

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN AND THE CAPITOL DOME

Recently it was announced that the Statue of Liberty in New York has been wired for brilliant illumination as soon as the world is again able to appreciate the glory of such a display. There is also another statue at Washington on the dome of the Capitol called, "Freedom," that received a similar treatment during the first World War to make it more resplendent. There are eighty-six floodlights and twelve searchlights in the Capitol dome illuminating system. Four of these searchlights are focused on the statue of "Freedom."

On January 15, 1856, Jefferson Davis wrote a letter to Captain M. C. Meigs, in charge of the Capitol extension, in which he made some comments on the design for the statue called "Freedom" which was to crown the dome of the Capitol. The Secretary seemed to be especially dissatisfied with the "Liberty Cap" which "Freedom" wore. Davis commented, "The Liberty Cap' has an established origin in its use, as the badge of the freed slave; and though it should have another emblematic meaning today, a recurrence to that original may give to it in the future the same popular acceptance which it had in the past. Why should not armed Liberty wear a helmet?" The Secretary's preference, with respect to the type of headgear to be worn by "Freedom," was made known to Crawford, the sculptor. As might be expected, he put a helmet or a crest on "Freedom." This change in reality transformed the figure into a knight, with all the implications of "the established origin in its use."

It was in the very midst of the Civil War, during the administration of Abraham Lincoln, that the Capitol dome was completed, and the statue of "Freedom" put in place. Something of the history of the erection of the statue is of interest in that the final approval of the design was by Jefferson Davis, then Secretary of War under Pierce, and the dedication ceremonies indirectly under the supervision of Lincoln.

Thomas Crawford passed away before the model for "Freedom" in heroic size was shipped to America from Europe. The boat on which it was forwarded was shipwrecked, but the statue was saved and transported by another vessel. The shipment reached Washington in April, 1859. On April 3, 1860, Secretary Davis authorized Clark Mills to cast the statue of "Freedom" from the Crawford model at the foundry near Blandensburg. The work had progressed to some extent when the Civil War broke out.

Simon Cameron, the new Secretary of War in the Lincoln Cabinet, authorized Captain Meigs to issue the following order on May 15, 1861. "Work upon the Capitol Extension and the new dome is suspended. This order is given in consequence of the condition of the country. The new government has no money to spend except in self defense. . . ."

In April, 1862, an act of Congress was approved authorizing the completion of the dome, which, of course, would include the casting and putting in place of the statue of "Freedom." When the statue was finally cast and viewed, preliminary to its erection on the dome, there was some dissatisfaction with respect to the headgear which Secretary Davis had suggested be changed from a cap to a helmet. Representative Robert McKnight, of Pennsylvania, on February 8, 1863, introduced the following amendment to a bill:

"Provided—That the architect of the Capitol be and he is hereby authorized and directed to have the non-descript ornament removed, under the direction of the sculptor, from the head of the bronze statue Liberty, before the same is elevated to its position on the apex of the Capitol dome." Nothing was done, however, at this time to have the objectional helmet corrected, and "Freedom" was put in place with the headgear of a knight.

Shakespeare's "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown" might be paraphrased in this instance with the use of the word "helmet" instead of "crown."

Hon. John H. Rice, chairman of the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds, made some inquiries about the "crest" on the "Statue of Freedom," and seeming especially anxious to learn whether or not it appeared in the original design. Thomas A. Walter, architect of the United States Capitol Extension, replied on April 20, 1864, that, "It conforms in every particular to what is understood to be the first design: viz, the design of Mr. Thomas Crawford approved by Jefferson Davis." Apparently, however, Mr. Walker did not call to mind Crawford's original drawing with the "Liberty Cap" to which Davis had objected.

It would be expected that the dedication of the statue which from the structural viewpoint, at least, completed the magnificent edifice, would be a time of great festivities with much oratory and public demonstration. We see in the following order by the War Department the hand of the Commander-in-Chief when it was requested of the superintendent of work on the dome that "no demonstration whatever be made on the placing of the head on the statue . . . that none of the persons on the dome be permitted to make any noise whatever, or to wave their hats and also that no attempt be made by anyone to speech making."

The importance attached to the unveiling of the statue, however, is shown by the following order from the War Department, known as Special Order No. 248, Headquarters, Department of Washington, Twenty-second Army Corps, December 1, 1863:

"Sec. 3 At 12 m. on the 2d inst. the Statue of Freedom which crowns the dome of the National Capitol will be inaugurated. In commemoration of this event and as an expression due from the Department of respect for this material symbol of the principle from which our Government is based, it is ordered—

"First, at the moment at which a flag is displayed from the statue a national salute of 35 guns will be fired from a field battery on Capitol Hill.

"Second, that the last gun from the salute will be answered by a similar salute from Fort Stanton, which will be followed in succession from right to left by salutes from Forts Davis, Mahan, Lincoln, Bunker Hill, Totton, De Russy, Reno, Cameron, Corcoran, Albany and Scott.

... "Fourth, Brigadier General W. F. Barry will make the necessary arrangement for and superintend the firing from Capitol Hill, Brigadier General De Russy from the works south and Lieut. Colonel J. A. Haskin from those north of the Potomac.

"By the command of Major-General Augur:

"Carroll H. Potter,

"Assistant Adjutant General."

The helmet on the head of the statue and the inscription on the base, "E pluribus unum," may have had too much thunder in the way of suggestion for oratory. Instead of preparing a speech on this really important construction achievement in the midst of a great war, the president on dedication day wrote a letter to George Opdyke and others, who had invited him to speak at Cooper Institute on December 3rd. The concluding paragraph of the letter might be considered his dedication speech for the Statue of Freedom.

"Honor to the soldier and sailor everywhere who bravely bears his country's cause. Honor also to the citizen who cares for his brother in the field, and serves, as he best can, the same cause—honor to him, only less than to him who braves, for the common good, the storms of heaven and the storms of battle."