

In Carthage, Missouri, a stroll through the town square feels like stepping into a storybook. At its center rises the Jasper County Courthouse. Completed in 1895, its turrets and steeply pitched roofs give it the air of a stone castle, casting long, dramatic shadows across the area. Around it, a collection of late-19th and early-20th-Century buildings, each constructed in Italianate and Romanesque Revival styles. Their ornate trim, weathered brick facades, and faded lettering tells the stories of the merchants, craftsmen, and families who shaped Carthage after the Civil War. The square hums with subtle movement, the flutter of a flag, the occasional creak of a storefront shutter, reminders that history isn't just remembered here, it lingers in every corner. Everywhere you look, Carthage seems alive with possibility, its streets, its architecture, its history whispering tales to anyone who stops to notice.

On a brick wall at 146 East Fourth Street, right in the heart of the square, the story continues in color, weaving together the town's past and present. The "Big Dreams Grow in Carthage" mural stretches 44 feet long and 28 feet tall and is composed of 459 hand-painted tiles. It celebrates 14 famous Carthaginians, portraying some as both an accomplished adult and their younger selves. NASA astronaut Janet Kavandi dons her spacesuit above a young girl in red, her childhood version, who plays with toy rockets at her feet. Cleveland Browns MVP Felix Wright floats above two boys tossing the pigskin, capturing his youthful days on local fields. Political pioneer Annie Baxter, America's first elected female County Clerk, watches over a cheering child in a yellow dress, her younger reflection poised behind a booth that reads "VOTF ANNIE."

The mural brightens a brick wall on the east side of McBride's Antiques, a surface that has stood witness to more than a century of the town's commercial life. Originally constructed in 1861 as a mercantile store and rebuilt in 1869 after a fire, it became the McCrillis Brothers Hardware store in 1879, at one point the largest hardware store in southwest Missouri. Over the decades, the space housed Bee's Variety Store, a sporting goods shop, and most recently, in 2008, the Sassy Spoon Bistro, a modern comfort food eatery. After a 2013 fire destroyed the restaurant, the City of Carthage purchased the remaining lot and converted it into a parking area, leaving a blank wall that disrupted the historic streetscape. Seeking to restore both character and charm, the City turned to Vision Carthage, a nonprofit formed in 2011 to revitalize and beautify the Maple Leaf City, to transform the space into more than just a wall.

"Vision Carthage is really dedicated to preserving [our history], because we see shadows of the past everywhere," said Kate Kelley, the current co-director for the organization. "We have ghost signs and ghost murals of these businesses that really built Carthage, that are fading, and we don't want them to. We want them to be remembered. Because when I think of Carthage, I think of history. And I think a lot of people who visit feel the same way."

One Carthaginian who shared that passion for preservation was local illustrator Andy Thomas. Thomas grew up in Carthage and attended school with several local legends; NASA astronaut Janet Kavandi, for example, had been his

sister's best friend and often visited their home. So, when Vision Carthage approached him in the summer of 2020 to design a mural that would bring life back to the empty lot, he already knew how he wanted to fill the scarred space.

"They wanted to highlight some of the famous people from Carthage," said Thomas. "So, we made a list of the [individuals] that we wanted to highlight, and I presented them with a sketch of a layout. I wanted to do a kind of a colorful, semi-cartoonish rendering, but I can't do cartoons exactly, so it ended up being, you know, my kind of artwork."

The final mural is more than a gallery of famous faces, it's a vivid journey into childhood, alive with primary colors and playful scenes. Below the adult figures, children skip and run, their youthful reflections mirroring the accomplishments above, set against a backdrop of Carthage's most cherished landmarks. Philanthropists Kent and Mary Steady stroll down the ruby-red brick road emerging from the courthouse, while ragtime composer James Scott pauses to admire a whimsical purple music store. Thomas also honored Carthage's artist community by depicting six local creators: Bob Tommey, Sam Butcher, Jerry Ellis, Bill Snow, Lowell Davis, and himself, working together on the mural. Ellis and Davis, both of whom passed in late 2020, had been mentors to Thomas, and Davis, often called the "Norman Rockwell of Rural Art," may have inspired his experimentation with the vibrant, joyous color palette, or perhaps that exuberance flowed naturally from the town itself.

"We have beautiful maple trees in Carthage, so it's a good time to use bright reds and yellows and oranges," said Thomas. "That goes back to, you know, artists like Dr. Seuss, who used bright colors and fantastical worlds to excite children. That was a little bit what I was trying to create, that *Wizard of Oz* feeling of going into a really different world. And yet, [for the] people from Carthage, all those landmarks are so very familiar to them. It doesn't look that fantastical for them."

In early September 2020, Thomas completed his original sketch, which he and Vision Carthage then worked with Paul Whitehill of Whitehill Enterprises to transfer onto 19-by-19-inch, 14-pound tiles. By May 2021, the installation was complete, and the mural was unveiled to the town. Since then, visitors have flocked to the square, pausing to photograph the vibrant scenes.

"We have travelers from all over the world who are on Route 66, who are here to see incredible, charming things like that," said Kelley. "I think art, in general, public art, goes a long way toward tourism and just creating spaces where people want to stop and reflect on their journey; to think about where they're headed, imagine themselves in that beautiful picture, and just to be thankful that they're there in that moment. We're thankful that they're here in Carthage."

In a world where memories are short and the next new thing is worshipped, small towns like Carthage offer something different. It's a town jam-packed with wonderful classic Americana, a town that holds important stories that still linger. Here, past and imagination meet, inviting travelers and locals alike to pause, take it in, and remember that even a small town can hold dreams as wide as the open road.