

# Making her Mark

Nellie Verne  
Walker,  
Sculptor





by Louise Noun

ON JANUARY 1, 1900, Nellie Verne Walker, age twenty-five, arrived in Chicago from Moulton, Iowa, her sights set on becoming a sculptor. Only four feet ten inches tall and weighing ninety-three pounds, Walker's ambition was in no way diminished by her small size. Walker planned to study with Lorado Taft, the well-known American sculptor who taught at the Art Institute of Chicago. Taft later recalled that "one day there walked into my studio a little girl, who had come to Chicago to learn sculpture and make her mark in the world of art. It was all arranged in her own mind; she had decided it. It made no difference how steep or how hard the way, she was going to succeed." Walker soon became one of Taft's favorite pupils.

This determined young woman, born in Red Oak in southwestern Iowa on December 8, 1874, was the daughter of Jane Lindsey Walker and Everett A. Walker, a tombstone maker and real estate dealer. When Nellie was a year old the Walkers moved to Moulton in the south-central part of the state. Nellie as the oldest of six children—four girls and two boys—was expected to help with household chores. She hated these tasks but was fascinated by her father's work as a stonecutter, so in order to avoid washing dishes, she escaped to his workshop whenever she could. Because of this interest Nellie was her father's favorite child. Furthermore he was impressed by the mini-

ature animals and people Nellie molded out of Iowa clay when playing house with her younger sister. As other children in the Walker family became old enough to assume household responsibilities Nellie was allowed to spend more time working with her father, where she learned to smooth and polish stone and to cut epitaphs and decorative borders. After graduating from high school in Moulton when she was sixteen Nellie taught one term at a nearby country school.

During the summer of 1892 Nellie asked her father for a block of Bedford stone intended for a monument base so that she could try her hand at carving a head of Abraham Lincoln. When her father hesitated, Nellie appealed to her mother, who supported her request, and her father eventually capitulated. Nellie knew nothing about the technique of sculpture, but with an engraving of Lincoln in Barrett's *Life of the Martyr President* for a model, and with the use of her father's tools, she managed in three weeks to create a credible likeness which followed the engraving down to the tilt of the head and the details of the clothing. Not knowing how to carve hair, she solved the problem by making long, thin rolls, which she later described in a 1948 interview as "something like little worms." "But that is how some modernistic sculptors make hair today," she commented.

The Lincoln head was shown in the Iowa Building of the 1893 World's Columbian





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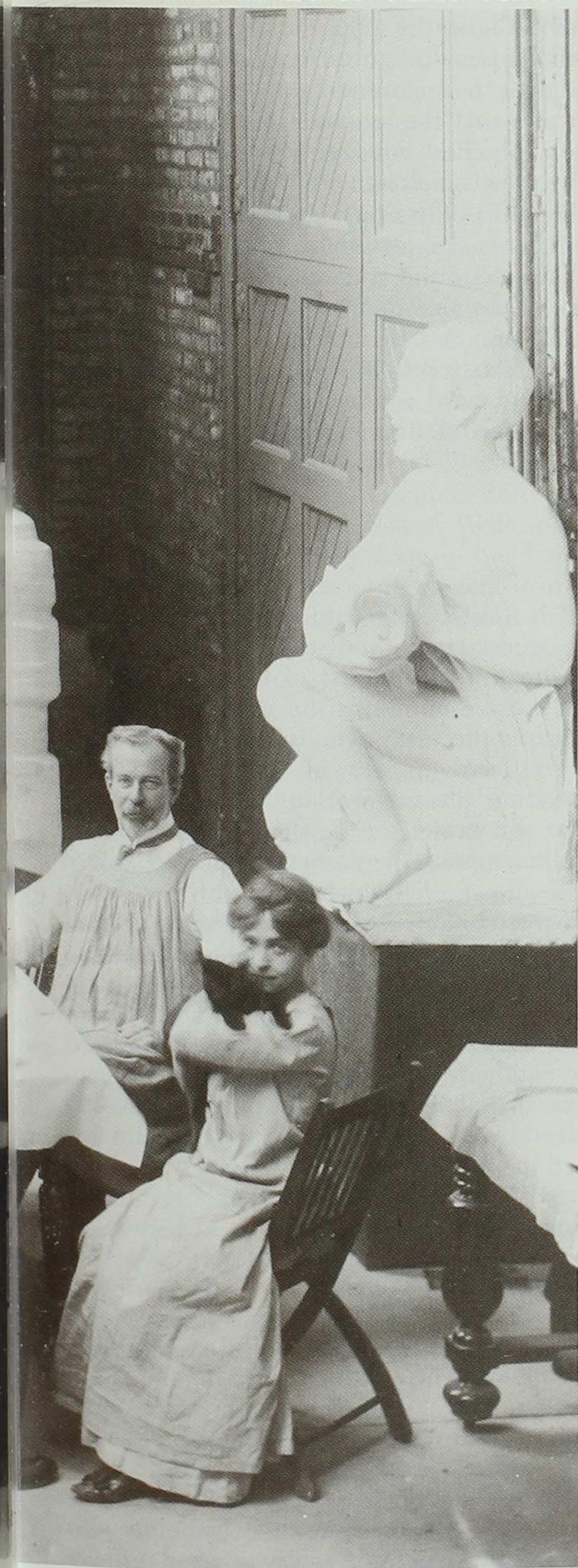
Taft at this time was a popular teacher with a circle of admiring students. He had studied in Paris at the École des Beaux-Arts in the early 1880s and was appointed as the instructor in sculpture at the Art Institute in 1886, a position which he held for the next forty-three years. He is well known for his *History of American Sculpture*, published in 1903, as well as for his monumental, often symbolic, sculptures in the Beaux-Arts manner. This style, which had reached a high point at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, was epitomized by

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Chief Keokuk  
1913  
Rand Park, Keokuk, Iowa

Daniel Chester French's sixty-four-foot-high symbolic female figure, *Republic*, which towered over the surrounding neoclassical palaces that adorned the grounds. Sculpture of this type embodied concepts of lofty virtue and noble idealism along with familiar symbolism. Although Taft was a leading sculptor of his time, his work is less highly regarded today. As Taft's protégé and student, Walker would also work in the Beaux-Arts tradition. But by the end of her career, modernism (in the new forms of abstractionism, expressionism, and realism) would replace academic styles and Walker would find herself out of step with current trends in art.

**I**N LATE 1903 and early 1904, Walker worked in the state capitol in Des Moines on a portrait bust of Governor Albert Baird Cummins. She used a temporary studio in the attic over the senate chamber where the governor would pose for her in his spare time. She was working here on January 4 when fire broke out in the house chamber. Smelling smoke she rushed downstairs where she begged firefighters to save her work. Since they were too busy to bother with her request she felt her way back up the smoke-filled stairs and covered the bust with a heavy cloth. In telling the story of her heroism a Des Moines paper commented, "She is a petite little lady, thoroughly devoted to her art, wholly unconscious of self and her whole person animated with ambition." Both Walker and the bust survived the fire unscathed. The bust was subsequently completed but apparently never purchased. When she broke up her studio in the 1940s Walker gave the Cummins bust to the Iowa State Department of History and Archives.

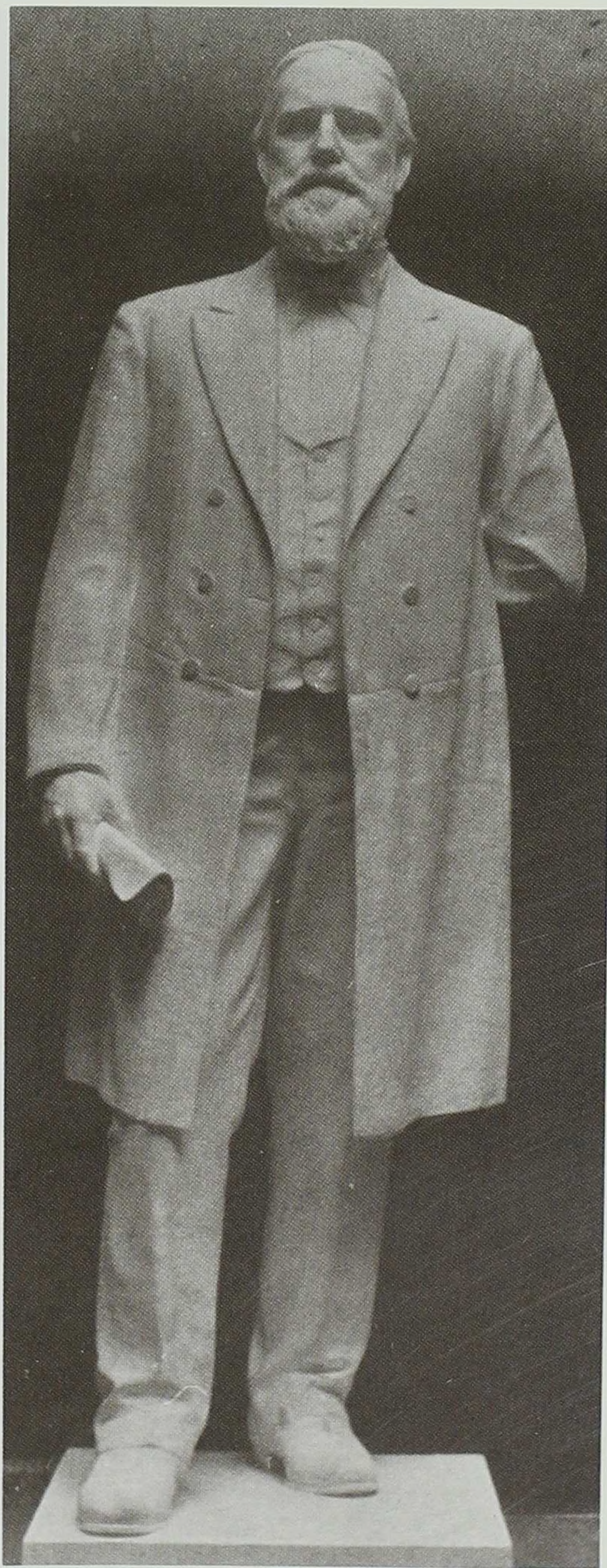
In 1905 Walker received her first important commission. This was for a grave monument in memory of Winfield Scott Stratton, a Colorado Springs mining tycoon who had died three years earlier. Walker had been visiting her cousin in Colorado Springs at the time of Stratton's death, and she became acquainted with the Stratton family when she was asked to make



a death mask of this eminent citizen. The Stratton monument consists of two veiled figures symbolic of charity which are partially detached from a mass of granite. This commission gave Walker immediate professional status. It also demanded her full time, so she quit teaching and accepted Taft's offer of space in his studio in the Fine Arts Building on Michigan Avenue, which afforded ample facilities for the execution of large-scale sculpture. The Stratton memorial was the first of a number of grave monuments which Walker executed during the course of her career. These include monuments in Cadillac, Michigan, and Marinette, Wisconsin, as well as in Minneapolis, Battle Creek, Omaha, Baltimore, and Chicago. One wonders if Walker ever thought of herself as following in her father's footsteps — except in a more elegant manner.

In 1907 Walker was commissioned by the state of Iowa to make a bronze portrait figure of former senator James Harlan for the Capitol in Washington, D.C. In 1913 she completed what is probably her best-known work in Iowa — a statue of Chief Keokuk. Commissioned by the Keokuk chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the statue stands in Rand Park in Keokuk overlooking the Mississippi River. A portrait bust in plaster of Dr. William F. King, former president of Cornell College, which is on display in College Hall at Cornell, was made in 1920. In 1923 Walker carved two panels in low relief set into the exterior walls of the library at Iowa State University in Ames. These panels are embedded so high that they are difficult to view. The panel at the north end of the building represents figures then symbolic of the activities of women students (art, home economics, literature); the other panel, at the south end of the building, represents figures symbolic of the activities of men students (engineering, science, veterinary medicine, agriculture). Both male and female students are draped in the classical manner.

Walker's other sculptures outside Iowa include numerous portrait busts; a war memorial to the soldiers of 1812 in the Historical Building in Springfield, Illinois; panels on the Woman's Building at the University of Michigan; and a group titled *Her Son*. Consisting of a mother and young boy, *Her Son* was once dis-

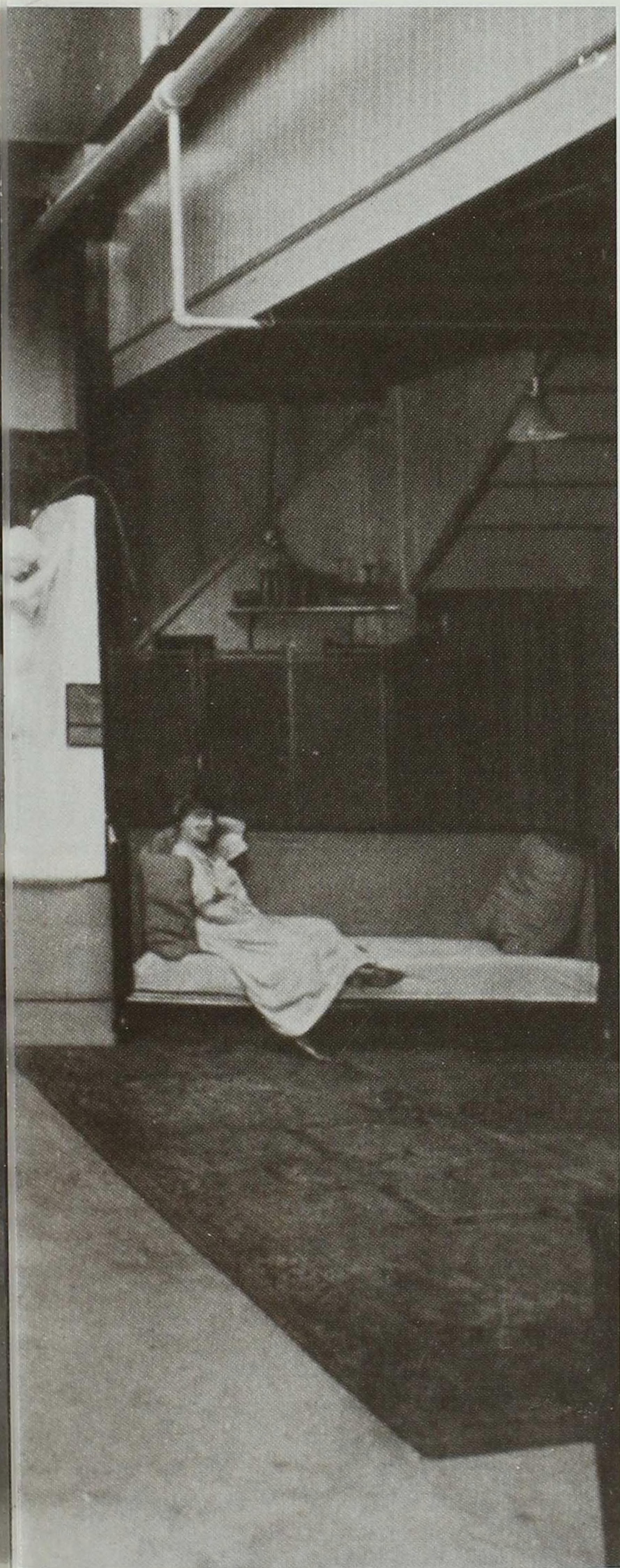


Senator James Harlan  
1907  
Hall of Fame, Washington, D.C.









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**D**URING HER CHICAGO YEARS, Walker was closely associated with the artistic and literary circles in the city. She was part of a group of painters, sculptors, and writers who owned "Eagle's Nest," a camp on the cliffs of the Rock River near Oregon, Illinois. There were six or seven cabins and a main lodge where members took refuge from the city heat in summer. In 1908 Walker was elected to membership in the "Little Room," an exclusive Chicago literary and social club. She was one of the organizers of the Cordon Club, whose membership consisted of professional women artists, writers, and musicians, and she served two terms as president of this organization. Walker also was a founding member of the Chicago chapter of the Business and Professional Women's Association and held membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Daughters of 1812.

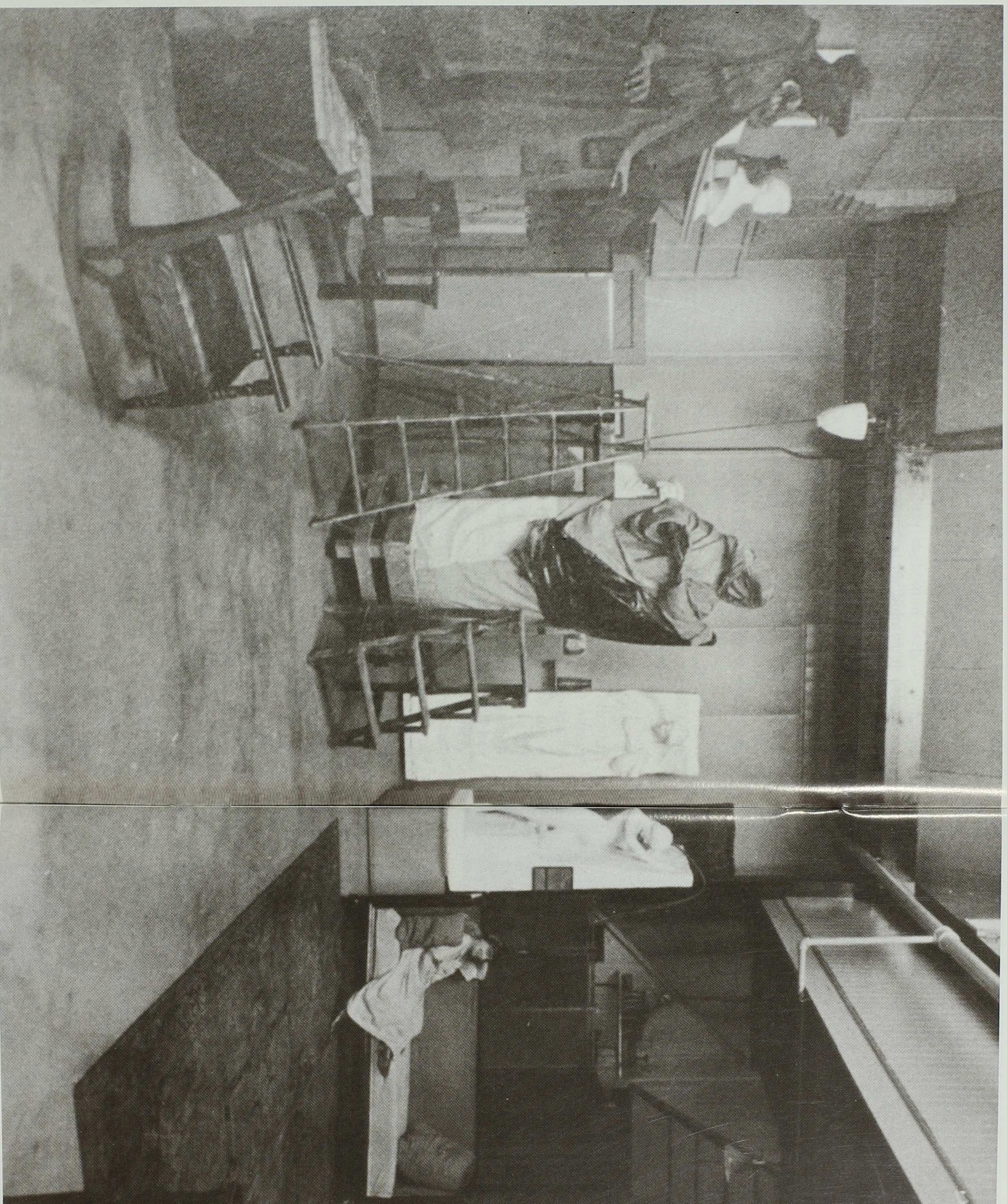
Walker won national recognition in 1911 with her election to the National Sculpture Society. The only other Chicago member at that time was Walker's mentor, Lorado Taft. That same year she left her studio in the Fine Arts Building in downtown Chicago and joined Taft and other artists who had moved the previous year to new studio space. Taft had erected studios on land belonging to the University of Chicago on its south campus at Ellis Avenue and 60th Street. Taft was given use of the land rent-free with the provision that after a certain time had elapsed, the studios which he erected there would become the property of the university.

These studios, all under one roof, came to be known as the Midway Studios because they were located on land which had once been the Midway of the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Each artist had her or his own studio in which to live and work. Taft and his wife had their living quarters in an adjoining old mansion. Joint housekeeping arrangements included employment of a cook who prepared the mid-

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day meal, which was served in a long, central court dominated by a plaster cast of Taft's *Fountain of the Great Lakes* and lined with other sculptures on either side. At times there were as many as thirty or forty people at lunch, presided over by Taft at the head of the table. Walker, the most permanent resident, traditionally sat at the other end.

Individual studios opened off the central court. Walker's had a high skylight, a large fireplace, a small kitchen, and a balcony with two bedrooms. A studio in the rear of the complex had a stage for dramatic entertainments and was stocked with costumes. Midway Studios became one of the showplaces of Chicago, and Walker's home and workplace until 1948. "This is an ideal way to live," she told her niece, Genevieve Lewis Szaton, "No husband to please, no children to disturb one, good friends to converse with, who will give help when needed, yet all the privacy one could wish for."

**W**ALKER MADE TWO (possibly three) trips to Europe, the first in 1910, and the second in 1914. During her first trip she traveled as far as Constantinople. Her second trip, begun in January 1914, was financed in part by gifts of friends anxious to enable her to make an extended stay. One purpose of this trip was to meet the seventy-three-year-old sculptor Auguste Rodin, whom Walker greatly admired. She rented a studio in Paris, intending to stay two years, but her visit was cut short in August by the outbreak of World War I. She was forced to flee, leaving all her possessions behind.

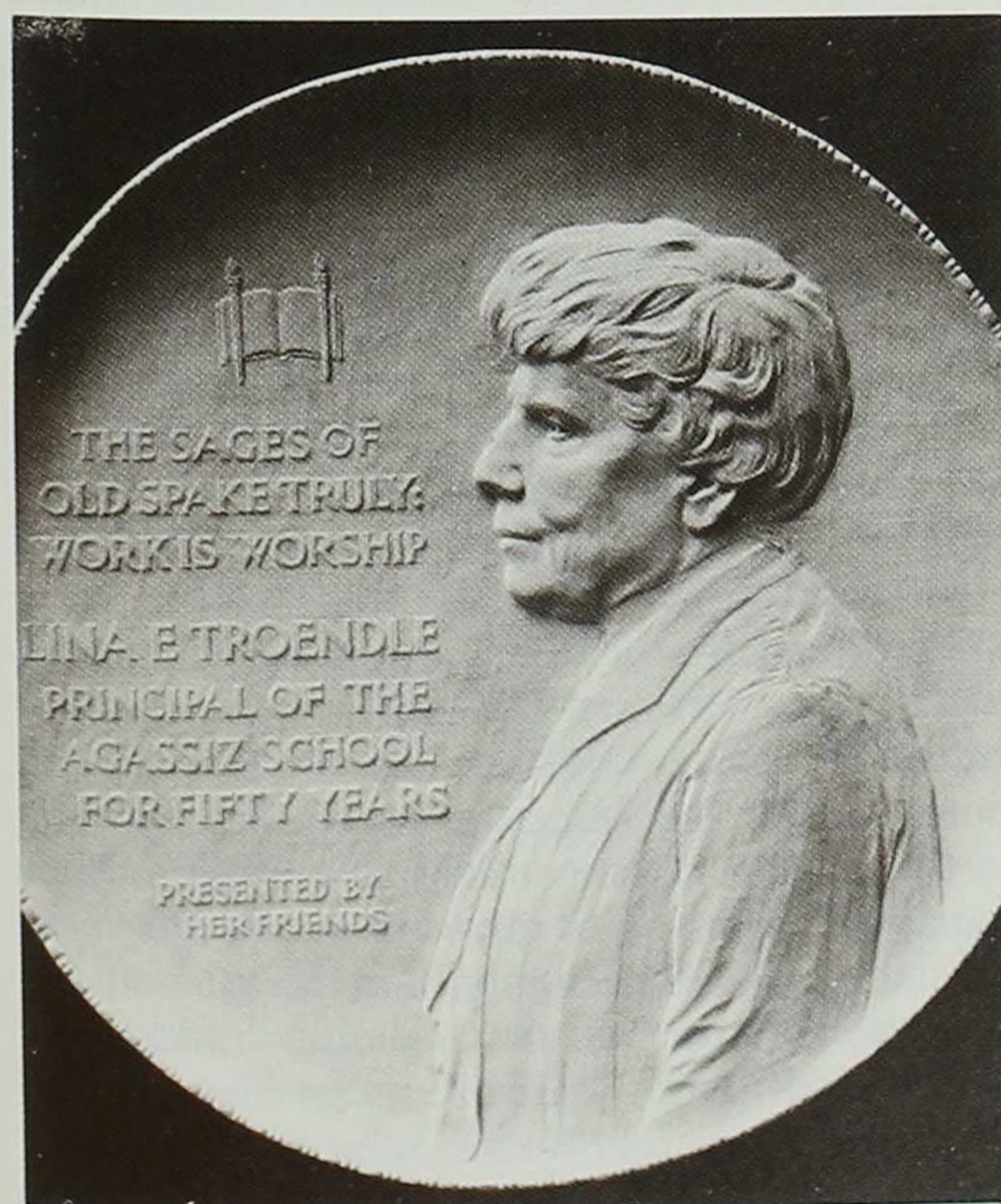
From 1917 to 1921, during the administration of Governor Frank Lowden, Walker served on the Illinois State Board of Art Advisors and in that role advised on public monuments, especially war memorials, which were popular following World War I. At the same time she was anxious to help people in





Iowa Suffrage Memorial  
1934, State Capitol, Des Moines

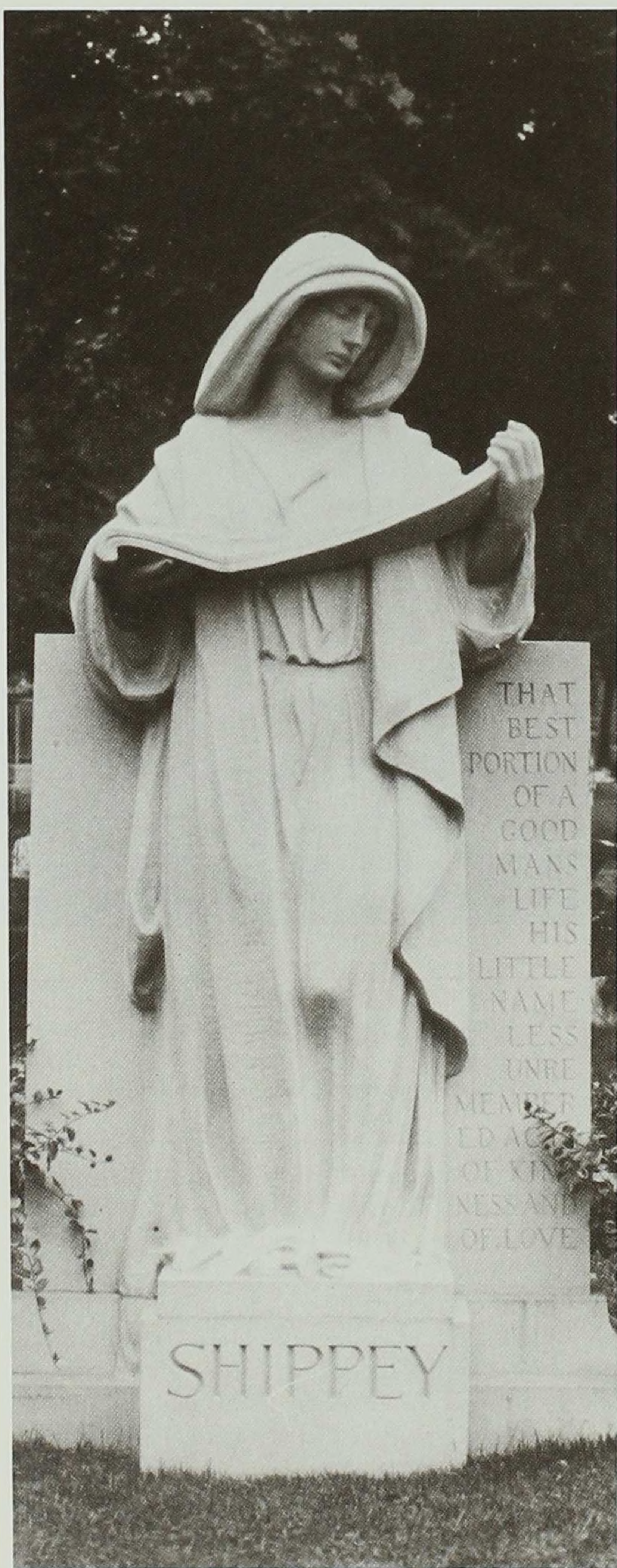
Portrait medallion of Lina E. Troendle  
1929, Chicago



Iowa who were interested in establishing a similar board. In early 1919 she wrote Edgar Harlan, curator of the Historical Department of Iowa, offering to come to Des Moines to show a set of seventy-five slides of war memorials which she had collected. There is no record of her offer being accepted. Although there was some interest in Iowa in establishing such a board, the legislature did not take any action in support of this concept.

**F**ROM TIME TO TIME Taft hired Walker to work on his commissions. She helped with the design and modeled the two large figures which flank the entryway to the courthouse in Jackson,





Monument at grave  
of Charles W. Shippey  
1922  
Rosehill Cemetery, Chicago

Mississippi. She was also part of a team which made sculptures for the Balaban and Katz movie theater in downtown Chicago. In July 1926, Walker wrote to her friend, the writer Henry B. Fuller, concerning work on this project: "Our sculpture factory has been running full-time and full-force, with occasional visits from . . . the architects. We are now on the home stretch, with eight more figures to make in about six weeks. . . . It's been rather fun, although I do not know that I have ever been so tired evenings as I have been since this work began."

With the prospect of several large commissions in 1926 she saw the possibility of earning enough to realize her dream of owning a small place on the south shore of Lake Michigan near Chicago. "If these good things come my way," she wrote her friend Fuller, "I'll build my shack on the back of the lot, fronting the water, and sell the front half for a million dollars . . . and live happily ever after." Unfortunately, this dream was never realized.

But Walker's goals went beyond her own personal happiness. Reminiscences written in 1969 by Walker's niece, Genevieve Lewis Szaton, recall Walker's warm and caring relationships with her family. She arranged and helped pay for medical treatment for a crippled niece and offered food and lodging to her nine nieces and nephews until they could get jobs in Chicago. Szaton spent several summers with Walker, assisting with her work and delighting in the friendly atmosphere of the Midway Studios. Szaton eventually married a young artist whom she met there.

Walker did not limit her houseguests to just her family. She loved cats and always had one or more in her studio. But not all Midway residents approved of her animal friends. When her friend Fuller, whom she affectionately called "Henry B," offered her another kitten in 1928, Walker regretted that she couldn't give it a home. "I wouldn't dare," she replied. "Mr. Taft would have a fit if another cat appeared on the scene. I meet the days now with fear and trembling for fear the cats will get me into trouble . . . another one would finish us all." Although Walker never married she had a close friend in Fuller, who often dropped by for a visit. Fuller's death in July 1929 left a

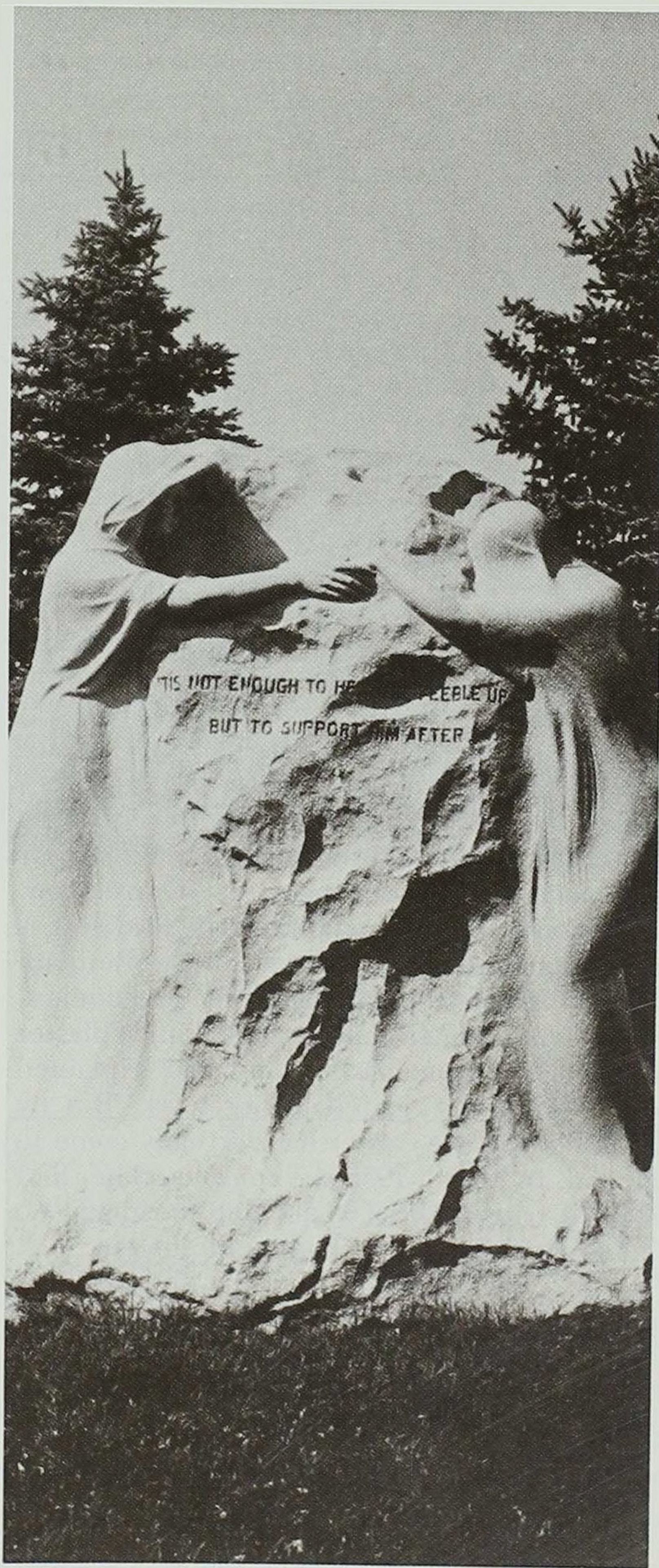


permanent void in her life.

Walker suffered an even more severe loss with the death of Taft in 1936. She found Midway Studios desolate without him. Walker was one of five of Taft's associates named to finish commissions on which he had been working. One of these is the Haym Salomon monument on Wacker Drive in Chicago. Walker sculpted the figure of Salomon.

THE DEPRESSION OF THE 1930s brought financial difficulties for Walker. Her career over the years had seen its ups and downs. It had hit a low point in the mid-1920s when work was scarce, but by 1927 she had reported to Edgar Harlan that "after several lean years" she now had plenty to do. But by the early 1930s the lean years returned as her sculpture commissions declined. She refused to have anything to do with the Works Progress Administration, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal agency which ran programs for unemployed artists. "I would starve before I would go to that bunch for help," she wrote a friend. The project in Chicago was in the hands of "an ultra modern advocate," she said, who would love nothing better than to be able to turn down older artists. Walker, who viewed Roosevelt with great alarm, commented after his election to a second term in 1936, "I wonder if we shall ever again have a general election. I think the American people *can be bought* which is perhaps the worst aspect of the whole thing."

In 1934 Walker did complete a low-relief memorial in bronze honoring the women who worked for woman suffrage in Iowa. This panel, commissioned by the Iowa Woman Suffrage Commission headed by Mary Hunter of Des Moines, is located in the rotunda of the state capitol near the entrance to the House of Representatives. Walker envisioned this work as showing "all those splendid women in their onward march toward victory . . . those early women who first took up the fight for suffrage, the passing of their torch to the hands of the oncoming band of workers, each bringing to the cause her special gift, the artist, the teacher, the doctor, the musician, the mother, etc. and at the end, the figure of a young girl,



Monument at grave  
of Winfield Scott Stratton  
1905  
Evergreen Cemetery  
Colorado Springs



bringing her youth, with its suggestion of others following on." The figures on this panel are clothed in long, flowing robes reminiscent of ancient Greek art; they are identified by the symbols they carry. Below this panel is a bronze plaque listing prominent workers in the suffrage cause.

Walker's best work is probably the Lincoln monument near Vincennes, Indiana, which was commissioned by the Illinois chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution and completed in 1937. It is located near the spot where the Lincoln family is thought to have crossed the Wabash River into Illinois. This monument consists of a relief panel of Indiana limestone, ten feet high and twenty-six feet long, showing the Lincoln family walking beside an oxcart loaded with their possessions. A guiding angel hovers overhead, pointing the way to Springfield. In front of this panel is a free-standing bronze figure of the young Lincoln helping to drive the oxen.

Another important source of Walker's income was lost with the decline in demand for paid lecturers during the Great Depression. For many years she had toured the Midwest as a lecturer under the auspices of the Redpath Bureau. In these "Clay Talks" she had demonstrated modeling a clay head, making a plaster cast, and cutting marble, and had explained other processes related to her work. But by 1932 her lecture career had virtually come to an end. In March 1935 she completed her first lecture trip in three years but she made no money because prices had had to be cut.

**W**ALKER'S CHICAGO CAREER ended in 1948 when the University of Chicago took over the Midway Studios property. Short of funds and with impaired eyesight, Walker, at the age of seventy-three, reluctantly decided to move to Colorado Springs, where her youngest sister lived. "I should have gone back," Walker said in a 1970 interview, "only I couldn't reconstruct life in Chicago with changing times and new concepts in art." Walker made a few sculptures during her Colorado Springs years, among them a relief panel of dancing children for a child-care center. She



also worked for a short time in the Van Briggle Pottery. But her lack of a studio, her age, and her failing eyesight severely limited what she could do.

Walker's last years in Colorado Springs were spent in the Myron Stratton Home for "needy oldsters." Ironically, the home had been founded through a bequest of the man whose family had given Walker her first professional commission back in 1905. During these years she filled albums with photographs of her sculptures and press clippings about her work as mementos for members of her family. She wrote her own obituary and let it be known that she wanted no funeral when she died. To complete arrangements for her death, she traded one of her sculptures, a figure of St. Francis made during her Chicago years, to a Colorado Springs funeral director in exchange for her cremation. She also asked her brother to destroy the Lincoln head which she had carved as a young girl. She felt it was too amateurish to be preserved. Her brother, however, kept the head in his home, and after her death he placed it in the John Garrett Memorial Library in Moulton, where it is proudly displayed along





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Walker remained alert and spry, despite near blindness, until well into her nineties. She died at the Stratton Home on July 10, 1973, at the age of ninety-eight. Funeral services for her were held in Colorado Springs and graveside services at the cemetery at Moulton where her ashes are interred. The need of her family and friends to mourn her death in a conventional manner triumphed over Walker's wishes for no funeral rites.

Walker was one of a surprisingly large number of women who became professional sculptors in the early nineteen hundreds. (The 1910 *American Art Annual* lists over one hundred such women.) They came from all walks of life — from Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, daughter of New York millionaire Cornelius Vanderbilt, to Walker, daughter of a Moulton, Iowa, tombstone maker. Walker was one of the few Iowa artists of her time to win recognition outside her native state. Her achievements, despite great handicaps, should stand as an inspiration for other women who aspire to a career in art. □

Lincoln Monument  
1937  
Near Vincennes, Indiana

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

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