as a monument to Plant City's heritage, both black and white.

Keys was a historical figure whose inclusion on the mural was not lost on his community.

"When you look at who helped in the workings of Plant City, Afro-Americans were right there," Johnson said. "That man was the face of the Afro-American community. Black folks could relate to him and

hopefully others could relate to him."

John Briggs immediately repaired the damage done to his mural in the 1970s and that night, the shopkeeper across the street from it sat up all night with a shotgun, hoping to catch those who would deface the city's heritage.

"The community kind of rallied together thinking that was a really horrible thing to do. Everyone knew Albert as the baggage handler and they were proud to have him up there," Betty Briggs said.

No one was prouder, however, than Keys himself, Briggs said.

"Just before he died, he had his family bring him by to see the mural one last time," she said.

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