

Notes from the Firehouse

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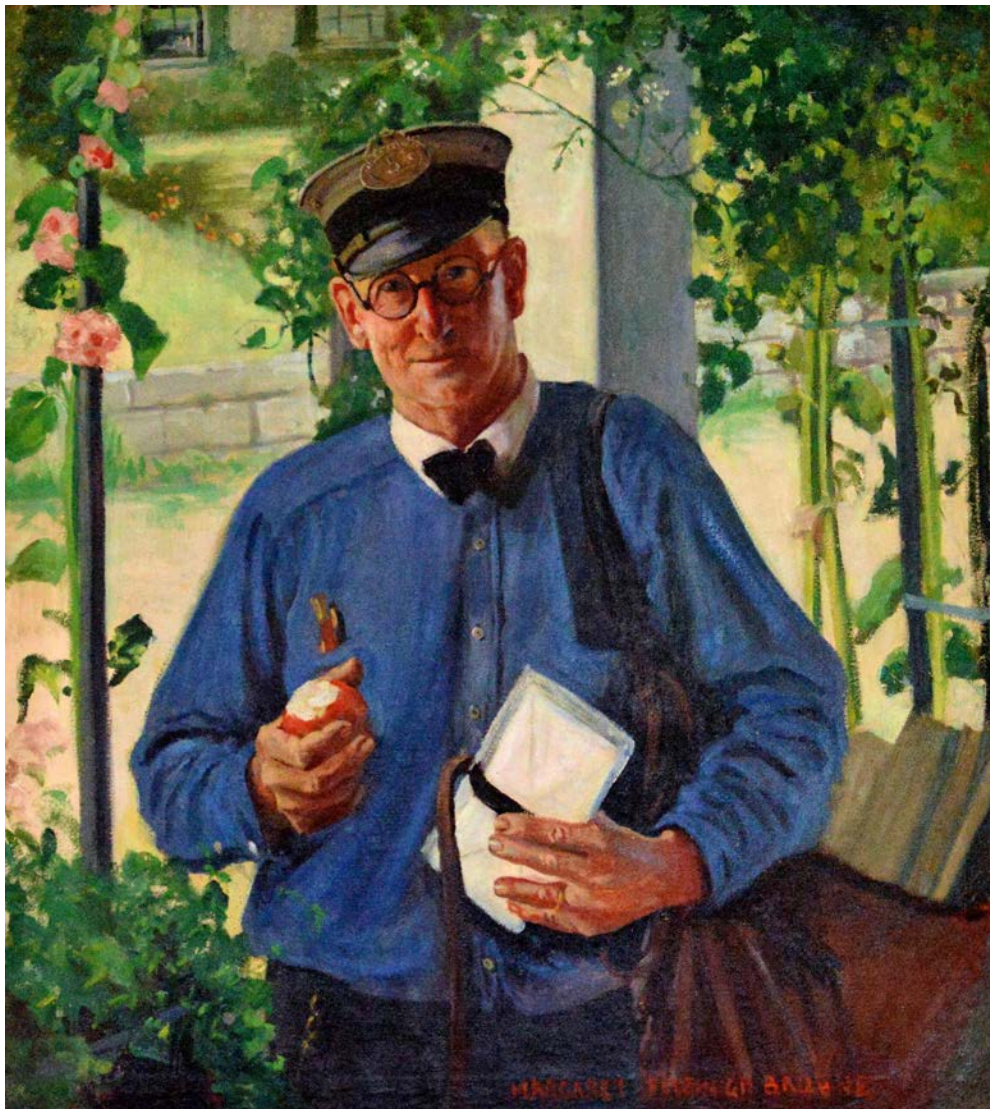
The Village Postman

Portrait of James T. Morrow Jr

From the *Squam Portraits* of Margaret Fitzhugh Browne

By

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If those in Annisquam were asked to name just one painting by Margaret Fitzhugh Browne (MFB) that is in the Village Hall, the portrait of James (Jim) Morrow, entitled *The Village Postman*, would probably top the list. Its position, to the right of the stage in the village hall, is the perfect place for Jim to engage your attention.

Born (1870) and raised in Gloucester by Nova Scotian parents, James Morrow Jr. grew up at 24 Taylor Street. In 1892, while employed as a shoemaker at a shoe factory, he married Carrie Procter, also from Gloucester. The 1900 census records them living on Perkins street; Jim is working at a shoe factory as a “heel shaver.” By 1910, Jim, Carrie, and three daughters, are at 75 Leonard Street, Annisquam. Jim has exchanged his job from making shoes to wearing them out! At 39 years of age he is a letter carrier, hired by the U.S. Government and assigned to the Annisquam post office where Charles Cunningham is the postmaster.



AHSPC384 Date uncertain, but between 1907 & 1927. Charles Cunningham, Postmaster, is in the middle; James T. Morrow is likely to be one of the Carriers.

Carrie died in 1915 and Jim remarried in 1917. With his second wife, Elizabeth Quinn, he had three sons, and the family moved to the house at 701 Washington Street. While delivering mail to the people of Annisquam, his sunny disposition earned him the label of “Sunny Jim”. He became famous around the world after a newspaper article, published on February 6, 1931, explained how he hinted at contents of letters as he approached the recipient.

Clipping below is from the Annisquam Village Hall Association Scrapbook.
<https://archive.org/search.php?query=Annisquam%20historical%20society>



Jim Morrow is perhaps the most original mail carrier in these United States. Village housewives know by his whistle the character of the mail they are about to receive. He takes his cue from the postmarks and return addresses. For example, if Aunt Emma sees him approaching her front gate whistling a medley of "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean", "Anchors Aweigh", "Star Spangled Banner" and "Dixie," she knows without looking that her morning's batch of communications will be a letter from her brother in Scotland, one from her nephew at Annapolis, her husband's pension check from Washington and a card from a neighbor's child in Miami. "Sunny" Jim rarely guesses wrong on a name in the upper left hand corner. They tell a story of the time he gave a woman something from a Gloucester dentist, accompanied by the whistled line from "Over There", the one about "The Yanks Are Coming". And sure enough the lady had seven teeth yanked that very afternoon. Later, when questioned, he admitted that his cue in that instance was derived from the maiden's swollen jaw. Otherwise the envelope could have contained a bill rather than a notice of an appointment.

Mr. Morrow is consistent; on the first of the month most of his customers get a mournful line from Chopin's "Funeral March".

Local newspaper articles also reported Jim Morrow's involvement in plays and musicals that were performed in Annisquam during the early years of the twentieth century.

MFB painted Jim's portrait in the summer of 1929, when he was 59 years old. Because the creation of Jim Morrow's portrait was documented in MFB's diary of 1929, I have transcribed her written entries, below. The entire diary is online at www.Archive.org

All transcriptions are in boldface type; the spelling and punctuation is as written.

Sunday, August 25. [1929]

Want to start Jimmy Morrow soon too.

Mention of the postman as being the subject of one of her “Squam portraits” was a written afterthought when MFB was listing her plans for the rest of the month. In the summer of 1928, MFB had finished painting Howard Blackburn’s portrait. Back in Annisquam in the late spring of 1929, she had likely been thinking of another subject for her growing number of Gloucester portraits.

Lunch on Tuesday was at “Mrs. Adams”:

Tuesday, August 27th

I beat it back to the studio, as Jimmy Morrow was coming for me to make the sketch for the painting I am going to do of him. I posed him with his mail bag over his shoulder, a bundle of letters in one hand and an apple with a bite out of it in the other leaning against one of the posts of the piazza with some hollyhocks and a bit of the street in the background I had a rather interrupted time as the telephone kept ringing but managed to get the sketch made before he had to go back to the P.O.

(The site of Jim Morrow’s pose, is shown at the completion of all the text.)

Wednesday, August 28.

I went over to Mrs P.’s for lunch and painted on Jimmy Morrows picture from one to 2:30.

Mrs. P. is Hulda Publicover; you will see her in two later “Squam portraits.” MFB often got her meals at Mrs. P.’s boarding house, or at Nancy Flagg’s “The Barnacle”. The aforementioned Mrs. Adams seems to have run a restaurant for lunches and dinners. I have not (yet) identified her place of business.

Thursday, Aug. 29.

...Lunch at Mrs P’s and painted J. Morrow. He is thrilled about being painted and very amusing and there is a noticeable improvement in the delivery of the morning mail as he has to hustle over his route to get through in time for a sitting.

Friday Aug, 30.

Painted Jimmy M. till 2.30, got on finely.

MFB had several favorite words that she sprinkled throughout her diaries: “finely”, “thrilling” or “thrilled”, and “crazy” as in “crazy about the portrait.”

Tuesday, Sept. 3.

I had lunch at Mrs. P.’s and beat it back to the studio to paint on Jimmy Morrow.

Wednesday, Sept. 4.

It got cloudy about noon time so I couldn't paint on Jimmy Morrow

Thursday, Sept. 5.

When we got back to Squam I had lunch at Mrs P,'s so as to be ready to paint Jimmy M. as at that time it looked lighter but it closed in again...

Tuesday, Sept. 10.

I went over to Mrs. P.'s for lunch and painted Jimmy Morrow afterwards,

Wednesday, September 11

....I had a hurried lunch and painted on Jimmy Morrow until 2.30. Got on finely, did a nice hand. Mrs. Nordell and a friend of hers happened along just as I was finishing and saw my things. Mrs N. gave me some good suggestions as to composition and the background of Jimmy Morrow.

MFB did not take offence at suggestions and often incorporated others' ideas into her paintings.

Thursday, Sept. 12

...It had clouded over so that I couldn't paint Jimmy Morrow.

Monday, Sept. 16.

They telephoned again at 2:30 just after I got through painting Jimmy Morrow (I wasn't able to do much on him and don't think I improved it much)

Friday, Sept. 20

I had lunch at Mrs P.'s (her last day.)....Came back and painted on Jimmy Morrow. Pretty cold but I managed to practically finish it. Think I can do the rest when I come back in Oct.

The telephone calls from September 16th relayed news of her sister's illness. She returned to Annisquam, from Boston, in October of 1929.

There are two themes that run through the entries above--and through later entries in her diaries. The place and time of day, was rigidly set for each sitting so that the light would be as consistent as possible, and MFB got lunch at midday!

Tuesday, October 8.

After lunch I had my last sitting with Jimmy Morrow and finished it. It was rather cold and windy and the sun kept going behind clouds but it was out enough to get what I wanted...

...While I was away...Jimmy Morrow's portrait [was put] on an easel inside the house as if he were looking out the window and J. was delighted because his family were fooled by it and thought he was standing there....

Jim Morrow made his postal rounds in Annisquam, but *The Village Postman* made the rounds of art galleries in New York, Atlanta, Boston, and Ogunquit Maine. It was boxed and sent by train and car to each art show. *The Village Postman* and another portrait, were selected and photographed for the catalogue of the December 1929 show of work by women painters and sculptors that was held in New York:

Was quite pleased with the way they looked but not altogether satisfied.
(A copy of the black and white photograph is in the AHS scrapbook.)

Tuesday, Sept. 22. [1931]

I drove up to Ogunquit. Got there in two hours and went to the bathing beach and had a swim in the surf and ate my lunch (sandwiches etc. that I put up before I started) in the sand dunes in my bathing suit. It was lovely. ...and there were several people on the beach, but not too many. Not a cheap crowd either. Afterwards I drove over to the Art Centre [sic]....and got my pictures.... I got home safely, taking 2 ½ hours as I couldn't drive as fast with the Village Postman on the back of the car.

In 1931, MFB had a Ford Cabriolet. *The Village Postman* was undoubtedly in the rumble seat! (Bill Friend of Annisquam was the proud owner of one of MFB's cars that she had traded in for a later model....)

Meanwhile, the actual Jimmy Morrow was on foot, making postal deliveries in Annisquam. In 1932 he completed 25 years of service as carrier in the village. By then, Charles Cunningham had retired, and Brant Dexter was superintendent of the Post Office which was based in the Village Hall.



Glued into the inside back cover of Volume 12 of MFB's diary, is a fragment of newspaper that refers to Jim Morrow's death in 1937. The article notes that the postman had been ill, confined to his home, since his retirement in 1935. But MFB may not have lost her connection to the family. On May 21, 1939, she stopped to see a Mrs. Morrow (whom I assume to be the postman's widow), and "**engaged her to cook, etc. for us next summer at 15 a week.**" Mrs. Morrow may well have needed the economic help, and MFB would have been able to have her lunches....

James T. Morrow is buried in Beechbrook cemetery in the family plot; the lichen-scarred stone also lists his father and mother.



The map demonstrates MFB's Cove House between what is now called the Custom House wharf, and The Barnacle. Jim Morrow was posed on the piazza of Cove House across from 26 River Road.

The stone wall that you can see in the painting remains. The lower windows of 26 River Road and the front lawn, shown in the painting, are now obscured by plantings. (Photographed 2019)

The hollyhocks climbing along the pole of MFB's piazza were not as bountiful as those in the Kollers' garden at 50 Leonard St. (Photographed 2019)



26 River Road