

The Commonwealth Memorial: A New Sculpture for the Capitol Grounds

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# THE COMMONWEALTH MEMORIAL

A NEW SCULPTURE FOR THE CAPITOL GROUNDS

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**ABSTRACT:** A bronze memorial scheduled for dedication on the grounds of the Pennsylvania Capitol Complex in 2020 promises to honor Harrisburg's historical African American community and commemorate the vanished neighborhood of the Old Eighth Ward. The installation, timed to mark the anniversaries of the ratification of the Fifteenth and Nineteenth amendments, will create a new destination place for historical tourism.

**KEYWORDS:** Commonwealth Monument, Harrisburg, Old Eighth Ward, Fifteenth Amendment, Nineteenth Amendment, African American history

The Commonwealth Memorial, or *A Gathering at the Crossroads*, as project director Lenwood Sloan appropriately named it, is a monument scheduled for installation on the grounds of the Pennsylvania State Capitol Park in June 2020. The IIPT–TFEC Harrisburg Peace Promenade, a project of the Foundation for Enhancing Communities, commissioned it as the major component of the multifaceted Commonwealth Monument Project. As a memorial to the anniversaries of the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments, this new work celebrates the city's historical African American community, remembers the vanished multi-ethnic community of the Old Eighth Ward, and creates a destination at which families and groups can gather.

The main feature of the monument will be a composition of four life-size sculpted figures of notable African Americans: Thomas Morris Chester, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, William Howard Day, and Jacob Compton. Three of the four were residents of Harrisburg (Chester, Compton, and Day) while France Ellen Watkins Harper was a frequent and favored visitor

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and guest. They will stand around a pedestal interacting with one another, discussing the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment. The pedestal, which is already finished, is topped with an aerial view of the streets and buildings of the Old Eighth Ward (figs. 1 and 2). The pedestal sides feature reliefs sculpted in detail depicting facades of businesses, schools, churches, synagogues, and other buildings that could be found in the Old Eighth Ward in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There are 100 names cast on the pedestal, significant women and men who impacted those living, working, loving, and speaking in Harrisburg's African American community between 1850 and 1920.

The four life-size figures will be realistically sculpted in historical period and will capture the inner character of the person. The hands and faces will show both their life struggles and their relationships to one another. Their eyes will follow the spectator and yet appear to be looking at each other.

As sculptors of this memorial, our artistic team at ART Research Enterprises created a visual image of the past to foster an understanding and



**FIGURE 1.** Design drawing of “A Gathering at the Crossroads.” Composition exhibits four prominent historical African American orators standing around a pedestal discussing the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment. Photo by Becky Ault.

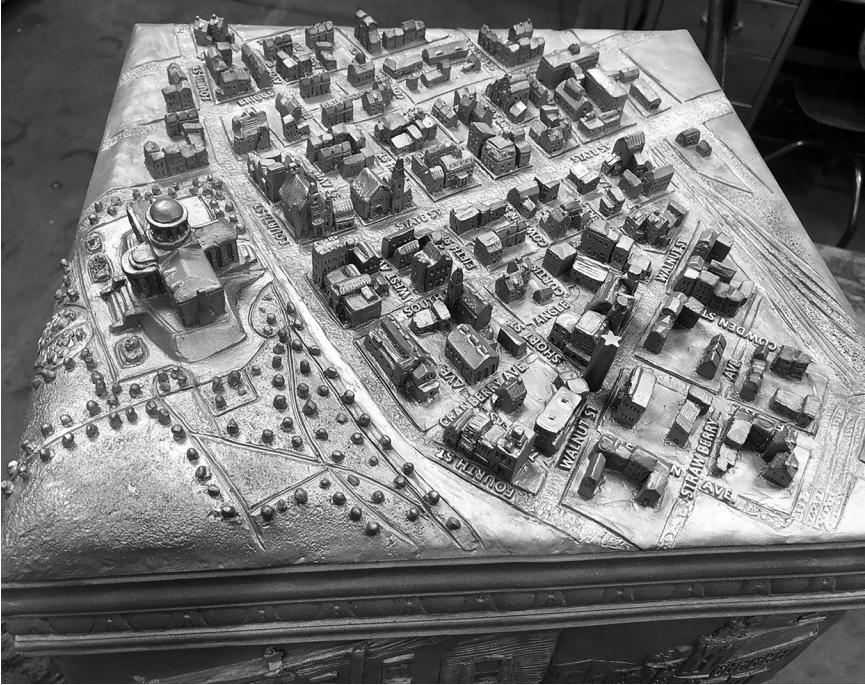


FIGURE 2. Aerial view of the Old Eighth Ward on top of pedestal before bronze casting. Photo by Becky Ault.

appreciation of important pathfinders. Capturing the human condition or spirit in material form is of utmost importance for sculptors. Each element of a figure's body—the face, hands, form, and clothing—tells a story. There is an inherent aesthetic challenge in sculpting such figures, in determining, for example, the historical period dress in which to clothe the body or how to communicate someone's life experiences. Each subject's stage in life provided us with insight into their possible clothing, gestures, and posture. The space between each figure can communicate custom of the historical period.

The first figure, Thomas Morris Chester, was a gentleman held in high esteem, a well-educated world traveler with many career achievements and refined manners. Mr. Chester was also the first African American to be a war correspondent. We designed him to have clothing of the finest fabric and dress in the fashion of the day. His shoes communicate little wear, while his hands offer the gesture of a refined gentleman and hold a pen. The expression on his face exhibits a man of strong moral character with gentle eyes that have seen the world and understand its knowledge

and affect. His posture is strong, with good shoulders to demonstrate determination.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was a woman in high standing born of free African American parents. As an abolitionist, she wrote so frequently for antislavery newspapers that she has often been called the “Mother of African-American journalism.” She was a teacher and published poet, famous for many compilations of poems and essays. In designing Harper’s sculpture, we benefited from seeing archival photos. Harper’s bronze sculpture holds the Fifteenth Amendment. She has a beautiful, gentle, glowing face with expressive, strong determined eyes. Her hands express her joy in the passing of the amendment and her determination for another fight ahead, to gain her right to vote. She wears a day dress with a small hoop, while the bodice appears as a suit top. Her feet have the finest shoes of the period, and she stands firm with strong posture.

The design for William Howard Day evokes his status as a gentleman, pastor, abolitionist, and educator. Day was also a well-educated individual with a master’s degree from Oberlin College and a doctorate in divinity from Livingstone College. He was Harrisburg’s first African American school board director and the editor of a weekly African American newspaper. Archival photos of Day have aided in designing his likeness. His sculpted face expresses compassion while his wide eyes demonstrate knowledge and strength. The style of his clothing is similar to Chester’s, but the fabric is not as refined.

The fourth figure, Jacob Compton, was also a gentleman perhaps not as refined as Mr. Chester and a bit humble, but with strong moral character. We have chosen to design him as a true hero, the carriage driver who whisked Abraham Lincoln to safety during a possible assassination attempt in Harrisburg in 1861. It has been difficult to find existing photos of Mr. Compton, but we have designed a sculpture that fits his character. His clothing, which includes gloves and jackboots, reflects his trade as a coachman, and are well kept and proper although not necessarily of high fashion. His face has the expression of a gentle soul with inner strength, a sign that he is also determined and accomplished.

The Orator’s Pedestal was the result of creative problem-solving in transferring historical content into an appropriate physical medium (figs. 3–5). Originally the 100 names of prominent (mostly) African American residents, for example, were to be recorded on engraved bricks installed around the bronze sculpted figures. However, our team ultimately decided to elevate these

individuals above the ground rather than have visitors walk on their names on bricks (see fig. 5; for more on the 100 names, see James B. LaGrand and David Pettegrew, “Harrisburg’s Historic African American Community” in this issue).

Translating the neighborhood of the Old Eighth Ward into a sculpture required creative solutions. With the help of the interactive map of Harrisburg available through the Digital Harrisburg website, our group was able to locate the names of the streets and locations of the buildings that no longer exist. The inspiration for the sculpted images of the historic buildings was Michael Barton and Jessica Dorman’s book, *Harrisburg’s Old Eighth Ward*,



FIGURE 3. Hand sculpting of plastiline clay to form the base of the pedestal. Photo by Becky Ault.



FIGURE 4. In process of metal finishing the pedestal. Note the neighborhood on its top. Photo by Becky Ault.

which includes thirty-five newspaper columns written by J. Howard Wert and numerous historical photos of buildings in the neighborhood from the early twentieth century. We combined the information from both sources into the sculpted details of the Orator's Pedestal. The bird's-eye view of the pedestal, inspired by a map of 1870 located by Jeb Stuart, displays the State Capitol Building and capitol grounds and the neighborhood of the Old Eighth Ward up to the Pennsylvania Railroad (fig. 5).

The sides of the Orator's Pedestal are filled with the 100 names and relief sculptures showing facades of religious buildings such as Bethel AME Church,



FIGURE 5. Finished bronze pedestal showing buildings and names. Photo by Becky Ault.

Wesley AME Zion Church, St. Lawrence Catholic Church, First Free Baptist Church, Keshet Israel Synagogue, and Chisuk Emuna Synagogue. Schools sculpted in relief include Lincoln School, Jennings School for Colored Students, Wickersham School, and St. Lawrence Catholic School. In addition, numerous businesses, realtors, manufacturers, hotels, and restaurants appear on the pedestal. The images are placed intermittently around the names.

To complete the composition and bring all the elements together, the Orator's Pedestal and the four orators are designed to stand upon a



sixteen-foot semi-circle of embedded cobblestone. The cobblestone represents the historic streets of the Old Eighth Ward where many orators of the day came to speak on street corners and in churches and meeting halls.

The entire bronze sculpture will be cast by the ancient lost wax casting method. Each character will first be hand-sculpted in plastiline clay, then rubber molded. From the molds, wax patterns will be painted, pulled, and redefined. Upon quality control of the wax patterns, they will be gated and vented to allow proper metal flow to the art object (gating and venting are industry terms that refer to adding wax elements around an art object as a vehicle for metal flow to the sculpture). The wax sculpture patterns with gates and vents will then be ceramic shell molded (another industry term for a mold material product) and the wax burnt out. The hollow mold will then be filled with bronze.

The life-size figures will be cast in three sections, then welded together and the seam welds metal-finished to become invisible. The final treatment for sculpture is patina, a man-made corrosion stabilized with wax or clear sealant. We choose a rich color called "museum brown" with burnished highlights, a traditional patina for this historic time period.

*A Gathering at the Crossroads* will offer a strong cultural immersion to the visitor and viewer. Designed to integrate the spectator into the community while interacting with others, the sculpture will help viewers understand the lives of some important Harrisburg residents and how they helped shape the history of the city, the county, commonwealth, and nation.

BECKY AULT is co-founder of ART Design Group and ART Research Enterprises, Inc. of Lancaster, PA. She has been an educator, registered conservator with the American Institute of Conservation, sculptor, ART Foundry owner, and philanthropist. She has sculpted and cast hundreds of life-size figures and animals that are permanently installed throughout the United States.