

## *Sculptors Bissell and Rhind Collaborate with the Governor*

In 1900, while on the Grand Tour of Europe, William Larrabee saw sculptor George Edwin Bissell's life-size bronze of Abraham Lincoln in Calton Park Burial Ground, in Edinburgh. Allegedly the first statue of a U.S. president on foreign soil, Bissell's Edinburgh Lincoln stands on a plinth marked "Emancipation" and holds a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation, a freed slave at his feet. Larrabee greatly admired Lin-

coln and commissioned Bissell to erect a similar Lincoln (*below*) for back home in little Clermont, Iowa.

Obscure though he may be now, George Edwin Bissell (1839–1920) was quite well known in his day. His background was in cutting stone—his father and brother were both quarrymen, cutting grave markers and mantelpieces in Poughkeepsie, New York. In 1873 Bissell was commissioned to carve something special: an immense marble plinth topped with an idealized marble firefighter, helmet in hand, mourning for his lost comrades. Bissell worked a full year on it, and its considerable success changed his life. European travel followed. He studied at the Academies Julian and Colarossi, and on his return he was a different man. No longer an "untutored gravestone man," now he was a sculptor.

In the 1870s and 1880s, Bissell made a number of Civil War monuments across Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and New York, cutting his artistic teeth as he cut his stones, as it were. Initially of marble, limestone, and granite, and later more and more of bronze, his work gradually grew from cemetery monuments to civic monuments and portrait busts.

By the 1890s he had become a nationally recognized artist, with works in three New York City parks, the Metropolitan Museum, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, and the rotunda of the Library of Congress. A founding member of the National Sculpture Society, Bissell was also a participating sculptor in the famous

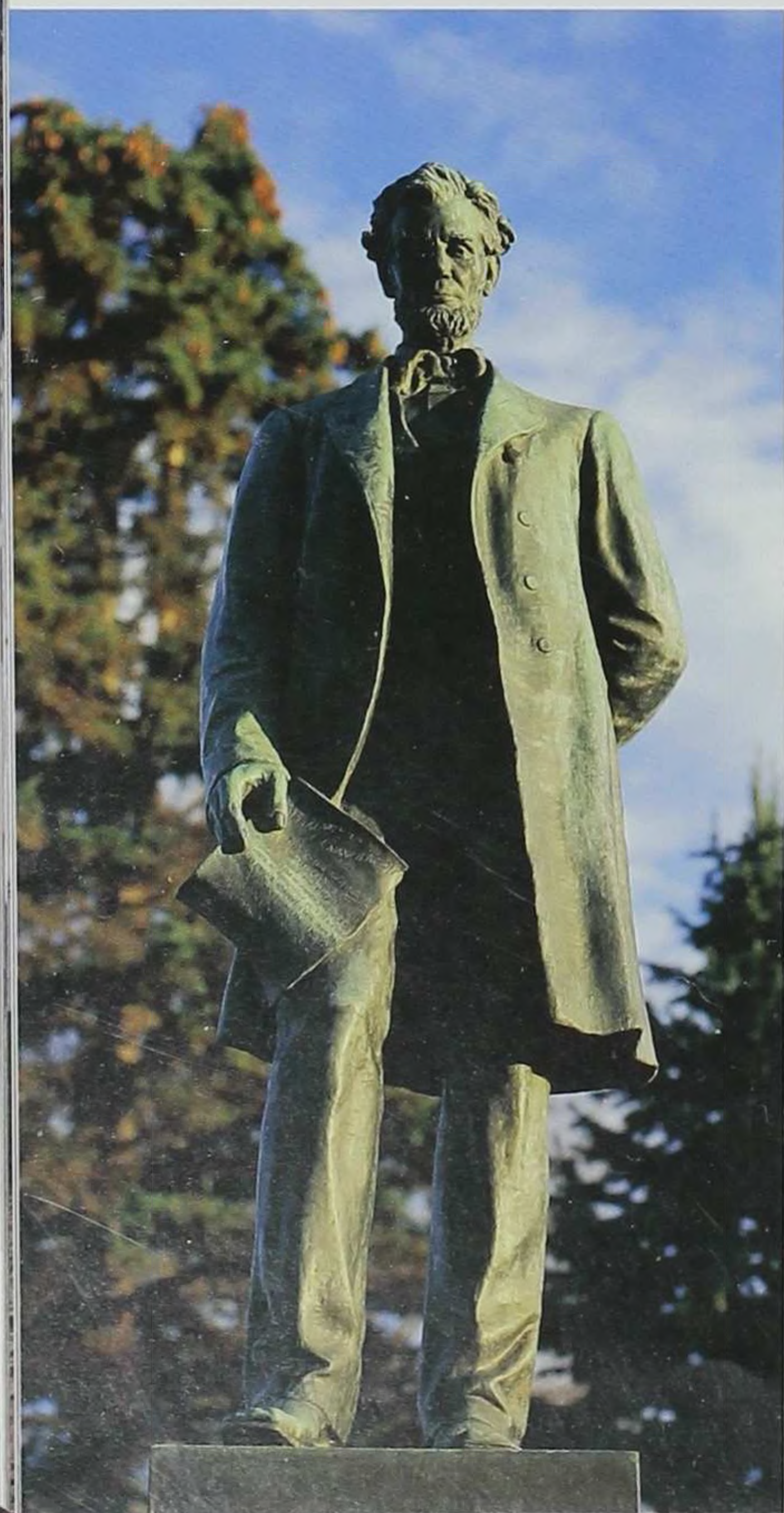


Rhind's statue of Governor Larrabee's close friend David B. Henderson (Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives) stands in Clermont.

Dewey Arch in New York City, honoring the commodore's triumph over Spanish forces in Manila Bay. Bissell's last known work is the 1905 Elton Vase, a large bronze urn at the entrance to Riverside Cemetery in Waterbury, Connecticut.

The second statue commissioned by Larrabee was a tribute to his best friend and political associate, David B. Henderson. Henderson had been a Civil War colonel, an Iowa congressman (1883–1903), and for four years Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. Henderson was also diabetic and his circulation was very poor, and the crutch he is shown using—which Larrabee insisted be prominently featured—reflects the fact that his left leg was artificial by the time this figure was modeled.

The Henderson statue was made by Scottish-born John Massey Rhind (1860–1936), a contemporary of Bissell and another charter mem-



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ber of the National Sculpture Society, perhaps known best for his architectural sculpture. A third-generation sculptor, Rhind came to the United States at age 21 to seek his fortune. His father said he would starve. But fortunately, as Rhind himself later said, the 1893 Columbian Exposition—"The White City" and its abundance of sculpture and ornamentation—opened "in the nick of time" and his career took off.

Rhind came to prominence in 1896 with his set of bronze doors for New York's Trinity Church, the so-called Astor doors, commissioned by William Waldorf Astor. He sculpted architectural ornaments for numerable New York City sites, from Macy's to Grant's Tomb, as well as the National McKinley Monument in Niles, Ohio, and a 75-foot-tall John C. Calhoun in Charleston, South Carolina. Rhind was indeed prolific. The McKinley Birthplace Memorial alone has a colossal outdoor marble statue and no less than 41 bronze busts, scattered throughout the building.



Bissell wrote Larrabee, "A lady called at studio today, her first visit and seeing statue of Sherman, 'Who is it. Gen. Sherman!' she asked. I was gratified at this recognition as portrait is far from complete." Bissell explained the hat chosen: "St. Gaudens used the same in his statue of Sherman, it is the hat with which I was familiar during my service, a comfortable felt hat, not exactly soft, but not starched."

Larrabee's other life-size bronzes derived from his role as chairman of the Iowa Commission for the 1904 St. Louis Exhibition. Following the trend established by the 1893 Chicago World's Fair and its White City, the St. Louis fair absolutely required sculpture. Larrabee personally commissioned four more pieces, all of Civil War commanders: from Bissell, bronze statues of General

William Tecumseh Sherman and Admiral David Glasgow Farragut, and from Rhind, bronzes of General Ulysses S. Grant and General Grenville Dodge, Iowan and chief construction engineer of the Union Pacific Railway.

Originally these four pieces stood in front of the main façade of the Iowa Building at the exposition. (Larrabee reportedly spent more on the Iowa Building than did the state



This bronze of General Grenville Dodge is one of four Civil War statues on the grounds of Montauk.

of Iowa.) Since he had paid for the statues personally, when the fair closed they all came to his elegant home, Montauk, where they stand today.

**T**he Larrabee Papers at Montauk include extensive correspondence regarding the statues. The letters articulate the interactions between the patron, the sculptors, and the foundries—a very rare find for art historians. The minutiae of casting, crating, and shipping, of contracts and payment schedules—“It will be necessary to make a payment on account, and therefore would appreciate a check for \$1,000 at your early convenience”—are covered in this correspondence. So are discussions about the designs themselves. Larrabee had very specific ideas, which he was not shy about expressing. Doesn’t Lincoln’s nose look a bit “pug,” Mr. Bissell? he inquired.

Bissell created four reliefs, one on each side of Lincoln’s plinth. Each depicted a Civil War scene: a soldier leaving home, a naval battle, Shiloh, and Lee’s surrender at

Appomattox. These scenes were also of minute interest and were fussed over endlessly. Larrabee apparently questioned Bissell’s depiction of a dog in the “leaving home” scene. In defense, Bissell asserted, “The dogs ears are right in pose according to observation of several of my neighbors dogs of same breed.” In the surrender scene, Bissell shifted Lee “from the center of group,” which required more changes: “This brought the figure so near the fireplace it became necessary to remove the cat—as the fire is burning on the hearth. Poor puss would have had her whiskers burned had I left her there.”

For his statue of Admiral Farragut, Bissell and Larrabee debated whether the naval hero should be opening or closing his sea glasses. Bissell prevailed, arguing that closing the glasses would indicate the battle was over and victory achieved. (See the Farragut statue on page 11.)

Like Bissell, John Massey Rhind too had much to endure. David B. Henderson’s crutch had to be very visible, rather more than Rhind thought, but the patron of Montauk would have his way. ❖



**General Ulysses S. Grant, by John Massey Rhind.** Letters between the sculptors and Larrabee reveal the governor’s scrutiny of every detail, as well as the sculptors’ carefully considered symbolic meaning behind a heroic figure’s clothing, stance, and objects held.



Two of Bissell’s four reliefs on the plinth beneath the Lincoln statue: a father says goodbye on his way to battle, while his son plays soldier with paper hat and sword, oblivious to the tragedy of war. Right: Lee surrenders at Appomattox.

Like many people, the representative of the Henry-Bonnard foundry, which cast the reliefs, apparently had trouble reading Larrabee’s handwriting. He asked the governor to send the inscriptions typewritten, “to obviate the possibility of any error in engraving same.”

