William D. White's Wilmington

By Ryan Grover, Curator

Biggs Museum of American Art

The Biggs Museum of American Art is honored to assist William D. White's biographer, Nancy Carol Willis, to reintroduce the work of this visionary artist to the public. For over two decades, the Biggs has fostered the careers and memories of some of the region's biggest artistic talents.

The William D. White artworks found for this exhibition have elevated his career into that lofty position. The artist successfully found unique points of view to explore in his paintings, illustrations and murals. Many of his iconographic influences may have emerged from the changing face of the city of Wilmington during the artist's lifetime.

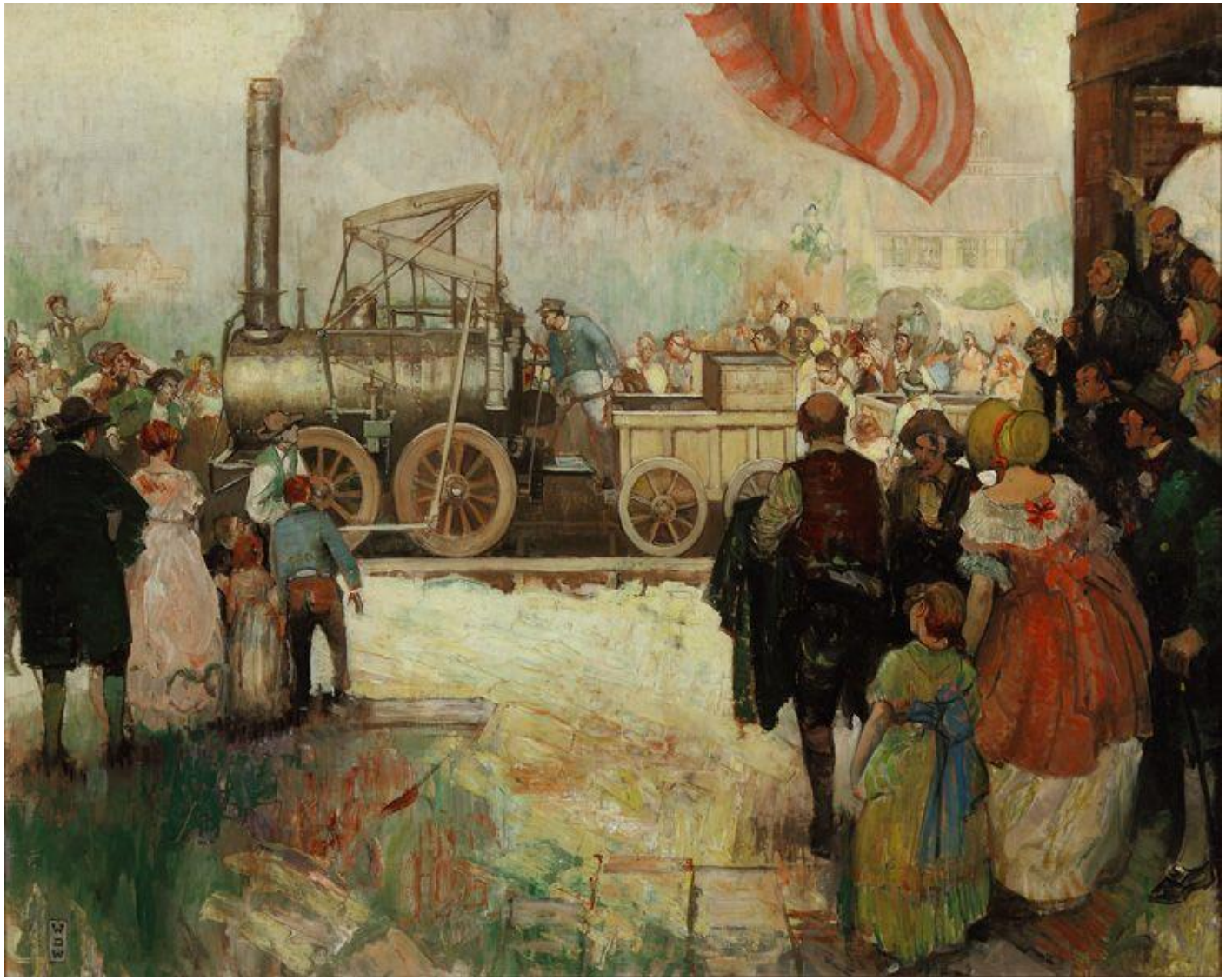
William D. White, Untitled (Brandywine Valley, c1935)

This painting demonstrates the artist's interest in the pastoral traditions in artistic depictions of local scenes and, at the same time, alludes to the artist's interest as a naturalist, a follower of Thoreau ,and a lover of the balance between the natural world and man's influence upon that landscape.

At the same time, William White was a student of the effects of industrialization on traditional communities, urbanization and urban decay. His life-long interest in sketching, capturing and ultimately immortalizing the decline of his hometown, shaped the career he created for himself and formed his most memorable images.

William D. White lived most of his life in the city of Wilmington, in the northern end of the state of Delaware, just south of Philadelphia. Post-Civil-War Wilmington, in the years leading up to White's birth in 1896, was a fast-growing industrial city.

William D. White, *Waiting for Arrivals* (Stourbridge Lion, 1925)



In 1837 the Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore railroad line opened to the city, thereby connecting Wilmington to Perryville, MD and further bridging the Delaware River and the Chesapeake (the C & D canal opened in 1829), several industrial manufacturers were established over the next sixty years.

The Lobdell Car-Wheel Company, the Pullman Palace Car Company, the J. Morton Poole Company, Remington Machine Company, the Jackson & Sharp Company, and Vulcanized Fiber are just a few of the industries that joined the DuPont Company and a myriad of river-powered mills in Wilmington.

The agrarian and fishing roots of this region also became tied to the quickly expanding rail industry and, like manufacturing, served the fast-growing mega cities of the eastern seaboard and beyond. The Civil War made Wilmington, Delaware one of the largest producers of iron and iron products in the United States. This quick wealth brought huge influxes of population and spread the city into western and northern suburbs.

Wilmington 1881

From the Map of New Castle County, Delaware 1881 G. W. Hopkins Reprint 2014 www.old-maps.com

Wilmington Population Growth

1850 – 13,979

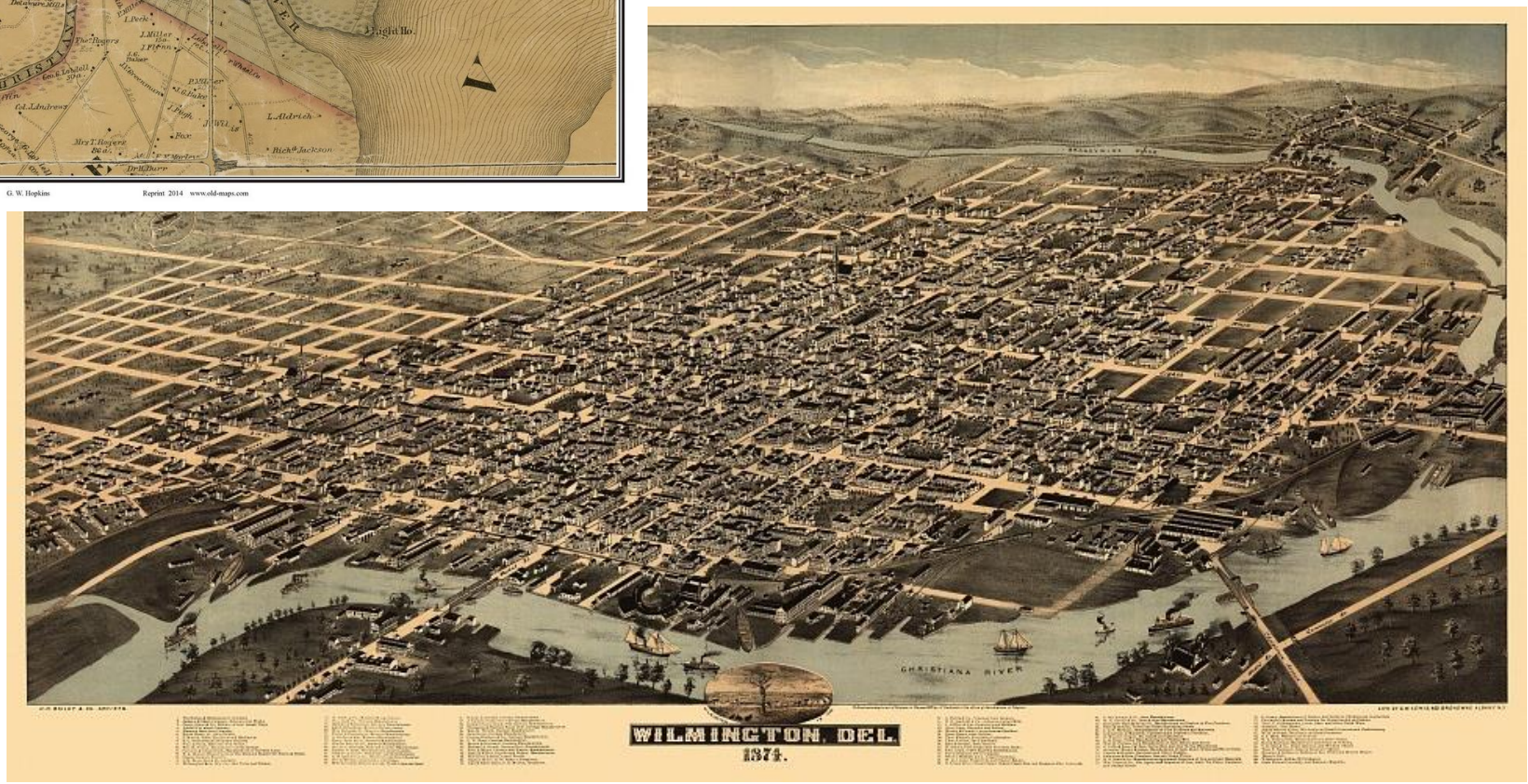
1880 – 42,499

1890 – 61,431

1900 – 76,508

1920 – 110,168

1930 – 106,597



Within the city, the 19th and early 20th centuries brought many new cultural and technological advancements.

1874: Richard Triggs Testimonial Concert - first program in the Grand Opera House.

1878: Wilmington installs first telephone line.

1882: Clawson S. Hammitt School of Art, the state's first art academy, opens in Wilmington.

1885: Patron and artist Henry Lea Tatnall, "The Father of Art" in Wilmington, dies.

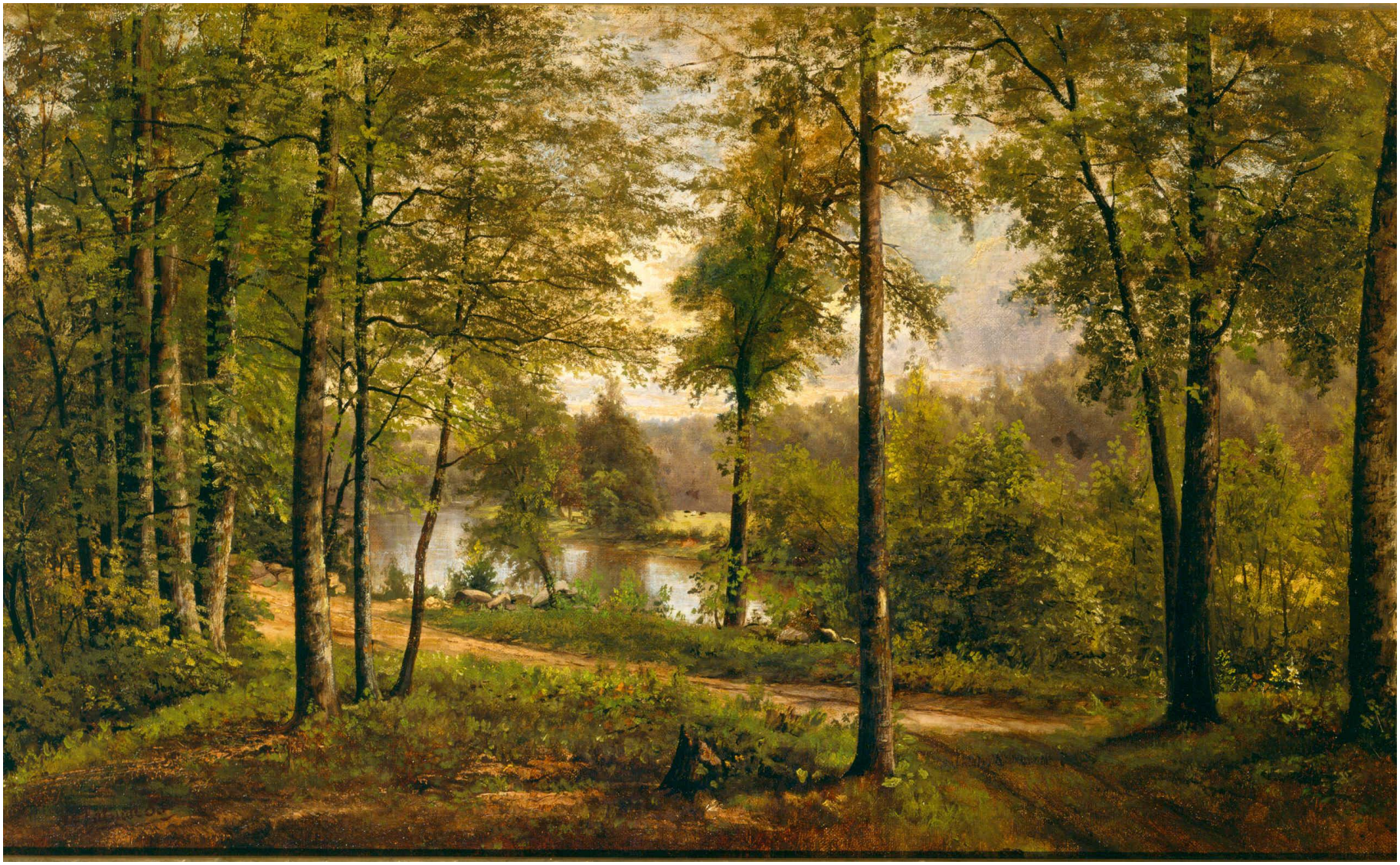
1900: Illustrator Howard Pyle opens the Brandywine School of Art in Wilmington.
1923: Building of the Wilmington Free Library IRS-1927-"Wilmington was the richest city in the United States per capita."
1928: Henryette Stadelman Whiteside opens the Wilmington Academy of Art.

Local fortunes rose with the population: 21,258 residents in 1860 grew to 76,508 in 1900. William D. White's grandparents established careers in construction and medicine in the late 1800s in support of this local population growth. In fact, his maternal grandfather, William Davidson and his brother, Thomas, owned a marble, sandstone and granite yard and supplied the monument to Delaware's second infantry of the Civil War at Gettysburg.

Industrial prosperity enveloped within the bucolic landscape of northern Delaware had long been a celebrated theme featured by many of the city's leading visual artists. Alfred Thompson Scott (1832-1914), Clawson Shakespeare Hammitt (1857-1927) and Henry Lea Tatnall (1829-1885) often depicted dams, railroad lines, bridges and mills along the Brandywine River.

Alfred T. Scott

Designed by Samuel Canby and Frederick Law Olmstead in 1886, and established as Wilmington's first public park, the Brandywine River was the site of much of Wilmington's most productive grist, gunpowder, and textile mills. James Hamilton (1819-1878) and Alexander Charles Stuart (1831-1898) focused on local marine scenes, often featuring industrial and military vessels.



Henry Lea Tatnall

Both Jefferson David Chalfant (1856-1931) and Frank English (1854-1922) featured laborers such as blacksmiths and farmers. Of these early recorders of Wilmington's early industries, Robert Shaw (1859-1912) is perhaps best remembered for intricate architectural studies of Wilmington's history of urban growth.

Frank English

DuPont Company Building (1906) 10th & Market Streets, Wilmington

During White's formative years, Wilmington's population continued to grow to a record high of 110,168 by 1920. The first World War brought unprecedented economic success to Wilmington. Dubbed the "Magic City," a 1918 newspaper advertisement claimed "Wilmington, the Wealthiest City per Capita in America."

The 1902-1906 construction of the 12-story DuPont Company headquarters at 10th & Market Streets, along with buildings for local competitors, Atlas and William White's future employer - Hercules, helped to transition Wilmington from the post-Civil War industrial giant to the expanding "white collar" city nicknamed, "Chemical Capital of the World." Wilmington's economy grew after the end of World War 1 because these companies hired highly trained managers, scientists, and technical personnel from across the United States and abroad. These well-paid workers changed Wilmington in many ways, and maybe most particularly, by precipitating a rapid exodus from the city.

Population: 1920: 110,000
1930: 100,000
1940: 112,000

Soursce: Carol E. Hoffecker, Corporate Capital: Wilmington in the Twentieth Century, Temple University Press, Philadelphia (1983)

William D. White, Untitled (Waterfront factory, n.d.)

An article entitled "Wilmington: Yesterday… Today…Tomorrow," published by the Wilmington Chamber of Commerce (July, 1929) described the "Beautiful homes, parks, playgrounds, churches, schools, and bridges; miles of perfectly paved streets, stately apartment houses, magnificent and commodious hospitals, attractive public buildings, theaters and hotels, delightful suburbs-all testify to the beauties of our city. Large retail establishments with the most modern store fronts, banks and office buildings show that we are alert commercially, while our manufacturing plants, manufacturing products of almost every kind and description, located in and around our city, provide employment for our working men and women."

The article then lists some of the city's newest accommodations, including: Motorized Police department, motorized Fire department, schools, churches, hospitals, public utilities, Diamond State Telephone Company, Delaware Power and Light Company, Wilmington Gas Company, state highways, Wilmington Marine Terminal, banking Institutions.

Demolition of old Wilmington Courthouse

In the period after World War 1, the creation of Rodney Square was achieved by demolishing the old County Court House and adding three new buildings: the City/County Building, the Wilmington Institute Free Library, and the Wilmington Trust Building. The center for financial institutions moved north along Market Street from 5th Street towards 10th.

Lower Market Street became a discard zone of older buildings and fewer public amenities. Following World War 1, the city's oldest industries, the tanneries, mills and shipyards began to close, along with Wilmington's industrial and tax base.

The Wilmington Marine Terminal opened in the 1920s, and General Motors and Chrysler would soon open plants nearby. Starting in the 1920s and 30s, Wilmington's only renovation came from the business owners such as DuPont and the banks that modernized downtown, mostly used by daytime employees who left at 5:00.

At the end of World War II, GI's who returned home to start families also left the crowded city for the suburbs, leaving the poor families living in Wilmington. A few suburban developments built during this timeframe include the Lincoln Street Development and the Wawaset Park Development by the DuPont Company. These developments were built on farmland at the expense of the local farming industry.

Wawaset Park Historical District
Photo #19, Bedford Court, c1920

William D. White, no title (men clinging to a post)

Fearing the loss of families, and an eroding tax base, a plan for urban renewal was started for Wilmington's east side under the terms of the Federal Housing Act of 1949.

The City demolished two acres of Poplar Street (539 houses total) and was later expanded to King Street. The torn down section of town sat as a vacant "wasteland" for over a decade and a demoralizing symbol of the destruction of a neighborhood from which Wilmington never recovered.

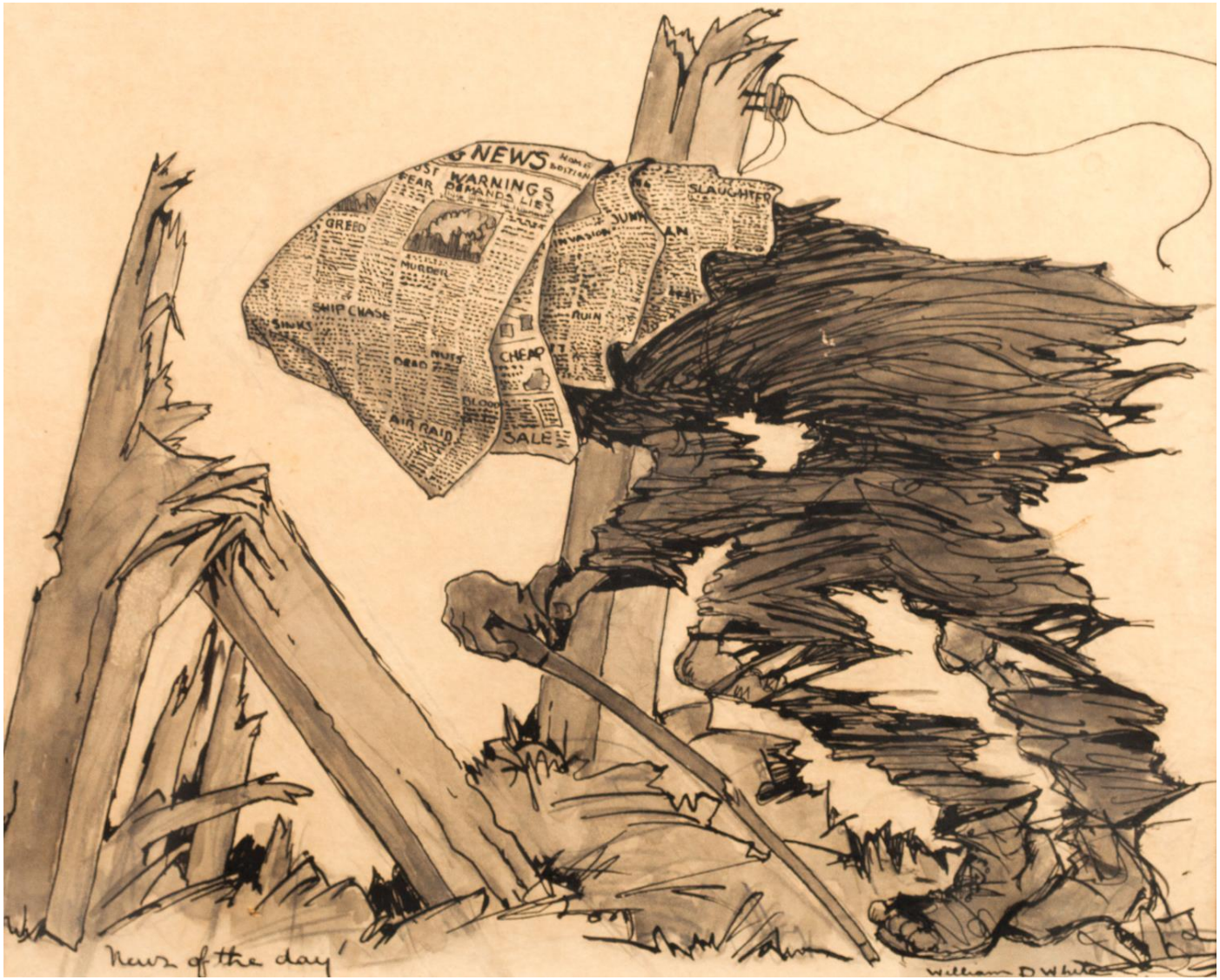
Delaware historian, Carol E. Hoffecker, has pointed out that Wilmington's successes could be measured in economic markers such as the dramatic increase in the number of railroad car makers and leather-goods manufacturers, as well as in consumer markers such as the 4000 automobiles already purchased in Wilmington by 1917.

However, she also describes how the growing middle class was dissatisfied with a neglected infrastructure of unpaved streets, inadequate housing, and poor public schools caused by a weak local government with a reputation for civic lethargy.

Ibid. p. 71

William D. White, Untitled (Wilmington east side neighborhood, c1938)

William D. White, *News of the Day* (c1940)



Instead of annexing the suburbs to help support the necessary improvements to Wilmington's infrastructure and to organize an overarching urban plan, city officials began to allow its slow disintegration. Furthermore, few improvements were made to house a growing population of the poor and people of color.

As Hoffecker points out, "Wilmington was completely unprepared to the face the Depression" that would crash in a few short years. City and federal relief programs that were soon to come favored roads and suburban building over inner-city renovation and further fueled growth in the ring of disjointed towns encircling Wilmington.

William D. White, *Obtrusion* (c. 1940)

"At the end of the 1920s, Wilmington was a city of much unfulfilled promise."

No improved city charter: Wilmington government followed a charter, established 1739 and revised in 1883, that maintained decentralized board structure, resulting in a weak central government.

Didn't annex the growing suburbs into the tax base.

No decent housing for a growing poor, and especially black, population.

Failure to begin serious overall urban planning.

The plight of two ill-clothed and poorly housed children, reflective of the Twenty-Five Neediest Families appeal, is depicted in this pen-and-pencil sketch contributed by Illustrator William D. White of Wilmington.

Wilmington News Journal *25 Neediest Families* campaign, 1953

Thousands of local workers were laid off from companies that never fully recovered from the post WWI downturn in local manufacturing, such as shipbuilding. Even the impenetrable Du Pont Company declined 18% from 1929-1930; 14.5 % 1930-31.

Associated Charities, soon to be renamed the Family Society, had no war chest and relied exclusively on private contributions. The State had no system of public welfare, relying on each county's alms house - an outdated holdover from colonial days. City and Federal depression programs favored roads and suburban building, not inner city renovation.

Yet, housing surveys of the 1930s found that nearly half of Wilmington's 20,000 residential structures had no indoor toilets, and almost as many had no tub or shower; nearly three quarters lacked central heating. The State Housing Commission found that 80% of the city's people had incomes below $2000.

Notable social historian, Connie Cooper, wrote that by 1900 Wilmington's population reached 76,508, and King Street supported over 240 stores and business (most of them food), twice as many as 20 years earlier. Several large-scale Market Houses were in operation for the sale of locally produced goods.

William D. White,
Untitled (Victory Café, c1955)

William D. White,
***Woman Selling Chickens*, 1934**

The mobility afforded by automobiles contributed to the death of Wilmington's market houses in the 1920s and 1930s. By 1920, only about 180 stores remained on Market Street, and many had a bad reputation for high prices, bad service, unclean environment and increasing congestion.

By 1940, only 130 stores remained in the King Street area, and by the 1950s, suburbanization had all but killed the King Street market.

William D. White's emergence as an artist coincided with the growing economic dichotomy of Wilmington and other industrial cities in America in the years before the Great Depression. He would have witnessed the plight of the working poor alluded to in the realist subjects of artists with whom he studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts: Hugh Breckenridge, Henry McCarter, & Daniel Garber.

White's lifelong interest in depicting the products, environments, and people of labor may have been further reinforced through the notorious American realists that exhibited in the Academy's annual expositions during his student years, including: Robert Henri, John Sloan, George Luks, Everett Shinn, William Glackens & members of The Eight and the Ashcan School. The effects of the often polarized, and wavering economy of Wilmington increasingly became the subjects of this socially conscious artist and he gravitated to images of the disenfranchised, the voiceless and the maligned.

While William D. White produced a wide variety of images for illustration, from ball gowns to Mexican copper miners; he imbued his working-man subjects with a special, almost religious reverence. A keen observer of human frailty, he found a way to demonstrate their inner strength of character - a character he first, and often, explored in the subjects of his own, Wilmington.

William D. White,
***Night Shift on Broad Street*, c1926**