

The Minute Man Pedestal and Its Two Time Capsules

By

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It is well-known that the artist, Daniel Chester French, created The Minute Man. Almost unknown is the concern he had about the design of the pedestal on which the sculpture would stand. French was studying abroad when the leaders of the Town of Concord pondered the problem of the pedestal. Through the *Proceedings at the Centennial Celebration of Concord Fight, April 19, 1875* published in 1876 and letters between French and his father, Henry Flagg French, and his brother, William Merchant Richardson French, the story of French's reaction to the town's decisions about the pedestal can be traced.

When Ebenezer Hubbard died in October 1871, he bequeathed to the town of Concord \$1,000 to erect a monument to honor the Americans who died on April 19, 1775. He stipulated that the monument had to be on the side of the Concord River opposite from the Battle Monument.

In March 1872 Concord formed a five member committee to decide on the type of monument that would best fulfill Hubbard's bequest. John Keyes became the chair of the Monument Committee. In March 1873 the committee recommended that the town "procure a statue of a Continental Minute-man, cut in granite, and erect it on a proper foundation, on the American side of the river with the opening stanza of the poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson, sung at the dedication of the Battle Monument in 1837, enduringly engraven [*sic*] for an inscription on the base."¹ The town authorized the committee "to procure designs and estimates for a statue."²

At the November 1873 meeting the Monument Committee submitted to the town a small plaster model of a minuteman completed by Daniel Chester French. The town accepted the design and appropriated \$500 to pay for the materials necessary to develop a full size model. The town chose five additional members for the Monument Committee which was "authorized to decide on material for the statue, to procure a suitable base and carry on the work."³ By 1874 the Committee decided that bronze was a more suitable material for the statue than granite, and in March the town appropriated \$1500 "to be used in procuring a suitable base to the statue and completing the work."⁴

In July 1874 French completed a full size clay model of The Minute Man. A plaster statue was then executed from the clay model. In mid-September the statue was sent to the Ames Foundry in Chicopee, Massachusetts to be cast in bronze.

French thought about the base upon which his statue would stand even while working on the model. In May he created two sketches for possible designs for a pedestal.⁵ After completing the statue, he continued to contemplate the design of the base as can be seen from the following two entries he made in his diary. On September 15 he went to the Boston Public Library

¹ *Proceedings at the Centennial Celebration of Concord Fight April 19, 1875* (Concord, Massachusetts, 1876), p. 12.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Michael Richman, *Daniel Chester French: An American Sculptor* (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1976), p. 42.

“looking for pedestals.” On October 2 he noted, “Began a model of the pedestal for my statue.”⁶ By his actions and diary entries, it is apparent that French did not realize that as early as 1873 the town had given the Monument Committee the responsibility for obtaining a pedestal for the statue. In mid-October 1874 French left for Florence, Italy to study art.

The townspeople had differing opinions as to what would be a suitable base for the statue as are noted in the *Proceedings*. “But how to place the Minute-man to best advantage when he came? Many forms of pedestal were suggested, simple and elaborate. The plan which pleased the committee more than any other, was to haul to the spot one of the great boulders that are found in Concord fields, and thus set the bronze farmer on a pedestal of some old glacier’s carving, merely smoothing a place, on the front to receive the inscription.” The committee, however, soon discovered that, “The practical difficulties of this scheme were found insurmountable.”⁷

In September Ralph Waldo Emerson, a member of the Monument Committee, had asked his friend, James Elliot Cabot, to view the full size plaster statue of The Minute Man at the request of French. Cabot, a philosopher and writer, who later wrote a biography of Emerson, also had some experience in architectural design. Emerson shared with the other committee members a sketch Cabot had created for a pedestal and a note from him.⁸

In October Emerson wrote to Cabot, “But the hint of the boulder has been emphasized by the discovery of a respectable rock within practicable distance of the spot on which the statue is to stand, and the vote taken at the close of the meeting of the Committee on Monday eve showed a majority for the boulder – Tis perhaps a dangerous choice, but at least it avoids the too much ornament of the base. I fear that it may be wrong, because you have not urged it.”⁹ Emerson’s reference to “the hint of the boulder” may imply that some of the committee members were still enthralled with the idea of using a field boulder or at least having a pedestal that resembled a boulder.

The committee had decided to use a block of white granite from Westford. The same source of granite had been used in the construction of the Battle Monument. John Cole of Westford split a block “so nearly rectangular and perfect that it almost tempted the Monument Committee to place it under the statue without further work upon it.”¹⁰

In a letter to his father in November French expressed his concern about using the block of granite as a pedestal, “If they set the statue on a plain block 7 ½ feet high by 4 ½ feet square, they will do as much towards ruining the thing as they [conveniently?] could. What is their [object?] in so doing? Is it to save money? It seems as if they might afford to spend a little on

⁶Diary of Daniel Chester French, 15 September 1874 and 2 October 1874, Daniel Chester French Family Papers (DCFFP), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Printed copies of the pertinent microfilm pages from Reel 28 are in the park library.

⁷ *Proceedings*, pp. 14 – 15.

⁸ Emerson to Cabot, 4 September 1874 in Ralph Rusk, ed., *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), Vol. 6, p. 264.

⁹ Emerson to Cabot, 2 October 1874, Rusk, Vol. 6, p. 265.

¹⁰ *Proceedings*, p. 15.

the base, since the statue has cost them so little.”¹¹ French’s fear that The Minute Man, his first major commission, would not be presented to the world at its best caused him to react with anger.

His sarcastic remark about how little money was spent on the statue reflects the reality that he had received no payment for his work. In fairness to the Monument Committee one should remember that French in a letter to John Keyes had stated, “That any compensation for my skill and labor be left entirely to your committee or the town. If in [the] future it is found convenient to pay me therefor I shall be thankful and if not, I will try to be content.”¹² Michael Richman in his book, *Daniel Chester French: An American Sculptor*, concluded that French, an artist just beginning his career, “was concerned more about fame than fortune.”¹³

When French wanted to secure the commission for the Concord monument, he was willing to sacrifice payment to have the chance to sculpt the statue. When he believed that the appearance of his creation could be diminished by the type of pedestal selected, his true feelings about not being paid were revealed, and he clearly was not content. Ultimately in 1876 the town paid French a \$1000.

In the same November letter to his father, French continued to rail against the committee and expressed his scorn of the committee’s aesthetic abilities, “If they think that such a base as they propose is a pretty thing, I [would - scored through] should say it is because they [must - scored through] have been brought up under the shadow of Bunker Hill Monument. I do not mind their not accepting my design because I thought a skillful architect would probably be consulted and a better design result, but such an idea as they propose never entered my head.”¹⁴

Within the letter to his father, French enclosed a letter to John Keyes in which he expressed his concern about the type of base the committee was considering. French asked his father to read the letter and determine if it should be sent to Keyes.¹⁵ Henry French forwarded the letter to Keyes without comment.¹⁶

In the letter to Keyes French wrote, “It was with a great deal of surprise and more regret that I heard of while in Paris of the decision of the Monument Committee to have as a base for the statue, a granite block 7 ½ ft high by 4 ½ ft square cut, as I understand, perfectly plain without moulding or ornamentation of any kind. I hope I shall be forgiven if I say that I hope such a pedestal will not be ordered. Nothing can add to or take from the effect of a statue so much as the way in which it is mounted and it is therefore but natural that I should feel an interest in the

¹¹ Daniel French to Henry French, 28 November 1874, DCFFP. A printed copy of the letter from microfilm Reel 13, Frame 45 is in the park library.

¹² French to Keyes, 3 November 1873, handwritten copy, not French’s original letter, Daniel Chester French Correspondence, 1873 – 1931, Concord Free Public Library (CFPL).

¹³ Richman, *Daniel Chester French*, p. 40.

¹⁴ Daniel French to Henry French, 28 November 1874, DCFFP.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Henry French to Daniel French, 28 December 1874, DCFFP. A printed copy of the letter from microfilm Reel 13, Frame 76 is in the park library.

subject. It seems to me that the base before mentioned would be neither handsome in itself, nor would it be in keeping with the statue, which is too light for so heavy a pedestal.”¹⁷

In his letter French enclosed a rough sketch of a base, “which at least would not injure the figure to be placed upon it. The dimensions are such that it could be cut from the same stone proposed by the Committee. If this does not meet your approbation and that of the other gentlemen of the committee may I ask you to use your influence toward applying to an architect who has made such work his study? I know that I am asking a great favor, but it is because I feel upon this subject very deeply.”¹⁸ It is unknown if the sketch still exists.

Henry French replied to his son in December that, despite Daniel’s appeal to Keyes, it appeared the committee would follow their initial vote “to set up the post as a pedestal.” Keyes had initiated the idea to have a rough base but was willing to try to meet Daniel’s wishes if others on the committee were agreeable. Change may be possible. French counseled his son to “look forward not back and do your best in the future.” He believed it was for the best that Daniel was not in Concord because there was little he could accomplish. Henry did not talk to the committee because, “They must enjoy the position of acting contrary to your protest with nobody to quarrel with.”¹⁹

Daniel responded to his father that he had received a letter from Keyes and had sent a reply. He was “in doubt whether I said the right thing. I made the best of the position and perhaps favored the post as much, if not more than it deserved. I am rather glad not to be responsible for any base for the statue. Who knows but what the post may be effective after all. The more I think of it, the more glad I am not to be present at the celebration. That letter, however, is a slight drawback to my peace of mind.”²⁰

By this time French has for the most part resigned himself to the idea that his statue will be placed on a pedestal that he does not like but he is still struggling with the fact. He tries to make the best of the situation but clearly is not happy if one letter can disturb his equilibrium. His comment that he is glad he will not be at the celebration when the statue is unveiled perhaps reflects his apprehension that the statue will not be a success because of the pedestal. Perhaps there was also some fear that his statue would disappoint. What should have been an eagerly anticipated event for a new artist turned into something to avoid.

On January 21, 1875 William French wrote Daniel that he knew that their father had already written to him “about the controversy respecting the base of your statue. I am very actively engaged in it – the subject – rather than the controversy – at present, and have considerable hopes of doing some good. Mr. Keyes asked me distinctly to examine the subject and give my opinion.” William had consulted the architects, Peabody and Snell, viewed the stone and where it would be placed, looked at drawings Daniel had provided, reviewed Daniel’s letters that

¹⁷ French to Keyes, 28 November 1874, Daniel Chester French Correspondence, 1873 – 1931, CFPL. A copy of the letter with a transcript is in the park library.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Henry French to Daniel French 28 December 1874, DCFFP.

²⁰ Daniel French to Henry French 17 January 1875, DCFFP. A printed copy of the letter from microfilm Reel 13, Frame 93 is in the park library.

discussed the pedestal and made perspective drawings. William's letter had tiny sketches of different styles of pedestals interspersed among the writing.²¹

Keyes informed William that the committee thought French's design for the base was "too elaborate and that it has to [*sic*] great a resemblance to the plinth (is it?) of the new soldiers' monument in the square also that it was too expensive (\$1500), and Mr. Keyes himself respected that you in your model had fought to give importance to your figure by putting it on a [*sic*] elaborate pedestal."²²

Emerson again advocated that the committee consult experts. The committee requested advice from James Elliot Cabot and Henry Van Brunt, a prominent Boston architect. They developed a design for the pedestal influenced by ideas and designs from Daniel French. William French thought the design was "quite pretty."²³ In February Emerson wrote to Cabot to thank him for the design. The Monument Committee had unanimously decided to adopt the design. "It is a wonderful relief to a committee, not one member of which was adequate to its charge, - to have escaped from its dangers by your mediation."²⁴

The design for the pedestal utilized the granite block that the town had obtained from Westford. John Cole moved the block to Concord in the winter and as a stone cutter began the work to transform it into the base for the statue. "The body of the pedestal is one block 7 ft high, with equal faces four feet broad, the front face rough pointed, but having a sunk panel, fine hammered, across the middle of which, in incised and bronzed letters, are these lines of Emerson: - 'By the rude bridge that arched the flood/Their flag to April's breeze unfurled/Here once the embattled farmers stood/And fired the shot heard round the world.' The rear face is similar to the front, and on the panel in high relief the inscription: - 1775/Nineteenth/of/April/1875. The lateral faces of the pedestal are rough hewn, with a smooth hammered margin six inches and a half wide. This main block is supported by a base projecting six inches and a half, and nine inches high, resting on a turfed mound three feet high."²⁵

In March French wrote to his father and expected that when his father received the letter the statue would be on its base. He expressed many worries about the statue: the bronze may have warped, the pieces may not have been assembled correctly, and the base may not have been level in his studio. The "figure must be set up so as to be balanced even if the granite base has to be cut away" He describes in detail, including enclosing a sketch, how to use a plumb to judge how balanced the statue is. He also enclosed a copy of his letter to the Monument Committee in response to his invitation to the unveiling. "If it were not that you will hear about it anyway, I would not let you see it, as I am by no means proud of it."²⁶ One might infer from this statement that French's letter may have included either some additional criticism of the pedestal or

²¹ William French to Daniel French 21 January 1875, DCFFP. A printed copy of the letter from microfilm Reel 40, Frames 30 - 35 is in the park library.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Emerson to Cabot, 7 February 1875, Rusk, Vol. 6, p. 271.

²⁵ *Proceedings*, p. 15.

²⁶ Daniel French to Henry French, 18 March 1875, DCFFP. A printed copy of the letter from microfilm Reel 13, Frame 145 is in the park library.

criticism of the Monument Committee or perhaps both. He ends his letter in the way sons have ended communications with their fathers for generations by asking for money.

It appears that the letter French wrote to the Monument Committee may no longer exist. He wrote a very gracious letter to the Committee of Invitation saying, "To the town which I am proud to call my home, I must ever feel most deeply indebted, and I would express my grateful sense of the honor conferred on so inexperienced a man, by the confidence implied in the commission for a statue, which is to commemorate so important an event. If by persevering in my profession I am ever enabled to accomplish anything worthy of my citizenship, I shall owe my gratitude to my friends at home, for the encouragement they have so early and generously extended to me."²⁷ This letter is certainly not a letter that French would be embarrassed for his father to see.

The section of the *Proceedings at the Centennial Celebration of Concord Fight, April 19, 1875* that is a report from the Monument Committee concludes by saying, "Mr. French is only twenty-five years old, and this is his first work of importance. The town cannot fail to be long grateful to him for the good work he has done, and the charm he has added to its meadows."²⁸

In 1925 for the 150th anniversary of the Battle of April 19, 1775, Daniel Chester French wrote a short pamphlet, "The Story of the Minute Man Statue as Told by the Sculptor in 1925". As to the issue of the pedestal, French merely stated, "The question of a design for the pedestal naturally presented itself and there was a disposition on the part of the Monument Committee to use a boulder for this purpose, but it was decided to secure the advice of Mr. J. Elliot Cabot, and he furnished the design as it appears today."²⁹ Michael Richman in his book, *Daniel Chester French: An American Sculptor*, commented, "Even though the sculptor, fifty years later, asserted that Cabot was the architect of the *Minute Man* pedestal, its authorship must be considered a collaboration: Cabot may be given major credit, but French's involvement must be acknowledged."³⁰

In French's account there is also not the slightest suggestion of the turmoil that the young artist had felt almost fifty years before when he fought to have a different pedestal. As a highly accomplished artist whose first major work, *The Minute Man*, was a success, French could be magnanimous about the past.

French also acknowledged the confidence the Monument Committee placed in him, an "inexperienced young man who had never made a statue, and whose previous work furnished no sufficient indication that he *could* make one." He thanked the committee for allowing him to work independently without offering opinions or criticisms. French concluded his account stating that the town paid him \$1,000 for the statue but "The experience and reputation that he gained through the opportunity to make so important a statue was worth many times this sum,

²⁷ French to E. R. Hoar, R. W. Emerson, George Heywood, 6 March 1875, Hoar Family Papers, CFPL.

²⁸ *Proceedings*, p. 17.

²⁹ Daniel Chester French, "The Story of the Minute – Man Statue as Told by the Sculptor", 1925. A copy of the account is in the Administrative Records archival collection, MIMA 76680, folder 4, in the park museum collection.

³⁰ Richman, *Daniel Chester French*, p. 42.

and he was well content.”³¹ Fifty years later French fully realized the value of his first commission as an artist and was content. As a young artist, however, he initially had not been content even though, when trying to obtain the commission for the statue, he had stated if he was not paid, “I will try to be content.”

Unrelated to the design of the pedestal or the statue was the creation of a time capsule that was placed beneath the pedestal which was installed in March. The time capsule consisted of a sealed copper box. Within the box was the History of the Monument by the Chairman of the Monument Committee; Lemuel Shattuck’s History of Concord, the Account of the Fight from the Diary of Rev. William Emerson; Pamphlet for 1850 celebration; Pamphlet for Dedication of Soldiers’ Monument in the Square, April 19, 1867; 1874 Town Report; Photographs of Daniel Chester French and The Minute Man; Map of the Village in 1775; Map of Concord in 1855; Map of Center of Concord in 1874; coins, stamps and newspapers of the time and invitations to the 1875 celebration.³²

On January 16, 1975 The Minute Man was temporarily removed from its pedestal in order to create a mold of the statue, in case the statue was ever damaged.³³ At that time David Moffitt, Superintendent of Minute Man National Historical Park, suggested that a time capsule be created for the Bicentennial of the battle. John Finigan, chair of the 1975 Concord Celebrations Committee, asked Mary Brady, Chair of the Bicentennial Committee for the Concord Girl Scouts, and Peggy Purcell, Youth Coordinator for the Concord Girl Scouts, to form a committee to spearhead the project.³⁴

Some of the twenty-five Girl Scout troops in Concord sent letters to historians, politicians, town leaders and significant citizens in Concord asking for their impressions of Concord in 1975. They assembled a scrapbook from the letters they sent and the replies they received. Other troops made a cassette tape, “Sounds of Concord”, which included church bells, traffic noise on Route 2, noise at the Citgo gas station, sounds at the dump, the sound of the train, the Alcott School Chorus, a Minutemen fife and drum concert and many other sounds in the community. Still other troops undertook projects, such as creating artwork and taking photographs, which would reflect what life was like for a child in 1975 Concord. Some troops gathered items which were typical of daily life.³⁵

The time capsule was placed in the top of the pedestal below the base of the statue. It was a metal cylinder fourteen and a half inches in length and two and a half inches in diameter. Engraved on one end of the cylinder was the message, “Minute Man National Historical Park, Concord, Massachusetts 29 March 1975/As part of the celebration of our National Bicentennial

³¹ French, “The Story of the Minute – Man Statue”.

³² *Proceedings*, p. 16.

³³ The intention was to make a mold of the statue. Instead a plaster cast of the statue was created which also can be used to cast a bronze statue of the original, if needed. The plaster segments are part of the park museum collection.

³⁴ Concord Fight – Bicentennial, April 19, 1775 – 200th Anniversary, Doc. Box 6, Concord (Mass) Girl Scouts, CFPL; “Minute Man Statue Guards Girl Scout Time Capsule”, *Concord Patriot*, March 27, 1975.

³⁵ “Minute Man Statue Guards Girl Scout Time Capsule”; “Girl Scouts Present Microfilm to Nat. Parks”, *Concord Patriot*, May 25, 1978.

by the Concord Troops of the Girl Scouts of America and preserved for future generations by the Eastman Kodak Corporation.”³⁶

The reference to the Eastman Kodak Corporation was included because the company microfilmed most of the paper items so they could fit into the cylinder. The microfilm was placed in a smaller cylinder, four inches in length by two inches in diameter, which was placed in the larger time capsule. The remaining space in the time capsule was filled with small items, such as a fifty star American flag, a Bicentennial flag, the cassette tape, “Sounds of Concord”, a Bicentennial commemorative medal, military patches, Scout pins and money. The time capsule was installed on March 29, 1975, when the statue was returned to its pedestal, during a ceremony which included the Girl Scout troops and dignitaries from the town, the Girls Scouts of America and the National Park Service.³⁷

³⁶ “Girl Scouts Present Microfilm to Nat. Parks” , May 25, 1978; Concord Fight – Bicentennial April 19, 1775 – 200th Anniversary, Doc. Box 6, Concord (Mass) Girl Scouts; Photographs of the time capsule are in the park library in the folder, Time Capsule, Minute Man Statue, 1975, in the Buildings and Grounds files.

³⁷ “Girl Scouts Present Microfilm to Nat. Parks”; Items that were microfilmed and objects collected by the Girls Scouts that were too big for the time capsule are part of a document collection at the CFPL.

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