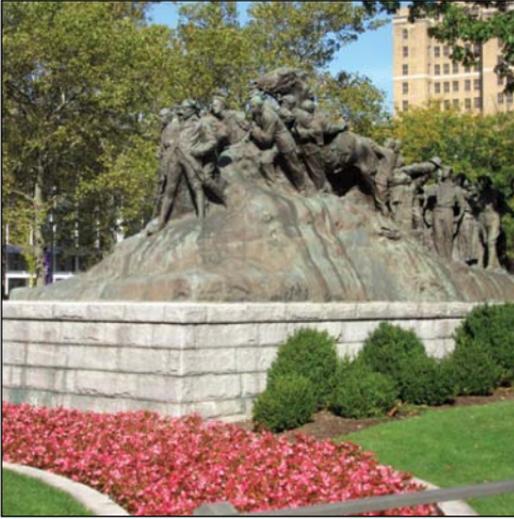


Wars of America



Military Park

Gutzon Borglum
1926

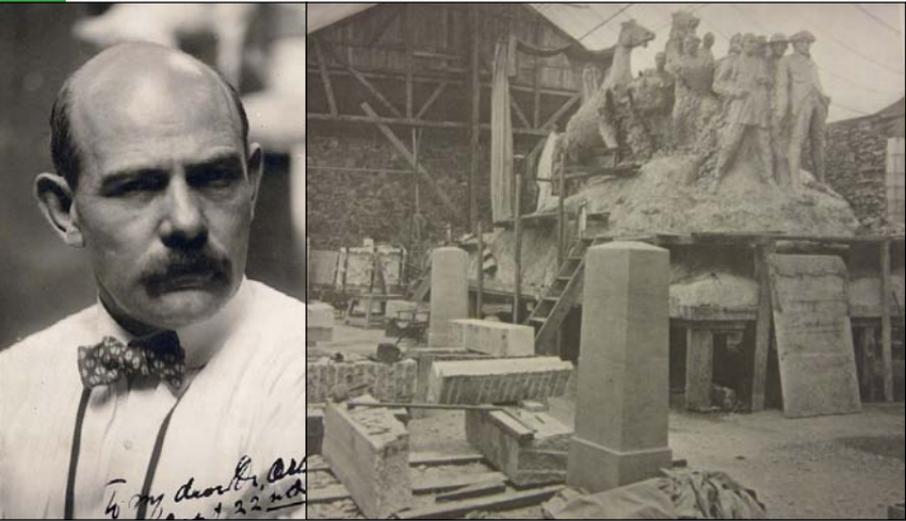
"The Wars of America" tells a wondrous story that will prove worthy of endless repetition to old and young.

— *Jewish Chronicle*¹
May 28, 1926, Page 4

"Wars of America" was the last—and the most ambitious—of the three public monuments bequeathed to the City of Newark through funding by the will of Amos H. Van Horn (for more about Van Horn, see page XX).

Though the United States had been involved in wars since its founding, the Civil War inspired a particularly strong desire for public memorialization. Yet, as of the 20th century, no such monuments were erected in Newark—something Van Horn's bequeath was meant to rectify. His will noted how, as "funds for this purpose are not being obtained as readily as desired and as this monument has always been one of my greatest desires," he left \$100,000 for "a Soldiers and Sailors Monument...to be erected in Military Park in the City of Newark."²

By the time the City got to this monument in 1920, a new wave of patriotic memorialization had been inspired by the sacrifices of the First World War. Sculptor Gutzon Borglum's (see page XX) reputation had already been established in Newark by his seated



Abraham Lincoln, "The Indian and The Puritan," and "First Landing Party of the Founders of Newark" (see pages XX, XX, and XX, respectively). "With that much money at my disposal," Borglum wrote enthusiastically of Van Horn's bequeath, "I can create a monument that will truly do honor to the brave men who have served America in times of war."³

His first thoughts for the Newark monument were something in a more typically classical style—a pillar surrounded by military figures from the various wars to date, shown in appropriate action. Yet he came to realize such an arrangement would fail to convey the range of emotions common to wars of all ages. He wanted a more sophisticated concept that would more fully embrace everything it meant for the nation to be at war.⁴

In the chicken coop-turned-studio behind his "Borgland" home in Stamford, Connecticut, Borglum crafted "sketch models" from clay and plaster until he had something he felt confident submitting.⁵ In February 1921, Newark lawyer Ralph E. Lum, representing the Van Horn estate, announced Borglum had been selected. It was said he won on the strength of his reputation and the committee hadn't even looked at his sketches. Van Horn's will spoke of a "Soldiers and Sailors Monument," but Borglum suggested the working title of "The Mobilization of America." He

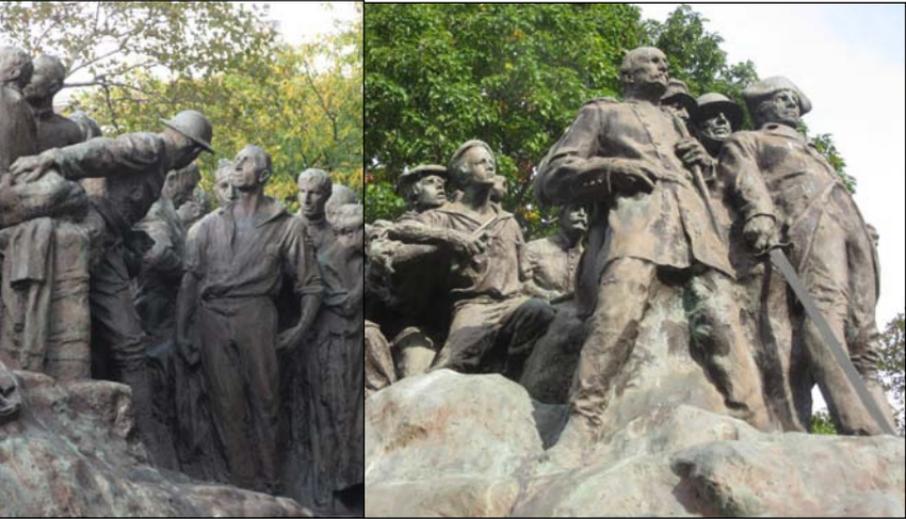


envisioned an incredible work in bronze—the largest ever erected in the United States, in fact—measuring 43 feet long, 18 feet high (24 feet with the pedestal) and comprised of forty-three human figure as much as 7 feet, 8 inches tall, and two horses.

Borglum submitted a clay model about 15 feet in length and told reporters he had made seven different configurations before arriving at one that pleased him. He explained:

This is the largest group ever built or proposed in America. It tells the complete story of a nation's effort as no other monument has ever attempted to do. The front of the group is composed of several men, fully uniformed and definitely at the edge of the battle in the presence of danger. This is shown by their attitude, by the general structure of the ground, by the agitation of the horses and by the rounding of one of the men engaged in harnessing the horses. Back of the entire group is a soldier bidding goodbye to his wife and children, indicating in a very simple and descriptive manner the motive which induces a peaceful nation to take up arms.⁶

It was to embody the citizen soldier rising to arms not for conquest but to defend the values of home. It spoke less to



romantic battlefield glory than the ideals of individual sacrifice for the greater good. There was even a male figure, being entreated by an army officer, whose body posture conveyed reticence—a conscience objector; a token to the reluctance with which a civilized people went to war.

Other sculptors declared it impossible to make so massive and complex a casting in bronze, predicting it would take Borglum on his own about six months per figure as long as 20 years to complete! It was suggested perhaps he should share the work with other sculptors.⁷ Yet Borglum's experiences with the Stone Mountain project had inspired him to think in mountainous scales. "A puny statue could never tell the heroic story of the American soldier and sailor," he asserted.⁸

Agreeing to a deadline of April 1923, Borglum encountered a complication right at the start. His studio was then-occupied by his second equine statue of Union General Philip Sheridan. The first was dedicated in Washington D.C. in 1908; the second destined for Chicago. So Borglum began the process outdoors of building armatures from tree trunks and making clay models in a nearby field. He hired builders to construct a new and larger studio around him while he worked. By mid-summer, with the first layers of clay in place, the studio walls had become tall enough to think about



a roof. Unable to put on a permanent roof with the statue taking shape inside, his wife sewed together tarps strung between the walls, later replaced by old circus tents.⁹

Borglum had the help of two able assistants, Luigi Del Bianco and Hugo Villa, who worked hauling the some 40-tons of clay that would ultimately go into the piece.¹⁰ Both were Italian immigrants and Del Bianco would go on to be the chief stone carver on the Mount Rushmore project¹¹ while Villa had been a violin maker before turning to sculpting.

On nice days at noon, Borglum's wife, Mary, and their children, Mary Ellis and Lincoln, would bring lunch out to the studio and try to encourage him to take a break. Young Lincoln, who was just eight years old when his father began the Newark job, wanted to skip school so he could watch his father work.¹²

Borglum had become good friends with, Ralph E. Lum, but Lum began to worry that his friend's vision exceeded his ability to fund it. Finding someone able to cast so large a piece within budget was challenging. When the first bid came in, Borglum wondered if it was a typo, but it was not—the quote for casting was \$120,000 when the total bequeath had been \$100,000! Scaling down the monument was never an option for Borglum—he would just keep writing to foundries until he found one that could do it within budget. At last

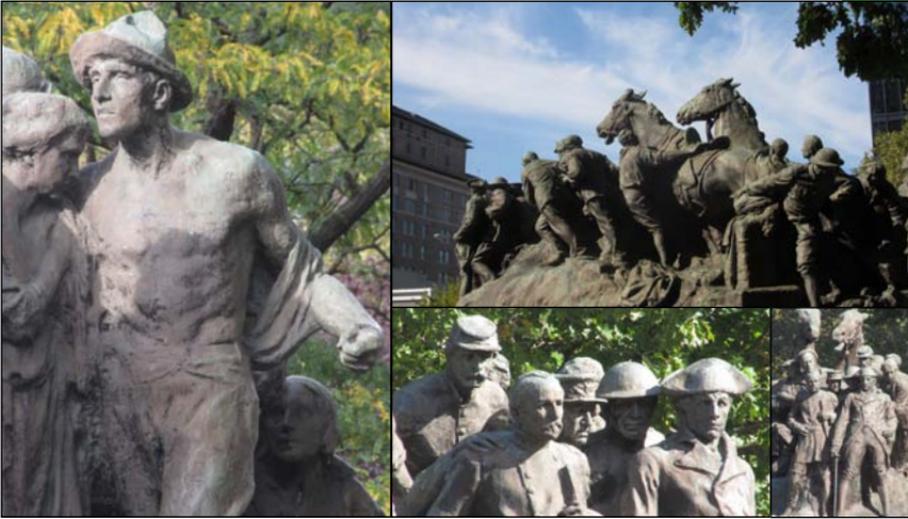


he found one in Italy, Gusmano Vignali, who estimated \$20,000.¹³

Work, however, ran into delay after delay. Among them were his responsibilities to the contentious Stone Mountain Confederate monument project in Georgia. Work also ground to a halt in 1922 as he grieved the death of his brother, Solon Borglum, at age 53 from complications associated with an appendectomy.¹⁴

Borglum's agreement with Vignali was to send them the 42 total figures in eight groups, but by December of 1922 only four figures were actually shipped. Clearly the April 1923 deadline would not be met, adding to Lum's worries. A harsh winter didn't help, as rain and sleet leaked through the tent roof. The modeling clay froze despite the bonfires lit around Borglum and his assistants as they labored in coonskin coats and fur caps. Borglum couldn't work with gloves and his hands were sore and bleeding.¹⁵

Borglum's perfectionist nature caused him to remake multiple times a troublesome sailor figure. Even once shipped, he would regret not having just a little more time to perfect them. At long last, however, the final pieces were shipped in the summer of 1924. When he hadn't heard back from Vignali, Borglum sent Hugo Villa to Italy to see what the problem was. Work was only just beginning and the figures sent back in 1922 were yet to be cast. The unveiling that had been scheduled for November 11, 1925 had



to be cancelled, straining Lum's patience. He wrote to Borglum in exasperation:

I will give no further thought to the subject and forget it, as nearly as I can come to doing that, until someone tells me there is some chance of getting the monument during my lifetime.

"Trust me a little longer," Borglum replied.¹⁶

The occasional news article or photos of progress in newspapers around the country kept up the public interest during the delays. Borglum himself gave a presentation broadcast by the Newark radio station WOR in March of 1924. The station was started in 1922 by Newark's department store magnate and philanthropist Louis Bamberger. Before the memorial was at last ready to be unveiled, Bamberger had Borglum's clay models on display in his store's window and put on an exhibition of photographs by the project's official photographer.¹⁷

When Borglum had to be at Stone Mountain, Mary took over the arrangements getting the castings shipped from Italy. Vignali wrote to her of complications he faced moving the massive works from the foundry to the dock. He needed to build a custom truck, but local authorities refused him permission to use them on their streets, adding:



We therefore put eight string horses to a wagon. They were accompanied by a crew of electricians because in many towns the electrical wires had to be removed before the wagon with its giant load could pass.

The whole thing was now over budget, but at long last the bronze castings arrived safely at Newark and the dedication could be firmly scheduled for May 31, 1926.¹⁸ Van Horn's bequeath had stipulated that the monument was to be erected in the city's Military Park—an appropriate site indeed (for more about Military Park, see page XX). It was placed opposite the Robert Treat Hotel. From a bird's eye perspective, it would form the handle of a sword-shaped water basin, hilt and blade, pointing towards the apex of the triangular park.

Crowds on hand to witness the event numbered anywhere from 5,000 to 20,000, depending on if they included the throngs outside the park or in the windows of surrounding buildings. At the appointed moment, Alice Mae Waer, grandniece of Amos Van Horn, drew apart the flags that had been covering the monument and two large yellow balloons carried off a flag of Newark to complete the dramatic unveiling. Among the more curious parts of the celebration was the release of 96 homing pigeons, two for each of



the then-48 states, allegedly to carry messages to their respective governors. How many completed their voyages home is unclear. Speakers included Navy Secretary Wilbur, Borglum, Governor Harry A. Moore, and Brigadier General High A. Drum (for the Secretary of War). Hundreds of soldiers, sailors, and marines marched on foot while others on horseback pulled caissons of artillery late of the battlefields of France.¹⁹

Borglum had been running about making last minute arrangements and was still in work clothes when he took the stage. Some press speculated he suffered from "mike fright" when he placed aside his prepared remarks. Yet he seems to have been sincerely overwhelmed by the moment of triumph, improvising:

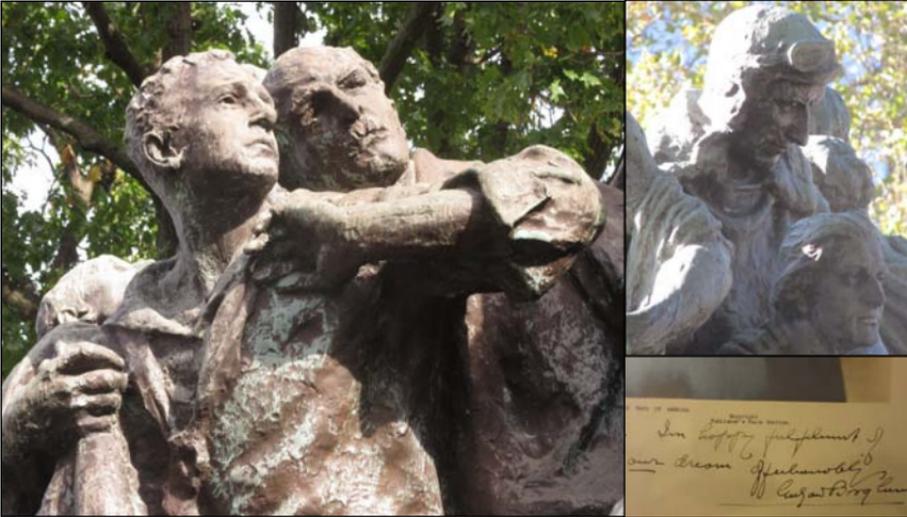
*It would be impossible for me to express the pleasure and the gratitude to God that I am able today to deliver to you...this memorial monument to the people who have founded and protected a new freedom in the world.*²⁰

"Wars of America" was celebrated as a triumph, and Borglum received letters and notes of congratulations. One he elected to read out at the unveiling displeased the editors of Newark's *Jewish Chronicle* who took Borglum to task for a "display of bad taste."



His secretary was ill-advised or unwise in selecting as the only message to be read of the many received, one that adroitly praised General Robert E. Lee and the Daughters of the Confederacy. All good Americans, no matter from what side of the Mason Dixon Line, know that many of the Confederates were sincere and brave in their determination to fight against the Union forces and the Unity of the Nation. But all must be convinced that the sooner we forget the cause that separated North and South during the Civil War, the better for all of us. The less we draw attention to the old prejudices and the partisan interests, the more we weld out people into a homogeneous national unit, which is the important thing to keep in mind.²¹

While it was proper for Borglum to receive the accolades—and the criticism—he was cognoscente of how “Wars of America” was a group project. It had begun with the broad thematic commands of Van Horn’s will to fund works he would never see. There were also his hardworking assistants, Luigi Del Bianco and Hugo Villa, as well as Gusmano Vignali and his workers at the foundry, not to mention his own family. His friend Ralph Lum handled funding and acted as intermediary to assuage frustration when delays ran into years. Borglum gave Lum a set of the several large photographic



prints taken of the completed monument, autographing one, "In happy fulfilment of our dream."

Those who admired "Wars of America" could search for figures patterned after real people. Amos Van Horn was represented as a young Union Army volunteer, as he had been in 1861. Borglum himself, his wife Mary, and son Lincoln are also to be found. The World War aviator was fashioned after John Purroy Mitchel. Known as "The Boy Mayor" when he served as New York City's youngest mayor from 1914 to 1917, he joined the Air Service as a flying cadet, achieving the rank of Major. He lost his life in a freak accident during a training flight in Louisiana on the morning of July 6, 1918 when his plane went into a sudden nose dive. His seatbelt had evidently been unfastened and he fell out of the aircraft, plummeting some 500-feet to his death.²²

Some years later Gutzon Borglum traveled to Italy to visit the Vignali foundry. The owner asked him an odd question—how did he like the champagne? "What champagne?" Borglum replied. It seemed that the workers had stashed bottles of bubbly inside the hollow bronze castings as a gift that never made it to Borglum! What became of them remained a mystery, but rumors of a hidden alcoholic treasure lingered. In 1990, the *New York Times* reported:



Ron Cavalier, owner of Renaissance Foundries of Bridgeport, Conn., and his son, Chris, recently clambered around inside the statue, poking arms into the heads of two horses where Italian foundry workers were said to have stashed cases of champagne as a gift to Borglum before shipping sections of the work to Newark for assembling in Military Park in 1926.

The search produced handfuls of dirt but no champagne. Mr. Cavalier said that he was disappointed but that perhaps some workers had found the gift before the statue was assembled and "had some enjoyable lunches."²³

Cavalier's inspections had a serious purpose. The intervening years had taken a toll. As the *Times* article described:

Mr. Cavalier said that the steel supports inside the statue had corroded and had to be replaced - "much like the Statue of Liberty" - and that thousands of tiny holes had to be plugged with bronze welds. Seams also were welded, and the outside of the statue was cleaned with acid and wiped with copper nitrate and copper sulphate to restore what the artisans believe was its original color.

Jerome D. Greco, chairman of the Down Town Park



Committee, which was formed six years ago to refurbish the city's parks, said an inspection of the Borglum landmark "showed that it was in danger of collapsing."²⁴

"Wars of America" was rededicated in 1990 following a two year restoration process costing \$300,000. Borglum's daughter was on hand, Mary Ellis Borglum Powers witnessed the original 1926 unveiling as a young girl. In the 21st century, it has become a centerpiece of overall downtown revitalization around Military Park. The sword-shaped pool, drained of its water years ago, is now a colorful flowerbed.

Cavalier added to the monument's history not only by its restoration. The *Times* related:

He said it was not unusual for workers to leave a message or a memento inside a statue they had worked on. "I left something inside the 'Wars of America,' but I won't say what it is," he said. "It will be a surprise for someone when they have to work on the statue sometime far in the future."²⁵

After the first dedication 64 years before, Gutzon Borglum and his family drove that night back to "Borgland." He suggested to



Mary that they move to Texas so they could be nearer to his next undertaking in South Dakota at a place known as Mount Rushmore.

Endnotes

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