

LINCOLN LORE

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LEONARD WELLS VOLK, 1823-1895

The story of sculptural art in America, as it relates specifically to Abraham Lincoln, begins with the life mask of Lincoln, created by Leonard Volk. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this study which was supplemented by a cast of Lincoln's bust, made at the same time of the above study and casts of Lincoln's hands made a few weeks later. The whole background of the more than sixty heroic bronze statues and countless busts of Abraham Lincoln reach back to Volk's original creations.

Leonard Wells Volk was born at Wellstown, New York, on November 7, 1828. Very early in life the boy determined to become a sculptor, and as his father, with whom he worked, was a marble-cutter, he received his preliminary training at home. Leonard Volk's first professional venture was in St. Louis where he opened a studio and among his first studies was a bust of Henry Clay. Young Volk married in 1852, a first cousin of Stephen A. Douglas. It was Douglas who provided for Volk's art training in Rome.

Upon his return from Europe in 1857 Volk opened a studio in Chicago on Clark Street, opposite the Sherman House. His first production was a bust of Douglas. For several years he was president of the Academy of Design in Chicago, which he helped to establish, thereby making definite contributions to an appreciation of art. His last work was a bronze figure of General Shields, placed in the National Hall of Statuary at Washington.

It is fortunate, indeed, that Volk has left us some of his reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln, especially with respect to the making of both the mask and bust studies, as well as the occasion when the casts of the hands were produced. As early as the Lincoln and Douglas debates, it appears that Mr. Lincoln promised Volk he would give him a sitting for the purpose of making a mask, but it was not until two years later when Lincoln was in Chicago, trying the Sand Bar Case, that the promise was fulfilled.

The Mask

The life mask (not a death mask) was made in April, 1860 on the top floor of the old Portland Block, in Chicago. We have Mr. Volk's own words as to the application and removal of the plaster to Mr. Lincoln's face in these words:

"The drying of the wet plaster on the face required about an hour, during which Lincoln was both patient and merry. It was difficult to remove without injury, the cheek bones being higher than the jaws at the lobes of the ears. He bent his head and worked it gently off with his own hands. The process made his eyes water, as the plaster carried away with it some of the fine hair of the temples."

Mr. Volk, later on, idealized the mask, showing Mr. Lincoln with a luxurious growth of hair and expressive eyes, but still retaining the same size and form of the original mask. This study was designed especially for a wall piece.

The Bust

It may not be generally known that at the time the mask was made, Sculptor Volk also made measurements of and modeled Lincoln's neck, shoulders and chest. These studies from life served as sources for the making of his bust of Lincoln to be used as a companion piece with his bust of Douglas. Mr. Volk also has written about this episode in these words:

"In the final sitting Lincoln removed his coat, waistcoat, and upper underclothing, and stood without a murmur for an hour or more while the sculptor modeled his breast and shoulders."

The Lincoln National Life Foundation is in possession of an original letter written by Volk to Hennecke & Co., of

Milwaukee, on March 6, 1890, in which the sculptor gives some interesting information about the disposal of this first bust. He says, "In regard to the bust of Abraham Lincoln for which he gave me sittings in April 1860, just before his first nomination for the Presidency which I afterwards executed in Statuary Marble in this City (Chicago). The Crosby Opera House Company purchased it at one thousand dollars and allowing it to go to the Paris Exposition of 1867. Before its departure and while in the Crosby Art Gallery, Mrs. Lincoln, paying a visit there, saw it the first time, and threw her arms around the neck and declared it the most perfect portrait of her husband ever made. After its return from Paris it was purchased by subscription from a few gentlemen including the late Isaac N. Arnold and presented to the Historical Society and soon after destroyed in the great conflagration, together with the original draft of the Emancipation Proclamation fastened in the wall just above it."

Lincoln students have come to know the different bust studies by Volk as the "short bust" including little but the head and neck; the "nude bust" showing in addition, Lincoln's shoulders and chest as moulded from life and actual measurements made; and the "draped bust" decorated with the classic draperies on the shoulders.

The Hands

It was not until after the nomination of Abraham Lincoln to the Presidency that Volk conceived the idea of making casts of Lincoln's hands. He went to Mr. Lincoln's home in Springfield, Illinois and there on the Sunday after his nomination for the Presidency made the famous casts. We also are fortunate in having Mr. Volk's own words about the making of these casts:

"Desiring that he should hold something in one of them, the nominee for president of the United States went to his little woodshed, took the saw, that was used in preparing the firewood, and cut off a piece of broom handle, returning whittling its end with a knife. While the plaster was drying on the hand clasping the bit of broomstick Mr. Volk detected on the thumb of the left a scar. 'You have heard me called a rail splitter,' said Lincoln, 'Well, one day while sharpening a wedge on a log the ax glanced off and nearly took the end of my thumb off. That's the scar.'"

The Statue

When Volk went to Springfield for the purpose of making casts of Lincoln's hands, he also anticipated as early as this, a life-size figure of the President. He stated that besides the casts of Lincoln's hands, he took back to Chicago the identical black alpaca, campaign suit worn by Lincoln during the debates, a pair of Lynn, newly made, pegged boots and four negatives made in Butler's photography gallery at Springfield. According to Volk "the views were front, rear, and two flanks." Later on all of these personal items, except the casts of Lincoln's hands, were lost in the Chicago fire.

There are at least three different full length studies by Volk, each of which the Foundation is pleased to possess in statuette size. One of these is of special interest as it incorporates all of Volk's original studies, even including the hands cast at Springfield with the right one grasping a stick. The first heroic statue of Lincoln by Volk was completed in 1876 and placed in the State House at Springfield. A heroic bronze statue of Lincoln was executed for the city of Rochester, New York in 1890.

Note: This is the ninth of a series of biographical sketches on the ten persons selected by the Foundation Advisory Group for enrollment on the Lincoln Recognition Roster.