

# A Penning for your thoughts

High Woods sculptor was a key figure at the Woodstock NYA Work Center

by Bruce Weber

**S**AUGERTIES SCULPTOR Thomas Penning (1905-1982) played a principal role in the creation and operation of the National Youth Administration Work Center in Woodstock. The now-historic NYAWC buildings on Route 212 east of the hamlet (and on the left past Easton Lane) currently house the Woodstock School of Art.

Back in 1935, Woodstock was selected as a site because of the community's reputation as a center for arts and crafts in America. Eleanor Roosevelt, who was instrumental in its founding, served as a messenger to her husband, president Franklin Delano Roosevelt, on the plight of youth in the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The New-Deal agency that was established helped over two million young people, 95 percent of whom came from families certified as in need of public relief. The NYA students were aged between 18 and 23, and were nationally of races in proportion to the general population.

The NYA Work Center in Woodstock provided young men the chance to learn such skills as wool processing, woodworking, metalworking, stonecutting and construction. Men predominated in the population of the center, as the only program open to women was in the textile unit.

The center was run to an extensive degree by the working students in cooperation with elected group leaders, councilpersons and home captains. It was modeled after Valkill Industries, established by Eleanor Roosevelt and her friends Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman. From 1927 to 1936 Valkill Industries sold reproductions of Colonial-era furniture, weavings and pewter produced by New York State parks workers.

Penning was hired as stonecarving instructor (and occasional ceramics teacher) and as a special craft consultant at the National Youth Administration Work Center. His fellow teachers in Woodstock included Ernest Brace as woodworking instructor, Eugene V. Caille as wool in-



JOHN KLEINHAN

*Phoenix*, c. 1940, Bluestone, Graphics and Printmaking Studio, Woodstock School of Art.

structor, and Elliot Fatum as metalwork instructor. Artist, poet and journalist Jean Wrolsen remembered the presence at the center of some dozen stonecutters from the area who assisted in the school's

educational work.

Penning was hired by Norman Towar Boggs Jr., an administrator, editor, writer and artist whose father had purchased property on the outskirts of the hamlet

of Woodstock in the 1920s, following the lead of John Dewey and other fellow Columbia University professors. In the early 1930s, Boggs Jr. returned to Woodstock after living abroad for several years.



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Left, Students Working on the Roof of the Stone and Forge Building, National Youth Administration Woodstock Resident Work Center, c. 1940; right, Young Men Working on Stone, National Youth Administration Woodstock Resident Work Center, c. 1941.

In 1938 he became closely involved with the planning, founding and operation of the National Youth Administration Work Center. Upon the inauguration of the organization in the autumn of that year, Boggs authored a brief article in his periodical *Order* on the NYA's "aim to provide experience to underprivileged youth in youthful skills." From 1939 to 1942, he served as the director of education, general craft coordinator, and executive assistant to the director of the Woodstock center.

#### A meeting ground for ideas

A planning committee had been established consisting of local people prominent in the arts, music, social work and literature. The committee chair was the artist and arts writer Julia Leaycraft. Penning was vice chairman, N. Jansen Smith was secretary-treasurer, and Anita M. Smith assistant secretary-treasurer. Among other local members of the committee were Boggs, Elizabeth Penning (Penning's wife, active as an artist and ceramicist), Carl Eric Lindin, Dr. John A. Kingsbury, Judson Smith, Miska Petersham, Peter Whitehead, Harold Rugg, Craig Vosburgh, Marianne Appel, and Roosevelt advisor Dr. James T. Shotwell.

Boggs and Penning were among the few members of the planning committee who became involved in the day-to-day activities of the NYA. Penning was very much in accord with the school's emphasis on craft, explaining that both he and the agency felt "that we have all gotten too far away from our home industries and crafts — and that the surest though perhaps the slow way to get our people off relief rolls is to train them back into the small home industries of their particular locales." He believed that what the boys would learn of the craft of stonecutting was of more value to them than their trying to become "indifferent" sculptors.

Boggs later stated that the NYA Work Center could not have existed without the local community, which "fashioned the planning, construction, administration and teaching staff of the NYA Camp... There was a climate of social idealism in the community that embraced individualism, self-reliance, [and] social welfare." He also noted that the Saturday-night dances at the Wilgus Country Store in the High Woods section of Saugerties, where Tomas and his wife Elizabeth resided, was "a meeting ground where ideas were exchanged about the establishment of the NYA school in Woodstock."

In addition to its longstanding tradition in the arts and crafts, Woodstock had an abundance of natural materials, mainly bluestone and timber. The town also had a ready pool of local instructors, and was close enough to large urban centers so students would not have to travel far from home. Local people realized that the center would bring financial benefits to the town as well as to nearby Kingston.

#### Site found, programs begin

Initially, the NYA had hoped to establish a camp at Mink Hollow, approximately six and a half miles west of the hamlet of Woodstock. The original land furnished for the center was part of the City of Kingston's watershed, and that city soon objected on the grounds that the center might pollute its water supply. In a spirit of cooperation, the Kingston Water Department offered a long leasehold on approximately 37 acres at Easton Lane east of Woodstock for a token rate.

The center set up temporary quarters for boys at a summer resort called Wildwood Farm in Lake Hill, a short distance from the Mink Hollow campsite. Meanwhile, faculty and students plunged into clearing the site at Easton Lane.

To initiate the programs of study, classes in stonecutting were begun in Penning's studio in High Woods. Other classes found space in the Allencrest



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*Hippo*, c. 1940, Bluestone, Graphics and Printmaking Studio, Woodstock School of Art.

Hotel in Woodstock (now home to the American Legion). In a letter to the *New York Herald Tribune* of August 6, 1940 outlining the course of study, Penning reported that a group of 15 boys working in his studio were learning to be stonecutters, which included operating their own quarry and getting out the stone.

Over the next three years, over 200 students participated in the Woodstock program, more than three-quarters of them young men, all residents of New York State. Some 147 of them were registered in Kingston. The majority were white, but a number were Native American and African-American. Lumber was cut onsite, and electricity was installed by local tradesmen, assisted by camp residents. There were various construction delays due to delays in receiving materials and because of the inexperience of the young construction crew.

#### Invitations from Eleanor

Eleanor Roosevelt took great pride in the NYA Work Center in Woodstock, an outgrowth of her own personal interest in handicraft. She attended the laying of the cornerstone of the woodworking building in 1939, and arranged picnics with the students both in Woodstock and in nearby Hyde Park.

Eleanor became friendly with the Pennings. They were invited to a picnic given by the Roosevelts, and also attended as members of the Woodstock-and-Saugerties-based square-dance group Cheats and Swings. Legend has it that it was at the latter event that Penning whirled Eleanor about the dance floor while the wheelchair-bound FDR looked on with approval, thanking him after the dance.

On one occasion Eleanor Roosevelt visited the Pennings when Elizabeth's mother was in from Florida. Elizabeth's mother maintained an air of politeness despite her strenuous disagreement with FDR's policies.

Edward Cloonan, a local resident who served as an engineer for the WPA, is thought to have had a significant role in

the overall design concept for the NYA Work Center. The design called for three buildings sited around an oval formed by a curving drive, with an interior road and footpath, large windows to provide north light, and cement flooring to support woodworking and heavy machinery.

In an interview in 1992 with artist Paula Nelson (who has had a long and important involvement with the Woodstock School of Art, and before that with the Art Students League's summer school in Woodstock), Boggs Jr. expressed a different emphasis. He said that he did not "not know of any master format or architectural plan for the NYA buildings." He surmised that the Stone and Iron Working Building was largely the plan of Penning, and that Eugene Caille may have had some input into the construction of the Wool Working Building. He thought that Ernest Brace, a carpenter, may have designed or built the arched windows of the woodworking shop.

William Cloonan maintained that it was his father, Edward, who designed the Palladium-style window on the south side of what currently is the gallery and office building of the Woodstock School of Art.

Boggs considered the NYA buildings a collaborative effort. He speculated that the architecture evolved as the result of the use of the buildings, the materials readily available, and "the opportunity to teach the students how to build with the materials." He claimed "the Woodstock camp was unique [among the NYA camps throughout the country], having been constructed for the purpose." Other camps, he said, "utilized existing buildings and state college campuses. They taught more traditional technical and vocational job-related skills."

#### The rustic aesthetic

The construction of the center began in early March 1939. Under the watchful eye and support of their teachers, the boys constructed the main buildings and learned the principles of building a house. The program aimed to move the

young people along the road to attaining jobs. They rotated from one department to another, in order that they could learn as many phases as possible of the various trades and occupations.

Boggs related that two men were sent from Albany to consult in the organization of the construction of the project. He related that "A.A. Medved was one, and the other was [a black man named] Taylor, [who lodged] with the Pennings when he was in town because no hotel or rooming house would register a black person at that time." In all, seven structures were constructed on the property — the three main buildings, each having a space of between 3000 and 4000 square feet, and four sheds.

The architectural forms of the three main buildings are in keeping with the rustic aesthetic associated with the Woodstock art colony, going back to the construction of the Byrdcliffe art colony at the turn of the twentieth century. They were built of a combination of materials, including native bluestone, clapboard wood siding with undressed wavy edges (as well as with a milled finish), and some brick. The gable roofs were originally made of slate, but many now have been replaced by asphalt. The interiors generally consist of large open spaces under exposed roof trusses.

Credit has been given to the architect Albert Graeser for designing the woodworking shop, the first structure to be built. Graeser was a leading local architect. His buildings include the elementary school across New York State Route 375 from the Woodstock golf course. The writer Sylvia Day, who resided close to the Pennings' property in High Woods on land that abutted the Glasco Turnpike and John Joy Road, credited the artist with designing the stonecutting and metalworking building and co-designing the textile building, and supervising the construction of all three buildings.

Anita M. Smith, the longtime Woodstock resident, artist, writer of a history of the art colony, and a member of the NYA planning committee, reported that Penning directed the students in building the pitch-faced bluestone walls for the three structures. According to Eugene V. Caille Jr. his father Eugene indicated to him that he designed the textile building and oversaw its construction. Penning may have had a partial voice in that work. In a recent conversation, Caille related that his father liked Penning and likely learned from him. It was the last completed of the three main buildings, opening in the spring of 1941.

The stonecutting and metalworking building, begun in mid-1940, was completed in early 1941. It was reported in December of that year in the local press as being "designed by Tomas Penning and being built of native stone, and when completed part of its equipment will be two 20-inch industrial lathes which have just arrived from the U.S. Army arsenal at Watervliet."

The walls of the building were made entirely of bluestone masonry, except for a small section of board-and-batten siding. The single-story structure now houses the graphics workshop and printmaking studio of the Woodstock School of Art. The north side has a large dormer window, and a very large semi-circular arched window, which serves as the focus of the design, on the west elevation. The interior was originally divided into two sections to accommodate both the metalworking and stonecutting programs.

On the walls of the metal shop (now the graphics workshop) are two stone relief panels. One, an appropriate motif for a metalworking shop, depicted a phoenix rising in flames, which relates to Penning's cover design of 1938 for the Maverick art colony periodical *The Phoenix*. Boggs believed that Penning may have carved the other, a hippopotamus,

“as a whimsy.” Both panels were made from small separate slabs of bluestone and then assembled.

### What the students learned

At Penning’s studio and quarry, students learned the use of elementary tools such as the pitch, point, chisel, bull-set and hand drill, as well as the compressor, jackhammer and derrick while cutting building stone and roughing out stock for shop work. In the workshop at the NYA, they learned to letter in stone, and to design and fashion garden furniture, monuments, gravestones, fountains and urns.

Over the course of their study, the youths had the chance to spend some of their time learning masonry, laying stone walls, building fireplaces, terraces and flagstone walks, or in-setting curbing. It was reported that the students “made many interesting pieces such as birdbaths for the Kingston parks, monuments of various types and many smaller pieces, expertly cut.”

At the center, the youths also learned about design, tool-sharpening, types of rocks, stone diseases, proper use and treatment of stone, and a brief history of stonemasonry through the ages. Blacksmithing and ironwork were also sometimes included in the work of Penning’s craft unit. Students were provided experience with working with several different kinds of stone, and especially bluestone. A dozen of the NYA students became journeymen stonemasons under Penning’s tutelage.

According to Sylvia Day, one of Penning’s former students carved the tombstone laid over the grave of the Maverick’s Hervey White. At the time of White’s death in 1944, Penning was serving abroad in the armed forces in World War II. According to Blanche Wiesen Cook, an Eleanor Roosevelt biographer, Eleanor “was heartened by NYA programs that trained white and colored youth in stonemasonry, which had resulted in an ‘epidemic’ of new stone houses.”

Penning found the young people a delight to work with. “One reason [they are a delight] is that they are given time for quality workmanship,” he explained. “Our machine-driven age has done much to stifle both workmanship and the creative ability. They require time and elbow room.”

### Stone is a living thing

Penning’s goal was to erase through training and education some of the distinctions between stonemasonry as an art — sculpture — and as a craft.

“We’re a pretty happy family — and a busy one,” he said. “I hope to get these boys scheduled in useful trades for which there is an actual demand. One practical angle of putting men to work in the bluestone field is that there is no expensive equipment required. You see, I am stressing the practical in this venture. For that reason, I plan in the near future to teach these young men the science of fireplace- and chimney-building. I want to combine the practical chimney-building stone-mason with the creative stone-carving artist... There have always been two distinct classes of stone artists — the purely theoretical artistic type, and the day-working stonemason.”

For him, there was no end to what could be learned through study: “We start right at the beginning with petrology... the study of stone composition. Stone is not a dead but a living thing — subject to disease and disintegration. Its welfare for example is dependent upon the very angle at which it is laid. It should be laid in masonry as nearly as possible in the same position as it lay in the quarry. The figuring of proper stresses in masonry, we call the masonry of fracture.”

Real study was essential to the art of laying and carving stone, he concluded.

Penning was proud of the level of

## “Native Stone, the art of Tomas Penning”

FROM OCTOBER 9 THROUGH DECEMBER 11, THE “NATIVE Stone” exhibition will explore the life, artistry, and achievement of High Woods bluestone sculptor Tomas Penning, a leading sculptor of the art colony. A Midwesterner by birth, Penning settled in the hamlet of High Woods in Saugerties in the early 1930s. Over the next five decades he was recognized in the region as “the bluestone sculptor” because of his devotion to this native stone of Ulster County. He embraced bluestone as the medium for his carvings, and was an outspoken advocate for its architectural merits...

Penning’s High Woods neighbor, fellow worker in bluestone and creator of Opus 40, Harvey Fite, referred to his friend as a poet, philosopher and sculptor. “[His] thinking is of the logical and reasonable sort which reminds one of [Thomas] Aquinas,” wrote Fite, “The subtlety of his carvings brings [the fifteenth-century sculptor] Agostino [di Duccio] to mind. Tomas Penning is himself, though in his work he is as simple and direct as the masters of another era... His work, like stone itself, is timeless.”

The public is invited to the opening reception of Native Stone on Saturday, October 9, from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. at the

Woodstock School of Art on Route 212 east of the hamlet of Woodstock.

The 56-page soft-cover exhibition catalog in preparation features the life work of Tomas Penning. It has been curated by art historian Bruce Weber in collaboration with Paula Nelson and John Kleinhans.

This past Sunday, a tour led by curator and art historian Bruce Weber at the Woodstock Artists Cemetery focused on Penning, who with Bruno Zimm designed the Shotwell monument at the high point of the original cemetery. Penning carved many of the early tombstones. There was also a visit across Rock City Road to the Woodstock Cemetery to view the High Woods Wilgus memorial. For more about the Artists Cemetery, visit <https://www.woodstockartistscemetery.org/>

On Sunday October 23, at 2 p.m. Bruce Weber will lead a tour of the property formerly owned by Penning, walking the site of his former grand studio and quarry pool, as well as Penning’s former house, which burned down in 1991.

Finally, the Woodstock School of Art and Shout Out Saugerties will co-sponsor a gallery talk by Bruce Weber about the exhibition on Saturday, November 20 at 2 p.m.



JOHN KLEINHANS

Bob Carver and Bill Eck (carvers), Eight Relief Panels on Base of Flagpole, National Youth Administration Center, 1940, Bluestone, Woodstock School of Art.



PENNING FAMILY ARCHIVES

Construction of Penning House, Highwoods, 1932.

craftsmanship achieved by his students. In late 1939, he arranged an exhibit at the Woodstock Artists Association of stonemasonry and pottery by his students at the NYA. A special exhibition of stonemasonry held at the NYA in June 1941 featured

examples by the “stonecutting unit, of which stonemasonry, quarrying, [and] lettering design is... displayed, [and] tools used in such work and a block of stone partly finished as to design, the carving being done by students.”

### Survival with integrity

Three works of Penning’s design stand on the lawn of the Woodstock School of Art. The most prominent of the three is the series of high reliefs on the eight sides at the bottom of the flagpole to the left of the entrance road. The reliefs were carved in 1940 by Penning’s students Bill Carver and Bob Eck.

The same students also carved the cornerstone on the woodworking building. The reliefs illustrate aspects of the camp’s teaching curriculum and the campers’ daily activities, among them images of masons, metalworkers and woodworkers, farmworkers, agricultural products, ceramics and leisure sporting activities, and a panel featuring a spinning wheel, the shearing of sheep and the mechanics of a loom.

In mid-August of 1940, Eleanor Roosevelt dedicated the bluestone base of the flagstaff. Following her visit, she attended a tea at the Penning’s home, which included artists Charles Rosen and Carl Eric Lindin.

The grounds of the Woodstock School of Art are also home to a birdbath by Penning, gifted by him to his journalist friends Polly and Sid Kline. The base was carved by one of Penning’s students during his NYA days. Incised at the bottom of the base is the inscription “NYA 1940.”

A photograph of a birdbath with the identical base was included in the Woodstock School of Arts’ *A New Deal for Art* exhibition of 2011. Seeing the photograph in the exhibition, the Klines’ daughter Nancy donated the birdbath to the institution.

Also on the school’s lawn is a bluestone sundial, donated by the artist and designer Petra Cabot. It was purportedly created by Penning at the time of the school’s initial construction in 1939.

Similar sundials from his property in High Woods are now on the grounds of the James Cox Gallery in Willow. A house on the Cox property has a fieldstone fireplace and chimney designed by Penning, and probably constructed by his NYA students when they were residing approximately a mile away in Lake Hill in the summer of 1939.

The National Youth Administration Work Center in Woodstock closed in early 1942 following the entry of the United States into World War II. Many students joined the armed services. In one day, three-quarters of the men from the center left for the war effort.

At the end of the war a few of them returned to live in Woodstock. From 1947 to 1979, the Art Students League utilized the buildings, and after that the Woodstock School of Art followed suit. The buildings continue to survive, their great integrity protected.