

Richard Mentor Johnson

(1780–1850)

Born near present-day Louisville, Kentucky, Richard Mentor Johnson made history as the nation's ninth vice president—and the first and only vice president elected by the U.S. Senate. As a young man, Johnson practiced law, served in the Kentucky state legislature, and was elected in 1806 as a Democrat to the U.S. House of Representatives. He retained his House seat during his service in the War of 1812, in which he distinguished himself as a military officer. He sustained extensive injuries during the Battle of the Thames, in which Johnson's Kentucky volunteers claimed an American victory on October 5, 1813.

Johnson entered the U.S. Senate as a Democrat in 1819, where he advocated abolishing imprisonment for debtors. He supported President Andrew Jackson, who aided his nomination for vice president in 1836 as Martin Van Buren's running mate. Because none of the vice presidential candidates received an electoral majority, the Senate, under the terms of the 12th Amendment, awarded the office to Johnson on February 8, 1837. Johnson ran again with Van Buren in 1840, but they were defeated by William Henry Harrison and John Tyler. Johnson served briefly in the Kentucky legislature before his death in 1850.



On March 4, 1895, the Joint Committee on the Library authorized the purchase of a bust of Richard Mentor Johnson for the Senate's Vice Presidential Bust Collection. Soon afterward, James P. Voorhees, son of Senator Daniel W. Voorhees of Indiana, a member of the committee, submitted a model for a bust. The younger Voorhees received the commission; he later sculpted the bust of John C. Breckinridge (p. 42) for the Senate's Vice Presidential Bust Collection.

Voorhees's bust of Johnson has surprising vitality, considering that it was the work of an unknown sculptor who based his posthumous likeness on a portrait painted more than 50 years earlier. The Johnson bust is unmistakably modeled after the 1843 life portrait by John Neagle, now owned by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Neagle's work was exhibited at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, where Voorhees might have seen it. However, it was owned during this period by Phoebe Warren Tayloe, the widow of prominent Washingtonian Benjamin Ogle Tayloe. Presumably, Voorhees would have had ample opportunity to study the Neagle painting at her home in Lafayette Square during the elder Voorhees's residence in the capital.

The effectiveness of the over-life-size bust is achieved through broad masses forcefully presented. The sculptor has emphasized the frontal expanse of a torso framed by widely spaced lapels and squared off at the bottom. It supports a noble head with simple, strongly stated features and a splendidly stylized mane of hair, deployed like storm-tossed waves. The treatment of the hair is instructive; although it is clearly based on Neagle's portrait, that portrait's suavely painted coif is replaced by boldly carved tufts. This treatment thoroughly invigorates the head and supports English author Harriet Martineau's observation that "his hair wanders all abroad."¹ At the same time, Voorhees intentionally reduces the fleshiness of the face as Neagle recorded it, removing some trace of the years intervening since Johnson's retirement and, perhaps, reminding viewers of "Old Dick's" storied service in the War of 1812. The heroic aura is seconded by a technical detail. A dot of marble is left at the front upper edge of each drilled eye: The effect at a distance is that of reflected light—and of flashing eyes.

The Senate's bust of Richard M. Johnson was inspired by this 1843 portrait by John Neagle.

(Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Museum Purchase)

Richard M. Johnson

James Paxton Voorhees (ca. 1855–1936)

Marble, modeled and carved 1895

31 ¼ x 30 x 16 ¼ inches (79.4 x 76.2 x 41.3 cm)

Signed and dated (under subject's truncated left arm): J. P. Voorhees / '95.

Commissioned by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1895

Accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1895

Cat. no. 22.00009

