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## History of ophthalmology

# The tragedy of Thomas Crawford, sculptor of the Statue of Freedom



Richard F. Novak, MD\*

Department of Pathology, University of Illinois College of Medicine, Rockford, IL, USA

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### ABSTRACT

The *Statue of Freedom*, which sits on top of the Capitol Dome in Washington, DC, was created by Thomas Crawford. At the peak of his career in 1856, while busy completing multiple commissions for the new Capitol extensions, he developed diplopia and consulted the leading oculists of the time in Paris, Drs. Desmarres and Sichel, who were certain he had an intraorbital tumor. Two American physicians were also involved in Crawford's care. Both became controversial after treating Crawford, one because of his method of diagnosis, the other because of his unproven method of treating cancer. Desperate, Crawford agreed to undergo an experimental treatment that destroyed the eye and orbital contents. He died 5 months later at age 44 and never saw any of his sculptures placed in the Capitol building.

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## 1. Introduction

On December 2, 1863, in the midst of the American Civil War, the sculpture *Statue of Freedom* by Thomas Crawford was placed on the recently completed Capitol Dome in Washington, DC (Figs. 1 and 2). The story of Thomas Crawford encompasses a period of great turmoil in America and his eventual tragic illness perplexed the most acclaimed physicians and oculists of that time.

## 2. Crawford's early years

In 1835 Thomas Crawford left his job as a marble carver in New York to study in Rome where artists from all

over the world congregated to learn their craft. With only enough money to last about 6 months it was quite a struggle for this poor, self-educated 19-year-old, but he prevailed.

His ability eventually became apparent to two young Americans, George Washington Greene, American Consul in Rome, and Charles Sumner, lawyer, staunch abolitionist, and future Senator from Massachusetts. Because of their Boston connections, which included the famous author Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, these two were able to launch Crawford's career, promoting his first American exhibition at Boston's Athenaeum in 1844.<sup>15</sup> Greene also introduced Crawford to his future wife Louisa Ward, a New York heiress. After their marriage in 1844, they settled in an old palazzo in Rome.

\* Corresponding author: Richard F. Novak, MD, Professor Emeritus, University of Illinois College of Medicine, 3292 Andover Drive, Rockford, IL 61114.

E-mail address: [newoldmaster@comcast.net](mailto:newoldmaster@comcast.net).

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**Fig. 1 – Capitol Dome and the Statue of Freedom by Thomas Crawford; 19.5 feet, bronze. (Photograph by R. Novak.)**

### 3. Capitol extension projects

Winning the competition in 1850 for the massive equestrian George Washington monument in Richmond, Virginia, took Crawford's work and reputation to another level.<sup>5</sup> Captain



**Fig. 2 – Statue of Freedom by Thomas Crawford. (Photograph by R. Novak.)**

Montgomery C. Meigs, supervisor of the Capitol construction, asked Crawford to submit proposals for multiple sculptures to be placed in the new extensions of the Capitol.

President Franklin Pierce (1853–1857) had changed the supervision of the construction of the Capitol extension from the Department of the Interior to the Department of War and appointed the former Senator from Mississippi, Jefferson Davis, Secretary. When Captain Meigs showed the pictures of the first two models of the Statue of Freedom submitted by Crawford, Secretary Davis objected to their caps. It was a Phrygian or Liberty cap worn by Roman slaves freed by their masters.

In a letter to Captain Meigs dated January 15, 1856, Secretary Davis wrote,

that it [the cap] seems to me its history renders it inappropriate to a people who were born free and would not be enslaved. ... the Liberty Cap has an established origin in its use, as the badge of the freed slave; and though it should have another emblematic meaning today, a recurrence to that origin may give it in the future the same popular acceptance which it had in the past.<sup>8</sup>

Secretary Davis did not insist the cap be removed, but did describe what he thought would be more appropriate. Captain Meigs informed Crawford of the Secretary's comments. Crawford, not wishing to lose the commission, removed the Phrygian cap and modeled an elaborate and unpopular headdress for the Statue of Freedom incorporating the suggestions made by Secretary Davis.

Pleased with Crawford's proposals, and after the approval of Secretary Davis, Meigs commissioned Crawford to create the doors to the Senate and House chambers, the sculptures for the pediment of the new Senate Wing, a sculpture to be placed above the Senate door, and the 19-foot sculpture, *Statue of Freedom*, to crown the Capitol Dome.<sup>19</sup>

He was the busiest sculptor in Rome, employing more than 50 assistants. The Capitol pediment alone involved 13 figures plus other ornamental details. The Richmond monument included a 21-foot bronze equestrian George Washington and six bronze 12-foot figures of famous Virginians.

### 4. The tumor

Busy with all this work, Crawford began to notice changes in the vision of his left eye that he initially dismissed as eyestrain, assuring his wife it would go away. In her words, "It is very nearly a year since a slight protrusion of the left eye began to attract our attention... In the course of a few weeks he himself was startled by seeing all objects double."<sup>4</sup>

Returning to Rome in 1856 from one of his many trips back to America he stopped in Paris to see the famous oculist, Louis-Auguste Desmarres (1810–1882) who "decided that a tumor of some kind was gradually forming behind the eye."<sup>12</sup> Shocked, confused, and depressed by Dr. Desmarres's diagnosis, Crawford continued to Rome where he consulted his personal physician Dr. Smyth. Dr. Smyth recommended he see William Gibson (1788–1868), who happened to be visiting Rome. Dr. Gibson, a Professor Emeritus of Surgery from the

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