

**NOTES ON HOUDON'S STATUE
OF GEORGE WASHINGTON
IN LAFAYETTE PARK, ST. LOUIS**

by Esley Hamilton

This essay was prepared for the annual wreath-laying ceremony on Presidents' Day, February 20, 2006, sponsored by the Cornelia Greene Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution.

The statue of George Washington in Lafayette Park pays tribute to a man who lived in an era that produced many men and women of exceptional sagacity and accomplishment. Yet he did more than any other individual to lead the nation successfully through the American Revolution, a war that during most of its long years we appeared to be losing. He then went on to take the lead in framing and putting into practice a radically new form of constitutional government. As of March 4, 2006, our Constitution will have lasted 217 years. France observes the 217th anniversary of the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 2006, and we need look no further than the outcome of the French Revolution to see what might have become of the ideals of our own revolution had we been led by a lesser mortal than George Washington.

Washington was portrayed many times by painters, engravers and sculptors. We are fortunate that two of these, Gilbert Stuart and Jean Antoine Houdon, were among the greatest portraitists ever to have worked in their media. What makes Houdon's standing figure of Washington even more remarkable is that it was commissioned not by a connoisseur but by an enlightened state government.

The Washington shown here was 53 years old, midway between the two great periods of his career, after the Revolution but before the Constitution and the Presidency, during the few years when he anticipated being able to spend the rest of his life as a farmer. In 1785, his most recent public event had been his resignation from the army on December 23, 1783 after eight years of service as commander-in-chief, and this statue is specifically designed to recall that event. At the time, the story of the Roman leader of the 5th century BC, Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus, was in many people's thoughts. Called from his fields and given dictatorial

powers in a moment of national crisis, Cincinnatus saved Rome and then returned to his plow. His name became a byword for unselfish service. Several months before Washington's resignation, General von Steuben had organized an association of like-minded officers, both American and French, and had called it the Society of the Cincinnati. The badge of the Society hangs under the waistcoat on the statue, and the plow, the fasces (the bundle of rods that symbolized Roman rule), and the sword placed to one side, would have evoked Cincinnatus to every informed viewer.

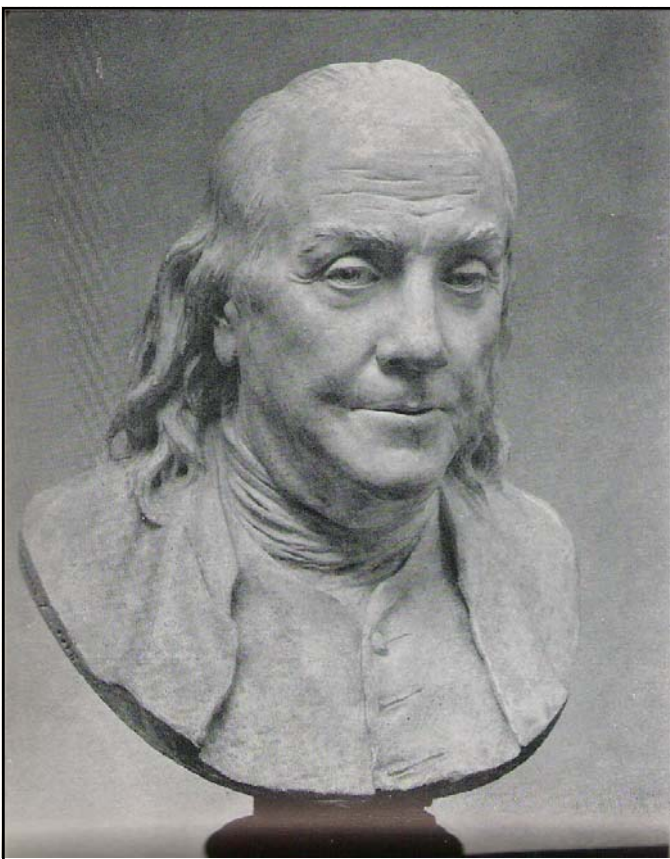


Jean Antoine Houdon, *George Washington*, Lafayette Park
Photo by David Finn & Amy Binder from George McCue, *Sculpture City: St. Louis*, Hudson Hills Press, 1988.

The General Assembly of Virginia voted on June 22, 1784 to commission a marble statue of Washington as "a monument of affection and gratitude." Governor Benjamin Harrison, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and the father of President William Henry

Harrison, realized that a European sculptor would be required and asked Thomas Jefferson to award the commission. Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were both in Paris at the time, the elder as the outgoing and the younger as the incoming American Minister to France. Harrison sent Jefferson a full-length painting of Washington he had commissioned from Charles Willson Peale. Jefferson replied in January 1785 that “there could be no question raised as to the sculptor who should be employed, the reputation of Mons. Houdon, of this city, being unrivaled in Europe.”

Jean-Antoine Houdon was then 44 and had been exhibiting his work at the annual salons in Paris for the previous sixteen years. Born in the town of Versailles in 1741, the son of a minor court functionary, he had shown an early aptitude for art and in 1761 had won the Prix de Rome, which permitted him to study in Italy. By 1786, his practice was international. He had created significant works for the Duke of Saxe-Gotha, Prince Henry of Prussia, and several members of the Russian court, as well as the most prominent of the French aristocracy and intelligentsia. Catherine the Great was at the moment wooing him to visit St. Petersburg to create an equestrian statue that could rival the one of Peter the Great recently completed by Etienne-Maurice Falconet.



Jean Antoine Houdon, Benjamin Franklin, original plaster model from *The City Art Museum of St. Louis, Handbook of the Collections*, 1953, page 148.

Houdon had already created portrait busts of two Americans in Paris, Benjamin Franklin in 1778 and John-Paul Jones in 1781. These had proved great successes, and Houdon had created versions in marble, plaster, and terra cotta. (Later American subjects were Jefferson in 1789, Joel Barlow, and Robert Fulton, both in 1804.) He made two versions of his Franklin wearing the plain “Quaker” clothes Franklin affected and another one draped *a l’antique*. Houdon saw all these editions as autograph works of art and would not have understood the obsessive (money-driven) need in modern times to distinguish an original from a copy. With Houdon, it is usually impossible to tell which example of a given work is the first or “prime” one. The marbles were typically the rarest, the most expensive, and often the most finely nuanced. But the plaster and terra cotta works could also be sensitively detailed. The St. Louis Art Museum’s fine plaster of Franklin, for example, came from the collection of Houdon’s client the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, and the Houdon authority H. H. Arnason wrote that “it may lay claim to that much abused phrase ‘an original plaster.’”

The uncanny likenesses that Houdon achieved were the result of painstaking measurements and molds or “life masks.” Not wanting to work from a painting on this important commission, he agreed to travel to America. He was willing to do this, while being tempted by the more lucrative equestrian project in Russia, probably because he hoped to obtain the pending commission for an equestrian statue of Washington that had been authorized by the U. S. Congress in 1783 but not yet implemented (it never was). Houdon sailed from Le Havre on July 28, 1785, traveling with Franklin, who was returning after nine years as minister to France.

On Houdon’s arrival in Philadelphia, Washington wrote to him. “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.” Even with this invitation, Houdon’s arrival at Mount Vernon came as a surprise, as Washington recorded in his diary for Sunday, October 2. “After we were in Bed (about Eleven Oclock in the Evening) Mr. Houdon, sent from Paris by Doctr. Franklin and Mr. Jefferson to take my Bust, in behalf of the State of Virginia, with three young men assistants, introduced by a Mr. Perin a French Gentleman of Alexandria [Virginia], arrived here by water from the latter place.”

On Monday the 10th, Washington recorded Houdon’s procedure for making plaster of Paris, which the sculptor used to make a life mask. Martha Washington’s granddaughter Nelly Custis also remembered that day:

“I was only six years old at the time, and perhaps should not have retained any recollection of Houdon & his visit, had I not seen the General as I supposed, dead. . . I was passing the white servants Hall & saw as I thought the Corpse of one I considered my Father, I went in & found the General Extended on his back on a large table, a sheet over him except the face, on which Houdon was engaged in putting on plaster to form the cast. Quills were in the nostrils. I was very much alarmed until I was told that it was a bust, a likeness of the General, & would not injure him.”

From the mask, now in the Morgan Library in New York, Houdon made a full bust of terra cotta (actually low-fired clay) for Washington and a plaster bust to take back to France. Washington paired his bust with the plaster of Houdon’s John Paul Jones he owned and placed them on brackets over the doors in his study. The terra cotta has remained at Mount Vernon ever since, although it now resides in the museum there while its original position is taken by a copy made by Clark Mills.



The Study at Mount Vernon, showing placement of Houdon bust. from *Mount Vernon, An Illustrated Handbook*, 1974.

Houdon arrived back in Paris on Christmas, 1785, but his plaster bust did not follow until the following May. He showed a version of the bust at the Salon of 1787 (eventually he made more than twenty variants) and

was far enough along with the full statue to date and sign it: *Fait par Houdon, citoyenne Français, 1788*, “made by Houdon, citizen of France.” Work must have continued into following year, however, when Gouverneur Morris, one of the authors of the Constitution, wrote in his diary, “5 June 1789. Go to Mr. Houdon’s. I stand for his statue of general Washington, being the humble employment of a manikin.” Houdon showed a model of the statue, but not the statue itself, in the Salon of 1793. He finally shipped the completed work in January 1796. The long delay allowed Virginia to complete the space for it in Jefferson’s new temple-form Capitol in Richmond. Future president James Monroe made the final payment for the statue in 1803 while special envoy to France.

It is sometimes said that the whole composition was carved from one piece of Carrara marble, but conservators who worked on the statue in 2000 found that both the cane or walking stick and the sword handle and guard had been fabricated separately and attached by him. The walking stick was not an affectation but something Houdon must have seen Washington using regularly as he experienced the fatigue of eight years of war.

When the statue was finally in place, some observers quibbled about the mixture of contemporary dress and classical symbols, but most agreed on the fidelity of the likeness. Chief Justice John Marshall told a friend that the head “seen at a point somewhat removed towards the side, from the front, presented as perfect a resemblance of the living man as he could conceive possible in marble.” When Lafayette saw the statue in 1824, tears came to his eyes as he cried out, “That is the man himself!”

Because Houdon had made no other copies of the standing Washington, in contrast to his usual practice, concern mounted during the 19th century about the safety of the statue. Antonio Canova’s posthumous figure of Washington was destroyed in 1831 when the North Carolina statehouse burned, and the Houdon statue itself narrowly escaped damage in 1852 when the skylight above gave way after a heavy snow. Prompted by this experience, the Virginia Assembly in 1853 authorized William J. Hubard, a Richmond-based portrait painter, to take a cast of the marble for use in making bronze replicas, which he was authorized to do for a period of seven years. Hubard struggled for three years to master the technology of bronze casting and eventually, according to *The Missouri Republican*, had to import skilled workmen from Munich, where our statue of Thomas Hart Benton and the three bronzes in Tower Grove Park were cast.

Hubard made six copies in all. One of the first went to North Carolina, where it was intended to replace the destroyed Canova. It was unveiled in 1857. (A replica Canova was returned to the State Capitol in 1970.) Another was installed on the entrance approach to the South Carolina State Capitol in Columbia, where, according to the WPA Guide, its walking stick was broken by Sherman's men. Others went to the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, Virginia, to New York City, Washington, D.C. and eventually to St. Louis. Hubard converted his foundry to munitions manufacture at the outbreak of the Civil War, and he was killed in an explosion there in 1862. His molds disappeared during the war too.

The Virginia legislature authorized the Gorham Company to make additional bronze replicas in 1910, when new molds were made. The damage that resulted to the surface of the marble (still visible today) caused that state to forbid any further work of this type. The legislation required a separate approval by the state for each copy made from the 1910 molds. By 1931 Gorham had made copies for the Peruvian Embassy in Washington; the Art Institute of Chicago, Memorial Hall in Philadelphia, the DAR in San Francisco; the Henry E. Temple Association in Columbus, Ohio, and the Memorial Chapel at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. The bronze in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol is a Gorham replica installed in 1934. By 1971, the number of Hubard and Gorham replicas in bronze had risen to 22, the most recent being in the Masonic Memorial in Alexandria, Virginia, the last by Gorham. Another count in 2003, this time including plasters, found a total of 33. Gorham claimed its bronzes were the finest in the world, but Gary Wills refers to the Gorham version owned by the Art Institute of Chicago as "a crude metal cast."

Part of Houdon's breathtaking artistry was his ability to create subtly modeled skin surfaces and gazes that seem to speak to the viewer. The technique he developed of drilling the cornea gave his subjects a directness of expression unknown before that time. He knew that in order for his works to be seen to best advantage, they needed to be displayed near eye level, and he did not want his Washington to have too high a pedestal. To encourage the use of a shorter base, he carved the name "George Washington" directly into the low plinth that is integral to the sculpture.

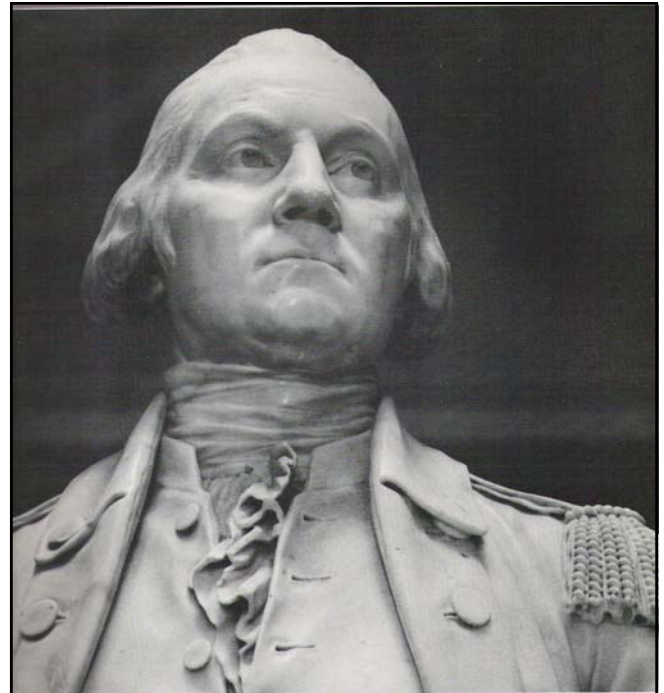
Virginia, however, wanted a taller pedestal, if only to accommodate a lengthy tribute written by none other than James Madison. Eventually this view prevailed, although not until 1814, during Madison's second term as President:

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 exerting both
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*

*One thousand seven hundred and eighty eight
And in the year of the Commonwealth the twelfth*



Jean Antoine Houdon, *George Washington*, Richmond, Virginia from H. H. Arnason, *The Sculptures of Houdon*, 1975, Plate 101

This inscription is now obscured by a circular iron fence. "The Virginians have made a great mistake in putting the statue high on a pedestal," writes Gary Wills in *Cincinnatus*: "This gives viewers a weirdly intimate introduction to Washington's shoe manufactory, but makes the play of light across his face impossible to see with clarity. . . Washington continues to elude us; but Houdon comes close to making him walk back among us, heroic but not distant after all."

The St. Louis pedestal is about the same height, a little over five feet tall, even though it has no such inscription. It is thus too tall for a good view of Washington's face but too short to respond to the need for public monuments to keep inquisitive hands at a distance. The Italian marble has suffered from acid rain and has taken on a bluish cast from the former patination of the bronze, which has been replaced. Its unadorned and somewhat gaunt appear-

ance, set on an earthen mound, has been mitigated in recent years by the denser surrounding landscape. The hedges improve the proportions of the pedestal and form a green transition to the ground.

Houdon designed the statue to be life-size. Washington was a big man, at six feet two inches in height, a commanding presence in a crowd and one of the tallest of the founding fathers. Only Jefferson rivaled him in this definition of stature. The marble figure was thus large enough for the space Jefferson assigned to it in the new Capitol Building he was designing for Richmond. Called the Rotunda, it is actually a square room, detailed with Palladian doorcases and niches and rising through the height of the building to a skylight.



Virginia State Capitol, The Rotunda seen from above
From *Historic Williamsburg*, Autumn 2003

Set in a broad open space, however, any statue that is merely life-size looks too small. That is why the statue in Washington, D.C. of Ulysses S. Grant on horseback, one of the largest equestrian statues ever made, looks just right. Our bronze is actually a little smaller than the original marble, six feet two inches including the plinth, as opposed to the same height for the man only. The difference is due to the shrinkage of the metal as it cools during the casting process. The problem of scale is exacerbated in Lafayette Park by the proximity of the monumental statue of Senator Thomas Hart Benton. Ironically, it was erected only a year before the Houdon, but at ten feet tall it is almost twice life-size. In a

photo of the Benton taken at the foundry in Munich, it looks even bigger next to its five-foot-two sculptor Harriet Hosmer. Pictures of the park taken before the devastating tornado of May 27, 1896, show a much denser planting than exists today, and the contrast between the two statues, the first public monuments to be erected in St. Louis, was perhaps not so obvious. It is to be hoped that future improvements to Lafayette Park will include a more enclosed setting for the Houdon.

Hosmer's decision to wrap Benton in a voluminous cloak or toga evocative of ancient Rome was derided by many but corresponded to the Neoclassical taste that was then on the wane. A similar debate had taken place eighty years earlier, when Houdon wanted to drape Washington in classical attire but deferred to the general's request to be shown in his military uniform, which by the standards of the time was rather dashing. At the 1869 dedication, Charles Gibson remarked, "Many of us have seen that old continental costume as worn in those days, but the younger portion of the inhabitants of this country probably have not done so." At the same time, Neoclassicism was still alive enough that the newspaper didn't need to define the term "fasces." The traditional symbol seen in ancient Roman reliefs was a bundle of rods bound around an axe and carried in official processions. Houdon's version is specifically American, having thirteen rods, with slender arrows between them.



Harriet Hosmer inspecting bronze cast of her Thomas Hart Benton in Munich, c. 1864, from McCue, *Sculpture City: St. Louis*, p. 33

An inscription on the opposite side of the plinth from Houdon's date gives the origin of the St. Louis bronze: "W. J. Hubard Foundry Richmond, Virginia, 1859." How the Hubard bronze got to St. Louis has been the subject of several contradictory stories, and at this distance in time it probably is not possible to determine the truth at every point. This is what *The Missouri Republican* reported the day after the dedication.

In 1860 [Hubard] placed it on exhibition in Spencer's Art Emporium on Fourth street. The owner was induced to bring it here, we believe on the probability of its purchase by the City Council, some action of that body having been inducement; but before it arrived the complexion of the Council was changed by a new election, and the body refused to purchase. The statue stood for some time in the Court-House yard, and was afterwards removed to the Accommodation Bank, on Chestnut street. The adverse action of the council was a sore disappointment of Mr. Hubard, who remained here many months in the hope of disposing of the work, the price asked being \$10,000. Finally becoming embarrassed, he borrowed some \$1,500 of Messrs. R. Wells; H. T. Blow and Dr. M. M. Pallen, giving his note at 90 days with a deed of trust on the statue. The note fell due and was taken up; the statue was sold and bought in by the holders of the deed, and some months since was sold to the Commissioners of Lafayette Park for \$5,000. Mr. Hubard died some years after leaving here, and we understand that the difference between the amount of his note and the price of the statue, less interest, has been forwarded to his widow at Richmond.

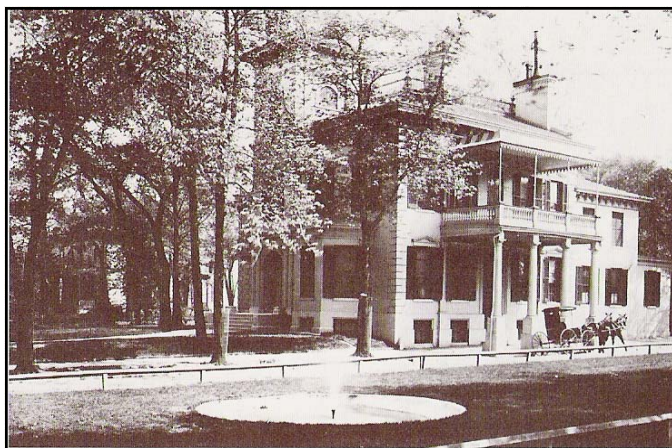
George McCue's 1988 version begins after Hubard's death, with three bronzes sold and three remaining:

"Mrs. Hubard sent the Lafayette Park bronze to Annapolis with a sale offer, declined by the Maryland legislature. Then she shipped it to St. Louis for consideration by the Missouri legislature, but nothing came of that. Somehow the statue became security for a loan and was stored in a real estate office on Third Street. Charles Gibson, a prominent attorney, redeemed it for the yard of his residence facing Lafayette Park. He accepted a city offer for it, and the monument was placed within the park.

Gibson lived almost opposite the site of the statue, at 2050 Lafayette, on the east side of Waverly Place (then called McNair), which had originally been the private drive to the home of his father-in-law Archibald Gamble. Gibson was for many years a member of the board of improvement that had supervised the development of

Lafayette Park since the 1850s. The board was composed of the mayor, the city engineer, and three citizens, who were typically residents of the neighborhood. In 1869 the other two were William H. Maurice, and Charles F. Meyer. Maurice and Meyer were both trustees of the Life Association of America, an early insurance company. Meyer was also president of the Union Savings and Loan Association and lived on Lafayette at Preston. Maurice was cashier (which meant manager) of the National Loan Bank and lived on Park west of Mackay (then called Armstrong). Maurice's brother John, who lived nearby, was the architect of such local ornaments as the Lafayette Park Presbyterian Church, the beautiful George Bain House at 2115 Park, and the home of General John Cavender at 21 Benton Place.

The story that Gibson had personally redeemed the statue several years before it was placed in the park was not told at the dedication, when it would have been pertinent and fresh in people's minds and when Gibson was present as one of the speakers. In 1914, when the *Post-Dispatch* tried to confirm the story, neither Gibson's son Charles E. nor his son-in-law Luther H. Conn (the man who bought U. S. Grant's White Haven estate from his creditors) knew any more than that Gibson had been instrumental in putting the statue in the park.



The Charles Gibson House, 2050 Lafayette Avenue, built 1851, looking southeast from the entrance to Waverly Place, with David Nicholson House in left distance. From Lawrence Lowic, *The Architectural Heritage of St. Louis 1803-1891*, Washington University Gallery of Art, 1982, p. 97

The official dedication took place at 4 p.m. on Saturday, May 15, 1869. "The erection was made the occasion of a large gathering of our citizens," the park board later reported. Former Mayor John F. Darby, who had served as long ago as 1835, presided, and current Mayor Nathan Cole spoke. Five other former mayors attended: John Daggett, John Krum, James Barry, Daniel Taylor, and James Thomas. Professor Waldauer's band performed in the bandstand that had been built two years earlier. "The day was signally pleasant and the crowd evidently enjoyed the growing

development of beauty and art in and about the park” which included the new iron fence that was being erected to the designs of Francis Tunica. Tunica was also working on Tower Grove Park at the same time. The afternoon ended with refreshments catered by Jacob Christ, “a cold collation which was spread upon a long table in a shaded portion of the park.”



Houdon's George Washington in its Lafayette Park setting before the tornado. From *Art Work in St. Louis*, The W. H. Parish Pub. Co., 1895

After the 1896 tornado, which is said to have shifted the 3,500-pound statue three-fourths of an inch on its pedestal, the neighborhood around the park declined dramatically. By 1914, most St. Louisans had forgotten that the statue existed. The women of the Wednesday Club (then located at Westminster and Taylor) asked park commissioner Dwight Davis to move it to the new public library on Olive, but he determined that would require a city ordinance. The Municipal Art Commission considered moving the statue again in 1935, this time to the City Art Museum in Forest Park, but instead they asked Victor Holm clean it. Reports on the condition of the statue continued to appear periodically, and in 1963 *Globe-Democrat* reporter Al Delugach described its appearance as “woebegone.” In that year, however, the Cornelia Greene Chapter of the Daughters of the American Republic came out in 17-degree temperatures to initiate the custom of laying a wreath at the statue on Washington’s birthday, later modified to Presidents’ Day.

Following a report on public art by the St. Louis Beautification Commission in 1969, a citywide effort began to conserve public sculpture, aided by Washington University’s Center for Archaeometry under Phoebe Weil. The results of that work appear in George McCue’s 1988 book, *Sculpture City: St. Louis*. In 2002 Patrick Rice, who had worked with Phoebe Weil, did more work on the Houdon. Ward Buckner reports that the late Robert Orchard got the St. Louis Ambassadors to

provide funding. Rice restored the walking stick, conspicuously missing in the McCue photo. He made a mold from the Gorham replica in Chicago, once installed in front of the Art Institute but more recently on loan to the Mayor’s office in Chicago’s City Hall. Buckner still has the mold, along with a maintenance manual.

The Lafayette Park Houdon is no longer the only one in St. Louis. On May 7, 2004, Washington University unveiled a new bronze cast on a new plaza in front of Olin Library. This one was made by Paul King Foundry, Inc. of Johnston, Rhode Island from a plaster cast in their possession. Its dedication, to the memory of William M. Van Cleve, marked the conclusion of the institution’s sesquicentennial celebration and one of the first formal recognitions by the university of the man for whom it was rather casually named. This version of the statue has a lower pedestal, still with room for inscriptions on all four sides. Three are taken from Washington’s first message to Congress in 1790: “There is nothing which can better deserve your patronage than the promotion of science and literature”; “Knowledge is in every country the surest basis of public happiness”; and “Every valuable end of government is best answered by the enlightened confidence of the people and by teaching the people themselves to know and to value their own rights.”



Jean-Antoine Houdon, *George Washington*, Washington University Cast dedicated 2004.

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