



CITY OF PORTSMOUTH, NH
Public Art Review Committee

March 27, 2025

Memorandum

To: Peter Britz, Director of Planning and Sustainability

From: Public Art Review Committee (PARC)

Subject: Review of Proposed Mural for 222 Court Street, *Ona Judge Mural*

On March 26, 2025, PARC reviewed a proposed public art project from the Black Heritage Trail of New Hampshire for their building at 222 Court Street. The project is a large mural (approximately 28' x 24') to be created on proposed cementitious cladding panels affixed to the building's brick wall which faces east. The Black Heritage Trail has received a variance from the Board of Adjustment for the mural which will depict Ona Judge, who escaped to Portsmouth while enslaved by Martha Washington. The mural will be created by Manuel Ramirez from [Positive Street Art](#).

PARC members were very enthusiastic about the plans for the mural and see it as a distinctive contribution to Portsmouth's growing collection of public art.

Site/location/safety. PARC noted that the mural is ideally located at the Black Heritage Trail headquarters where residents and visitors to the City will be able to learn more information about Ona Judge and her important role in local and national history. From the location, the Langdon House which played an important role in the Ona Judge story, is visible. Further, the site is only a few blocks from the African Burying Ground which receives many visitors to Portsmouth.

In terms of accessibility, the mural will be highly visible to pedestrians walking down the busy Pleasant Street corridor. The four-way stop signs at the corner of Court and Pleasant as well as crosswalks support traffic and pedestrian safety; given the four-way stop, the mural should not cause a distraction for drivers.

Recognizing that there is very little clearance between the wall and the adjacent driveway (shared by two condos), the Black Heritage Trail has worked closely with the neighbors to ensure their cooperation. The mural will be positioned approximately 4 feet off the ground to avoid contact with vehicles in the driveway and improve visibility. Explanatory signage for the mural will be placed on the wall facing Court Street to avoid drawing pedestrians onto the neighbors' driveway.

Scale. PARC believes the large scale of the mural (covering most of the brick wall) is appropriate given the proximity of the wall to other properties. The mural will optimally be viewed at a distance which will discourage viewers from encroaching on private property. The scale and the amount of building coverage (on a relatively small building) create contrasts with the aesthetics of the image (see more below) which PARC believes add to the uniqueness of this particular work.

Wall preparation. PARC appreciated the groundwork that the Black Heritage Trail has undertaken to avoid damaging the brick wall that will support the mural. Paint will be applied to panels which

will be affixed to the wall with a small space between the panels and the brick. We understand that there are several types of panels under consideration, including one that simulates the texture of a brick wall. The artist has successful experience using such panels for murals in other locations, including those with harsh weather conditions like Portsmouth. PARC recommends that the Black Heritage Trail consider a non-textured panel flat panel.

Materials/durability/maintenance. The artist will use spray paint over an acrylic or latex masonry paint finished by a clear coat seal—similar to the material used in other murals with a life before “touch up” of approximately 10 years. The Black Heritage Trail and the artist take responsibility for arranging for “touch ups” that may become necessary with wear. PARC recommends considering an anti-graffiti coating of the artist’s choosing.

Aesthetics/design. PARC has been able to review the image from which the artist will develop the mural; it is as historically accurate as possible given what is known about Ona Judge’s arrival in Portsmouth. The image depicts a confident and well-dressed Ona Judge with a backdrop based on the Philadelphia waterfront from which she sailed to Portsmouth in 1796. The Black Heritage Trail has consulted with historians on appropriate appearance and dress. PARC members highlighted the cohesiveness of the artwork, noting that the beauty and muted/soft colors of the image are especially appropriate given the scale of the work, its placement in context, the importance of Ona Judge’s story in the context of Black history and the history of Portsmouth, and the subject—the total effect is expressive of the era and Judge’s character and story.

Artist. Through Positive Street Art based in Nashua, Manuel Ramirez has created approximately 100 murals in NH and other locales over the past twelve years, including in Nashua, Manchester, Lancaster, Hudson, and Salem. He is experienced in working in urban environments, in the New England climate, and with the types of materials proposed for the Ona Judge mural.