

LINCOLN LORE

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BUSTS OF LINCOLN BY VOLK CREATED IN 1860

The substance of Lincoln feature articles which appear in the daily press is usually reflected in the contents of the correspondence which comes to the Lincoln National Life Foundation. Any item which calls attention to some supposed Lincoln rarity, with a monetary value estimated at a considerable sum, is bound to result in treasure hunts in dusty attics for similar pieces.

The *New York Times* for March 6, 1949 called attention to a Volk bust of Lincoln valued by the owner at \$50,000. This exceedingly high appraisal is incentive enough to bring out of hiding for observation and valuation, scores of discarded pieces of old statuary made by the famous artist Volk, and busts of Lincoln made by any other sculptor as well. Inquiries are already reaching the Foundation about the valuation of Lincoln statuary and a letter now before the editor of *Lincoln Lore* states, "I believe I have a duplicate of this bust, insured for \$50,000 by its owner. . . . I am taking the liberty of writing you for any advice as to whom to contact for selling same?"

Just what evidence was used by the owner of the bust mentioned in the *Times* to arrive at the valuation of \$50,000 is problematical inasmuch as he admitted that he had paid but \$5.00 for it originally. The bust is described as "a beardless plaster bust of Abraham Lincoln done in 1860. . . . Imprinted on the bust is the name of the sculptor Leonard W. Volk."

A statuary company in Boston advertised in 1909 replicas of the Volk smooth face Lincoln, 14 inches high at \$2.00. A Chicago firm more than twenty years ago offered one 24 inches high for \$6.50. It is difficult to visualize a plaster bust of Lincoln by Volk in any design now bringing over \$50, to say nothing of \$50,000.

A story of the evolution of Volk's works on Lincoln, from the original life mask made in 1860 to the variant studies of the full-length figures and contemporary replicas, would "fill a book." Even confining the data to a compilation of the many different models would take more space than this bulletin allows. Just a brief identification of nude beardless busts made as early as 1860 will be attempted.

Heroic Size Nude Bust

Volk's application for a patent on the life size nude bust originating with the mask, reached Washington on May 17, 1860, the day before Lincoln was nominated for the presidency. The application was accompanied by a picture of the bust which picture was signed by Volk and witnessed by Hiram Joy and John Vanannan. The application was numbered 1250 and captioned "Leonard W. Volk Design for a Bust of A. Lincoln." Attached to the picture was a statement entitled "Specification forming part of Design No. 1250, dated June 12, 1860," the day on which the patent was issued. The statement follows:

"To all whom it may concern:

"Be it known that I, Leonard W. Volk, of the city of Chicago, in the county of Cook and State of Illinois, have made or produced a new and original Design in Round Relief of a Bust Representing Hon. Abraham Lincoln, of Illinois; and I do hereby declare that the following is a full and exact description of the same.

"A 'Hermes' bust, viz., head, shoulders, and breast cut off below the pectoral muscles and without drapery or covering of any kind, the head slightly elevated and turned to the right.

"What I claim as my production, and desire to secure by Letters Patent, is—

"The design for a bust as above described, and represented in the accompanying print.

LEONARD W. VOLK.

Witnesses:

Isaac D. Arnold,
E. B. McCagg."

The photograph of the bust which was made a part of the description of the patent issued, definitely places the completion of this bust several days before the application was received in Washington on May 17, 1860. The picture reveals that a card had been attached to the right side of the bust for photographic purposes bearing this inscription "L. W. Volk, Sc. 1860." Whether or not the bust was actually inscribed at this time is problematical. Obviously it could not have carried the patent date which was not known until the patent was granted nearly two months later.

This heroic nude bust measured 15 inches from the base of the bust to the point of the chin and 10 inches from the chin to the top of the head or 25 inches overall. After the patent was granted the date "Patented June 12, 1860" was imprinted on the right side of the bust and the inscription "L. W. Volk, Sculptor, 1860" was inscribed on the left side. This is the same design that was placed in a niche in the church at Hingham, England and dedicated on October 15, 1919.

Cabinet Size Nude Bust

The second stage of the nude Volk Bust was a cabinet size replica study. Apparently one of the earliest, if not the first one, was presented to Mrs. Abraham Lincoln. Mr. Volk was in Springfield, Illinois the day the President was nominated on May 18, 1860, and recorded this incident about his visit to the Lincoln home on that day: "I gave her (Mrs. Lincoln) a cabinet-size bust of her husband which I had moulded from the large one." This statement while giving primacy to the heroic copy does indicate that this cabinet size bust also preceded the patent. This smaller bust, of course, would also be lacking a patent date. Members of the Lincoln family are not informed as to what became of this presentation copy. Mr. Wilfred Thomas now has in his possession a copy of the cabinet size nude bust which he exhibited at the New York State Library at Albany in 1947. This bust however has the patent date inscribed upon it which would place it later than June 14, 1860.

Composite Busts

Leonard Volk's patent had not been issued a month before he discovered that it was being infringed upon by a vendor who was selling busts made by Volk's Lincoln head imposed on the shoulders and chest of Henry Clay. Volk immediately followed the vendor to his shop and with a mallet not only broke the newly made busts in stock but also the mold that was being used. Volk was brought before a magistrate and fined six and one-quarter cents for the use of the mallet. The *Boston Morning Journal* for July 4, 1861 printed a detailed story of the incident copied from the *Crayon*. How many of these composite busts were distributed before Mr. Volk began using the mallet is not known.

Later copies of the nude busts of 1860 were cut in marble and cast in bronze, but these later studies can in no way be confused with the plaster copy recently discovered in New York on which a fabulous appraisal has been placed.