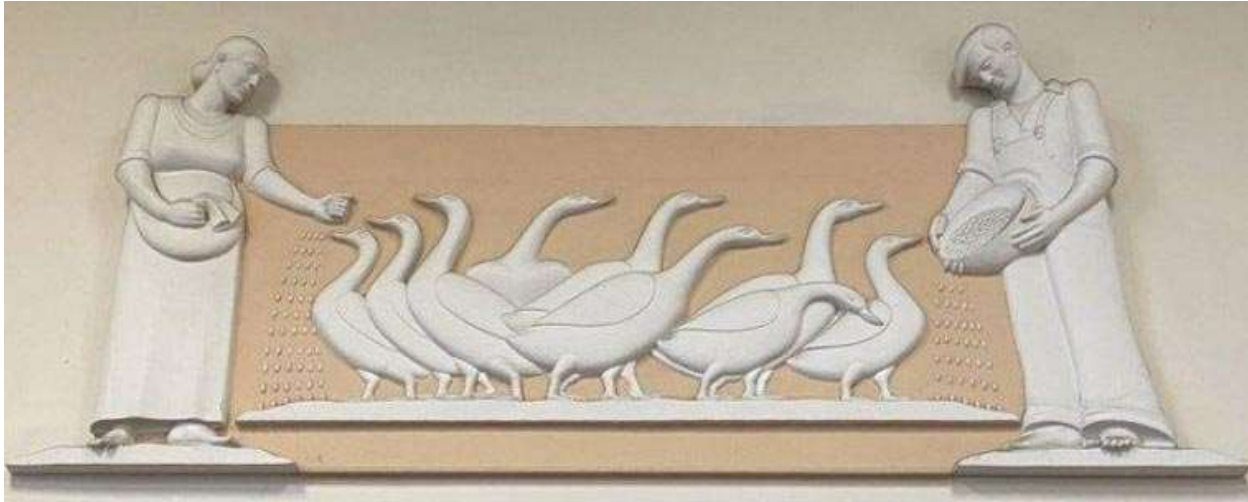


# MANSFIELD MEMORIES: 'Farmers and Geese' - fine art at the post office

By Kevin McNatt and Andy Todesco

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Joseph Coletti's "Farmers and Geese" depicts two farmers, a man and a woman, feeding grain to nine geese below

As the Great Depression entered its eighth year, there was a bright spot for Mansfield. On Jan. 1, 1938, a new post office was dedicated at 140 North Main St. All agreed with Town Manager Harold Everett when he said the building "will stand for many years as a considerable asset to the community."

But the US Treasury Department was not quite done with the new post office. During the Depression the government funded art work to adorn federal buildings. This would further the appreciation of art and support artists struggling to find work. In Mansfield they were looking for something that would depict local life. Artist Joseph Coletti of Boston was commissioned for the project.

Born in Italy in 1896, Joseph Coletti worked with John Singer Sargent on the ceiling of the Boston Public Library and the rotunda of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. In 1924 he returned to Italy for two years as a visiting fellow at American Academy in Rome. He came back to Boston to set up his own studio. Later in life he would serve as chairman of the Massachusetts Art Commission. Coletti also sculpted the statue of Lt. General Edward Logan at Logan Airport. His work can be found at the Biblioteque Nationale in Paris, the Vatican Museum and the Smithsonian.



Artist Joseph Coletti of Boston created the sculpture "Farmers and Geese."

In 1938 Joseph Coletti came to Mansfield looking for the perfect theme for his commission. After meeting with postmaster James Bellew and local historian Jennie Copeland, the artist sensed that something highlighting local industry would be best. He submitted four themes to the Treasury Department, but secretly hoped that they would select a depiction of Mansfield's goose farming industry. His hopes were realized when the department selected his idea of a sculpture called "Farmers and Geese."

"I wanted so much to get away from the banal spread eagle and other symbols of the government which are so overworked," Coletti told the press.

"I was sure we had selected the most interesting theme when I picked up a Boston newspaper and saw a large picture of your Mansfield geese being driven to the farm; all the while blocking traffic behind them."

By 1938 the Austin Goose Farm had been operating for about 70 years. It once held the distinction of being the largest goose farm in the world. When trains arrived packed with geese from Canada the birds were paraded to East Mansfield halting traffic while they passed.

Coletti said "here is a subject with great decorative possibilities, appropriate to the locale, and typically New England in aspect."

Joseph Coletti finished his bas-relief sculpture in late May 1939 and delivered it to Mansfield. "Farmers and Geese" is a plaster cast six feet long and four feet wide. It depicts two farmers, a man and a woman, feeding grain to nine geese below. Its oyster white subjects were chosen to blend with the wall behind it while the terracotta background provides a strikingly simple contrast.

"Farmers and Geese" was set into a recess above the postmaster's door where it remained for five decades. It was moved when a new post office was built on Giles Place in 1990. It now hangs above the door to the service lobby in the current Mansfield Post Office.

In 1939, the Mansfield News called Joseph Coletti “altogether an intelligent and very interesting man.”

A visitor griped that the geese depicted in Mansfield’s post office were Canadian. Jim Bellew replied, “Sure, if you go back far enough you’ll find potatoes aren’t native Americans, either.”

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e-mail:

Hi, Kevin and Andrew.

Thank you for your article on Joseph Coletti’s bas-relief of *Farmers and Geese*. It was an enjoyable bit of history from a long time ago that I wasn’t familiar with. I posted a link to the article on the American Academy in Rome’s Twitter feed and Facebook page.

You may wish to know that the artist’s last name is Coletti with one L, not Colletti. I discovered this when I looked him up in the American Academy in Rome database of fellows.

Here is his *New York Times* obituary (<https://www.nytimes.com/1973/05/07/archives/joseph-coletti-74-a-boston-sculptor.html>) and a link to his papers in the Boston Public Library (<http://archon.bpl.org/?p=collections/findingaid&id=147>).

Joseph Coletti