

Once Upon A Time in Quincy: Cornelius G. Volk Sr.: A self-made sculptor

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A coating of white residue covered Gov. John Wood as he emerged from the statuary studio of sculptor Cornelius Volk at Third and Maine. Always meticulously attired in a black tailor-made long frock coat, the governor walked out white as a ghost, whiskers, hat and all. The moment was described by William Kerksieck who as a young boy drove Wood to the studio to have a life-size model made by the sculptor. Kerksieck had waited for hours only to have a ghostly scare when Wood walked out of the studio.

The clay model of Wood undertaken by Volk in the summer of 1872 was nearly finished in October that year. A number of Wood's closest friends had recently critiqued the model positively. Newspapers announced that residents were invited to view the work at Volk's studio. Citizens whole-heartedly endorsed the proposal for the statue. Discussion in city council chambers the next month was how to pay for the statue, whether to proceed in marble or bronze and where to place the image of the city's honored founder, former mayor and past Illinois governor.

Three years after Wood's death in 1880 and eleven years after initiating the piece, the resulting bronze sculpture of Gov. Wood was unveiled by Volk on July 4, 1883, at a program attended by thousands in Washington Park. Examined by the large crowd, many who had known Wood for 40 years, the statue was considered a "perfect likeness." As a personal friend of Gov. Wood, Volk put his "whole heart" into creating the commemorative piece ultimately cast in bronze at the Chas. F. Heaton foundry in Philadelphia. Although the statue has been moved three times in Washington Park, it stands today at the southwest corner of the park. A duplicate model given by the city of Quincy is in the Illinois State Capitol Rotunda in Springfield.

First class sculptors were rare in the Midwest in the 19th century. However, Quincy was home to just such a sculptor, Cornelius Volk, whose brother, Leonard Volk of Chicago, sculpted the life mask and hands of Abraham Lincoln in 1860. The lives of the talented brothers have many intriguing twists in Illinois history. And, their artistic flair was fostered by another man who called Quincy home in the 1840s, Stephen A. Douglas.

Cornelius Gesner Volk was born in 1822 in Essex County, N.J., and Leonard Wells Volk was born six years later in Wellstown (now Wells), N.Y. Both boys got their schooling in New York City. Both married Barlow family cousins. Cornelius married Martha Louise Barlow on June 8, 1845, in Bethany, Genesee County, N.Y. They moved to Quincy in 1848 and remained for the rest of their lives. The same year Leonard opened an artist's studio in St. Louis. He married Emily Clarissa Barlow of Bethany, N.Y., on April 28, 1852, in St. Louis and in time opened a studio in Chicago. While in St. Louis he modeled a bust of Henry Clay, the first bust made west of the Mississippi River.

Garrett Volk, father of Cornelius and Leonard, was a marble-cutter and through him the brothers learned the stone cutter's trade early in life. Soon after Cornelius arrived in Quincy he established Quincy Marble

Works and advertised Italian and American marble products from tombstones to statuary.

How Cornelius acquired the artistic skill to sculpt the cast of John Wood is an intriguing story. Cornelius resided in Rock Island for several months during 1857-1858 where his second son, Cornelius Jr., was born on March 30, 1858. He had moved there to study under his brother, Leonard, who had recently returned after 18 months of study under masters of art in Italy. Sen. Douglas, a maternal cousin of Leonard's wife, had been so impressed by Leonard's talent and financially supported his study abroad. Leonard shared what he had learned with his brother. With the newly acquired expertise Cornelius went on to submit an elaborate design for the Abraham Lincoln monument in Washington in 1867 and later a design for the Elijah Lovejoy monument. Though the designs were not accepted, they gave him a national reputation.

Volk created busts of Lincoln, Webster, Shakespeare and Byron and gave them to Chaddock College in the spring of 1884. He also gave Chaddock the valuable design plans for the Lincoln and Lovejoy monuments. It is not known where these treasured works of art are located today. Descendants of the Volk family living in Quincy in the 1950s owned one of the four sculptures of Abraham Lincoln's hands made by Leonard in 1860.

The first marble monument erected in Woodland Cemetery was done by Volk and ordered by John Wood who established Woodland Cemetery in 1846. A monument featuring an open law book for the distinguished Judge Archibald Williams, a close friend of Abraham Lincoln, and the magnificent ornamental Rogers family vault are two works that represent Volk's artistic talent. Timothy Rogers had the large burial chamber built in 1876 using Vermont marble on the vault façade. Roger's bust was carved on four sides of the 40-foot tower.

More than any other local work, the Civil War Soldier's Monument in Woodland Cemetery overlooking the Mississippi River stands out as a memorial to the fallen soldiers of Adams County as well as to its designer and creator, Cornelius Volk. The soaring 30-foot tribute was dedicated on Oct. 31, 1867, during a ceremony attended by a crowd of civic, military and county residents. The monument effort was spearheaded by the Sisters of the Good Samaritan, a soldier's support group, with monies left from war-time fundraising.

Cornelius Volk and his wife, Martha Barlow Volk, are buried at Woodland not far from where the soldier's monument lifts skyward. The artist who was the pride of the community is buried in the Barlow family lot. The humble stone for Cornelius rests at an angle tucked tightly into a corner by the curb.

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