

Aysh-ke-bah-ke-ko-zhay, or Flat Mouth

(ca. 1774–ca. 1860)

A powerful Ojibwa, or Chippewa, chief in the Leech Lake area of present-day Minnesota, Aysh-ke-bah-ke-ko-zhay, or Flat Mouth, visited the nation's capital in 1855 as a member of the Indian delegation from the Midwest. The tribal leaders were brought to Washington to negotiate land treaties. Aysh-ke-bah-ke-ko-zhay spoke on behalf of his people in negotiating the cession of more than ten million acres in north-central Minnesota—a land package that included the headwaters of the Mississippi River. The Native Americans received more than one million dollars in funds and services, but aspects of this cession and others in the region continued to figure in government discussions with Native Americans for the next hundred years.

Aysh-ke-bah-ke-ko-zhay (other English spellings are also known) means “bird with the green bill” in the Ojibwa language. “Flat Mouth” did not derive from this native name but was instead an English translation of the nickname “Gueule Platte,” applied by early French traders. In 1911 Smithsonian Institution ethnologist James Moody characterized the great leader as “probably the most prominent Ojibwa chief of the upper Mississippi region from at least 1806, when he held council with Lieutenant [Zebulon] Pike . . . probably to his death, which seems to have occurred about 1860.”



Aysh-ke-bah-ke-ko-zhay in 1855.
(Minnesota Historical Society)

While on delegation business in Washington, D.C., in 1855, Aysh-ke-bah-ke-ko-zhay, together with his colleague, Be sheekee, sat for a portrait in clay by sculptor Francis Vincenti, who was then working on decorations for the extension to the U.S. Capitol. Seth Eastman, a U.S. Army artist then assigned to the Indian Bureau (p. 128), brought the two Native American leaders to the Capitol. A key purpose of the portraits was to provide lead sculptor Thomas Crawford with realistic models for depictions of Native Americans in sculptural groups. Aysh-ke-bah-ke-ko-zhay was probably about 81 years old when he posed for Vincenti.

Vincenti's treatment of Aysh-ke-bah-ke-ko-zhay—unlike his bust of Be sheekee—is primarily descriptive of appearance, less concerned with the animating spirit. The eyeballs are blank, not drilled; the mouth benign; and great attention has been given to the grand nose and curiously emphatic lower lip that, one assumes, gave the chief his nickname. The upper ears are slit and simply ornamented. His blanket is also more simply conceived than that of Be sheekee, and the horizontal turban would not particularly attract the eye were it not for the startling braidlike material that appears to gush like a fountain from both sides of the turban. The young Capitol sculptor Lot Flannery years later recalled seeing Vincenti at work on this bust—both as it was being modeled during sittings at Wren's Hotel and then as it was being carved about 1855.

In addition to what has been written about Vincenti in the entry on Be sheekee (p. 38), a few facts or surmises may be added to his brief history. His Italian first name was probably Francesco. He is known to have worked on the Capitol decorations from 1853 to 1858. For his work on the two portrait busts he was paid six dollars a day from building construction funds. Though this might seem an inconsequential reward (Sarah Ames, for example, would be paid \$1,500 for her bust of Lincoln just 12 years later), it should be understood that Vincenti was being paid as an exceptionally skilled artisan, not as an artist. Captain Montgomery C. Meigs, superintendent of the Capitol extension, confirms this in a letter written to Vincenti on October 17, 1854. The letter, apparently in response to Vincenti's proposal to travel to Italy to import additional skilled stonecutters for work on the Capitol, states: “Let them understand that skillful workmen get from \$2.50 to \$2.75 per day of ten hours work, and that

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Francis Vincenti (dates unknown)

Marble, modeled 1855, carved 1855–1856

22¾ x 21⅝ x 14½ inches (57.8 x 54.9 x 36.8 cm)

Unsigned

Purchased by the U.S. government with funds appropriated
for the extension of the United States Capitol, ca. 1856

Cat. no. 21.00001

this is to be the inducement. . . .”¹
Compared with those wages, Vincenti was well paid.

After his work on the Capitol, Vincenti went south to Richmond, Virginia, where he worked for the Richmond-born Edward Valentine for a time. Some years later, Valentine reported encountering Vincenti in Paris. Vincenti may have been among the many stone carvers and sculptors who worked on Parisian projects ordered by Napoleon III and his Prefect Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, particularly the new opera house that was constructed and decorated between mid-1861 and 1869.

For many years, the identities of both the subject and the artist of this bust remained unknown. Early in the 20th century, the architect of the Capitol conferred with anthropologists at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Inquiries among elderly Ojibwa in Minnesota confirmed the bust as a portrait of Aysh-ke-bah-ke-ko-zhay, whose turban and pierced ears with silver pendants indicated an Ojibwa man of high rank. At the same time, sculptor Flannery relayed his memories of Vincenti working. With the bust’s identity confirmed, the architect provided a suitable marble pedestal.

