

Sculptor used Georgia marble to carve Lincoln

By Webb Garrison

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To national leaders, 1900 was a year to celebrate and commemorate. Its coming meant that our national capital had been on the banks of the Potomac River for 100 years.

Congressional leaders, seeking a better way to express "the power and dignity of the nation," decided to erect memorials to U.S. Grant and Abraham Lincoln.

In time, Grant's monument became the central feature of the plaza originally designed to serve as the western approach to the Capitol.

Lincoln could be properly honored, national leaders felt, with a suitable memorial for which \$2 million was set aside.

But when Henry Bacon completed his design for a mammoth structure resembling a classic Greek temple, builders knew they'd need more money. In the end, the memorial cost \$2,949,000.

It would have been far more expensive had not the sculptor who executed the 175-ton statue of Lincoln provided it at less than his cost.

Daniel Chester French was born in New Hampshire and reared largely in Massachusetts. His first formal training in art came from a woman who'd studied in Paris. She was Louisa May Alcott, best known as author of "Little Women."

After having studied under half a dozen specialists, at age 23 French won the commission to design what became the Minute Man statue. Erected at the site of Revolutionary battles, it was later depicted on World War I war bonds.

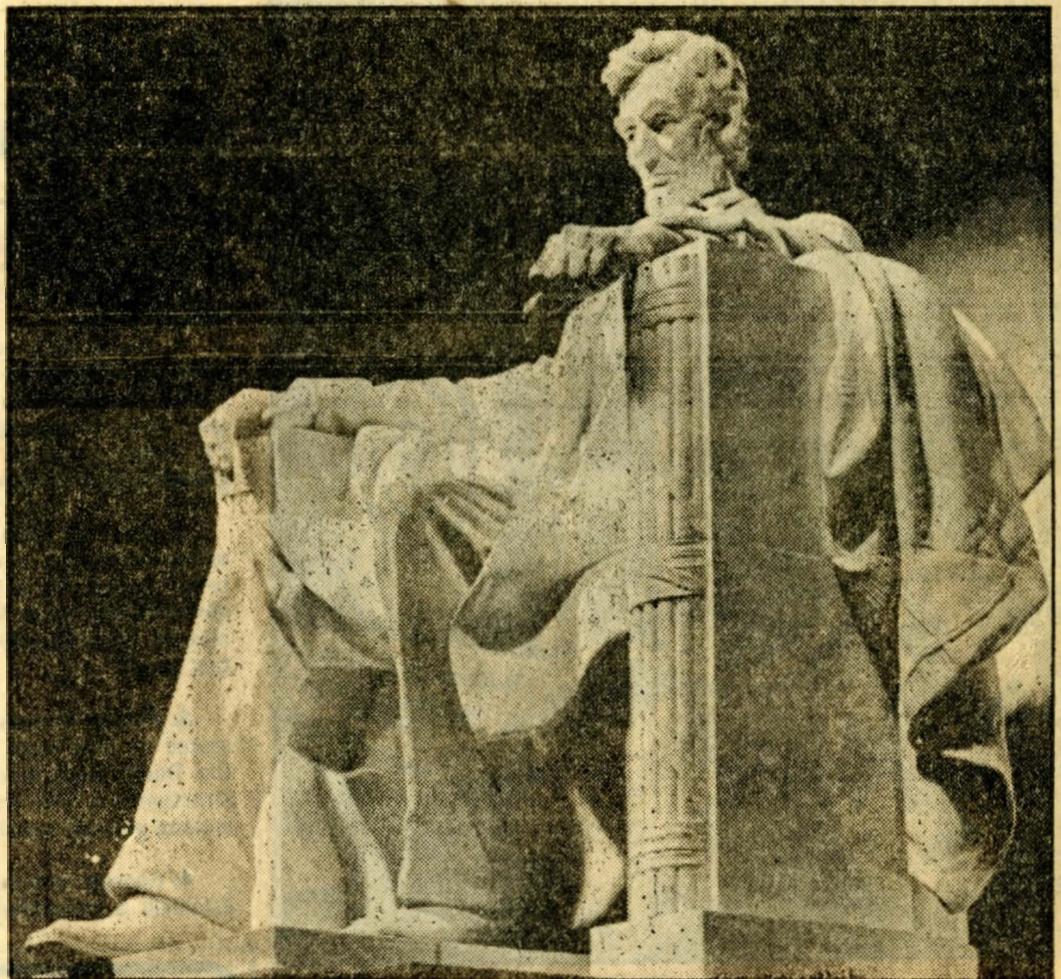
Internationally known before he was 30 years old, French spent two years in Italy. There he studied various kinds of Italian marble as well as techniques for cutting it.

To his immense delight, French won the commission to execute a statue that would be the central showpiece of the planned Lincoln Memorial. By then he had established a studio in New York City.

One reason for choosing that spot was the availability of the finest marble carvers in the United States. The Italian-born Piccirilli brothers were known for inherited generations-old skills and techniques.

Long before he knew he would design the Lincoln statue, French had decided to use the Piccirilli brothers if he got the commission.

Once that decision was made, the sculptor faced a momentous question. Precisely what



FAMOUS STONE: Daniel Chester French's statue of Abraham Lincoln in D.C.

kind of marble should be used for what he hoped would become our nation's most-visited statue?

In conjunction with the Piccirilli brothers, he chose white Georgia marble.

Early in the work, French made a second major decision. Without any guarantee of additional funds, he decided to double the size of Lincoln's seated figure.

Six Piccirilli brothers, plus 27 of their employees, working in relays, spent six years executing French's design. When they got through, they had 28 huge blocks of marble. Collectively, they looked like pieces of a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle.

French submitted a bill for just \$88,000 — the amount initially listed as an estimate for a statue half the size of the one delivered.

In our nation's capital, he spent weeks supervising the fitting of pieces together. An Associated Press dispatch described the immense blocks of marble as being "so adroitly joined together that they appear to be one huge monolith."

Observance of Lincoln's birthday Feb. 12 is particularly meaningful to the tens of millions who have stood before the statue so overpowering in its solemnity that many spontaneously kneel.

Even among Dixie visitors, only specialists recognize the material from which America's most famous statue was carved. Ironically, Georgia marble was selected by a Yankee sculptor and shaped by Yankee artisans not long out of Italy

A commentary, of sorts, stems from the Piccirilli brothers' written verdict that they regarded "Georgia marble as probably the best and most durable of the American marbles for fine memorial work."

The hills of North Georgia, from which marble for the Lincoln statue came, once literally ran red with the blood of men in gray who resisted invaders in blue sent South by Lincoln and his generals.

Old wounds disappear from memory when one stands or kneels in awe before the statue executed by Daniel Chester French. Georgia marble from which it was carved is a silent but eloquent witness that — largely due to Abraham Lincoln's unflinching stand — warring sections became once more "One nation, under God." ■

In last Sunday's Dixie Scrapbook, Nathanael Greene's first name was misspelled. The correct spelling is Nathanael, not Nathaniel.