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Vinnie Ream

THE "PRAIRIE CINDERELLA" WHO
SCULPTED LINCOLN AND FARRAGUT—
AND SET TONGUES WAGGING

BY KATHRYN ALLAMONG JACOB

NO SOONER HAD CRUSTY CIVIL War hero Adm. David Farragut died in August 1870 than efforts to raise monuments to his memory sprang up. The war had ended only five years earlier, and Farragut's heroics remained fresh in everyone's mind. His distinguished career had culminated in the 1864 Battle of Mobile Bay, in Alabama, when he had shouted, "Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!" which galvanized his fleet to sack a series of important Confederate forts. Farragut's stunning victory here and his earlier daring attack on the city of New Orleans led him to become America's first admiral.

Commemorating this naval hero was something Congress took seriously. A Congressional resolution called for a statue of Farragut "after a design moulded from life" to grace the nation's capital. Apparently, these words had been carefully chosen by friends of Washington, D.C.



sculptor Dr. Horatio Stone, who was already at work on a Farragut statue. Stone assumed he had the commission in the bag. He was wrong.

The introduction of the resolution proved to be just the first salvo in a ferociously fought campaign to win this prestigious prize. When the dust settled, Stone came out the loser, bested not by one of the old lions of American sculpture but by a striking young woman with sparkly brown eyes and a tangle of thick curly hair. While 26-year-old Vinnie Ream had only one major sculpture under the belt that encircled her tiny waist, she had an abundance of ambition and charm. To her supporters, she was just a simple girl from the Wisconsin wilderness, a "prairie Cinderella." To her detractors, she was a shameless flirt who used her feminine wiles to win commissions her mediocre talent didn't merit.

MS. REAM GOES TO WASHINGTON

VINNIE REAM WAS BORN IN MADISON, Wisconsin, in 1847. Her father, Robert Ream, a former surveyor, brought his family East to Washington, D.C. in the first year of the Civil War. Money was tight for the Reams. In 1862 Vinnie Ream appealed to political friends and secured, at the Post Office Department, a \$500-a-year clerkship open to women. Although two months shy of her 15th birthday, the precocious girl swore that she was "above the age of 16 years" and went to work in the dead letter office.

In 1863 she visited the studio of sculptor Clark Mills, whose statue of Andrew Jackson astride a rearing horse stands opposite the White House. Of this transforming day, Ream later wrote, "I felt at once that I, too, could model and, taking the clay, in a few hours I produced a medallion of an Indian chief's head."



Ream nears completion of her ten-foot-tall plaster model of Union Civil War hero Adm. David Farragut at the Washington Navy Yard.

Impressed, Mills offered to take her on as a part-time pupil.

Mills' studio in the Capitol basement was a popular spot for politicians. Several Congressmen were intrigued by the novelty of Mills' beautiful apprentice and sat for her. Within a year, Ream was sculpting busts of such notables as Pennsylvania Representative Thaddeus Stevens

and Oregon Senator James Nesmith.

In 1864 Ream expressed her wish to make a bust of President Lincoln. Two Congressmen interceded with the President, but Lincoln refused. When he learned that she was a young girl trying to earn a living by her art, he relented and allowed her to set up shop in a corner of his White House office, where she would

work while he spoke to a succession of petitioners.

The resulting bust of Lincoln, lavishly praised by her supporters, emboldened Ream to seek the \$10,000 commission for a full-length statue of the President offered by Congress early in 1866 not long after the assassination. Few commissions for sculpture had been awarded by the federal government, and none had gone to a woman, much less a girl of 19 years with little experience. Ream launched her effort with a demure letter to the U.S. House Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds. Others also set to work on her behalf. In April 1866 a remarkable petition arrived at the committee's offices. It began: "The undersigned . . . being personally acquainted with Miss Vinnie Ream, take great pleasure in endorsing her claims upon public patronage. . . ." President Andrew Johnson's name topped the list of signatures, which included those of members of his Cabinet, 31 senators, 110 current and former representatives, and 31 other notables, among them Gen. George Armstrong Custer.

A TALENT FOR LOBBYING

THADDEUS STEVENS' RESOLUTION awarding the commission to Ream passed the House by a vote of 67 to 7, but it ran into trouble in the Senate. Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner was among those who had not fallen under Ream's spell. He wasted no time on subtlety: "I am bound to express my opinion that this candidate is not competent to produce the work which you propose to order. . . . She may make a statue, [but] she cannot make one that you will be justified in placing in this national Capitol. Promise is not performance, but what she has done thus far comes under the first head rather than the latter." He continued for some minutes more.

Even before Sumner finished, Ream's champions were on their feet



seeking recognition. Senator James Nesmith of Oregon got the floor first. Regarding her inexperience, Nesmith sarcastically pointed out that "the Senator might have raised the same objection to Mr. Lincoln, that he was not qualified for the Presidency because his reading had not been as extensive as that of the Senator, or because he had lived among rude and uncultivated society." Alluding to Sumner's admiration for all things European, Nesmith noted bitterly, "If this young lady and the works which she has produced had been brought to his notice by some near-sighted, frog-eating Frenchman, with a pair of green spectacles on his nose, the Senator would . . . vote her \$50,000."

Senators entered the fray on both sides. Senator Jacob Howard of Michigan sided with Sumner. While questioning Ream's artistic talent, he conceded archly that "surely she has shown no lack of that peculiar talent known commonly as 'lobbying' in pressing forward her enterprise. . . ." But in the end, Ream's friends triumphed 23 to 9. The \$10,000 commission for a full-length statue of President Abraham Lincoln was hers.

Marriage proposals started to arrive in Ream's mailbox, and stories about her popped up in newspapers all across the country. Some reporters



"A more distinguished company has seldom graced an American wedding," wrote one reporter in 1878 when Vinnie Ream (left) married Richard Leveridge Hoxie (inset), a lieutenant in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.



inexperienced a sculptor also, however, sparked censure and incredulity, especially among women writers. Asking rhetorically "Who is Vinnie Ream?" the acid-penned reporter Jane Swishelm answered, "Ream is a young girl of about twenty who has been

noted her beauty, "her tiny pink fingers and long raven lashes"; some her energy, calling her a "hummingbird of a maiden." That so important a commission should go to so young and

studying her art for a few months, never made a statue, has some plaster busts on exhibition, including her own minus clothing to the waist, has a pretty face, [and] . . . sees members

at their lodgings. . . ." Others hinted darkly that Ream was a "humbug" who did not do her own work.

She set to work in Clark Mills' old studio in the Capitol amid a steady stream of Congressmen, reporters and the curious, who were eager to see the young artist at work. In the spring of 1869, the finished model was packed up and shipped off to Italy to be rendered in marble. With it went Ream, her guitar, her two pet doves and her parents.

The marble statue of Abraham Lincoln—along with Ream and her parents—arrived back in Washington, D.C. late in 1870. At the statue's unveiling in January 1871, the audience broke into applause for the young artist as the American flag enveloping it was slowly raised (p. 113). The first reviews praised the statue to the skies. But in the weeks that followed,



Ream spent five months in the White House modeling Lincoln in clay, later describing him as "a man of unfathomable sorrow," haunted by his son's death and civil war.

other voices, again those of women reporters, sang a different tune. They charged that the Lincoln statue was "a frightful abortion," "a formless thing," "lifeless and soulless." Most serious was the criticism of the grand old man among American sculptors, Hiram Powers, who called the statue a "caricature," and branded Ream a "female lobby member" with "no more talent for art than the carver of weeping willows on a tombstone."

Whether praised or pilloried, how-

ever, Ream was a celebrity. Picture postcards of her and her artwork were sold in the Capitol and on the street. She was also nearly the sole supporter of her family, and fame hadn't brought her wealth. Funds from the Lincoln commission had quickly disappeared. Nor had fame brought her new commissions or buyers for her allegorical statues. She needed business. When the Congressional resolution calling for a full-length Farragut statue was intro-

duced, Vinnie Ream saw her chance.

Much to sculptor Horatio Stone's disappointment, the Joint Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds did not award him the commission but announced an open competition. Artists had nine months to submit their models. The winner would receive a \$20,000 commission and the chance to sculpt one of Washington's most prestigious memorials.

THE COMPETITION

REAM WENT TO WORK IMMEDIATELY on both her model and her friends. She courted Farragut's widow, who became her champion. She asked Mrs. Farragut for the names of the admiral's friends, and she wrote to every one of them soliciting their support on her behalf.

By January 1873, a dozen male artists and Ream had submitted models. While most of the models were small, Ream's and Stone's were each larger than life. Members of the press found some purported likenesses bad beyond belief: J. Wilson MacDonald's model made Farragut look like he was throwing a rope to a trapeze performer; Randolph Rogers' looked like "martyrdom at the stake" and was "too dreadful to contemplate." The entry of Edward Watson included a tiny, featureless Farragut atop an enormous, ill-proportioned base, or "a good deal of pedestal and precious little Farragut." Both Stone's and Ream's models had their partisans. Several naval officers praised Stone's model as "true to life." President Ulysses Grant called Ream's model "first rate," and Adm. David Porter claimed hers was "the only likeness of the Admiral in the lot."

In Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman, Ream found her most ardent supporter. On Valentine's Day afternoon in 1873, the infamous Union general who devastated the South with his march to Georgia went to the Capitol to view the Farragut models and met the young sculptor.

She invited him to visit her studio. A few days later, Sherman wrote the committee that "the plaster model of Vinnie Ream struck me decidedly as the best likeness, and recalled the memory of the Admiral's face and figure more perfectly than any other model there on exhibition."

Much speculation has surrounded the relationship between the 53-year-old general and the 26-year-old artist. Sherman's letters to Ream suggest intimacy, yet they could also be just another example of the effusive and flirtatious language that was common to the 19th century. In April 1873, for example, Sherman writes, "I miss you more than I thought possible, and your little foolish ways. . . ." Later he admonished Ream, "I destroy your letters. You must do the same of mine." But she didn't. Among her papers at the Library of Congress is Sherman's letter in which he asks, "I . . . wonder if you miss me and who now has the privilege of toying with your long tresses and comforting your imaginary distresses." What is clear is that Sherman, like many other prominent men in Washington, was smitten by Vinnie Ream and that the two began to plot a strategy designed to win her the Admiral Farragut commission.

By then the committee had begun deliberating. Days, then weeks, passed with no decision. Growing increasingly anxious, Ream urged Sherman to lobby two senators on the committee, Justin Morrill of Vermont and Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania. Sherman replied that it "would hardly be right for me to seek out Mr. Cameron and urge him to any definite course of action; but if I see him I will endeavor to do so in such a way as to make him feel that it is his own thought."

Despite Sherman's efforts, Ream came up short when the committee voted in February 1873. The committee decided to reject all models and take the matter up in the next Con-



Ream's bronze of Admiral Farragut stands vigil in Washington D.C.'s Farragut Square.

gress. The *New York Times* observed, "The nation ought to feel particularly gratified when it reflects upon its narrow escape from another of Miss Ream's eccentricities in bronze." Ream, who needed this commission to make ends meet, grew frantic.

In February 1874 Congress took up the matter of the Farragut statue again. A proposal emerged that shifted responsibility for the decision onto the shoulders of Secretary of the Navy George Robeson. With no influence over Robeson, Ream begged her friends to help her. Representative Godlove Orth of Indiana wrote that "her friends in the House" would add the names of General Sherman and



The marble statue of Lincoln, which Ream began at age 19, stands in the U.S. Capitol.

Mrs. Farragut to the proposal along with that of Robeson. Stone's supporters cried foul, but the resolution passed anyway.

Robeson resented the setup. He refused to poll the two other members of his committee. Ream again worked behind the scenes. When asked to weigh in on her behalf, Senator John Ingalls of Kansas teasingly replied that she was "the biggest and most delightful fraud I ever met," but he agreed to do what he could. Eventually Robeson had no choice but to take a vote of his committee. General Sherman and Mrs. Farragut voted for Ream; Robeson chose latecomer Launt Thompson. Unable to change

Mrs. Farragut's mind, Robeson relented and announced Ream the winner.

With the first installment of the \$20,000 in hand, she set to work. By the spring of 1878, her ten-foot-high plaster model depicting Admiral Farragut during his bold night attack in 1862 of the forts protecting New Orleans was finished. Most large bronze sculptures were sent to Europe for casting, but in the summer of 1879, Ream announced that the Farragut statue would be cast at the Washington Navy Yard, a first for the foundry there. In addition, the statue and four mortars adorning the pedestal would be made from the bronze propeller of the admiral's flagship, the U.S.S. *Hartford*.

The *Evening Star* wrote that "patriotic impulse prompts her [Vinnie] . . . to have the work done in this country." But love as much as patriotism lay behind her choice. On May 28, 1878, after turning down more than a dozen suitors, Vinnie Ream married handsome Lieut. Richard Hoxie, who was assigned to Washington with the Corps of Engineers. General Sherman himself gave the bride away.

The Farragut statue was dedicated on April 25, 1881, the anniversary of the day that New Orleans surrendered. Ream joined President and Mrs. Garfield and Mrs. Farragut in places of honor on the stage as John Philip Sousa conducted the Marine Band. Deafening cheers rose as two members of Farragut's crew hoisted the flag covering the statue. Vinnie Ream Hoxie rose to acknowledge the crowd's applause.

After her marriage, Ream deferred to her husband's wishes and gave up sculpting. According to Ream family lore, Hoxie took her hands in his and said, "These now belong to me. Your work for art is ended. . . . Now you must live, not for the world, but for love and me." She settled into the role of good Victorian wife and devoted herself to volunteer work, her hus-

band, and her son, Richard. The Hoxie home on Farragut Square became one of the capital's liveliest salons, offering good music and an interesting assortment of Congressmen, Cabinet members, military men and other luminaries.

In 1906 Vinnie Ream Hoxie came out of retirement to sculpt Iowa Civil War governor Samuel Kirkwood for Statuary Hall in the Capitol. Writing to a friend, she explained her husband's change of heart: "Three years ago I had a most serious attack of heart trouble and the army surgeons thought it was due to suppression of feeling—my wanting to work and not being allowed to do so. Col. Hoxie became very much frightened . . . he told me again and again that if I would try and live I might resume my work." Although seriously ill, she managed to complete the Kirkwood statue by means of a rope hoist and boatswain's chair rigged up for her by her husband.

In 1912 the State of Oklahoma asked her to sculpt a statue of Sequoyah, the Cherokee leader, for Statuary Hall. The model was nearly finished when she collapsed while on a visit to Iowa City. Rushed back to Washington in a special railcar, she died in the capi-



Rumors flew about the relationship between Ream and General Sherman.



This bas-relief portrait of Ream adorns her monument at Arlington National Cemetery.

tal, of kidney disease, at 67 years of age on November 20, 1914.

The Sequoyah statue was finished by her friend and sculptor George Zolnay. Her husband, now a general, also commissioned Zolnay to sculpt a bronze bas-relief of his wife as a young girl to grace the front of her graveside monument at Arlington National Cemetery. To crown the memorial, General Hoxie had a bronze casting made of Vinnie Ream Hoxie's "Sappho," a neoclassical rendition of the great woman lyric poet of ancient Greece. It was one of her favorite pieces. He gave his wife's original marble statue of Sappho to the Smithsonian Institution where it now is in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Lastly, he wrote this fitting epitaph for this remarkable woman: "Vinnie Ream—Words that Would Praise Thee are Impotent." ❧

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ADDITIONAL



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