

William Almon Wheeler

(1819–1887)

William Almon Wheeler was a U.S. representative from New York and the 19th vice president of the United States. Born in Malone, New York, he taught school, studied law, and later served as county district attorney. He also served in the New York state assembly and senate, and was active in banking and railroad development. Wheeler presided over the New York state constitutional convention of 1867–68 and then served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1861 to 1863 and 1869 to 1877. During his House years he authored the so-called Wheeler compromise to settle a critical Louisiana election that was in dispute.

The Republicans nominated Wheeler for vice president in 1876 on a ticket with Rutherford B. Hayes against Democrats Samuel Tilden and Thomas Hendricks. In a disputed outcome, a specially created electoral commission decided the election in favor of Hayes and Wheeler. Although the two developed a strong friendship while in office, Hayes rarely consulted Wheeler on matters of state. The vice president spent most of his time presiding over the Senate, where he cast six tiebreaking votes during his term in office. The Hayes and Wheeler ticket did not seek reelection. After turning over the vice presidency to Chester A. Arthur, the running mate of newly elected President James A. Garfield, Wheeler made an unsuccessful bid for election to the U.S. Senate in 1881. He then retired to northern New York and died there in his hometown of Malone in 1887.

Sculptors Daniel Chester French, Edward Potter, and Augustus Lukeman, left to right, in the garden of French's Chesterwood estate, 1898.

(Chesterwood, A National Trust Historic Site, Stockbridge, MA. Photographer, Julia Worthington)

In 1886 the Senate authorized the acquisition of a marble bust of each former vice president of the United States for display in the Senate Chamber. In executing the mandate, the Joint Committee on the Library recommended the immediate commissioning of busts of the three living vice presidents: Hannibal Hamlin, Chester A. Arthur, and William A. Wheeler. The Wheeler commission, however, was not awarded until 1890, three years after the subject's death. Senator William M. Evarts of New York, chairman of the Joint Committee on the Library, recommended sculptor Edward Clark Potter for the project, and Potter readily accepted. The sculptor relied on photographs to capture Wheeler's likeness.

Born in Connecticut, Potter trained in the studio of the celebrated American sculptor Daniel Chester French. There Potter perfected an understanding of animal anatomy, which led to his specialization in equestrian sculpture. He frequently collaborated with French on equestrian commissions—French would model the rider, and Potter would model the horse. In 1886 Potter traveled to Paris to continue his studies. After exhibiting there, he returned to the United States and settled in Washington, D.C., in 1890, the same year he undertook the Wheeler bust.

A major boost in Potter's career came with the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where he and French exhibited a number of jointly produced figural groups. Potter continued to collaborate with French on various equestrian statues for several more years and completed a number of works on his own as well, including the admired equestrian portrait of General Henry Warner Slocum at

Gettysburg. Potter also created successful portrait statues, such as likenesses of Robert Fulton for the newly constructed Library of Congress (Jefferson Building) and of Michigan Governor Austin Blair for the state capitol in Lansing. The artist's most notable works are his two marble lions for the New York Public Library. Although they were initially criticized by some residents as lackluster and unmajestic, Potter's lions are today much beloved.



William A. Wheeler

Edward Clark Potter (1857-1923)

Marble, ca. 1890-1892

30³/₈ x 26³/₄ x 17¹/₄ inches (77.2 x 67.9 x 43.8 cm)

Unsigned

Commissioned by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1890

Accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1892

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