



About the Artwork: *Washington Resigning His Commission*

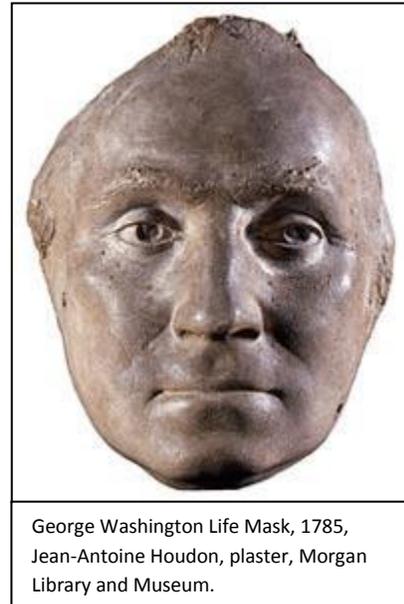
In 1835 a movement was started in Philadelphia to erect a statue of George Washington in Washington Square. The foundation for the monument was laid but soon, the project began to languish. By 1840 there was enough money in the fund to resume plans for the monument's execution, German artist Ferdinand Pettrich was the favored sculptor. On July 2, 1840, at a meeting of citizens of Philadelphia, a series of resolutions was adopted, one of which stated: "Resolved, that this meeting having been furnished with the best testimonials of the skill and classical taste of Ferdinand Pettrich, pupil of **Thorvaldsen**, that he be requested, at the earliest period, to furnish this committee a model of the statue upon a pedestal of proportionate dimensions, containing appropriate bas relief representations in full costume of the continental army of the revolution." Sometime in August of 1840, an announcement was made that permission had been obtained from the Council of the City to exhibit the model of the Washington statue in Independence Hall, and that it would be on view there from August 18 until September 1. A description of the work was written in the August 29, 1840 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*:

"Statue of Washington. The model exhibited during the last week to large crowds in the Hall of Independence is one eighth of the full dimensions when completed. The bas reliefs on the four panels represent figures which are to be the size of life. The basement and sub-basement are to be composed of New England granite to the height of fourteen feet, and executed in imitation of rock work. The steps of which there are thirteen corresponding to the original confederation of the states are to be composed of Pennsylvania marble eight feet in height. The **equestrian** statue is to be eighteen feet in height, that is, from the hoofs of the horse, to the crown of the head of the rider and to be executed in iron made from anthracite coal from the mines of Pennsylvania. The model of the statue is made by Ferdinand Pettrich, sculptor. The pedestal and steps are designed by W. Strickland, architect. There are four panels with figures in bas relief representing – The surrender of Cornwallis. The Ladies of Trenton greeting General Washington and strewing his path with flowers from a triumphal arch erected on a bridge crossing Assunpink Creek. The occurrence took place twelve years after the battle of Trenton and on the same spot. The arms of the United States and military trophies. The surrender of his commission to Congress. All the **bas reliefs** to be cast in iron, and to be finished in what is called gunbarrel or brown bronze. The horizontal dimensions of the pedestal equal twenty-one feet by thirty feet and the whole height from the ground to the crown of the statue will be forty feet and the weight of the casting from twelve to fourteen tons. The whole estimate of cost will exceed fifty thousand dollars and may be completed in less than three years."



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By the time the public next heard of the planned monument, plans had significantly changed. The May 22, 1841 issue of the *Saturday Courier* stated that the subscribers to the “long contemplated statue of Washington” had decided to erect a “pedestrian statue to be wrought by the gifted Pettrich at a cost of ten thousand dollars.” A committee consisting of **William Strickland**, **Joseph Hopkinson**, and **Thomas Sully** was to oversee the work. The author of the article wrote that he had seen the plaster model for this pedestrian statue in Pettrich’s studio in the **Merchant’s Exchange** in Philadelphia. “It is truly a noble figure, simple and beautiful. The features are copied from an original cast of the face of the great and good man.” The cast referred to was the famous [Houdon Washington life mask](#), which was given to Pettrich in 1839. Author R.H. Stehle hypothesized that this model seen by the writer may have been a free standing version of one of the panels mentioned for the pedestal of the equestrian statue. This model was most likely SAAM’s bronzed plaster statue of *Washington Resigning His Commission*, which was mentioned as having been the subject of one of the panels in the equestrian monument.



George Washington Life Mask, 1785,
Jean-Antoine Houdon, plaster, Morgan
Library and Museum.

It is not certain exactly why plans for the finished statue were never carried out. It has been suggested by Stehle that Pettrich may have allowed himself to be diverted by a commission which he had received in Washington, D.C. in 1841, which he thought he could attend to without interfering with the fulfillment of his obligation in Philadelphia. This commission was likely from the Secretary of the Navy Abel P. Upshur, urging Pettrich to come back to Washington to create a monumental pedestal for an equally monumental sculpture. At the time, **Horatio Greenough** had been engaged in creating [an enormous statue of George Washington](#) intended for the Capitol rotunda. Upshur was given the task of moving the large statue to the Capitol for exhibition and Congress had appropriated five thousand dollars to cover the expenses for the move. A temporary wooden pedestal was erected, but a more permanent option was deemed necessary. Upshur contacted Pettrich about creating the pedestal, agreeing to pay him a total of seven thousand dollars for the completed object. While waiting for the arrival of the marble, Pettrich set to work creating models of subjects with which to embellish the panels of the pedestal; “. . . it did not appear to be doubted that Congress would cheerfully appropriate a sufficient sum to cover the cost of such illustrations if the design were approved. Mr. Pettrich stated that he would execute it for ten thousand dollars



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and it was formally agreed that he should produce his design in plaster to be submitted to and approved by the Secretary of the Navy.”

However, not everyone was in agreement with this proposal. In a letter dated November 18, 1841, a committee of the Boston Athenaeum sent a letter of protest about the chosen artist’s ethnicity. They did not want Pettrich, a foreigner, to have any part of this work, nor did they feel it was fair to Greenough. Additionally, xenophobic members in the House of Representatives, led by John Quincy Adams, voiced their concerns and from the record of deliberations made on May 11, 1842, it seems clear that some members were determined to see the commission given to Greenough and not to a foreigner. In the deliberations, Adams remarked that he would rather see the statue burned, than see the commission given to a foreigner like Pettrich. These heated deliberations eventually ended with Pettrich being informed that he would not be paid for the work he had already put in to the commission. The committee could not cancel his contract with Upshur, but it could tell him that whatever work he produced in conjunction with the pedestal they would not accept.

A mere two weeks after these remarks were made in the House, Pettrich was attacked in his studio on May 31, 1842. Pettrich himself believed the attack to be perpetrated by rival sculptors. An interesting fact to note is that one of Pettrich’s patrons, Secretary of War Joel R. Poinsett, was the political opponent of John Quincy Adams. An account of the incident appeared in the May 31, 1842 issue of the *Intelligencer*:

“An attempt at assassination – One of the most atrocious attempts to take away the life of a respectable citizen that it has ever befallen our lot to record occurred last Sunday night about ten o’clock, in the first ward of this city, at a building not far from the **Executive Mansion**. Two assassins entered the studio of Mr. Pettrich, the sculptor, and after a severe struggle, stabbed him in two places. This fiend-like and cowardly attack was made, as it is thought, by two white men with their faces blacked. Mr. Pettrich received two stabs, on the left breast, and in the abdomen with a sword-cane or pointed instrument, which entered obliquely. It is thought by Dr. Miller, the attending surgeon, that Mr. Pettrich may recover although the wounds are severe and his situation is critical. We understand that the Mayor, who received information about the circumstances about eleven o’clock, remained with Mr. Pettrich until twelve o’clock on the night of this atrocious outrage, and took steps to set the city police on the alert for the apprehension of the assassins to whom no clue, however, has yet to be found. It is earnestly to be hoped that their efforts may prove successful. Since writing the above we have just learned from Dr. Miller (eight o’clock P.M.) that Mr. Pettrich is better.”



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Despite the murky circumstances surrounding the attack, we can be certain that as a result of his injuries, Pettrich developed a serious illness in his lungs. Doctors had advised him to relocate to a warmer climate. The attack on his life appears to have been the final straw for Pettrich who had already been disgruntled at the lack of Governmental patronage. President Tyler gave him a recommendation to the court of Brazil and so Pettrich and his son left for Brazil from Boston in February of 1843 on a warship, but not before Pettrich gifted the statue of George Washington to the National Institute for the Promotion of Science. In Brazil, Pettrich became court sculptor to Emperor Dom Pedro II, executing many statues of the Emperor on the same scale as his Washington statue. He became friends with the Emperor who gifted him studio space within the royal palace. It was here where Pettrich carved his marble masterpiece, *The Dying Tecumseh*. Pettrich later returned to Rome and presented his studies of the North American Indians to the Museum of St. John Lateran, at which time the Vatican honored him with a lifetime papal pension for his work.

Glossary

bas reliefs: sculptures which are carved so that the carved shapes project only slightly from the flat background.

equestrian: a sculpture of a rider seated on a horse. This type of sculpture has traditionally been reserved for military commanders.

Executive Mansion: one of the original names for the White House. The name was used until 1901, when President Theodore Roosevelt authorized the use of the name "White House." Before the term "Executive Mansion," the house was referred to as the "President's House."

Joseph Hopkinson: (1770-1842) member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Pennsylvania. He served for many years as the president of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

Horatio Greenough: (1805-1852) American sculptor who worked almost exclusively for the United States government. He is best known for his controversial sculpture of a toga-clad George Washington, based on a statue of the Greek god Zeus by ancient Greek sculptor Phidias.

Merchant's Exchange: a brokerage house in the nineteenth century, designed in the Neo-Classical style by architect William Strickland, located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Thomas Sully: (1783-1872) American portrait painter born in England, but who spent the vast majority of his life in the United States, specifically Philadelphia.

Thorvaldsen: [Bertel] (1770-1844) internationally renowned Danish sculptor.

William Strickland: (1788-1854) American architect based in Philadelphia.