

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

*The Other People
In Norman Rockwell's
America*

Jane Allen Petrick

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Note to the Reader

Whether we love his work or hate it, most of us think of Norman Rockwell as the poster child for an all-white America. I know I did. That is, until I took the uncanny journey I share with you in this book. Then I discovered a surprisingly different truth: Norman Rockwell was into multiculturalism long before the word was even invented.

Working from live models, the famous illustrator was slipping people of color (the term I use for the multi-ethnic group of Chinese and Lebanese, Navajos and African Americans the artist portrayed) into his illustrations of America from the earliest days of his career. Those people of color are still in those illustrations. They never disappeared. But the reason we don't know about them is because, up until now, they seem to have been routinely overlooked.

For example, in her book, "Norman Rockwell's People", Susan E. Meyer catalogues by name over one hundred and twenty Norman Rockwell models, including two dogs, Bozo and Spot. But not one model of color is named in the book.

Another case in point? "America, Illustrated", an article written for *The New York Times* by Deborah Solomon, art critic and journalist. In honor of Independence Day, the July 1, 2010 edition of the paper was dedicated to "all things American".

"America, Illustrated" pointed out that Norman Rockwell's work was experiencing a resurgence among collectors and museumgoers. Why? Because the illustrator's vision of America provided "harmony and freckles for tough times." As Solomon put it, Norman Rockwell's America symbolized "America before the fall." This America was, it seems, all sweetness and light. Solomon simply asserts: "It is true that his (Rockwell's) work does not acknowledge social hardships or injustice."

The America portrayed by Norman Rockwell was also, apparently, all white. Seven full-color reproductions of Rockwell's work augment the

multi-page *Times* article. The featured illustration is “Spirit of America” (1929), a 9” x 6” blow-up of one of the artist’s more “Dudley Doright”-looking Boy Scouts. None of the pictures chosen to illustrate the article includes a person of color.

This is puzzling. As an art critic, Deborah Solomon surely was aware of Norman Rockwell’s civil rights paintings. The most famous of these works, “The Problem We All Live With”, portrays a little black girl integrating a New Orleans school.

One hundred and seven *New York Times* readers commented on “America, Illustrated”: most of them were not happy with the article. Many remarks cited Solomon’s failure to mention “The Problem We All Live With”. One reader bluntly quipped: “The reporter (Solomon) was asleep at the switch.” The other people in Norman Rockwell’s America, the people of color, had been strangely overlooked, again.



This book hopes to begin to correct this oversight. It will be an eye opener for everyone who loves Norman Rockwell, everyone who hates Norman Rockwell, and for all those people in between who never thought much about Norman Rockwell because they believed Norman Rockwell never thought much about them. *Hidden in Plain Sight: The Other People in Norman Rockwell’s America* is dedicated to those “other people”: individuals who have been without name or face or voice for so long. And it is dedicated to Norman Rockwell himself, the “hidden” Norman Rockwell, the man who conspired to put those “other people” into the picture in the first place.

CONTENTS

Prologue -----	vii
Chapter 1: Early Glimpses-----	1
Chapter 2: Hiding In The White House -----	17
Chapter 3: The Rockwell Models Of Washington County -----	25
Chapter 4: Moving On: The Little Black Girl(s) In The Little White Dress -----	45
Chapter 5: The Others In “The Golden Rule”-----	63
Chapter 6: Modeling The 60’s -----	69
Chapter 7: Coloring The Boy Scouts -----	81
Chapter 8: The Navajos, The Illustrator, And Glen Canyon Dam -----	87
Chapter 9: Norman Rockwell Saved My Life-----	99
Chapter 10: The Whitewash -----	113
Epilogue -----	119

Prologue

“Finally, someone is looking. . .”

Laura Claridge, Norman Rockwell biographer

A colored man is perched on top of the Statue of Liberty. Norman Rockwell put him there. But for nearly sixty-five years, no one has said a word about him.



Working on the Statue of Liberty by Norman Rockwell. July 6, 1946

“Working on The Statue of Liberty” appeared as the July 4th, 1946 cover for *The Saturday Evening Post*. The illustration portrays the famous lady being proudly refurbished by five diligent workmen. Three of the workers are white. One of the workmen is a caricature of Norman Rockwell. The fifth worker, the one next to the Rockwell look-alike, is brown.

The model for all of the figures (except the Rockwell look-alike of course) was a white Vermont construction worker named Sousy. Working from photos of Sousy, Norman Rockwell produced a series of charcoal sketches. These drawings reveal that, as “Working on The Statue of Liberty” evolved, Rockwell decided to make a statement about the American experience. He picked up a colored pencil and changed the skin tone of one man from white to brown.

Amazingly, this statement from Norman Rockwell has escaped all notice. The brown man sat unacknowledged on top of Rockwell’s Statue of Liberty for sixty-five years before I noticed him while looking for people who looked like me in Norman Rockwell’s America. Here’s how it all started. . .



October, 2009. Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Final stop of three-day road trip. Given an unseasonably frosty morning and my thinned out blood, I am bundled up like Nanook of the North.

My friend and traveling buddy Pennie Scales (a hardy Yankee farm girl, much more lightly dressed than me) proceeded directly to the main gallery. I, on the other hand, had to stop to de-mummify myself in the coat room. After piling my winter gear into a locker, I headed towards the galleries.

The main corridor of the museum opens onto a large rotunda. Coming out of the coat room into this corridor and looking straight ahead, I could see the circular visitors’ desk and beyond that, the back wall of the first gallery.

As I stuffed the locker key into my back pocket, I realized I was alone in the hallway. The visitors’ desk was virtually empty as well. But just beyond it, a noisy mass of heads and torsos pulsed, apparently gathering for a museum tour. A huge painting looked down upon the hubbub from the back gallery wall. My eyes moved up to it and I stood stock still.

Over the top of the crowd, left profile facing me, floated a dark brown forehead topped by a thick wooly braid.

My shoulders dropped. My breathing slowed. My lips released a yogic “aa-ahh”, curving into a slight smile. I felt great. And I did not have the slightest idea why.

As the tour group surged off with its docent, I moved closer to the painting. Then, there I was, standing right in front of. . . myself! My six-years old, 1950's, Bridgeport, Connecticut self. Skin oiled, socks evenly folded down, white sneakers gleaming. Walking with a straight back the way numerous trips up and down our railroad apartment with Encyclopedia Britannicas on my head had taught me to do. There was my double, striding off to school in Norman Rockwell's painting, "The Problem We All Live With."

The docent and her ducklings were headed my way, so I tacked against the flock to the other side of the room. There I encountered a portrait of a crisply dressed African-American dining car waiter: shoes polished, uniform immaculate, dignity as well as forbearance in the smile he gives his young white customer. That waiter was my Uncle Hugh!

Well, not really. But at that moment, in my strangely-altered state, he seemed to be my Uncle Hugh.

Hugh was my mother's oldest brother. My mother was the third youngest of thirteen children born to a somewhat self-consciously middle class black family in Baltimore, Maryland. Her big brothers were like second daddies to her, and although he died before I was born, my mother often told me stories about this favorite brother. The family was very proud of the fact that Hugh had a job as a Pullman porter, great work for a colored man in those days.

Mommy would reminisce about how sharp Hugh looked in his gleaming Pullman uniform. When he got home from a tour on the trains, Hugh would scoop up his little sister, swing her above his head until she was hysterical with giggles and then, from the deep recesses of his jacket pockets, present her with a rainbow of hard candies. I always felt a special fondness for my Uncle Hugh. And now, here he was, (or at least he seemed to be), smiling out from the Norman Rockwell painting, "Boy in a Dining Car".

Using a dining car from the New York Central's Lake Shore Limited as his setting, Norman Rockwell had captured a moment in his own son Peter's life when he created the December 7, 1946 Saturday Evening Post cover, "Boy in a Dining Car". In the illustration, a young white patron earnestly tries to calculate a tip for the smiling black waiter standing by. Ten year old Peter Rockwell himself was the model for the young patron. Norman Rockwell hired Jefferson Smith, a twenty-eight year veteran

employee on the New York Central Railroad, to portray himself as the waiter in the tableau.

I looked up into the waiter's face and smiled. "Hi, Uncle Hugh!" I whispered. "How you doin'?" Then that strange feeling of relaxation flowed over me again. And this time, I knew why.

Traditionally (at least among those of us who were raised right), when one African American encounters another in a situation where we are few, some gesture of acknowledgement occurs. A head nod. Eye contact and a slight smile. A soft, "How you doin'?"

Standing in this gallery of the Norman Rockwell Museum, I realized that I had had no such interaction for three days. In all the historic sites I had visited, all the trails Pennie and I had hiked, all the gift shops we had browsed, coffee shops in which we had gossiped, in all that time and all those places, I had not seen nor been greeted by one other black person.

Now I am very used to being "the only one." A la Ralph Ellison in his book, The Invisible Man, I have internalized my own invisibility. So three days in the Berkshires with no other black people around was not startling. What was startlingly was stumbling upon a clear presence of me and my friends and my family, thanks to Norman Rockwell!



Erin McLaughlin, a blogger on "Teaching Digital History," observes that, on the surface, "Boy in a Dining Car" appears to be a coming-of-age narrative. However, she continues, the work holds much deeper interpretations: "(The porter views) the young boy with compassion and patience. In this way, it is the African American man (who has the) confidence and power and in turn, he is using his power to give respect and compassion (back) to the young boy."

Respect, compassion and patience: that was my Uncle Hugh. And Norman Rockwell had captured it all.

My mind reeled. Norman Rockwell, icon of white-on-white America, had created portrayals of black people that rang very true to me as a black person.

The docent was now concluding her tour, heading back into the gallery in which I stood. Concluding her remarks, she commented that all of Rockwell's

portrayals were drawn from live models. "Including the people of color?" I turned and asked her. "Yes," she replied, "including the people of color."

Questions flew around in my head. Who were these "colored" models? Where had Norman Rockwell found them? What had been the quality of their experiences with the famous illustrator? And why had Rockwell chosen to depict them at all?

Standing in front of my "Uncle Hugh" that chilly October morning, I decided to go and find out.

Chapter 1

EARLY GLIMPSES

Colored people were *the* topic of conversation in Norman Rockwell's Vermont during the spring of 1946. And those conversations were not always pleasant.

In March of that year, Crystal Malone, a 19-year-old junior at the University of Vermont, Burlington, had been accepted as a pledge to the *Upsilon* chapter of *Alpha Xi Delta* sorority. Malone, a native of Washington, D.C., was black. *Alpha Xi Delta*, founded in 1893 in Galesburg, Illinois, had been, up until Miss Malone's pledge, all white.

When Crystal Malone arrived as a freshman at UVM in 1943, there was only one other black student on campus. Having grown up in and been conditioned by the segregated world of Washington, Crystal never expected to be asked to join a white sorority. She was pleasantly shocked when she was.

Alpha Xi Delta's invitation to Crystal may have been one of the outcomes of a conference held at UVM the previous November. Anti-Semitism and "anti-Negroism" were its themes. According to "The Cynic," the UVM school paper, when the conference ended, one hundred students "thronged the lounge to elect a committee to investigate the quota system and abolish it on this campus."

The committee met with quick success in several areas. In January, 1946, "The Cynic" proudly announced, "Henceforth, all sorority rushing will be on a basis of no racial or religious discrimination."

Interviewed about the matter decades later, Crystal Malone Brown recalled, "When I was asked to join *Alpha Xi Delta*, I remember being pleased—the spoken emotions and feelings after the war (World War II) made me think it was possible."

But it wasn't. When *Upsilon* Chapter announced that it had pledged Crystal Malone, *Alpha Xi Delta* national president, Beverly Robinson, immediately traveled from Washington, D.C. to Burlington. Her mission: convince the black co-ed not to go through with the pledge. Sitting in a student lounge, Mrs. Robinson advised Malone, "Life is selective, and maybe it's just as well to learn it while we are young."

Crystal Malone declined to be de-selected. *Upsilon* chapter vowed to stand by their colored pledge and ushered her into full sisterhood—at which point the national office of the sorority suspended the UVM chapter.

The women of *Upsilon* chapter appealed to the university administration for help. But university President J.S. Millis was somewhat wishy-washy concerning the controversy. According to "The Cynic," the president's response was, "This is a matter between the local sorority and the national." The campus, and a good part of the state of Vermont, was thrown into an uproar.

UVM faculty and students staged massive protests, overwhelmingly in support of the young sorority women of *Upsilon* chapter. *Life* magazine sent a crew up to Burlington to cover the story, complete with photographs of Malone, a quintessential co-ed in pearls and cashmere. In the article, "Sorority Fight: Vermont Chapter Stirs Nationwide Controversy by Admitting Negro", published May 20, 1946, the magazine smugly observes, "Last winter *Life* pointed out that sororities were undemocratic."

Throughout Vermont, letters to the editor poured into local newspapers, some in support of the *Upsilon* chapter coeds, many, with nasty racial epithets, against them. Letters poured into the office of President J.S. Millis as well, the majority of them urging him to take a strong stand in support of Crystal Malone and her soon-to-be sorority sisters. One of those letters was from one of Vermont's most famous citizens: Norman Rockwell.

Norman Rockwell hated bigotry. Decades later, he would tell *Esquire Magazine*, "I was born a white Protestant with some prejudices which I am continuously trying to eradicate."

Rockwell's rejection of those prejudices was one of the many reasons he wasn't close to his only sibling, Jerry. Jerry's incessant racist jokes infuriated Rockwell. But the venom that the illustrator had witnessed oozing forth

when news broke about a colored girl pledging *Alpha Xi Delta*? That had been worse than anything he had ever heard from Jerry.

And so Rockwell, along with his wife Mary and their friends John and Dorothy Canfield Fisher, sent UVM President J.S. Millis a statement of outrage and support: outrage at the prejudice being displayed and support for those standing up against it. The famous illustrator wanted to be sure the letter showed Malone and those spunky sorority girls that Norman Rockwell was proud to stand with them.

But President Millis did not step in and the national office of *Alpha Xi Delta* did not back down. So the sorority sisters of *Upsilon* Chapter, including Crystal Malone, who had completed her pledge and “gone over,” performed an historic act of protest: they burned their sorority charter. Doing so meant that no UVM group, including themselves, could use the name *Alpha Xi Delta* for five years. Knowing this, the chapter decided to close its doors, essentially saying: “if we can’t be *Alpha Xi Delta* with Crystal, there will be no *Alpha Xi Delta*.”

Crystal Malone went on to graduate as a business major with the Class of 1947 and to marry Wesley Brown, the first African-American graduate of the US Naval Academy at Annapolis. In 2008, the National Office of *Alpha Xi Delta* sought out Crystal Malone Brown, wishing to offer her a formal apology. As Deanna Detchemendy, then national president of the sorority recounts:

When I contacted Mrs. Brown’s daughter (Carol Jackson) with the hopes of getting in touch with Mrs. Brown and arranging a meeting at which Alpha Xi Delta would formally apologize, she shared that Mrs. Brown had generally conveyed positive memories of her relationship with Alpha Xi Delta to her children, most particularly of her Upsilon Chapter sisters who were so very supportive. And that while certainly difficult, she (Mrs. Brown) perceived the incident with our then-national officers as one that helped shaped her character in positive ways as an adult.

Detchemendy went on to say that:

Mrs. Brown was not in good health, and Mrs. Brown had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and was experiencing (and would continue to experience) related mental deterioration. Given this information, we felt that outreach to Mrs. Brown at that point and the related dredging of negative memories could easily cause more harm than good at this stressful time for the family, and so we determined to forego "closure" on our end in order to avoid opening old wounds for Mrs. Brown or her family.

Crystal Malone never modeled for Norman Rockwell. But photos in *Life* magazine confirm that, with her saffron-colored skin and long, silky tresses, Crystal could have portrayed Spice Mackson. Spice is the key figure in "Love Ouanga," Rockwell's illustration of a black Pentecostal congregation for a short story of the same name.

"Love Ouanga"

"Love Ouanga", written by Kenneth Perkins, appeared in the June, 1936 issue of *American Magazine*. Set in 1930's New Orleans, the story is a beautiful and rich reprise of *La Traviata*, but this time with a happy ending. And this time, the characters are all black.



***Love Ouanga* by Norman Rockwell. June, 1936**



Spice Mackson lives in a better, although not the best, part of black New Orleans, her simple cabin serving as a beauty parlor by day and a love nest for hire by night. Only two people hold the center of Spice's love. The first is her baby boy, "one of the gods, a little one, but as real as ever her ancestors had worshipped in Guinea": a little god, yes, but one who needs a poppa. The second is Tad Barley, scion of a prominent black New Orleans family, who is ready and willing to fill that need and marry Spice: lock, stock and baby.

The fly in the ointment is Tad's father, Aesop Barley. A powerful precinct boss who speaks in the affected cadences of "the educated negro," Barley Senior confidently opines that his degrees from Tuskegee Institute and Howard University have basically taken most of the African out of him. When he hears of his son's plans to marry Spice, Aesop Barley immediately enrolls Tad in a Negro Officers' camp in Iowa and prepares to ship him out.

Balking at the plan, Tad slips over to Spice's place and urges her to run away with him. But Spice is determined to stay put. New Orleans is home: her beauty parlor is here, Tad's future law career is here. If they run off, they might end up just being "cotton choppin' Nigras."

While Spice pleads with Tad, Aesop Bradley approaches Spice's home. Tad sneaks out the back door as Aesop enters the front with a policeman, a social worker and a court order to take away the baby. The order stipulates that if Spice leaves town and stays out for three years, the child will be returned to her.

The mother's wails bring neighbor women swarming into the cabin. They offer her water but she asks for, and gets, gin. When the commiserating assembly then asks Spice what she plans to do, she responds, "I'm goin to a prayer meeting."



The congregation of "Blood of The Lamb" church consisted of thirty decidedly down-and-out black folks worshiping in a decidedly down-and-out part of New Orleans. One member of this flock, however, was very well known, revered, and at times feared, in all parts of town. Her name was Swamp Suzanne.

Swamp Suzanne, although a dedicated participant in the energetic Christian worship of “Blood of the Lamb,” was also a powerful voodoo priestess. Her praying could flip from the God of Israel to the gods of Guinea in a heartbeat. Suzanne’s ability to assemble *ouangas*, compilations of rituals and potions that hypo-charged her prayers, was legendary. Spice Mackson headed straight down to the Wednesday night prayer meeting of “Blood of the Lamb.” She intended to get Swamp Suzanne “to pray for old Barley a whole lot.”

When Spice arrives at the church and slouches to the end of a bench, forgetting to throw away her cigarette, the entire congregation gaps at her. Here was a “city gal sho’ nuff.” It is this moment Norman Rockwell captures in “Love Ouanga.”



“Love Ouanga” ends well. When Swamp Suzanne hears that Aesop Barley has stolen Spice’s baby, she enlists the assistance of the rest of the congregation in assembling an *ouanga* to put on him. Spice, frightened that the spell might actually kill Barley, runs out to warn him. But a drumming in his head (along with the phone call he received from a church member informing him that he was about to be voodoo-ed) had already drawn Aesop Barley, half-crazed, to the church building.

The congregants see him coming and flee, abandoning the artifacts of the ceremony. But Spice stays behind, and through various ploys with the *ouanga* implements, convinces Barley Senior that if her baby is returned, she can lift the spell. He agrees; she does; and all live happily ever after. “It was not a hate *ouanga* she had worked,” Barley muses to himself as he watches an exhausted Spice stagger back to her cabin to welcome her baby and Tad. “It was a love *ouanga*.”

Reactions to Rockwell’s Illustration of “Love Ouanga”

Reproductions of “Love Ouanga” appear in a number of Rockwell anthologies, but never within the context of Kenneth Perkins’ story. Presented without that context, the picture elicits reactions ranging from bafflement to embarrassment to downright offense.

For example, I showed “Love Ouanga” to several black Rockwell models without their knowing the story behind the painting. When I mentioned that I was considering using this illustration as the cover of my book, their recoil from the idea was as obvious as that of the congregants of “Blood of the Lamb” to Spice.

Yet “Love Ouanga” affirms Rockwell’s magical talent for telling stories with paintings as much as any *Saturday Evening Post* cover. The blacks in “Love Ouanga” are not the caricatures typical of 1930’s portrayals of blacks, nor do they all “look alike”: each is uniquely rendered. In fact, the art critic Karal Ann Marling asserts that Spice Mackson is the most beautiful woman Norman Rockwell ever painted.



The striking figures in “Love Ouanga” range from coal-black to saffron yellow: it is reasonable to assume that the models from whom they were drawn had skin shades spanning the same palette. And those models probably came from the very historic black community residing in New Rochelle, New York.

In 1936, the year he painted “Love Ouanga,” Norman Rockwell’s home was New Rochelle. He had moved there from New York City with his parents in 1913. By 1936 he had married and divorced his first wife, Irene, and was now living with his second wife, Mary and their three sons.

A community sitting on Long Island sound about twenty miles north of the Bronx, New Rochelle was settled in 1688 by French Protestants. These Huguenot artisans fled to New York (then called New Amsterdam) by way of the Caribbean, bringing blacks from the islands north with them. By the late 1700’s, a significant number of people of African descent, both slave and free, were living in New Rochelle.

For example, the first national census, taken in 1790, shows New Rochelle with a nearly 20% black population: 136 of its 692 residents were African-American. The 1820 census shows 150 African-Americans residing in New Rochelle. Only six of them were slaves.

A prominent Quaker couple, James and Mary Mott, had much to do with the pre-Civil War absence of slavery in New Rochelle. In July, 1776,

the Motts purchased mill property on the shore of Long Island Sound. There, in 1801, they build Premium Mill, the country's largest flour mill at the time.

The Motts' oldest son James, also a Quaker and a staunch abolitionist, was the husband of Lucretia Coffin Mott, a founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society (and a champion of the woman's suffrage movement). The Mott family home in New Rochelle is believed to have been a station on the Underground Railroad.

By 1936, New Rochelle boasted a vibrant African-American community. Black stores, restaurants, funeral parlors abounded. Norman Rockwell would have had little trouble finding colored models for "Love Ouanga." A stickler for veracity, it is highly likely the illustrator even visited several of the historic black churches in his home town, just to get the picture right.

However, when the Rockwell family moved to Arlington, Vermont in 1939, finding models of color became more of a challenge.

Looking for Color in Arlington, Vermont

Vermont is the whitest state in the union. Presently, only 2% of Vermont's population is non-white.

But this has not always been the case. One hundred-and-fifty years before Norman Rockwell went looking for colored models in the Green Mountains, the town of Vergennes, Vermont was 7% black. In the early 1800's, the Vermont communities of Braintree, Winsor and Burlington were each over 3% black. And these were free people of color: slavery had been outlawed by the state's constitution in 1777.

In her book, *Discovering Black Vermont*, Elise A. Guyette asserts that the myth of an "always white" Vermont emerged out of historians' need to focus on research topics having valid, accessible documentation. Believing that African-Americans had never been a presence in Vermont, historians did not look for documentation of their existence there.

Vermont, however, from the Federalist period until the Reconstruction era, was home to numerous free black families peacefully maintaining their small farms. Many became integral parts of their integrated communities, holding public office and serving on church boards.

For example, Lemuel Haynes, born to a white mother and a black father in 1753, was raised as an indentured servant in the home of a pious Puritan church deacon. Haynes went on to become one of the most influential Calvinist ministers in New England, serving as pastor to Rutland, Vermont's West Parish Church for thirty years. He was the first black pastor of a white congregation in the United States. In 1804, Middlebury College granted Lemuel Haynes an honorary degree, the first honorary degree bestowed upon a black American.

But after passage of "The Fugitive Slave Act" in 1850, the history of the "real Vermonter" began to whiten. The reason? The emergence of the theory of "scientific racism".

Scientific racism purported that blacks and whites have different genetic origins. This erroneous doctrine supported the claim to inalienable rights for whites while buttressing belief in the ineradicable inferiority of blacks, just as newly-freed people of color were seeking the full advantages of democracy. Combined with the "Fugitive Slave Act," scientific racism produced a cloud of suspicion around anyone brown. It was no longer comfortable to be colored in Vermont.

So, colored people began to "disappear". They disappeared, not through migration, but through marriage. One hundred years of living together in small, integrated farming communities had resulted in a large mixed race population. Now, increasingly, these colored Vermonters called themselves "white" and sought white spouses for themselves and their children. By the time Norman Rockwell moved to Arlington in 1939, all the native black Vermonters had vanished. If he wanted to depict people of color in a painting, he was going to have to look some place else for the models.



1942: Americans were in the grip of World War II and things were not going well. Norman Rockwell wanted to present his "The Four Freedoms" paintings as bold statements of tolerance and hope, values that were under deadly attack "over there."

Rockwell worked on the four posters for seven months. Wrestling with "Freedom of Worship" took two of them. In "Freedom of Worship," the

artist was trying to portray two complex subjects in one painting: racial tolerance and religious freedom.

Rockwell's first attempt at putting these concepts onto a canvas was set in a country barbershop. Initial sketches show a Jew, a Negro and a Catholic priest harmoniously hanging out together while waiting to be groomed by a white, "obviously" Protestant barber.

These initial sketches satisfied Rockwell. But Catholic friends who saw the drawings said, "Priests don't look like that." And WASP associates really didn't recognize the barber as an Episcopalian (or as a Presbyterian, for that matter).

Then there were the opinions of the black people who passed through West Arlington for various reasons: Evelyn Hardy, for example, housekeeper to neighbors up the road. As far as this group of critics was concerned, the Negro's skin was much too light. . . or much too dark. Rockwell's whole initial concept for "Freedom of Worship" fell apart.

After much angst, however, the artist finally came up with another conceptualization. "Freedom of Worship" portrayed people of different faiths and different ethnicities, all in an attitude of worship. Evelyn Hardy, the neighbor's housekeeper, was asked to model as one of them. She appears as the thoughtful black woman in the upper-left-hand corner of the painting.

For Hardy, posing as a Rockwell model was one of the most momentous events of her long life. Born in New Jersey, Hardy died there in 1985 at the age of 102. In a local newspaper article commemorating her centennial, Hardy explains that she met Norman Rockwell in the mid-1940's while working as housekeeper for a wealthy Vermont family who were friends of the illustrator.

Rockwell invited Evelyn Hardy to pose several times, producing numerous sketches of her full face and profile. Hardy was paid the standard modeling fee: \$10 per sitting. However, the famous illustrator also gave her a memento that turned out to be far more valuable: a sketch of herself drawn in 1943, the year his studio burned down. The sketch was signed, "To Mrs. Evelyn Hardy from Norman Rockwell."

Evelyn Harding treasured this personal keepsake, holding onto the sketch as long as she could. "He (Norman Rockwell) was a wonderful

person, a very nice person.” However, nearing 98 years old and facing financial difficulties, the aged Rockwell model finally had to part with her signed Rockwell sketch. In 1981, Evelyn Hardy sold her Norman Rockwell portrait to a museum for \$4500.



While Norman Rockwell painted the war effort from the bucolic banks of the Battenkill River in rural Vermont, folks in urban Bridgeport, Connecticut worked the war effort in the many industries that boomed along the banks of the Housatonic River. By the time I celebrated my first birthday in April, 1946, my father, William “Buddy” Allen, had leveraged the flood of demand for housing arising from southern black workers seeking some of those good factory jobs into ownership of two pieces of real estate. His second piece of property was our three stories, six family brick home on George Street.

Built in 1914, just at the beginning of World War I, its name, “St. George”, was conspicuously carved in the stone above its third story lattice. Over the fifty-one years spanning the building’s opening and my birth, its surrounding neighborhood had gone from white Protestant middle class to white immigrant working class. It remained, nevertheless, a white neighborhood.

My dad’s first property in Bridgeport had been a rooming house located on “the other side of town”, in the basement of which Buddy ran the longest established permanent floating crap game in the state of Connecticut. When he had garnered from these games a large enough stash of cash, my father got his Jewish friend, Ray Blank to front for him on the purchase of the St. George, white tenants and all. Mr. Allen then proceeded to move his new wife and their soon to be arriving first child (me) into his new home. Thus George Street received its first colored residents, (we were colored back then, not black, and certainly not African-American) and its first colored landlord to boot.

Norman Rockwell’s Urban Connection

Although his home was rural Vermont, Norman Rockwell knew about integrated urban neighborhoods like 1940’s Bridgeport, Connecticut. Long before interstates, Levittown and “white flight,” working-class

neighborhoods in Troy, New York and Los Angeles, California attracted the artist. He drew sketches and took photographs of their tenements and people. These sketches provided the backdrop for two of Rockwell's *Saturday Evening Post* covers, "Homecoming GI" (1945) and "Road Block" (1949). Both illustrations include people of color.

Troy, known as "The Collar City," was home to Arrow Shirts, whose "Arrow Collar Man" was made famous by advertisements illustrated by Rockwell's mentor, friend and New Rochelle neighbor, J.C. Leyendecker. Troy was a booming factory town, manufacturing four million collars a week during the 1920's. Another source of industrial fame for the town was its ironworks, fabrications that, in the mid-1800's, were second only to those of Pennsylvania.

From his Vermont home, Norman Rockwell frequently traveled through Troy on his way to Albany, New York where he caught the train to New York City. When the artist decided to create a *Post* cover commemorating World War II vets coming back to their home towns, he decided to make that home town working-class Troy, New York.

"Homecoming GI" appeared on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* on May 25, 1945. Among the folks gleefully (or shyly, in the case of his young sweetheart) welcoming home the young soldier is not only Norman Rockwell himself (standing in a doorway of the tenement) but also two young boys recklessly hanging from a tree they have climbed, wildly waving a welcome. One of the two boys is black.

In 1945, kids just went out to play: no "helicopter parents," no play dates. Black and white kids frolicked and fought together up and down America's streets. Think "Our Gang."

Elsie Wagner Fenic, in her moving memoir "White Girl in Harlem," provides a lovely glimpse into this time. A second generation Polish-American, Fenic can still jump a pretty mean double dutch, thanks to spending her first nineteen years enjoying 1940's New York City street games with black and Latino friends.

Norman Rockwell put black and white playmates together in "Homecoming GI", not to make a civil rights statement but because,

on the streets of Troy in 1945, they were really there. Rockwell's artistic integrity demanded he put them in the picture.



The 1940's working class neighborhoods of Troy, New York were a mirror image of my neighborhood in Bridgeport. Just as Troy was known for shirts and iron, Bridgeport was known for brass and bras. Norman Rockwell could have sketched "Homecoming GI" while standing on the corner of my block.

When Mr. and Mrs. Gravina's son, Tommy, came home from the Navy (even though it was with a brown-skinned Puerto Rican wife that talked funny English), the whole neighborhood turned out to welcome him: Italian, Polish, Irish, the several colored families that had moved into Mr. Allen's apartment house (after most, but not all, of the white tenants had moved out). If any of us had subscribed to The Saturday Evening Post or gone to read it in the library (we didn't), we would have recognized the scene on the May 25, 1945 cover right off the bat. Those boys up in the tree? That was Jimmy Buffalini (the white one) and J.D. Bradshaw (the black one), two of the most rascally devils ever to terrorize a little girl on a tricycle.

Residents of George Street didn't know much about Norman Rockwell. But looking at "Homecoming GI," it certainly seems like Norman Rockwell knew something about us.



Another Norman Rockwell urban setting was Los Angeles, California. During the winter of 1948-49, while vacationing with his in-laws in Los Angeles, Rockwell paid a visit to a Mrs. Merrill, widow and owner of a rooming house for women. The famous illustrator wanted to borrow her entire house.

Located in the MacArthur Park neighborhood of Los Angeles, 719 South Rampart Boulevard was a three-story tenement flanked by similar structures and the "Pacific Telephone and Telegraph" building, the place of work for many of Mrs. Merrill's boarders. Rockwell sought Mrs. Merrill's permission to stage a photo shoot in front of her building. Capturing the

street as well as some of its residents as models, he would then use these photos to create one of his famous *Saturday Evening Post* covers. But Mrs. Merrill said no.

Apparently, even back in 1949, not everybody loved Norman Rockwell. The feisty LA landlady felt that, in his paintings, the famous artist did not “enhance” his subjects. Rockwell persisted in his request, however, and Merrill finally gave in: for payment of \$50.00.

The camera crew showed up on South Rampart while one of Mrs. Merrill’s roomers, Antonia Piasecki, was doing her laundry. In a letter to the Norman Rockwell Museum she writes: “Mr. Rockwell asked me for some fancy undies for the clothes line. I gave him nylon stockings, black lace trimmed panties and bra which he hung up himself. . . .”

A moving truck arrived, complete with California license plates and two moving truck drivers. Lots of photos were taken. The result was “Road Block,” the character-filled illustration which appeared as the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* on July 9, 1949.

Norman Rockwell put himself in the painting: he’s the violin teacher looking out the window of what was actually Ms. Piasecki’s bedroom. Ms. Piasecki also got to be a Rockwell model: she’s the young woman leaning out the window below Rockwell. The red-haired lady standing at the basement door? That’s the resister-turned-Rockwell model, Mrs. Merrill.

The models for other figures in the painting have been identified, as well. Joseph Magnani, director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and a friend of Rockwell’s, is the artist hanging out of the window in a building across the street, accompanied by a barely-draped young lady. Peter Rockwell, the artist’s youngest son, is the bespeckled boy with the violin right below them. But Ms. Piasecki does not remember “there being all those children (at the shooting site) at the time.”

“All those children” is probably Ms. Piasecki’s polite code for the two little black kids posed at the bottom of the scene. They stand solemnly with their backs to the viewer, studying the impasse created when the big red truck meets a little white dog.

Apparently, Norman Rockwell didn’t actually encounter any black children on South Rampart Street that day. But given his understanding of

similar neighborhoods in Troy, New York (and Bridgeport, Connecticut), he knew they were there, somewhere. So Rockwell went out and found them.



They are touching in elegance, innocence and simplicity. Two black children, a little girl and an older boy, in rear profile. The black and white photo in the Norman Rockwell Museum archives shows the boy's shirt crisply pressed, the little girl's braids impeccably arranged. Both are standing holding their hands behind their backs, staring out at an unseen horizon.

That's all I've been able to find out so far about these two little colored models in "Road Block". No names are written on the back of the photo. The meticulously kept Rockwell receipts do not reveal who was paid for posing for this shot. The locale of the photograph, although it appears to have been taken in Los Angeles, is not known for sure, either.

But this is known: in 1949, Norman Rockwell purposely went out and found two black children to model for him so he could place their figures in his illustration. Rockwell knew they were supposed to be in the picture.



The house at 7149 South Rampart Boulevard has disappeared. Where the building once stood now stands a parking lot. In the 1950's, integrated neighborhoods began disappearing from America. Correspondingly, colored models disappeared from Norman Rockwell's 1950's paintings as well.



But urban or rural, white or black, Americans of every hue joyously celebrated their country's victory over the Axis powers in World War II. When asked to commemorate this celebration on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*, Norman Rockwell wanted to portray its multicultural nature. His commitment to realism, even apart from his liberal values, required it.

Expressions of diversity needed to be made subtly, however, subtly enough to get past the censorious eye of *Saturday Evening Post's* publisher,

George Horace Lortimer. Lortimer discouraged the appearance of people of color in *The Saturday Evening Post*. And when they did appear, he would allow them to be shown only in menial positions.

Rockwell had managed to sneak black kids into “Homecoming GI” and “Road Block.” But those were kids. For his painting celebrating America’s WWII victory, “Working on the Statue of Liberty,” the artist wanted to portray *men*, American men preserving the torch of freedom. And preserving the Statue of Liberty was not a menial job.

So the artist needed a discreet way, an almost clandestine way, to get a colored person into the picture and onto the cover. Rockwell’s gambit, when he played it, was so discreet that no one noticed it for over sixty years.