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HOUDON'S WASHINGTON

AN ADDRESS
BY
W. A. DAY



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HOUDON'S
WASHINGTON

AN ADDRESS

by

W. A. DAY

before the ELEVENTH ANNUAL CONVENTION *of the*
GENERAL AGENCY ASSOCIATION

of

THE EQUITABLE LIFE
ASSURANCE SOCIETY

of the UNITED STATES



ATLANTIC CITY

MAY 5-6

1922

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PREFACE

THE following address was delivered before the eleventh annual convention of the General Agency Association of the Equitable held at Atlantic City on May 5 and 6, 1922.

Insofar as the insurance on Houdon's life is concerned which I believe to have been the first business insurance written in American history, my attention was drawn to it by reading certain letters of Thomas Jefferson. I subsequently searched further and in the archives of the State Department in Washington found more material which, for some unknown reasons, had largely been omitted from the printed correspondence of John Adams.

In an address at the Tenth Meeting of the General Agency Association I mentioned this insurance, intending at the time to enlarge upon it at some future date. A number of matters intervened and it was only this year that I was able to present such further material as I had been able to find. In the meantime a number of gentlemen asked me for the material which I had used in my first address and that material was, with my consent, used by them. I have now added considerable data not contained in the first address and have in the following pages set down what I was able to find regarding Houdon's visit to this country and the history of the Washington Statue in Richmond.

The material for the study of this is meager. Houdon himself has left no records as far as I am able to discover, and his contemporaries on this side did not greatly enlarge upon his visit. Some of the works which may contain greater details were not accessible to me; what I have written is at best a modest contribution to the history of Houdon and Washington. It lays no claim, however slight, to completeness and was written largely for my own enjoyment. I present it, therefore, as the result of an amateur interest and as nothing further.

W. A. D.



GEORGE WASHINGTON

The General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia have caused this Statue to be erected as a monument of affection and gratitude to

GEORGE WASHINGTON

who uniting to the endowments of the Hero the virtues of the Patriot and rising Hero in establishing the Liberties of his Country has rendered his name dear to his Fellow Citizens and given the world an immortal example of true Glory Done in the year of

CHRIST 1796

One thousand seven hundred and eighty six and in the year of the Commonwealth the second





HERE are episodes in the lives of great men which are negligible to the philosophical historian; but which, however, may possess the more charm for the amateur. They cast side-lights upon the figures of history; they infuse warmth into the cold monumental conception of greatness; but they do more than this, for episodes in the lives of national heroes are of the very stuff of the nation itself, so completely incorporated in its great men, especially during the great crises which bring them forth. Democracies are peculiarly alive in their heroes; France is Louis XI, and Richelieu and Danton and Napoleon; England is Cromwell and Chatham, Nelson and Wellington; and the American Revolution lives most pristinely in Washington.

The episode of which I shall speak to you is an episode in Washington's life. To be sure his role in it is passive and distant and yet it is because of the events of which I shall speak that we know anything definite of his physical appearance. His statue

by Houdon and the measurements the sculptor took are the only accurate and trustworthy records we have of the general physical aspect of the "father of his country."

Beyond the general interest we all take in everything relating to the founders of our Republic, this tale has an aspect peculiarly interesting to us—life insurance played a prominent part in this historical episode; it enabled the impoverished State of Virginia to employ the greatest living sculptor, and one of the greatest portrait sculptors of all time, to make an image of Virginia's greatest son. At that comparatively early date in its development, life insurance provided in simple form what it provides a thousand-fold more elaborately today—PROTECTION.

On June 22, 1784, the General Assembly of Virginia passed a resolution calling upon Governor Harrison to take steps for the procuring of a statue of General Washington "to be of the finest marble and of the best workmanship." Art had not flour-

ished in the frontier communities, which all the States still were; there were many respectable craftsmen; there were no sculptors. Whatever the merits of craftsmanship, they would have proved wholly unavailing in a task which required the greatest of art in conception and execution. Such a sculptor could then be found only in France where art flourished under the patronage of a lavish court. Moreover, the State of Virginia already knew what an artist France could produce, for it possessed a bust of Lafayette by Houdon, a copy of the bust it had itself presented to the Municipality of Paris. Hence it was to France that Virginia turned and to the same artist who had already carried out work for the Commonwealth to honor a great friend.

Jean Antoine Houdon was born in 1741 and was therefore in the full vigor of life and achievement. He was certainly at the height of his glory, a glory undimmed by the progress of time, for but lately he has been ranked as one of the greatest of portrait sculptors by no less a man than

Rodin. He had at this time completed his greatest work, to which Rodin refers, his bust of Voltaire; he had made an equestrian statue of Louis XV, and was overwhelmed by commissions for kings and princes. He had, in 1778, made a bust of Franklin and in 1780 one of Admiral John Paul Jones, who, being a man of much vanity, had sent a number of casts to friends, all but one of which are now lost. The bust of Franklin had been a remarkable work. Houdon's desire for accuracy in portraiture had caused it to be magnificent as realistic sculpture, but somewhat disappointing to Franklin's friends, who found in it certain traits not mentioned by Poor Richard in his famous autobiography. But the rugged protagonist of civic and private virtue who had been somewhat "cruelly" portrayed, bore Houdon no grudge. When Harrison wrote Jefferson to find the best sculptor in all Europe, Franklin joined him in recommending Houdon. Harrison had proposed that the statue be made from a life-sized drawing of Washington by Charles Willson Peale (price 30 guineas). Jefferson, who together with

Franklin had approached Houdon and found him willing, wrote Harrison on January 12, 1785, as follows:

“Statues are made every day from portraits, but if the person be living, they are always condemned by those who know him, for want of resemblance.”

Willing Houdon was; he fully appreciated the honor of the choice of himself as sculptor, but he would not do what Harrison wanted; he would make the statue only after he had personally measured his subject and had made a clay model from which he could in three years complete the work. He told Jefferson that he had with difficulty escaped a commission to make a statue of Catharine of Russia in order to devote himself to the task for which Jefferson wanted him. But Houdon (you will find confirmation of this in the pictures of him) did not lack the thrifty characteristics of his race; he had his eye on a bigger business than the State of Virginia's commission. On July 12, 1785, Jefferson wrote the Virginia delegation in Congress, as follows :

“The most important object with him is to be employed to make General Washington’s equestrian statue for Congress. Nothing but the expectation of this could have engaged him to have undertaken the voyage, as the pedestrian statue for Virginia will not make it worth the business he loses by absenting himself.”

The equestrian statue was never made; its cost would have been 600,000 livres or £24,000 if it were to be completed in ten years and 1,000,000 livres (£40,000) if it were to be completed in eight years. This was a sum wholly beyond the means of the United States to pay, for they were extremely impoverished by the war of the Revolution and in a most unsound and dangerous financial condition. But Houdon never abandoned hope and offered his services again as late as March 26, 1804, as unavailingly as before.

It was thus full of hope for greater commissions that he agreed to go to America to model Washington and from this model to make a pedestrian statue. It was originally hoped that Houdon would sail

early in the year 1785, but his departure dragged on until July. A letter from Jefferson to Patrick Henry, then Governor of Virginia, written on July 15, 1785, gives the terms of the contract; Houdon was to receive 25,000 livres, the equivalent of 1,000 English guineas, besides his expenses for the journey, which were expected to be about 4,000 or 5,000 livres. But an important provision in this contract was irksome and was agreed upon only because Houdon made it "a sine qua non without which all would have been off." This was the provision that in the event of his, Houdon's, death during this journey, the State of Virginia would pay his family 10,000 livres, or about 400 guineas. To quote Jefferson:

"This latter proposition was disagreeable to us, but he has a father, mother and sister who have no other resource but in his labors and he is himself one of the best of men."

No wonder that Jefferson found this proposition irksome. The state of sea travel was uncertain, the dangers of it were great. An accident would have cost Virginia dear for

we find that at this time they had considerable trouble finding the 8,333- $\frac{1}{3}$ livres which was to be paid down as an advance payment with which to procure the marble from Italy. But "the best of men" insisted. He also had read Rousseau and was as full of sentiment as was Jefferson whose letters regarding Houdon are occasionally delightfully ingenuous; he was, however, a Frenchman; he was more artisan than artist in sentiment and he was determined to have his family profit by his death, should such an eventuality befall the thrifty head of this touching household.

Jefferson's mind now turned to the covering of the risk by insurance placed in London upon the life of Houdon. This had not been suggested by Houdon who left the matter of how to provide the funds with which his family were to be paid to those who undertook to pay them. Jefferson's practical mind hit upon this scheme of protecting the State against loss by Houdon's death while upon his journey. He wrote from Paris, where he resided as minister to

the Court of France, to Adams at London under date of July 7, 1785, as follows:

“Monsieur Houdon has agreed to go to America to take the figure of General Washington. In case of his death, between his departure from Paris and his return to it, we may lose twenty thousand livres. I ask the favor of you to enquire what it will cost to ensure that sum, on his life, in London, and to give me as early an answer as possible, that I may order the insurance if I think the terms easy enough. He is, I believe, between thirty and thirty-five years of age, healthy enough, and will be absent about six months.”

As the sum guaranteed Houdon by the contract in case of his death was only 10,000 livres the loss of 20,000 livres of which Jefferson speaks must have included the first payment already made of 8,333 livres which would have been lost should Houdon not have lived to make the bust and should the marble have been purchased without being used by Houdon. Houdon was to sail on the 28th of July. An answer from Adams therefore was of importance if the assurance was to be effected

before Houdon incurred the risk of the voyage. Houdon did sail on July 28th from Le-Havre in company of Benjamin Franklin and, as Jefferson wrote to Washington on July 10, 1785, "one or two subordinate workmen, who" as the discoverer that *all men are created equal* ingenuously assured Washington "of course, will associate with their own class." On his departure Houdon lost his clothes, or rather left them behind him, and subsequent correspondence regarding his expenses mentions the purchase of new shirts, etc., Houdon having but four on the voyage.

Let us now leave Houdon and follow the course of the insurance on his life which had been proposed by Jefferson who had not heard from Adams. On August 4th Adams wrote the following letter:

Grosvenor Square, August 4, 1785.

"Houdon's life may be insured for five per cent, two for the Life and three for the Voyage. I mentioned it at Table with several merchants; they all agreed that it would not be done for less. But Dr. Price, who was present,

undertook to enquire and inform me. His answer is, that it may be done at an office in Hackney for five per cent. He cannot yet say for less, but will endeavor to reduce it a little. You may write to the Dr. to get it done and he will reduce it, if possible."

It appears from this letter that Adams was not particularly interested in procuring this insurance; for a number of large insurance companies were then in existence and he could, without serious inconvenience, have answered Jefferson sooner.

On August 10th Jefferson replied to Adams and asked him to effect the insurance. His letter, which follows, is interesting. To cover the risk completely the life of Houdon should have been insured not only for the 10,000 livres tournois covering the sum to be paid to his heirs but also for the 8333. livres tournois which had been paid and which would have been uselessly expended, had he died and, in addition, the travelling expenses should have been included, as they also would have been vainly spent in the event of his death. But the

State was probably too poor and we see that the sum covered was comparatively small.

“I will pray you to insure Houdon’s life from the 27th of last month till his return to Paris. As he was to stay in America a month or two he will probably be about six months; but the three per cent for the voyage being once paid, I suppose they will insure his life by the month, whether the absence be longer or shorter. The sum to be insured is 15,000 livres tournois. If it be not necessary to pay the money immediately there is a prospect of the exchange becoming more favorable. But whenever it is necessary be so good as to procure it by sending a draft on Mr. Grand, which I shall take care will be honored.”

To this letter there was no reply. Adams presumably put Jefferson’s letter aside and forgot it. On September 24th Jefferson became anxious. He could not have heard of the arrival or non-arrival of Houdon and Franklin by this time, but he justly feared that Adams had jeopardized the whole business. (Houdon had arrived safely in Philadelphia on September 14, 1785, which, of course, was not yet known in Paris and

London.) Jefferson now wrote Adams requesting the immediate effecting of the insurance:

“Is insurance made on Houdon’s life? I am uneasy about it, lest we should hear of any accident. As yet there is no reason to doubt their safe passage. If the insurance is not made, I will pray you to have it done immediately.”

And eleven days later Adams wrote him a letter containing an explanation but hardly an excuse (on October 5, 1785, when Houdon had already been three days at Mt. Vernon.) From this letter it appears that the fault was that of Dr. Price and that immediate steps, unless the doctor’s memory should again fail him, would be taken to place the insurance.

“Dr. Price called upon me this morning but had unfortunately wholly forgot the insurance on Houdon’s life, but I gave him an extract of your letter to me, and promised to pay the money for the premium at any moment. I am afraid that certificates of Houdon’s state of health will be required, and the noise of Al-

gerine captures may startle the insurers. The Doctor (Price), however, will get it done if he can, and as low as possible."

In this we get a brief insight into the soundness of British insurance methods even then and also into the curious delay on the part of Adams; and the light is thrown upon him, who was in this case, from what motives we know not, certainly negligent and disobliging. Fortunately the insurance was never needed; had it been needed the loss would have fallen hard upon Virginia because of the negligence of Adams or perhaps Dr. Price.

The insurance was, however, effected only on the 12th of October, 1785, as explained by a letter of Adams to Jefferson dated October 24th, more than three months after Houdon's departure. The risk which Virginia had meant to insure she had to carry herself for those three months. The English underwriters refused to "look back" and would insure only for the future. It may seem curious to us that they should so refuse, but news travelled slowly and had

they "looked back" the news of the insured's death might have been travelling just as the insurance was being effected.

"The insurance is made upon Houdon's life for six months from the 12th of October. I have paid Thirty-two Pounds, eleven shillings Premium and charges, which you will please give me credit for. I could not persuade them to look back, as they say they never ensure but for the future and from the date of the Policy. I suppose it will be safest to keep the receipt and policy here, for fear of accidents."

It can only be hoped that Adams took more interest in the safe keeping of the policy than he had in the effecting of the insurance. This ends the insurance phase of the episode. It is interesting in showing Jefferson's acute appreciation of the principle of insurance.

Houdon had arrived safely with his four shirts and Dr. Franklin in Philadelphia and had gone to Mt. Vernon where he arrived on October 2d, at eleven o'clock at night, escorted by a French gentleman from

Alexandria. We hope he had suffered from no impositions such as Jefferson, in the interest of thrift and the expense account, had hoped would be spared him. He set to work and began an exhaustive series of measurements of Washington. At this point history becomes singularly silent. There are no records on the part of Houdon of his American visit; only a few entries without detail appear in Washington's Diary. On hearing of Houdon's arrival Washington wrote him :

“By a letter, which I have lately had the honor to receive from Dr. Franklin, at Philadelphia, I am informed of your arrival at that place. Many letters from very respectable characters in France, as well as the Doctor's, inform me of the occasion, for which, though the case is not of my seeking, I feel the most agreeable and grateful sensations. I wish the object of your mission had been more worthy of the masterly genius of the first statuary in Europe; for thus you are represented to me. It will give me pleasure, Sir, to welcome you to the seat of my retirement, and whatever I have or can procure, that is necessary to your purposes, or convenient and agreeable to your

wishes, you must freely command, as inclination to oblige you will be among the last things in which I shall be found deficient, either on your arrival or during your stay." (September 26, 1785.)

It was an austere letter and somewhat ungracious in its insistence on the case not being of his seeking. The rest of the letter is polite but distant and Houdon may have been chilled by it. It has been said that he was not treated with great consideration or with the consideration he expected by Washington and the Americans. Certainly he made no impression on Washington, whose entries in his diary are meagre. Perhaps Houdon was disappointed in not obtaining the commission for the equestrian statue — a commission far beyond the means of Congress to remunerate. At all events we know little of his stay at Mt. Vernon or in this country.

He worked assiduously and on October 13th he made a life mask of Washington which is now in the possession of J. P. Morgan, Esq. He also made detailed meas-

urements for his great work and left Mt. Vernon on October 14th, returning to France where he arrived before Christmas, 1785.

On December 16, 1786, he showed a bust in Paris of Washington which, however, is not what is commonly known as the Houdon Bust; there were several busts all rather similar made by him; this bust was exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1787. The statue itself should have been completed in 1789 at the latest, but it did not reach its destination until 1796 when it was set up in the Capitol at Richmond. This has been variously attributed to the Revolutionary disturbances in France, but it is not the likely reason. The Revolution during its first two years did not greatly affect the average citizen; even during the Terror, life continued much as before. The truth of the matter is that Houdon would not deliver the statue because he was not paid. Non-payment does not seem a vice to poor debtors, and the United States collectively and individually were poor. The archives of Virginia contain a voluminous corre-



spondence with Houdon regarding the payments, the last of which was not made until 1793 when Houdon, who had lost the patronage of the great, when the great lost their heads in more senses than one, was in very indigent circumstances. In fact, the last payment of 2,800 francs was not made until 1803 when Houdon received this sum in settlement of his loss on assignats in which he had been paid—and gave final receipt for the whole transaction. It has been said that Houdon's reward lay in the gratitude of American posterity—again the "best of men" fails us; again he thriftily insists on present payment. But at last he was paid; the chapter closes with his last pathetic offer in 1804, mentioned above, to make an equestrian statue for which he exhibited a model about one foot high in the Salon of 1793. A German traveler now unknown saw it in his studio—all trace of it is lost. And America lost an image which might have been an equal to the Colleoni at Venice by Verrocchio and Donatello's great Gattamelata of Padua. The statue reached Richmond finally and was set up without cere-

mony on May 14, 1796. The fact that the State House was not completed before then prevented its earlier delivery and erection. It is a life-size statue of Washington, six feet two inches high, and stands on a pedestal five feet high. Originally the pedestal was to have borne the following inscription:

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE
CONGRESS OF VIRGINIA
HAVE CAUSED THIS STATUE TO BE
ERECTED AS A MONUMENT OF
AFFECTION AND GRATITUDE
TO GEORGE WASHINGTON
WHO
UNITING TO THE ENDOWMENTS OF
THE HERO THE VIRTUES OF
THE PATRIOT
AND EXERCISING BOTH IN ESTAB-
LISHING THE LIBERTIES OF
HIS COUNTRY
HAS RENDERED HIS NAME DEAR
TO HIS FELLOW CITIZENS AND
GIVEN THE WORLD AN IMMORTAL
EXAMPLE OF TRUE GLORY.

This inscription was not placed on the pedestal; originally, Washington's name only was written on it; he needed and needs no further eulogy. He is depicted in a simple military uniform, a cloak falling over his back; his right hand grasping a walking stick, his left reposing on the Republican fasces, symbol of law and unity. At his feet stands a plow. The statue being life size gives an unfortunate impression of smallness, accentuated by the head and the rather thin legs. An antique costume had been proposed; Washington and Houdon preferred to show Washington as the soldier and citizen who returned to his plow having achieved the liberty of his country. It is not Houdon's best work; the modern costume proved a handicap by putting an undue emphasis on naturalistic detail of dress. But nothing can exceed the head (and portrait sculpture was Houdon's field par excellence) in firmness and dignity. It is the head of the thinker, the austere philosopher and the far-seeing statesman. A copy of the statue in bronze has been placed outside the

National Gallery on Trafalgar Square in London. Opposite, though some distance away, the statue of Charles I is placed riding toward Whitehall, sitting on his horse imperiously, every inch a king, a symbol of the kingship that is passed. And from his pedestal another looks steadily towards the Thames and the sea — George Washington, symbol of his people and the kingship of Liberty and Democracy.

ADDENDA

A D D E N D U M

*Letter of Houdon
8 September 1796
To the Governor of Virginia*

"The eight July 1785 he was agreed between his excellency Mr. Jefferson in the Virginia States name and me that I should executed in marble the statue of Mr. Washington for the price of 25000 french money to be paid in three times—at the period of the last payment at the end of 1792 I received 9000 which would formed the whole sum I ought to received if it had not been paid in assignats who losing in that time 60/100 only give the value 5625 silver. I remains due 3375.

By a letter to his excellency Mr. Morris I immediately claim against this sort of payment. I enclose here the answer Mr. Grand made for him to me—Mr. Morris and Mr. Short didn't received answer from the Virginias State to the several letters they wrote on this account. When at the end of 1795 his excellency Mr. Monroe ordered the statues departure. I renewed my claim for being paid the sum of 3375 but neither the minister nor the consul won't take any determination on this subject they and me wrote to the Virginia's state on this account, but again no answer. Now I address myself directly to you, Sir, and I hope you will find my request as right as any of the three ministers above mentioned and that I shall received a satisfactory answer. I am with the respect due your character Sir, of your excellency the most obedient servant,

HOUDON

Sculpteur au Louvre á Paris

A D D E N D U M

*Receipt of Houdon
for the last payment*

J'ai reçu de son excellence, Monsieur Monroe, pour le compte de l'état de Virginie, la somme de deux mille huit cent Livres pour solde ce qui me restait dû sur le statue pedestre du Général Washington, que j'ai exécutée et livrée au dit état. Paris ce 27 Prairial an 11.

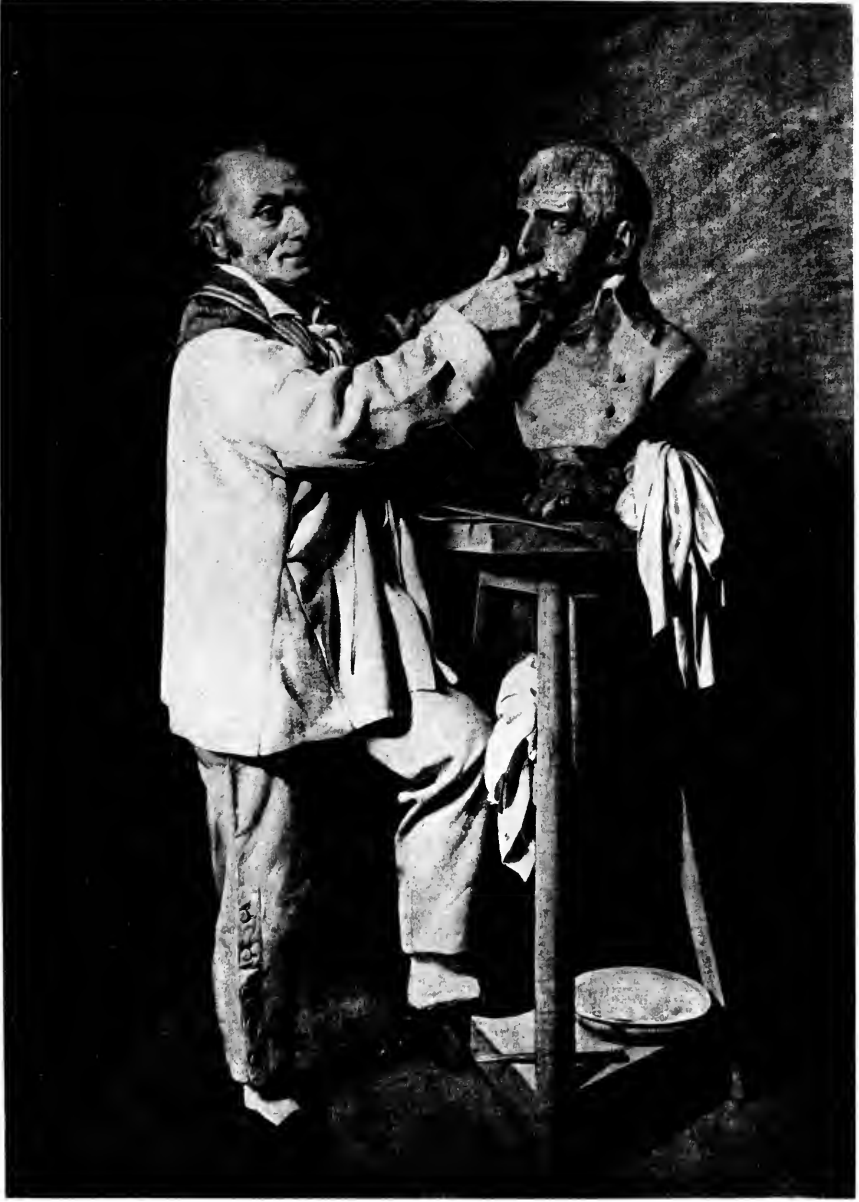
HOUDON.

(16 Juin 1803).

A D D E N D U M

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