

# Canova's statue of Washington

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY PAULINE S. JOHNSON

R. D. W. Connor, *Canova's Statue of Washington*. North Carolina Historical Commission Bulletin No. 8 (1910).

## As you read...

### AN EXPENSIVE STATUE

At a time when the General Assembly was reluctant to spend money on necessities for North Carolinians, they did vote for one expensive project. In an atmosphere of patriotism after the successful conclusion of the War of 1812 and as a way to bring visitors and prestige to the state, the representatives decided to commission a life-sized marble statue of the greatest American hero, George Washington.

The governor, with the advice of Thomas Jefferson, made a contract with Antonio Canova, a famous Italian neoclassical sculptor. *Neoclassicism* was an artistic style in the late 1700s and early 1800s that was inspired by the ancient classical period, generally that of Greece and Rome. Canova's statue depicted Washington as a Caesar in Roman costume holding a pen and tablet.

Originally, the General Assembly appropriated \$10,000 to Canova for sculpting the statue. But a second payment to him, the cost of a marble pedestal with historic engravings on all four sides, some mishandled funds, payment for men who helped to put the plan in action, transportation costs, and extensive improvements to the State Capitol — including a domed rotunda — to house the sculpture increased the cost of the project to perhaps six times as much by the time the statue was installed in the capitol building in 1821. While the white marble statue for a time did draw many visitors to the state, including the Marquis de Lafayette in 1825, it was destroyed when the capitol burned to the ground in 1831.

- Why do you think the General Assembly would have spent so much money on this statue when they were reluctant to spend money on internal improvements and schools?
- What do you think the poorer citizens of North Carolina may have felt when they saw the statue? When they learned how much it cost?

What do you think the members of the wealthy planter society would have felt when they saw the statue? When they learned how much it cost? Do you think the members of the General Assembly were representing their constituents well in this situation?

- This article was written in 1910. Why do you think the author did not discuss the high cost of the statue?



Figure 1. Canova's statue of George Washington, as drawn by an unknown artist.

Probably no work of art ever excited a more general interest in the United States than Canova's statue of Washington. The time at which it was ordered, the scarcity of such works of art in the United States, the fame of the sculptor, the manner in which the statue was brought to this country, the eminent names associated with its history, and its tragic fate, all combined with the love and veneration felt for the memory of Washington to attract to it the attention of the Nation and to make its erection a national event...

The statue was ordered just after the close of our second war with England, in which the young Nation had asserted its dignity and vindicated its claim to the respect and consideration of the world. Men spoke of the contest as our "Second War for Independence," and its victories recalled the glories of the Revolution...

As memories of the Revolution were revived, the central figure of that struggle loomed up with more than its usual greatness. Somehow or other it seemed that as the genius of Washington had established independence, so his spirit had guided the Nation through its struggle to maintain it...

While this feeling was at its height, the General Assembly of North Carolina met in annual session. On the 16th of December, 1815, the House of Commons, and four days later the Senate, unanimously adopted a resolution instructing the Governor "to purchase on behalf of this State a full length statue of General Washington." As there was no limitation of price or action placed on him, the Governor determined to execute the commission in the most liberal spirit. At his request the State's senators in Congress, Messrs. Turner and Macon, undertook to ascertain whether a statue "worthy the character it is to represent, and the State which erects it," could be made in the United States; and if not, what would be the cost of getting one from Italy.

Some of the most eminent men in the country became interested in the work. William Thornton and Benjamin H. Latrobe, architects of the National Capitol, declared that the statue could be executed in the United States as well as anywhere, and recommended a French sculptor named Valaperti; but Joseph Hopkinson and Thomas Jefferson were of opinion that no sculptor in the United States would offer himself as competent to do the work. Both urged that Canova be employed.

Accordingly to Canova Governor Miller decided to apply. In determining what style should be adopted and what model should be followed, the opinion of Jefferson, in favor of the Roman, prevailed....

[The governor's] instructions were that the style should be Roman, the size somewhat larger than life, the price to Canova \$10,000, the attitude to be left to the artist....

As it was intended that the statue should be placed in the hall of the State Senate, which was only sixteen feet in height, [Canova] was of opinion that the statue should be in a sitting attitude...He pushed the work as rapidly as possible and completed it in the spring of 1821. Upon being advised that it was ready for shipment the Governor of North Carolina applied to the Secretary of the Navy for permission to have it brought to the United States in a war vessel. This request was readily granted and the necessary orders promptly issued. Accordingly, Commodore William Bainbridge, commanding the United States Ship Columbus, in a letter written May 19, 1821, from Gibraltar Bay, informed the Governor of North Carolina that he had the statue on board and would sail within ten days with it for the United States. The Columbus with her cargo arrived at Boston July 22, and thence the statue was shipped by a coasting vessel to Wilmington, N. C. From Wilmington a river boat conveyed it up the Cape Fear River to Fayetteville, whence it was brought overland to

Raleigh. It reached Raleigh December 24, 1821, and with elaborate ceremonies was set up in the rotunda of the State House.

Perhaps the most interesting event in its brief history was the visit which La Fayette<sup>f</sup> paid to it in March, 1825. "This was indeed an interesting scene," wrote an eye witness, "and we were fortunately so situated that we heard the inquiries and remarks, and witnessed the feelings which it [the statue] elicited. We were gratified to hear the General observe that the likeness was much better than he expected to see. He seemed deeply interested in examining the historical designs on the pedestal, and expressed his approbation of the exquisite workmanship of the whole."

The statue had but a brief existence. In the early morning of June 21, 1831, the citizens of Raleigh were alarmed by the cry of fire and in a few minutes every person in the village knew that the State House was in flames. The structure was soon a heap of ashes. With it was destroyed the statue of Washington, "that proud monument of national gratitude, which," declared the Raleigh Register, "was our pride and glory."...

For many years the ruins of the statue on exhibition in the State Hall of History were a melancholy reminder of the precious treasure which had brought to the people of North Carolina so much self-gratification...

Perhaps the best description of the statue is that of the Countess Albrizzi in "The Works of Antonio Canova," illustrated by the great English engraver, Henry Moses:

In this fine composition Canova has not only maintained the dignity of his subject, but (warmed by admiration of the amiable qualities of this illustrious man) has also infused into the statue an expression of the gentleness and benevolence which tempered his severer virtues.

The hero is sitting with an air of noble simplicity on an elegant seat, raised on a double square base. Nothing can surpass the dignity of the attitude or the living air of meditation which it breathes; and the grandeur of the style, the force and freedom of the execution, the close and animated resemblance to the original, all conspire to place this statue in the highest rank of art. The fine tunic which he wears is seen only at the knee, being covered by an ample ornamented cuirass, above which is a magnificent mantle fastened by a clasp on the right shoulder, and flowing down behind in majestic folds. Beneath his right foot, which is extended forward, is a parazonium sheathed, and a scepter, signifying that the successful termination of the war, and the establishment of the laws, had rendered them now useless.

The hero is in the act of writing on a tablet held in his left hand, and resting on the thigh, which is slightly raised for its support. From the following words already inscribed on it, we learn the subject which occupies his mind — 'George Washington to the people of the United States — Friends and Fellow-Citizens.' In his right hand he holds the pen with a suspended air, as if anxiously meditating on the laws fitted to promote the happiness of his countrymen; a border of the mantle, raised to the tablet by the hand which supports it, gives a fine effect to this graceful and decorous action. In his noble countenance the sculptor has finely portrayed all his great and amiable qualities, inspiring the beholder with mingled sensations of affection and veneration. This statue is only in a slight degree larger than life; his robust form corresponding with his active and vigorous mind.

If to this great man a worthy cause was not wanting, or the means of acquiring the truest and most lasting glory, neither has he been less fortunate after death, when, by the genius of so sublime an artist, he appears again among his admiring countrymen in this dear and venerated form; not as a soldier, though not inferior to the greatest generals, but in his loftier and more benevolent character of the virtuous citizen and enlightened lawgiver.



Figure 2. This reproduction of Canova's statue stands in the rotunda of the North Carolina State Capitol today.

---

## On the web

### More from LEARN NC

Visit us on the web at [www.learnnc.org](http://www.learnnc.org) to learn more about topics related to this article, including George Washington, North Carolina, art, history, and politics.

## Notes

1. The Marquis de Lafayette, a young French nobleman who fought in the U.S. Army under George Washington during the American Revolution. In 1824–25 he returned to the United States and visited each of the twenty-four states. He was welcomed everywhere with parades and celebrations.

## About the author

### PAULINE S. JOHNSON

I am currently the Director of a Teaching American History Grant for Buncombe County Schools, Asheville City Schools, and Madison County Schools. I have taught history and English in the seventh and eighth grades for over twenty-six years at Reynolds Middle School in Asheville, North Carolina. I am currently doing adjunct work for Mars Hill College and Western Carolina University. I have a Masters Degree from Western Carolina University and am Nationally Board Certified in Early Adolescence/Social Studies-History. I am certified to teach K–12 and I also have Academically-Intellectually Gifted certification.

## Image credits

More information about these images and higher-resolution files are linked from the original web version of this document.

### Figure 1 (page 2)

Drawing attributed to E. J. Pinkerton. Original image available from Library of Congress (<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3c20700> ). This image is believed to be in the public domain. Users are advised to make their own copyright assessment.

### Figure 2 (page 3)

Image from <http://www.flickr.com/photos/stgermh/5881880/>. Copyright ©2005. This image is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 2.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/>.