



"Pittsburgh and Glenwood," by David Gilmour Blythe (photograph courtesy of private owner)

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## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

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### *Blythe's Trolley: "Pittsburgh and Glenwood"*

By Arthur C. Riley

A number of critics and collectors of American art rank David Gilmour Blythe (1815-1865) among the important genre painters of the nineteenth century. Blythe's reputation rests largely on the uniquely American works produced during the last ten years of his life in Pittsburgh. These paintings, often satiric in nature, exposed the foibles of his fellow citizens.<sup>1</sup> In his oil painting titled "Post Office," Pittsburghers are seen pushing each other aside at the general delivery window to get at their mail, while a pickpocket works the crowd and one man sneaks a peek at another's letter over his shoulder. Other Blythe paintings include the "Firecracker (No. 2)," a portrait of a mischievous street urchin lighting a firecracker with his cigar; "Prospecting," a satire of the rampant land speculation in the new oil fields of Western Pennsylvania in the early 1860s;<sup>2</sup> and "Pittsburgh Horse Market," a graphic depiction of man's cruelty to animals.

In 1862, Blythe rendered in pencil and ink wash a drawing titled "Pittsburgh and Glenwood Trolley." This rare drawing, one of only six works on paper known to have survived, was the only one satirically depicting an actual local setting. Bruce W. Chambers described the

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The author, a native of Brooklyn, moved to the Pittsburgh area in 1957 to work for United States Steel. He has a sustained interest in the works of artists active in Western Pennsylvania during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He resides in the North Hills with his wife and five children.

Mr. Riley wishes to acknowledge the generous contributions of Harold R. Shuler, who first suggested the article and lent encouragement throughout; Oliver Miller, of the Port Authority Transit and The Arden Trolley Museum, for providing pertinent information from his files; Bruce W. Chambers and David Wilkins, for taking the time to critique the original manuscript; Harley N. Trice II, for recommending that the Historical Society consider the article for publication; Pamela Holcomb Oestreicher, editor at the HSWP, for shaping up the final product; Nancy C. McCann, for typing the original; and Marcy L. Brant, for typing the last draft.—Editor

1 Blythe's satiric work is often compared to the paintings and graphics of Honoré Daumier, a contemporary nineteenth-century French artist, and William Hogarth, an eighteenth-century English artist. Like Blythe, these artists keenly observed the human condition and the role played by mankind's imperfect institutions.

2 This work is thought to be the earliest painting relating to the American oil industry.

drawing in his book *The World of David Gilmour Blythe (1815-1865)*:

... a figure, possibly that of the artist himself, is shown alighting at the Glenwood end of the Pittsburgh and Glenwood trolley run. In the foreground, following the oval framing line, and reading from left to right, are the face of an Indian, inscribed "1709", next to a medallion with the face of a pilgrim, inscribed "Plymouth"; an artist's palette, labeled "Hope"; a rock labeled "Nick"; and, across the bottom, following the line of the trolley, a figure bent under the burden of the "Bible", pushing a cart labeled "Progress" toward "Europe", which is being guarded by a scarecrow labeled "Italy". The globe of the Earth and a crescent moon appear on the right hand side of the frame.

To decipher the iconography in this 1862 drawing, one should know that urban horse-drawn trolleys on rail came to Pittsburgh in 1859,<sup>3</sup> a century after General John Forbes named the new city. Since the horse trolley era in Europe began in 1869, a literal interpretation of the drawing is possible: Pittsburgh is symbolically represented as an Indian hunting ground in "1709," but is shown to have progressed to modern transportation in little more than a century after its founding. At the same time, a much older Europe languishes because of the pervasive influence of the papal state in Italy. Blythe's use of the "Plymouth" medallion probably symbolizes the generally positive influence of the Pilgrims, who he felt sparked American traditions of freedom and progress.

As for Glenwood, however, it was not until 1883 that the first horse trolley on rail actually linked this outlying area with downtown Pittsburgh five miles distant.<sup>4</sup> Exactly why the trolley did not come to Glenwood earlier is a matter of conjecture. Perhaps the thinly populated Hazelwood-Glenwood area could not support a profitable franchise. In 1859, the East Liberty Passenger Railroad Company's campaign to sell eight hundred subscriptions at twenty-five dollars per share to finance construction failed. Contemporary reports from other eastern cities indicated that many new street railway companies were generating inadequate revenues while experiencing high operating costs.

Blythe probably rode New York City trolleys in 1837 and 1840 when he enlisted in and left the U.S. Navy through the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Opponents of horse trolleys in Pittsburgh during the 1850s argued that people were being maimed and killed by trolleys in New

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3 New York City introduced the first horse trolley to North America in 1832.

4 By 1890, the Glenwood horse trolley was replaced after only seven years by the first permanent electrified trolley line in the city. Incidentally, a cable car line operated for a time on Fifth Avenue in Oakland-Shadyside during the mid-1880s before being replaced by the new electric trolleys.

York City. The artist's drawing of the trolley has a cattle (or people) guard on the front and a warning bell on the roof. Both were absent on the early Pittsburgh horse-drawn trolleys. Though primitive, these early trolleys were cleaner, safer, roomier, and more comfortable than the small omnibuses that rattled and bounced over Pittsburgh streets. Blythe satirized the overcrowded omnibus in such works as "The Stage Coach" and "Omnibus," circa 1858-1859.

In his 1862 drawing, Blythe is probably commenting on a proposed trolley to Glenwood. His trolley is a curious mixture of obsolete and futuristic design, a product of artistic creation. For example, it has some of the features of New York City and Boston horse trolleys of the 1850s. These sported flat roofs with protruding vents as well as two stacked rows of decorative side panels beneath the windows. But in 1862, Pittsburgh horse trolleys were smaller (fifteen to twenty passengers) and lighter, in order to navigate the steep hills in our city. They also had a curved and raised roof with open slots for ventilation.

A steam-powered trolley was planned for Philadelphia in 1854 along with a right-of-way required for the route. This project was ultimately scrapped in favor of horse trolleys, which operated over a portion of this right-of-way. However, by 1860 a steam dummy car pulling a passenger section was placed in service in San Francisco and operated there for seven years.<sup>5</sup> These developments were duly reported to a national readership in popular illustrated periodicals of the time, such as *Harper's Weekly* and *Ballou's*. Blythe is known to have used stories from periodicals and newspapers for themes in his paintings. Other modern touches added to the "Pittsburgh and Glenwood Trolley" include enclosing the front end of the trolley and incorporating what appears to be a steam engine. Note the exhaust stacks in the front section of the roof.

On the sign "Eatings" next to the Indian's nose in the drawing, it appears that Blythe superimposed a "K" over the "E" as the first letter. Since "Eatings" makes little sense, it is likely the sign reads "Keatings." The *Pittsburgh City Directory* for 1862 listed a J. D. F. Keating residing at the Glen Hotel on the Second Street Road in Glenwood, and a Jacob A. Keating living at 36 Third Street in downtown Pittsburgh. Blythe lived nearby at 66 Third, so it is entirely possible he knew the Keatings. Also, many years ago there was a trolley route in Pittsburgh known as "Glenwood and Keating." The Pittsburgh Railways Company routing sheets at the turn of this

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<sup>5</sup> Some years later, a self-contained steam trolley ran for a few months in Philadelphia during the 1876 Centennial Exhibition.

century indicate Keating (also referred to as Keatings) was a stop located near Brown's Bridge on the Monongahela River, less than one-half mile east of the north end of the Glenwood Bridge. Brown's Bridge was situated immediately east of the present Homestead High Level Bridge. Possibly the Keatings operated the old omnibus franchise in Glenwood, or after failing to get the horse trolley franchise in 1862, had this route named in their honor years later. J. D. F. Keating is not listed in the city directory after 1862, but other Keatings remained at 36 Third Street.

As can many of his later works, Blythe's trolley drawing may be seen as a puzzle, readable on several levels. Returning to the warning bell on Blythe's trolley, note that the word "Bell" or "Belly" appears directly under the "Plymouth" medallion. The bell may also be a symbol for America's Liberty Bell or the 1854 steam trolley in Philadelphia. "Europe" is depicted as a large lizard-like creature. In its mouth is a rock labeled "Nick," which it chokes upon because it cannot swallow.<sup>6</sup> "Nick" may symbolize the devil or a flaw in the church St. Peter established in Rome, whose policies Blythe felt had long obstructed progress in Europe and were now affecting America. He bitterly complained in letters that Irish and German immigrants were subverting native American values and ideals by clinging to old world ways and becoming unwitting pawns of the Democrats. Blythe was, of course, an avid Republican and Protestant, who articulated the opinions, fears, and prejudices of many Americans of that time. We may hypothesize that just as Blythe saw "Hope" for himself in painting (artist's palette), he suggested the best hope for the world and suffering mankind (bandaged globe and man pushing cart) would be through unfettered and enlightened pursuit of "Progress," the beneficial results of which would hopefully accrue at the appropriate time and place. (Crescent moon wanes for Blythe's trolley in 1862.) The Pittsburgh and Glenwood Trolley finally arrived in 1883. ■

#### SOURCES

The author relied on Bruce W. Chambers, *The World of David Gilmour Blythe (1815-1865)* (Washington, D.C., 1980) and Dorothy Miller, *The Life and Work of David G. Blythe* (Pittsburgh, 1950) for information about the artist. He also used many documents and records at the Port Authority Transit (PAT) of Pittsburgh, The Arden Trolley Museum of Arden, Pa., The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, and The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, Oakland Branch.

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6 This creature, though crudely sketched and at rest, is not unlike the dragon depicted in Blythe's oil painting of the same year, "Lincoln Crushing the Dragon of Rebellion." This painting also contains Blythe's art palette and the (cracked) Liberty Bell.