



George Washington Statue by Horatio Greenough

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## Summary Description

The Horatio Greenough George Washington statue was commissioned by the U.S. Congress in 1832 to commemorate the centennial birthday of President George Washington. The statue portrays a seated Washington with his left hand and forearm holding a sword and the right arm and hand pointing towards the heavens.



The figure is draped in a toga with the chest bare and the feet in sandals. On the chair are carvings depicting both classic and new world figures and on the back an inscription by the sculptor. The chair rests on a granite base.

## Detailed Description

The statue is a massive 12 ton sculpture carved from Carrara marble. The style is Italian and the symbolism classical. It is modeled after the Greek statue of Zeus by Phidias. The head of Washington is copied from the bust of Washington by Jean Antoine Houdon. The sword in Washington's hand shows his relinquishing power after he led the country to victory in the American Revolution. The right

hand points to heaven acknowledging the source of law.

On the side of the chair are two relief panels, one showing the Greek god Apollo driving his chariot and the other representing an infant Hercules battling with a snake while his half brother Iphidus shrinks in fear. Apollo represents the enlightenment spread by the



United States under Washington's presidency. Hercules stands for a courageous North America and Iphidus a cowardly South America. On the right back corner is a carving of a downcast American Indian showing the state of the country when civilization arrived from Europe. On the left back is a carving of Columbus holding a globe signifying the connection between the discovery of the New World and European domination? On the back of the chair is the inscription "Simulacrum istud ad macnum liberatis exemplum nec sine ipsa duraturum Horatius Greenough faciebat." (Horatio Greenough made this image

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as a great example of freedom and will not survive without freedom itself.)

## **Statement of Significance**

Greenough's statue of George Washington is nationally significant because it was the first statue of Washington commissioned by the United States government. It is also significant as a work of art by America's first recognized professional sculptor Horatio Greenough.

## **Historic Analysis**

### **Summary**

By the end of the American Revolutionary War in 1782 George Washington was acclaimed as a military hero and statesman. There were numerous suggestions proposed to create a monument to honor this extraordinary man. Of all the suggestions three ideas stand out: an equestrian statue at the nation's capital; a rotunda in the Capitol building to house Washington's tomb with a white marble statue above the crypt; and a free standing building dedicated to his memory. Although the fervor for honoring Washington continued over the following decades the debate over the form of the monument and funds to support such a project delayed making the dream a reality. Finally in 1832 a commission to produce a statue to occupy the Capitol rotunda was granted to Horatio Greenough. The statue was installed in 1841 but remained in the rotunda for only two years before it was moved to the east lawn of the Capitol building. The statue remained on the Capitol grounds until 1908 when it was transferred to the Smithsonian Institution and moved into the West Wing of the Smithsonian Building. In 1964 the statue was installed in the newly built Museum of American Art and Technology, now the Museum of American History. The statue currently resides on the second floor of the building.

### **Background**

The Continental Congress on August 7, 1783 in recognition of George Washington's contributions to the new Nation proposed that an equestrian statue of George Washington be erected "at the place where the residence of Congress shall be established". Pierre Charles L'Enfant included a site for such a statue in his designs for the capital city. His plans show a location close to the current Washington Monument. In 1793 the Capitol architect William Thornton proposed an alternate placement in. He proposed that a statue be placed in the center rotunda of the Capitol over Washington's crypt. However, the development of the Capital City and work on the construction of the Capitol building went slowly. The form and placement for the memorial was not finalized. Thornton's concept was later endorsed by John Marshall in 1799 shortly after the death of Washington. In 1801 the House authorized the construction of a mausoleum but the Senate vetoed the bill. In 1832 to commemorate the 100 birthday of George Washington, the House Committee on Public Buildings passed a resolution instructing President Jackson to commission Horatio Greenough to sculpt a marble statue for the rotunda. The

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statue was to be a pedestrian figure rather than the originally proposed equestrian statue. The head was to copy that designed by Jean Antoine Houdon for the statue installed in 1796 by the State of Virginia in Capitol Building in Richmond. The idea of Washington's tomb in the rotunda was abandoned as the idea was repeatedly rejected by the Washington family.

### **Capitol Rotunda and Washington's tomb**

The design of the Capitol building was awarded to Dr. William Thornton in 1793. Although the original design has been lost, a description of the design includes a ground floor crypt that would occupy the exact center of the Capitol under the rotunda where the four quadrants of the city met. Thornton relocated the equestrian statue from L'Enfant's location to a position above the crypt. The double monument of the equestrian statue and the tomb would ensure the Capitol as the center of the nation. The concept was not endorsed by the government since national monuments appeared to be contrary to the ideals of the new democratic nation. It was not until 1799, eight days after Washington's death that John Marshall proposed "a Marble statue be erected by the United States in the Capitol, at the City of Washington, and that the family of George Washington be requested to permit his body to be deposited under it". No immediate action was taken except that a burial platform was prepared for the crypt to be included as part of the construction of the rotunda.

By 1800 the construction of the building was placed in the hands of Benjamin Latrobe, as Architect of the Capitol. Latrobe proposed "a mausoleum of granite and marble, in pyramidal form 100 feet square at the base and of proportionate height". It was intended to be a free standing building not part of the Capitol Building, however, no specific location was indicated. In 1801 the House appropriated \$200,000 for the construction but the Senate vetoed the bill.

The issue came to a head in 1832, the centennial of Washington's birth. The family of Washington rejected the idea of Washington being entombed in the Capitol. The idea of a tomb was then abandoned in favor of honoring the spirit of Washington by building a colossal statue to be installed in the Capitol rotunda.

### **American Art**

In the early years of America's independence American art was in its infancy. There was no choice but to turn to Europe for public sculptural adornments. Italian sculptors with training in the classical tradition and with access to the marble quarries of Italy came to the US in response to this need. Two of the most notable were Enrico Causice who won the commission for the Washington monument in Baltimore and Antonio Canova who was commissioned to execute a statue of George Washington for the new state house in Raleigh North Carolina. The sculptor Jean Antoine Houdon also was engaged to fabricate a statue of Washington for the State of Virginia. The influence of these works led to the Italianate style becoming an important part of American aesthetics and American life.

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America had restricted facilities for training artists and the early academies could not be compared to their European counterparts. It was the patronage of the newly rich who had traveled to Europe and collected art that supported the first American artists who went abroad to learn their craft. Patrons advanced money to these students who often repaid either in cash or in kind.

### Horatio Greenough



It was from this environment that Horatio Greenough emerged to be recognized as America's first sculptor. Horatio Greenough was born on September 6, 1805 in Boston Massachusetts. His father was a successful businessman and was well connected socially. Horatio and his siblings were expected to be educated and to determine their own course to a productive life. Although there was little in the society of the time that focused on the arts, four of the nine children developed an interest. As a young child, Horatio was drawn to an ornamental garden sculpture in the family garden, but it wasn't until several years later that he began to experiment with sculpting by making chalk reproductions of well known busts and statues. By the time he was twelve, his artistic talent was recognized by the

director of the Boston Athenaeum where he was given free entry to the Fine Arts room.

After working with alabaster and plaster of Paris, he learned to model in clay. His skill was recognized by the French sculptor, John Binon who brought him into his studio in Boston. Although he wished to pursue a career in the arts, his father insisted that he continue his education and he entered Harvard in 1821. At Harvard he fully immersed himself in the study of the classics. At the same time he continued to do modeling which led to his winning a competition for his design of a Bunker Hill monument.

During his studies at Harvard he became acquainted with Washington Allston, a painter and member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He soon became Greenough's mentor and ultimately the major influence in his development of an appreciation of art aesthetics. Allston was particularly attracted by the beauty of classic Greek sculpture and delved deeply into the history and philosophy of this genre. Greenough's appreciation of art history and aesthetics, which later developed into writing his own essays on these subjects, resulted from his association with Allston.

In 1825 before graduating from Harvard he sailed to Rome to study art where he spent eighteen months modeling and studying the antiquities of Rome. A case of malaria brought him back to New England. After recuperation from his illness he went to Washington wishing to make a sculpture of President John Quincy Adams. He hoped that the success of this undertaking would establish his reputation. An introductory letter

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from Josiah Quincy, mayor of Boston, enabled him to get a commission for a portrait of Adams. Adams was pleased with the bust and the success launched Greenough's career as a portrait sculptor.

Through Allston's connection Greenough was introduced to Samuel F. Morse who became a life-long friend. Morse in turn introduced Greenough to other artists active in New York. In Washington he was received by Charles Bullfinch and interacted with others of influence. Encouraged by his success in the area of portrait sculpture and his new friends, he anticipated further commissions. He was particularly set on producing a national monument for the Capitol. However, he was not able at this time to secure any commissions from the government. Anxious to return to Italy, he left committed to using marble as his medium.

### **The Colossal Statue**

Greenough's desire to produce a sculpture for the Capitol coincided with popular demand. A joint committee was appointed in February 1832 to arrange the commemoration of Washington's birth. A request was made for permission to inter Washington's remains in the Capitol as specified in the 1799 resolution. However, the proprietor of Mount Vernon, John A. Washington, refused the request. The plan to move Washington's body to the Capitol came to an end. The tomb became a storage room. Instead a resolution was executed instructing President Jackson to appoint Horatio Greenough to sculpt a marble statue for the rotunda.

The efforts of Greenough's friends to promote his skills to the government were finally rewarded. The fact that he was an American was emphasized, implying that no foreign artist should be given such an important commission. Secretary of State Edward Livingston notified Greenough of the resolution and included specifications for a full length pedestrian statue with a head after the likeness of Jean-Antoine Houdon's statue that had been placed in the Virginia state capital. Greenough responded with his proposal that the statue together with its pedestal, be 25 feet in height with 15 feet for the statue. A model of the statue in clay would take a year to eighteen months. This model would then be sent to the Carrara quarries where stonecutters would block cut the statue in marble. He informed Livingston that his fee was \$20,000 to be paid in installments of \$5000 over 4 years. A House resolution was passed on April 22, 1832 but since the bill was not passed as a joint congressional bill, the Senate struck out the appropriation clause and passed its own resolution which was passed on June 26 which in turn was passed by the House on July 14. However it was not until July of 1833 that President Jackson accepted Greenough's fee structure and the first installment was made.

The first drawings of the statue were sent to Secretary of State Edward Livingston on January 28, 1834. The drawings convey the general idea of the position, action and sentiment of the figure, its dress and accessories.

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Greenough took for his model what the neoclassical period believed was the greatest statue ever created, by the greatest sculptor who ever lived, the Zeus of Phidias. Greenough in his accompanying letter clearly outlines his thinking about the design he is presenting. He believed Washington should be represented as lofty, heroic, and ideal. This goal would be achieved through a classical treatment which would use classical drapery and symbols. Suggestions were made by friends and congressman for changes in the dress as well as replacing the sword with the placement of Washington's hand on the Constitution. Concerns about the public reaction to the classical presentation, however, did not diminish Greenough's belief that his design was appropriately majestic for the location in the Capitol rotunda. Despite the disagreement among critics, the design was approved by Secretary of State John Forsyth in 1835. Greenough proceeded to cast a model of his design.

Greenough returned home in 1836 and visited Washington to examine the Capitol rotunda. He found that the proposed center location of the statue would not allow it to be properly seen because of the lack of light coming from the oculus in the dome. He then recommended that it should be placed between the center and the library door.

On returning to Florence in early 1837 Greenough found that repairs to the model were necessary due to a distortion of the model caused by the weight of the upraised arm. The model was sent to Carrara in late 1837 for the next process, blocking out the marble. Due to several setbacks at the quarry, the block was not delivered until March 1839. The statue was finished by Greenough over the next year and was not ready for shipment until late 1840. Transportation of the statue was initiated by Congress in May 1840 but problems with arrangements delayed the move until May of 1841.

The final finished statue stood eleven feet in height and measured seven feet in width. The size and weight of the statue required that a ship be modified to accommodate the statue. The statue finally left Leghorn on its voyage to Washington in August 1841.

### **Installation and Removal**

In preparation for the installation of the statue in the rotunda, Greenough had repeatedly specified that the statue be placed on a pedestal that would be fashioned from granite from the Quincy, Massachusetts's quarries. The funding for the pedestal and the execution of the design were contended by Greenough and the US government. Greenough insisted that it was not part of his commission. He again specified that the statue be placed in the rotunda between its center and the door leading the library. The pedestal issue was not resolved. A resolution was passed on May 27 1840 to provide

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funds for transporting the statue. Greenough was not invited to accompany the statue. An American ship was chartered and the statue arrived in July of 1841. Shortly afterwards, the statue was moved to the rotunda and placed on a temporary wooden pedestal 13 feet high in the center of the rotunda, contrary to Greenough's wishes.

The poor lighting and height of the pedestal obscured the view of the statue. Friends of Greenough solicited the government to move the statue to Greenough's designated spot. The statue was moved and the pedestal lowered by 8 feet. Meanwhile, American opinion about the work was divided. The press and artists praised the statue but most Americans expressed unfavorable opinion.

When Greenough arrived in Washington in November 1841 he was confronted with a situation complicated by the poor presentation of the statue as well as the criticism of the American public. The statue was moved closer to the west side of the rotunda and attempts were made to improve the lighting by experimenting with torches at various heights to improve the visibility of the statue. These efforts proved to be fruitless. The inability of the public to be able to view the statue as it was intended contributed to the distaste for this portrayal of George Washington. The public could not reconcile their image of their beloved leader with this representation.

Recognizing the failure of the statue to be an icon for the public, Greenough petitioned Congress to have the statue moved to the east lawn. A pedestal and a temporary shelter were specified to be built under the direction of Isaiah Rogers, an architect and engineer. The phrase from Washington's eulogy "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen" was inscribed by Rogers on the front and sides of the pedestal. In 1842 the Senate appropriated \$1000 for its removal. Rogers moved the statue onto the pedestal and moved it to the east lawn. The temporary wood shelter remained until the fall of 1846.

### Capitol Grounds

The statue was situated on the eastern plaza in line with the eastern stairs and facing the building. It remained on this site until 1908. When the wooden shelter was removed in 1846, a railing was placed around the statue and plantings put around the base.

When Greenough visited Washington in 1852, he found this inappropriate and degrading



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Washington, D.C. - Washington statue, Capitol grounds



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the strength of the statue. Over the years the landscaping of the Capitol grounds was poorly maintained. It was not until Frederick Law Olmsted was commissioned in 1875 to develop a plan for the grounds that eastern plaza took on a more formalized landscape with walkways and seating areas. The statue remained exposed but was covered with a wooden box in the winter to protect the marble from deterioration from pollution and harsh weather. The railing and plantings were removed leaving the statue sitting on an open surface. By the early twentieth century, the statuary flanking the Capitol buildings eastern stairs, the George Washington statue and others on the west side the building were no longer deemed appropriate. The removal of these works resulted in the Greenough statue being transferred to the Smithsonian Institution in 1908. The statue was removed from the pedestal and installed in the Castle. The pedestal became the cornerstone of the new Capitol Power Plant located at South Capitol and D streets.. The granite base was laid near the plant in an area that is now a small park dividing Washington Ave. SW from South Capitol Street between D & E streets.

The statue was installed in the apse of the West wing of the Castle and remained there from 1908 until 1964 when it was moved to the second floor of the Museum of American Art and Technology.

### Conclusion

Although there was much discussion on the classical form and dress of the statue, the reasons for the failure of this statue can be attributed to two factors. First, a public that was not well versed in art and history was offended by a presentation which represented pomp and grandiosity that did not match their image of George Washington. Second, the statue's placement could have been better appreciated for its grandeur if the environment within the rotunda had been better illuminated to properly view the statue. Plans to illuminate the rotunda as well as other interiors of the building were submitted by Robert Mills in 1840. Nothing was done until 1847 when a detailed plan went forward.

The statue from its inception was guaranteed to elude popular comprehension yet it was intended for placement at the heart of the nation's capital. George Washington finally won a place in the rotunda when Constantino Brumidi painted the fresco "The Apotheosis of Washington" at the center of the dome of the rotunda.



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