

S.C.'s Washington Statue By Gifted French Sculptor

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On the State House steps there is a bronze statue of George Washington, a historic and rare work of art. The replica is one of six in the nation that were cast from the original in the rotunda of the Virginia state capitol in Richmond.

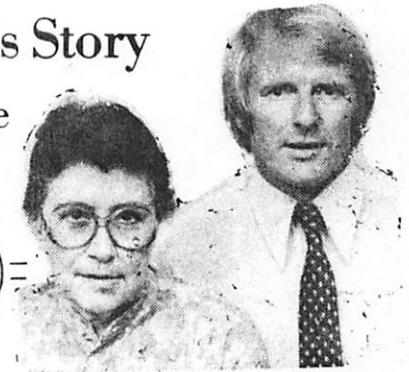
Jean Antoine Houdon (1741-1828), a gifted and imaginative son of a French domestic servant, was the best sculptor in the world in his time. Houdon is still acclaimed by critics as one of the best portrait sculptors who ever lived. In his lifetime Houdon created more than 200 busts, including images of Benjamin Franklin, Voltaire, Rousseau, John Paul Jones, LaFayette, and Napoleon.

In 1784 the Virginia Assembly commissioned the Washington statue. James Madison wrote the inscription. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were then in Paris, and Gov. Benjamin Harrison asked them to negotiate for the statue. Gov. Harrison also requested Charles Willson Peale to send them a full-length portrait of George Washington for use by the sculptor.

Franklin and Jefferson decided to send Houdon to America. Houdon was expensive and insisted that his life be insured for he was the only support of a large family. A year later Franklin accompanied Houdon to America and made all the arrangements with Gen. Washington to have the work done at Mount Vernon.

Houdon made a clay mold of Washington's face that came out perfectly. Before the clay dried and shrunk he made a plaster mold to take to Paris for use when he sculpted the figure of Washington in marble. Houdon also took very careful measurements of the general in the presence of James Madison. He intended to make the statue precisely life size. He also took notes in Washington's military attire so that he could copy it exactly.

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Houdon's resulting statue is six feet two and one half inches tall. The head is considered the best representation of Washington in existence. It was signed and dated in 1788, the year George Washington was elected president.

In 1853 the Virginia Legislature commissioned the William J. Hubard foundry in Richmond to make casts from the original statue. Six replicas were made in bronze. One is at the South Carolina State House. The others are at Virginia Military Institute, Raleigh, N.C., St. Louis, at the Corcoran Art Gallery in Washington, and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

In 1857 Sen. A.P. Butler wrote South Carolina Gov. R.F.W. Allston, urging him to acquire one of the bronze statues for South Carolina. Gov. Allston's request was not responded to by the legislature, so he took it upon himself to advance the state of Virginia \$2,000 from a contingent fund to reserve the statue until he could persuade the legislators to appropriate the necessary \$10,000. The money was appropriated.

The State House was not yet completed, so the statue was sent to

Charleston to stand temporarily on the Orphan House grounds. When the State House was far enough along to accommodate it, the statue was moved to the lower corridor. When the statue was later moved to its new site on the front portico, convict laborers constructed a crude pedestal from scrap granite and marble left over from the building of the State House.

A small tablet was placed at the base of the statue which read: "During the occupation of Columbia by Sherman's army Feb. 17-19, 1865, soldiers brickbatted this statue and broke off the lower part of the walking cane."

Houdon gave the clay bust to George Washington and it remained at Mount Vernon until 1860. Not it is in the Corcoran Art Gallery. Clark Mills, a South Carolina sculptor, made a plaster cast head of Houdon's clay figure in 1853 to use as a model for a statue he did of Washington.

In the 1939 legislative manual, J. Wilson Givves wrote that the Houdon statue of George Washington is a priceless possession "comparable to the Apollo Belvedere of the Vatican."