

# Henry Wilson

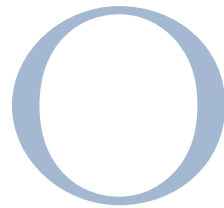
(1812–1875)

Henry Wilson overcame humble origins to become a successful businessman, a U.S. senator from Massachusetts, and the 18th vice president of the United States. Born in Farmington, New Hampshire, and named Jeremiah Jones Colbath, he was indentured to a farmer when he was 10 years old. After changing his name to Henry Wilson, the young man—long estranged from his parents—apprenticed himself to a cobbler when the terms of his indenture were satisfied.

With little formal education or money, Wilson practiced his trade and later established a prosperous shoe factory in the 1830s near Boston. He eventually devoted himself to civic affairs, and in 1840 he was elected as a Whig to the Massachusetts house of representatives. He served in the state legislature for 11 years. Passionately opposed to slavery, Wilson left the Whigs in 1848 and helped found the Free Soil Party. He edited the new party's organ, the *Boston Republican*, between 1848 and 1851.

First elected to the U.S. Senate to fill the vacancy created by Edward Everett's resignation, Wilson served from 1855 to 1873. He aligned with abolitionists and supported the Republicans in 1860, and he played an important role during the Civil War as chairman of the Committee on Military Affairs. Wilson urged President Abraham Lincoln to declare emancipation and accept freedmen into the ranks of the Union army; he was also instrumental in writing bills to free slaves in the border states.

Highly influential among his colleagues in the Senate, Wilson advocated measures to aid the working class, equal rights for women and freedmen, federal aid to education, and federal regulation of business. Selected as Ulysses S. Grant's running mate in 1872, he was considered a great asset to the ticket. Following the Grant-Wilson victory, however, the new vice president suffered a stroke in 1873. His poor health prevented him from assuming many duties of his office. Two



On January 16, 1885, the Senate passed a resolution introduced by Senator George Hoar of Massachusetts calling for the installation of a marble tablet in the Vice President's Room in the U.S. Capitol in memory of Vice President Henry Wilson, who had died in the room 10 years earlier. Senator Hoar also asked the Joint Committee on the Library to informally approve the expenditure of \$1,000 to commission noted sculptor Daniel Chester French to create a bust of the late vice president for placement above the plaque. The committee agreed, and a week later Senator Henry Dawes, also of Massachusetts, introduced a resolution authorizing the purchase of the bust. Dawes observed that the only other distinguished public servant to die in the Capitol was John Quincy Adams, who suffered a stroke on the floor of the House of Representatives in 1848. To honor Adams, the House had directed that a tablet, surmounted by a bust, be placed in the old Speaker's Room. Dawes called for a similar memorial for Wilson, praising his dedication: "The public services and the life of Mr. Wilson were entirely American, and furnish a remarkable illustration of the working of our institutions. . . . That fame he largely achieved in this body, of which he was the President when he died." Dawes also noted that the former vice president was "the child of poverty," continuing, "It has been said of him here that he had no other home but this Capitol."<sup>1</sup> The Senate adopted Senator Hoar's resolution, and four days later, the Joint Committee on the Library awarded the commission to Daniel Chester French of Massachusetts.

French produced the bust of Vice President Wilson in Boston and sent the nearly finished work to the Capitol in April 1886, writing, "I have still a few days work to do upon it and shall come to Washington to finish and place it in two or three weeks." A month later, French was still waiting to learn if the bust had arrived. There is no record of when he visited Washington to finish the marble. Final payment for his work was made on June 10, 1886, and the bust was placed in the Vice President's Room that year. The bronze commemorative plaque, though authorized at the time the bust was commissioned, was not installed in the room until 1902.

The bust is marked by simplicity, in the subtle, unemphatic modeling and especially in the striking symmetry of the costume. The broad verticals of coat lapels, vest, and shirtfront have a measured, dignified rhythm and at the same time form a strong base for the head, which is

*Henry Wilson*

**Daniel Chester French (1850-1931)**

Marble, modeled 1885, carved 1885-1886

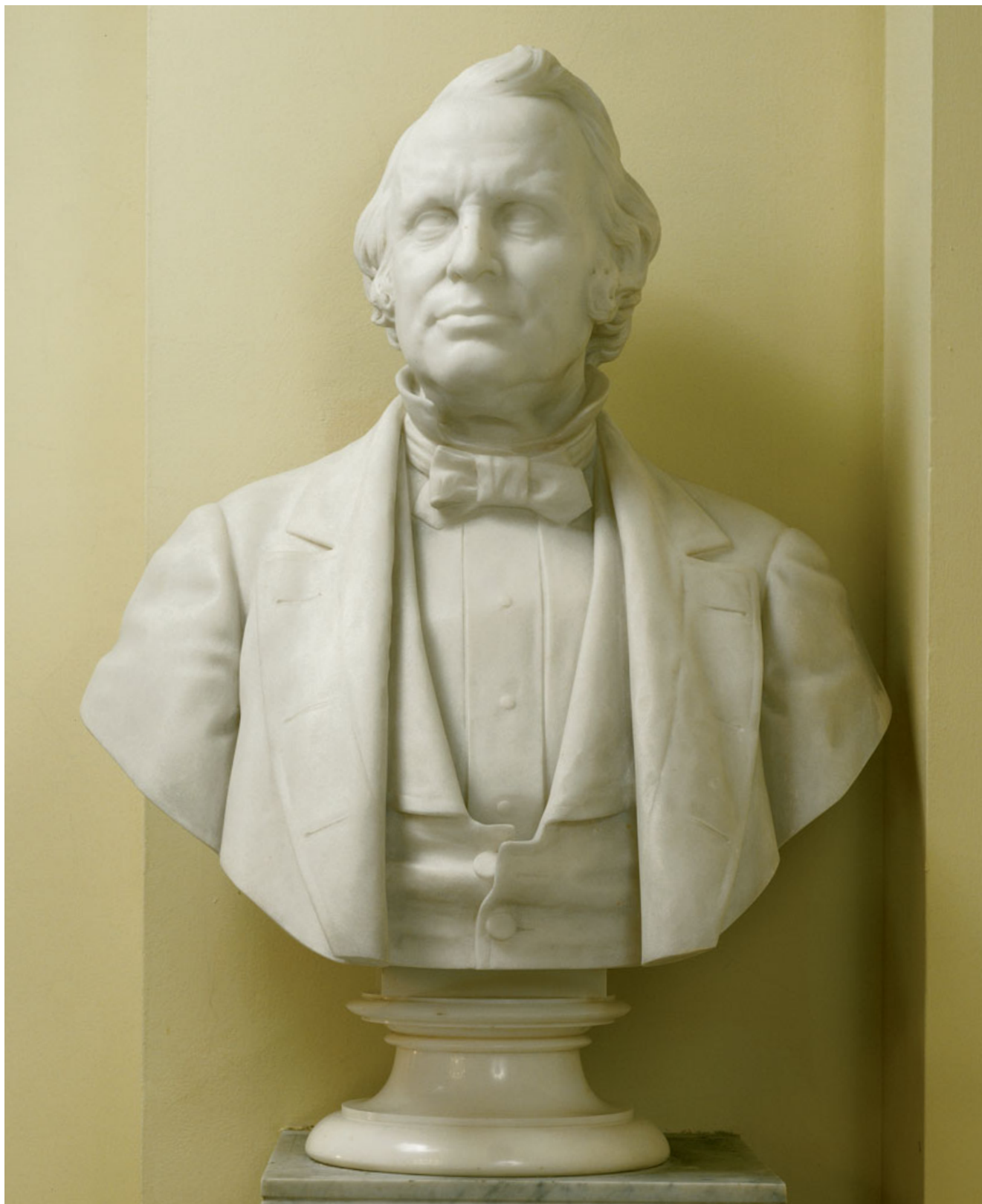
27½ x 25½ x 15¾ inches (69.9 x 64.8 x 39.1 cm)

Signed and dated (on back of subject's left shoulder): D. C. French / 1885

Commissioned by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1885

Accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1886

Cat. no. 22.00018



years later, while visiting the Senate bathing rooms and barber shop in the Capitol basement (supplied for the use of members of Congress, who often resided in local boardinghouses), Wilson was struck by paralysis. He was taken upstairs to the Vice President's Room, just off the Senate floor, where he died a few days later.



cupped in the incisively carved wing collar. The eyes are left blank; it may be that French intended this as an allusion to classical sculpture and to what he viewed as Wilson's modern-day association with Greco-Roman virtues.

Several additional vice presidential bust commissions followed closely after the Wilson portrait. In 1886 the Senate authorized marble busts of five vice presidents: the three who were living at the time, as well as John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, the first two men to hold the office. However, while the Wilson bust was commissioned specifically to commemorate the statesman's death in the Capitol, and was therefore designated for display in the Vice President's Room, the other five busts were destined for the Senate Chamber itself, and formed the initial core of the Senate's Vice Presidential Bust Collection. Perhaps in part because of the success of his Wilson likeness, French was later awarded the commission for the bust of Vice President John Adams (p. 6).

**Daniel Chester French working in his New York studio on the clay model for his memorial sculpture to his friend and fellow artist Martin Milmore, 1891.**

(Chesterwood, A National Trust Historic Site, Stockbridge, MA)

***Right:***

**In 1886 the marble bust of Henry Wilson was placed in the Vice President's Room (S-214) in the U.S. Capitol. This ca. 1900 photograph was taken by Francis Benjamin Johnson.**

(Architect of the Capitol)



