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LIFE AND DEATH MASKS OF LINCOLN

The Life Masks

There seems to be much confusion about the famous life mask of Lincoln made by Leonard W. Volk, which is usually called a death mask.

We are not left in doubt about the making of this famous life mask as the story of its origin is told by Mr. Volk in *Century Magazine* and later reprinted in the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* for July, 1915.

Mr. Volk first met Abraham Lincoln at Lincoln, Illinois, in 1858 and told him that he would like very much to make a bust of him. Mr. Lincoln promised that when the opportunity offered itself he would grant him that privilege.

It was nearly two years before Volk met Lincoln again. Volk had just returned from Washington to Chicago in the spring of 1860 when he read in the paper that Lincoln was in the city. He remembered the promise Lincoln had made to give him some sittings and he immediately approached the president on the subject.

Appointments were made for his visits to the Volk studio in the Portland Block, just after breakfast. Mr. Volk said that Lincoln was there promptly each morning and never failed to be on time.

As Lincoln was in Chicago for the famous Sand Bar Case which delayed him there from March 23 until April 4, it was during this time, presumably during the last week, that Lincoln gave Volk the sittings for the famous studies.

Upon the occasion of his first visit Lincoln said:

"Mr. Volk, I have never sat before to sculptor or painter—only for daguerreotypes and photographs. What shall I do?"

Mr. Volk advised that he would only take the measurement of his head and shoulders then and the next morning, Saturday, he would make a cast of his face.

Mr. Volk describes Lincoln's reaction to the making of the mask as follows:

"He sat naturally in the chair when I made the cast and saw every move I



Bas-relief from Reed's Death Mask of Lincoln

made in a mirror opposite, as I put the plaster on without interference with his eyesight or his free breathing through his nostrils. It was about an hour before the mold was ready to be removed, and being all in one piece, with both ears perfectly taken, it clung pretty hard, as the cheek-bones were higher than the jaws at the lobe of the ear. He bent his head low and took hold of the mold and gradually worked it off without breaking or injury."

Mr. Volk says that by previous appointment he was to cast Mr. Lincoln's hands on the Sunday morning after his nomination, and at 9 a. m. Mr. Lincoln received him in the dining room of his home where the casts were made. The casts of Lincoln's hands are often associated with the life mask.

R. W. Gilder served as chairman of the committee which, in the early nineties, purchased the original life mask from Leonard W. Volk for \$1,500. The committee had a bronze replica of the mask made, and both were then presented to the Smithsonian Institute.

Clark Mills also is said to have made a life mask of Lincoln in February, 1865. It looks so gaunt and haggard it is often referred to as a death mask. A brief biographic sketch of Mills says that, "The latter part of his life was spent in making busts, and he invented a method of putting plaster on the face of his subjects, thereby adding greatly to the truthfulness of his casts."

The Death Masks

A study of the traditional death masks of Lincoln presents a much more difficult problem than the well preserved story of the life mask.

The Lincoln Historical Research Foundation has just recently come into possession of a bas-relief of Lincoln

said to have been reproduced from a death mask made by Louis Henri Reed.

A story of this death mask appearing in the *Indianapolis News* for April 8, 1910, follows:

"One of Henri's early works, if not his best, was a plaster bas-relief of Abraham Lincoln, claimed by some to have been made from a death mask taken from the martyred President's face as he lay in state at the old capitol here by special permission of Governor Morton. . . .

"There were only two, or, perhaps, three, copies of this made. One of these, because of oversight somewhere, I was fortunate enough to procure twenty years ago in a Washington street auction house, said at the time to be part of the effects of Mr. Wallace then sold. Its fidelity as a likeness was certainly equal to any shown of the same subject at the recent Saint Gaudens exhibit here.

"This bas relief, or, more properly, haute relief, of the head and neck of Mr. Lincoln was in full side view, the whole oval being 26 by 21 inches, the head and neck 20 inches long. During the national encampment of the G. A. R. here, in 1893, I hung it from my office window, appropriately draped, with the words, 'Your Great Commander,' under it on a large printed placard. This attracted universal attention as the great parade went by, and soon many veterans came up the stairs to obtain a closer view of it."

"The only replica of this work I know of was held by Ben L. Darrow, the Meridian street shoe man, living in Illinois street, which Mrs. Darrow told me was a present from Mr. Reed; but, as that family is broken up by death, it would be difficult to locate it, unless the son, Philo, of Chicago, has it. Their copy was the prettier, as mine was unframed, while theirs they had put in a deep wooden frame and covered with glass.

"The fate of mine was as tragic as those of its maker and subject. One night we were awakened by a tremendous crash, and found that the heavy mass had broken the cord that held it high on the wall, and the work of art was smashed to smithereens and beyond the hope of repair."

The framed copy mentioned in the above article is probably the same one now in possession of the Indiana State Library. This and the one in possession of the Lincoln Historical Research Foundation are the only two known to exist.

Some Lincoln authorities have claimed that another death mask of Lincoln was made while the body was lying in state in the Capitol at Washington, and other traditions recall one taken at Springfield after the arrival of the body. Evidence is not at hand to confirm either of these statements.