

Maine History

Volume 36
Number 1 *Issues 1-2; Fine Arts in Maine After
the Civil War*

Article 2

6-1-1996

Franklin Simmons and His Civil War Monuments

Martha R. Severens
Greenville (SC) County Museum of Art

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal>



Part of the [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Sculpture Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Severens, Martha R.. "Franklin Simmons and His Civil War Monuments." *Maine History* 36, 1 (1996): 2-17.
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol36/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Maine History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

MARTHA R. SEVERENS

FRANKLIN SIMMONS AND
HIS CIVIL WAR MONUMENTS

Franklin Simmons was a Maine sculptor who achieved national prominence for his Civil War monuments. Simmons' work in Maine earned him the opportunity to create numerous monuments in Washington, D.C. In this article Martha R. Severens reviews the sculptor's life and work and provides insight into a unique style that inspired other sculptors across the Northeast. Ms. Severens, curator at the Greenville (SC) County Museum of Art, has published volumes on the Museum's Southern Collection and on Andrew Wyeth. Previously, she held similar positions at the Portland Museum of Art and the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston, SC.

In "A Nameless Grave," written almost a decade after the conclusion of the Civil War, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow raised the issue of commemorating deceased soldiers.

Thou unknown hero sleeping by the sea
In thy forgotten grave! with secret shame
I feel my pulses beat, my forehead burn,
When I remember thou hast given for me
All thou hadst, thy life, thy very name,
And I can give thee nothing in return.

Longfellow bemoaned the lack of appropriate tributes to fallen heroes, but he was not alone. Even before the end of the war various attempts were made to honor the dead. Civic



Portland Sailors' and Soldiers' Monument, 1888-1891. Photograph from the Maine Historical Society Collections.

monuments and activities such as parades and anniversary speeches served several purposes, from assuring that the dead not be forgotten to helping reconcile the forces that started the conflict.¹

Fortunately, Maine could call upon one of its native sons – Franklin Simmons (1839-1913) – to create suitable public monuments which would eventually serve as models for sculptors in other states. Born in Webster, Maine, Simmons moved at various times between Bath and Lewiston. In the absence of a sculptural tradition in the state, he studied first with the itinerant landscape painter John Bradley Hudson and then continued his studies in Boston under John Adams Jackson, a sculptor working

FRANKLIN SIMMONS

in the neoclassical style. Later, Simmons traveled to Italy where he studied ancient Roman sculpture. Under the influence of both modern and ancient styles, his work conveyed a blend of realism and idealism.

In the late 1850s and early 1860s Simmons's work consisted primarily of portrait busts of prominent men, many of whom were associated with Bowdoin College.² As early as 1863 he was commissioned to undertake a life-size memorial to General Hiram G. Berry for Achorn Cemetery in Rockland, Maine. Berry, a prominent businessman and politician, had been a colonel in the 4th Maine Infantry and had fought at both Bull Run and Yorktown. A Major-General, he was in command at Chancellorsville when he died in 1863, becoming the state's first senior-officer casualty. Portland art patron and critic John Neal wrote to Mrs. Berry with an emphatic recommendation: "From my knowledge of sculpture, and this young man Simmons, I feel myself entirely justified in saying that I am sure of his work being not only a comfort and a consolation to the family, but an honor to the state and country."³ The marble monument, measuring six and a half feet, represents an important commission for both Maine and Simmons. It is decidedly heroic, representing "the General standing in a martial attitude, gazing into the distance, contemplating as it were the sullen ranks of the foemen."⁴ Semipublic and cemetery-oriented, the monument to Berry depicts the figure of a well-known local man. It may have been the first in the country to honor a victim of the Civil War in this manner, making Simmons a pioneer in America's tradition of Civil War commemorative monuments.

Not long afterward, the City of Lewiston became the first locale to erect a commemorative statue in a public space. Simmons's handsome, dignified, and idealized young soldier, standing in an elegant *contrapposto* pose with his right hand on his hip and a musket in his left, established a theme linking Civil War monumental sculpture with Simmons's classical orientation. This was a major commission for the young artist; \$5,000 of municipal funds were allocated, a sum "very much less than the usual cost of such a monument, the sculptor having reduced his



President Abraham Lincoln, circa 1865. Bronze medallion, 22-1/4 inches. Courtesy Portland Museum of Art. Museum Purchase.

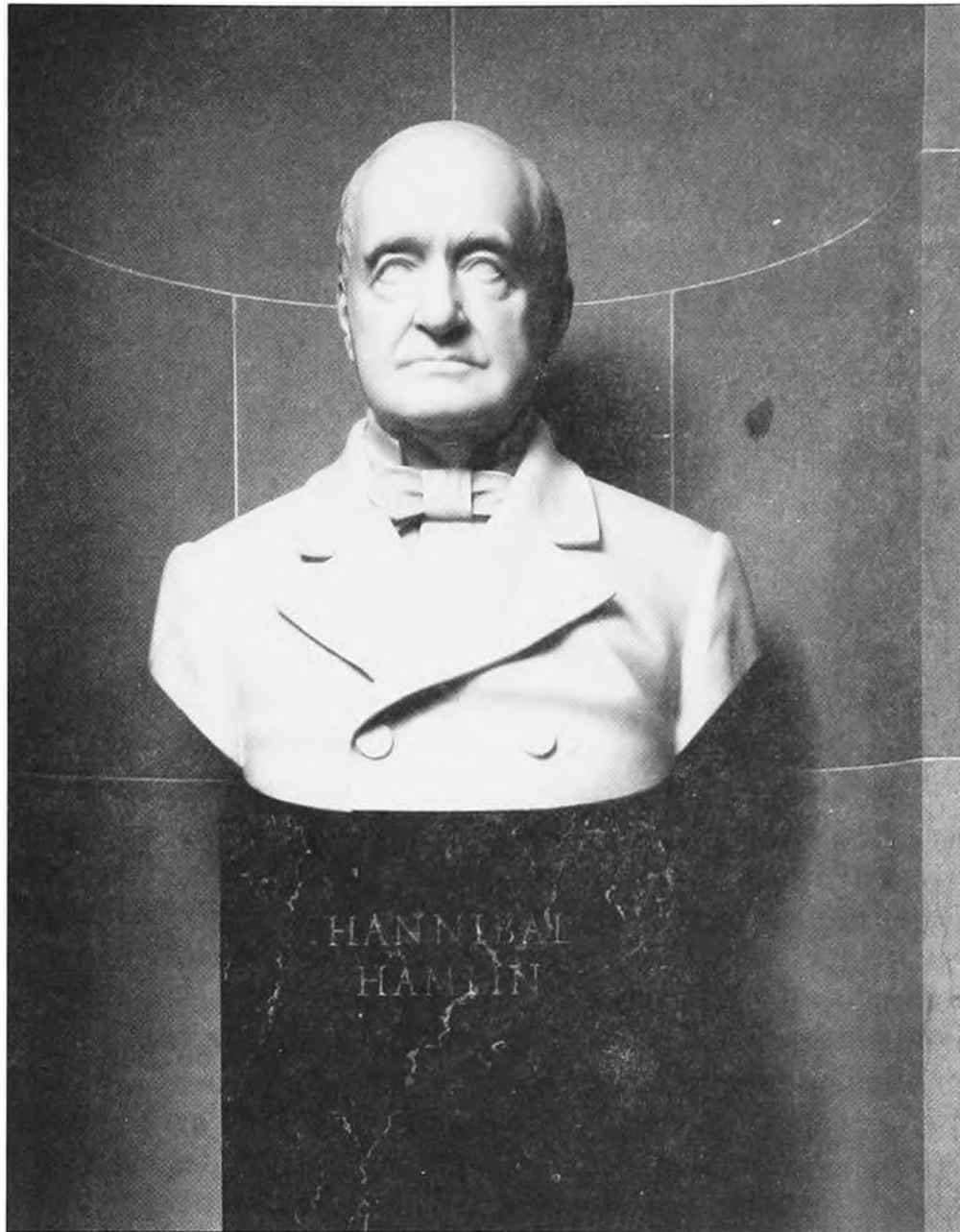
price by several thousand dollars, having a natural pleasure in leaving behind him in his native city some witness of his artistic hand."⁵ The statue measures seven feet and weighs an impressive 1,000 pounds. On each side of the base are plaques bearing 112 names of the dead accompanied by the following uplifting declarations: "Justice demanded the sacrifice. We willingly offered it. In our death is Freedom's Victory." The success of this monument was quickly recognized, and almost immediately Simmons undertook another for Chelsea, Massachusetts. Throughout the following decades numerous statues, many using Simmons's classically rendered Lewiston soldier as a model, sprang up in towns throughout New England, and as far west as Wisconsin."

FRANKLIN SIMMONS

The desire to commemorate the war dead and pay homage to military heroes presented Simmons with an array of opportunities that he was able to capitalize upon. The potential rewards were also recognized by the William C. Miller bronze foundry of Providence, Rhode Island, which sent Simmons to Washington with the express intent of making bronze medallion portraits of President Abraham Lincoln and members of his cabinet. In May 1865 the editorial page of the *Kennebec Journal* saluted Simmons: "While Maine has shown brilliantly in the war now so suddenly and successfully terminated, it can be expected that with the return of peace she will fulfill her former pledges in the various departments of science and art. We have this suggested to us by the progress of Mr. Simmons of Portland, whose excellence in his art is attracting much notice and the most flattering compliments here."⁷

Beginning in late 1864, Simmons began his twenty-four medallions, which include portraits of General Ulysses S. Grant, Admiral David Farragut, and Secretary of State William Seward. The profile format emulates Roman cameos, and the sharp and penetrating realism also reveals the influence of ancient examples. The medallions were registered by the United States Patent Office and were exhibited in Washington, New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia.

Despite the success of his medallions, Simmons's attempts to get a sitting from President Lincoln were ill-fated. Mrs. Simmons described a reception she and her husband attended at the White House where they were "introduced and shook hands with the 'Illinois Joker.'"⁸ Much later, in 1908, when Simmons was bidding on the commission for a monument to the President in Lincoln, Nebraska, he recalled the events surrounding his medallion: "I knew President Lincoln and, so far [as] I know, am the only American sculptor who remembers him....I had an interview with him two days before he was killed when he promised to sit...for his bust."⁹ After Lincoln's death Simmons procured photographs and a plaster cast of the President's features. These he put to good use in making his medallion and three other likenesses of the president: one in marble, another



Vice-President Hannibal Hamlin, 1888. Marble bust. United States Capitol. Photograph courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

in bronze, and a small full-length version.¹⁰ He did not, however, succeed in winning the Nebraska commission.

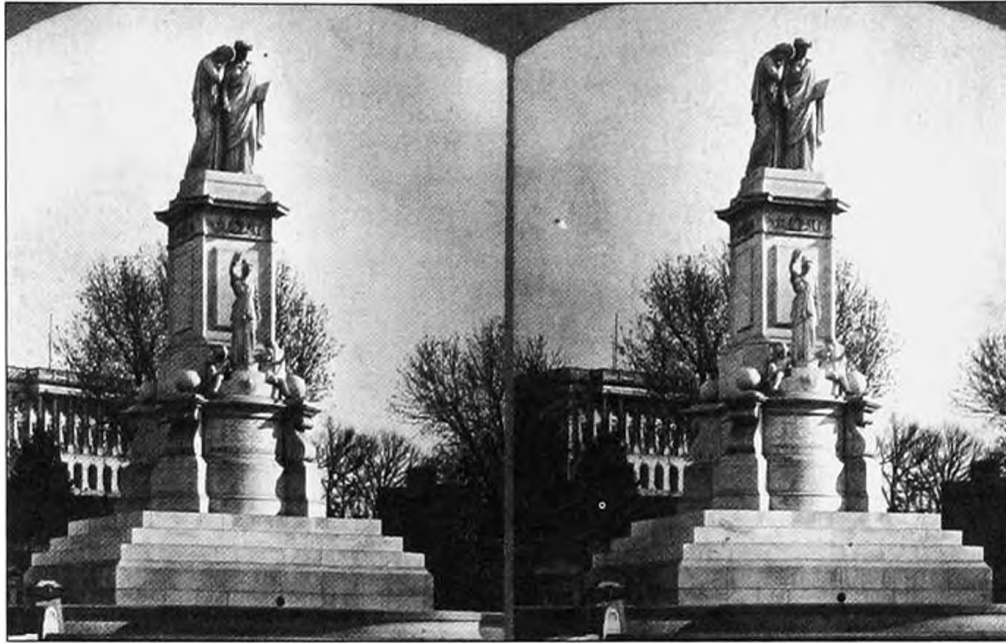
Busts were a mainstay of Simmons's career, and reportedly he made over one hundred during his lifetime. At an average price of \$800, he must have

FRANKLIN SIMMONS

found bust-making to be very lucrative. In 1888 he was commissioned to do a bust of fellow Mainer Hannibal Hamlin. It was placed in the United States Capitol, where it is still displayed. Before preparing the bust, Simmons inquired of Edward Clark, the Architect of the Capitol, what treatment was preferred: "The more classical style with bare neck and draping or more naturalistic style with frock coat, collar and necktie? I think the classic treatment would be best. I have not much sympathy with the frock coat."¹¹ After visiting Hamlin in Maine, Simmons executed the marble in Rome, where he maintained a studio.¹² Despite his own preferences for classical garb, the sculptor depicted his subject, according to Hamlin's choice, in a frock coat. The result is a somewhat stiff, severe likeness, but one appropriate for display in the Senate Gallery, where it would be seen from below. Ironically, Hamlin's most salient physical trait – his swarthy complexion – is completely eliminated by the pure whiteness of the fine Italian marble.

Simmons's letter to Clark alludes to a certain dualism that ran throughout his entire career, namely the conflict between a concrete image rooted in reality and a loftier idealism. Simmons's own inclination seems to have been for the ideal, perhaps because he spent the majority of his career in Rome where the influence of ancient models remained potent. Fortunately, he was able to obtain several commissions which allowed him to indulge his artistic preferences.

Among the most important of these was a memorial to celebrate the role of the Navy in the Civil War, destined for a prominent location at the foot of the Capitol Building in Washington. An imposing forty-five foot tall monument surrounded by a basin of water, it bears a conventional inscription: "They died that their country might live." Technically called the Naval Monument, soon after its installation it became known as the Peace Monument. Alluding to its second designation, Admiral David Porter, a prime mover behind the project, wrote to Edward Clark: "If this statue don't [sic] make members of Congress feel peaceful I don't know what will, for it looks very soothing."¹³



Naval (or Peace) Monument, 1877. Marble. Stereopticon albumen print. Artist unknown. Courtesy Portland Museum of Art. Gift of Paul Frederick Stocum in memory of Franklin and Ella Bourne Stocum Simmons.

Part of the monument's peaceful quality results from Simmons's use of classically derived female figures, dignified and somber. An allegorical figure of History, holding a tablet on which are written the names of the deceased, is accompanied by a mourning woman usually interpreted as a grieving America. A third figure below, also wearing a Greek-style *peplos* or garment, represents Victory, holding aloft a laurel wreath and an oak branch. On the reverse, extending an oak branch in her right hand, is the seminude figure of Peace with symbols of Plenty and Agriculture at her feet, along with emblems of Art, Literature, and Science – all of which prosper in peace time.

Shipped from Simmons's studio in Rome, the Naval Monument was installed in 1877. The local press hailed its idealism and its classical sources. After commending the innovative conception, one reporter continued: "The composition and the general simplicity of design and execution of the drapery show that the artist made a careful study of the best models of

FRANKLIN SIMMONS

antiquity, and endeavored to form a style after the best principles of classic art.”¹⁴

Following upon the success of the Naval Monument, Simmons was commissioned to do another major civic project in the nation’s capital: an imposing equestrian tribute to General John Alexander Logan. Logan had been responsible for organizing the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), an association for Union veterans of the Civil War. The monument, entirely in bronze, is located at the center of Logan Circle, and consists of a twelve-foot statue of horse and rider on a pedestal that incorporates twenty life-size figures combining both historical events and emblematic figures. One relief depicts Logan in consultation with the officers in his command, gathered around a table as they confer over a map. On the other side, Logan is shown taking the oath of office for the Senate. With the exception of a Roman-like figure of a woman representing War (or the Defense of the Union) at one end, and a personification of Peace at the other, the Logan monument is dominated by portraits of actual individuals participating in specific events.

Reaction to the combination of realism and idealism in Simmons’s Logan monument was positive, including the response from the general’s widow, who had visited the sculptor in Rome while he was at work on the project. By necessity Simmons worked from photographs of the deceased general. Nevertheless, Mrs. Logan was enthusiastic about the sculpture’s realism: “This is without question the finest statue in this country because of its repose and artistic merit, to say nothing of the fine likeness to General Logan and the well-modeled horse.”¹⁵

In 1890 the GAR commissioned Simmons to do a larger-than-life marble monument of Grant for the rotunda of the United States Capitol, to be placed opposite the statue of General George Washington. As the northern general who accepted the surrender of Robert E. Lee, Grant was considered by some to be the embodiment of the heroic success of the Union, and thus an appropriate counterpart to Washington. The commission was a stunning tribute to Simmons’s reputation as a sculptor of Civil War monuments.



General Logan Monument. Washington, 1897-1901. Bronze. Photograph courtesy Kenneth Sewrens.

FRANKLIN SIMMONS

Simmons was already familiar with Grant, having had firsthand contact with him during the winter of 1864-1865, and he probably had retained material relating to the General from which he could work. Moreover, Simmons had already completed several tributes to Grant. In addition to a profile medalion, Simmons had rendered several busts. One, a plaster, is signed "Simmons, sc 1866" and bears a caster's seal: "P. P. Caproni & Bro. Boston Plastic Arts," which suggests it may have been destined for bronze replicas. A carved marble bust with similar dimensions is dated 1869. Curiously, in the plaster version Grant is portrayed without clothing, while in the marble one he is shown in his street clothes.¹⁶

Before sending the marble from Rome in 1894, Simmons cautioned the Architect of the Capitol to take great care while unpacking the statue and then described his objective. "The statue is intended to represent the General just at the close of the war in the act of laying aside his sword, and the return of peace is indicated by this act as well as by the sprig of olive at the base of the column. 'Let us have peace' is the idea of the composition."¹⁷

Seeking to give the likeness an idealist cast, Simmons intentionally selected a restorative image, and one that required a youthful interpretation of Grant. The sculptor anticipated the response of some when he stated, "To those who remember him better as he was later in life and as President of the United States, the face and figure will not appear full enough."¹⁸ However, it was the peaceable attitude of Grant which caused objection, as it was not in keeping with the more militant image held by the GAR. As reported in the press, the committee rejected the statue as "an unfit representation of the man." The memorial, according to the article, "now stands in boxes on the east side of the rotunda in a sort of no man's land, hanging like Mohammed's coffin between the heaven and hell of final acceptance and rejection."¹⁹

Simmons, not wanting to let such an important commission slip through his hands, regrouped and executed a second statue – apparently an acceptable likeness, as the General appears more

heroic. In the second version Grant holds his sword in his left hand, rather than having placed it aside, and his military garb is more complete with high boots, gloves, and belt. Official Congressional proceedings of the unveiling record its success. "For a moment there was entire silence, while all eagerly scanned the marble semblance of the General. Then, as the beauty of the statue and the perfection of the likeness became appreciated, there was a burst of generous applause. Mrs. Grant inspected the statue critically and smiled her approval."²⁰

Although Simmons's success with the Grant statue was not unqualified, he continued to accept challenging commissions overseen by committees. As early as 1873 the citizens of Portland were motivated to memorialize their Civil War dead, and in October the Portland Soldiers' and Sailors' Association was formed.²¹ Fund raising began almost immediately, and a design competition was conducted to which several sculptors, including Simmons and Preston Powers, son of the more famous Hiram Powers, submitted proposals. Simmons, who generally absented himself from competitions, suggested "a female figure, armed and cuirassed, exultantly raising a banner aloft, upon the lance head of which a wreath of laurel hangs."²²

Despite a series of problems and setbacks over a period of eighteen years, the Portland memorial represented a high point in Simmons's career. Progress was slow and fund-raising efforts lagged, in part because a committee desiring to pay tribute to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was also seeking funds from similar public sources. The Longfellow monument, awarded to Simmons, was the first to succeed in gaining financial support, and was completed in 1888. In addition to lackluster fund raising, the Soldiers' and Sailors' Association members vacillated about the concept of their monument. At one point they entertained a purely architectural version which in the end was too expensive. In addition, the site at Market Square, which required the removal of at least one structure, was not confirmed until 1887. The next year the design committee, consisting of such eminent citizens as painter Harrison Bird Brown, mayor



General Ulysses S. Grant, 1894 (first version). Marble. 90-1/2X43 inches. Courtesy Portland Museum of Art. Gift of the City of Portland from the estate of Franklin B. Simmons.

and historian James Phinney Baxter, and architect Francis Fassett, terminated all other proposals and turned to Simmons, who had been waiting on the sidelines for almost thirteen years. “The Committee does not hesitate to recommend Mr. Franklin Simmons, a sculptor of National reputation, a citizen of Maine, and one who would take great pride in designing a monument in this City of Portland.”²³

Accordingly, Simmons was awarded the project and envisioned a monument that “would be out of the common – it would not be a rehash of what has been done over and over again.”²⁴ He proposed a fifteen-foot female figure representing the American Republic, accompanied by accessory groups of soldiers and sailors. Like the monument to General Logan, this approach permitted Simmons to synthesize an idealized figure with more concrete and everyday ones. The towering allegorical figure has been variously interpreted – even as a Christian “Our Lady of Victories” – but she clearly resembles Athena, the Greek goddess of war, in her costume, pose, and accouterments: sword, shield, and laurel wreath. Her dignity was recognized during the dedication ceremonies, but even then the meaning of the monument was subject to debate: “A noble work such as this dignifies its surroundings and beautifies and benefits the town. There let it stand, symmetrical, beautiful...to each a different emanation, a different emotion, a different story. This monument means to the veterans, victory; to their sons, peace; to their children, the joy of living; to all it means loyalty, sacrifice, union, strength.”²⁵

This imposing figure is complemented by human-scaled and thus more accessible reliefs of soldiers and sailors, and the entire monument is enhanced by the simple classical base designed by the noted architect Richard Morris Hunt. Hunt was well qualified in matters of monumental bronze statues, having provided the design for the base of the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor, unveiled in 1886. The Portland monument bears a plaque on its pedestal which pays tribute to the city’s military heroes. “More than 4,000 men were enrolled from Portland in the army and navy for the War of the Rebellion. Not less than 300 were killed in battle or died in service. Honor and grateful

FRANKLIN SIMMONS

remembrance to the dead; equal honor to those, who daring to die, survived.”

The Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Monument was Simmons’s final completed commission for his native state, but was not his last contribution to the City of Portland. Recognizing that individuals like Harrison Bird Brown and James Phinney Baxter had invested in the cultural life of Portland by founding the Portland Society of Art and erecting a library, Franklin Simmons decided to enhance the city with the bequest of his collection, consisting of the sculptures remaining in his studio upon his death. After shipping delays caused by World War I, in 1921 the many marbles, plasters, and bronzes from Simmons’s Rome studio were delivered to the Portland Society of Art, precursor to the Portland Museum of Art. Today, these sculptures can be found at the museum, which is itself strategically located midway between two of Simmons’s most important public monuments: the Longfellow statue and the Sailors’ and Soldiers’ Monument. Together they serve as a testament to Simmons’s life work.

NOTES

¹See Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), chapter 4.

²For biographical material on Simmons, see Pamela W. Hawkes, "Franklin Simmons, Yankee Sculptor in Rome," *Antiques Magazine*, July 1985, pp. 125-129; also Hawkes, "Franklin Simmons," manuscript, December, 1975, files of the Portland Museum of Art. Simmons's birthplace has been given variously as Webster and Lisbon. A search by Hawkes in town records did not confirm either location, and his biographer, Henry S. Burrage, "Franklin Simmons," *Maine Historical Monuments* (Augusta, 1922), p. 109, gives Webster.

³Neal to Mrs. Hiram Berry, October 7, 1863, quoted by Burrage, "Franklin Simmons," 116.

⁴Edward K. Gould, *Major-General Hiram G. Berry: His Career as a Contractor, Bank President, Politician and Major General of the Volunteers in the Civil War*, (Rockland: Courier-Gazette, 1889), p. 290.

⁵*Lewiston Journal*, February 28, 1868.

⁶For example, Gray, Maine, Naugatuck, Connecticut, and Columbus, Wisconsin.

⁷*Kennebec Journal*, May 19, 1865.

⁸Mrs. Simmons as quoted in *Portland Transcript*, November 12, 1864.

⁹Franklin Simmons to the Honorable Addison Wait, Secretary, Lincoln Centennial Memorial Association, August 4, 1908, Grand Army of the Republic Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.

¹⁰The marble was acquired in September, 1889, by Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Slogan from a Christie's, New York auction; the bronze was published as the property of Chester Orsini in *Time*, August 18, 1952, but its present whereabouts is unknown. In 1913 the two-foot clay statuette was at the Maine State Library, but Simmons indicated at that time he had no recollection of it. See *Bulletin of the Maine State Library* 3 (October 1913): 4. Its present whereabouts is unknown.

¹¹Simmons to Edward Clark, Architect of the Capitol, 1886, archives of the Office of the Architect of the Capitol (hereafter, OAC).

¹²Hawkes, "Franklin Simmons."

¹³David Porter to Edward Clark, April 16, 1877, OAC.

¹⁴*Evening Star* (Washington), January 22, 1878.

¹⁵Mrs. John Logan, *Reminiscences of a Soldier's Wife* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), p. 449.

¹⁶Both the plaster and the marble are in the collection of the Portland Museum of Art and were acquired by purchase in 1978. They were not part of the significant body of work the artist bequeathed to the City of Portland upon his death.

¹⁷Simmons to Edward Clark, June 10, 1894, OAC.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Evening Star* (Washington), May 4, 1894.

²⁰*Proceedings in Congress on the Occasion of the Reception and Acceptance of the Statue of General Ulysses S. Grant, Presented by the Grand Army of the Republic*, May 19, 1900 (Washington, DC, GPO, 1901), p. 6.

²¹See Pamela W. Hawkes, "Our Lady of Victories," *Maine Historical Quarterly* 20 (Fall 1980): 79-99. The extensive archive of the association is in the Maine Historical Society Collections.

²²*Portland Press*, October 29, 1873.

²³"Report Recommending the Employment of Franklin Simmons as Sculptor of the Monument" (1888), Portland Soldiers' and Sailors' Association Papers, Maine Historical Society (hereafter PSSA).

²⁴Simmons to H. B. Brown, Esq., and Gentlemen comprising Committee on Design for Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument (undated letter), PSSA.

²⁵John Marshall Brown, dedication speech, in *Portland Press*, October 29, 1891.