

Clark Mills

(circa 1810 - 1883)



We often talk about Francis Bicknell Carpenter in Cortland County, since his famous painting of Abraham Lincoln hangs at the Capitol, and he was born and raised in Homer. However, there is another native of Cortland County who has THREE important statues prominently displayed in Washington, D.C. Curious? Clark Mills created the first equestrian statue in America and his life began in Taylor.

We don't have a definitive date, but it was between 1810 and 1815. His father died when he was five years old and he was placed with an uncle. This was typical of the time as women had few options to provide for a family and no real rights to their children. Mills ran away at 13 because of harsh treatment at his uncle's. From 1828-1835, he worked a variety of jobs, including working as a farmhand, hauling lumber, and canal work. He froze his feet so badly while working in a swamp clearing stumps that he could not wear shoes for months and he had to look for less demanding work. He sought out work with a cabinet-maker, then became a millwright's apprentice. After that he was employed in plaster and cement mills, then worked in stucco, followed by modeling busts out of clay. He created a new method of taking casts from living persons. His method was fast and inexpensive and soon he had a tremendous amount of work. He studied marble cutting as well and carved a bust of John C. Calhoun which was touted to be the best likeness of him. He was a self-taught artist who solved problems in a new way.

In 1848, he was approached to submit a design for a statue of Andrew Jackson seated upon a horse. Mills had never seen Jackson nor a statue of a horse and so at first he refused. He did some research and after 9 months, he produced a small model in bronze which was approved by the committee. The horse appeared perfectly balanced on his hind legs and was very lifelike. It was agreed that he would be paid \$12,000 to execute the statue and the bronze would be provided. It took 2 years to make the plaster cast and a lot of trial and error. A statue of this size of bronze had not been attempted in the United States to that



date. The bronze was from cannons which were captured by Andrew Jackson during the second war with England. The statue was dedicated in January 8, 1853 and placed in LaFayette Square in Washington, D.C. It is still there, directly across from the White House. Congress was so pleased with the delightfully original statue that they added \$20,000 to the fee which had already been paid. With the mold already made, Mills was commissioned to make identical statues, which were placed in New Orleans and Nashville, Tennessee.

Mills' next project was an equestrian statue of George Washington. He was also chosen to complete "Statue of Freedom" which was designed by Thomas Crawford. Crawford had gotten as far as making the plaster model but had died before having the chance to cast the statue in bronze. Mills purchased land close to Washington and built a studio and a foundry to complete these orders. The Washington statue was very different from the Jackson statue and Mills was paid \$50,000 to create it. The finished product was completed and dedicated in 1860 and stands in Washington to this day.

As mentioned previously, Statue of Freedom designer Thomas Crawford, died before he was able to cast the statue. His molds were in his studio in Rome and had to be shipped to the United States in six pieces. The first ship to carry the molds began leaking and had to dock, which then happened a second time. They finally arrived in America where Clark Mills was to work his magic and create the statue in bronze. His foreman and he had a disagreement over pay and the foreman went on strike. Mills hired African-American Philip Reid, a master craftsman (and slave), to complete the casting and assembly. When the statue was complete and ready to be placed at the top of the cupola of the Capitol building, it was hoisted in sections by former slaves and completed December 2, 1863. The statue is one of the most admired in the Capitol.

Ruby Potter, former historian for Taylor, collected stories from older community members and newspaper clippings from her mother's scrapbook. We know, from her sources, Mills had a brother who remained in Taylor who was blind. Mills came back to Taylor as an adult at least once to visit his brother and to leave money to help provide for his care. He had a bronze replica of the Jackson statue that he carried with him and showed it to Potter's relatives. Eventually Gurley (Phineas) Mills went to live with his brother in Washington where he died. Apparently there was another brother named John who was a horse thief.

Clark Mills turned what could have been an ordinary life into an extraordinary one! Yest, despite having famous statues on prominent display in the capitol of our nation, we know very little about him.

Condensed from an article written by Tabitha Scoville, Cortland County Historical Society