

Be sheekee, or Buffalo

(ca. 1759–1855)

Born on Madeline Island in Lake Superior, near the present-day Red Cliff reservation in Wisconsin, Be sheekee was a distinguished leader among the Ojibwa, or Chippewa, people. The name “Be sheekee”—from the Ojibwa language—was variously transcribed into English; other forms appearing in print in the 19th century include Pee-Che-Kir, Bezhike, and Pezhiki. Americans of English heritage called him “Buffalo” or “Great Buffalo,” whereas the French used “Le Beouf.”

Introduced to fur trapping as a means of trading for European goods in the 17th century, the Ojibwa became dependent on a system that ultimately depleted their resources and drove them west. Be sheekee was chief of the La Pointe band of Ojibwa, located on Lake Superior in Wisconsin; he also led all the Lake Superior and Wisconsin bands of Ojibwa during much of this cultural transformation. The United States government encouraged native people to concede mineral rights, and by the 1850s these groups were under increasing pressure to relinquish most of their traditional land and agree to live on reservations as well. Be sheekee traveled to Washington, D.C., in 1852 and 1855 as part of official Native American delegations to discuss and sign treaties with the U.S. government. During his first visit, Be sheekee met with President Millard Fillmore to successfully settle a number of grievances. In 1855, together with Aysh-ke-bah-ke-ko-zhay, another Ojibwa chief, and 14 other Native Americans from Minnesota and Wisconsin, Be sheekee negotiated a land cession treaty. He died the same year and is buried at La Pointe (Madeline Island), Wisconsin.

The Senate possesses a remarkable pair of busts of Be sheekee (Buffalo) and Aysh-ke-bah-ke-ko-zhay (Flat Mouth; p. 22) by the virtually unknown Italian sculptor Francis Vincenti. These Native American leaders came to Washington, D.C., in 1855 as part of a delegation responsible for negotiating a treaty with the United States government. On February 17, 1855, Captain Seth Eastman (who was also an artist; p. 128) wrote to Captain Montgomery C. Meigs, superintendent of the Capitol extension, that the two Ojibwa Indians were in the city and would consent to having their portraits modeled in clay, after their business was finished.

The request for Be sheekee and Aysh-ke-bah-ke-ko-zhay to pose undoubtedly came from Meigs, who wished to ship some models of Native Americans to Rome for the guidance of Thomas Crawford (p. 88), the artist then modeling figures for the east pediment of the Senate portico. (Whether the clay models or plaster casts from these two specific works ever reached Crawford is not recorded.) Meigs wrote in his journal, “Vincenti is making a good likeness of a fine bust of Buffalo. I think I will have it put into marble and placed in a proper situation in the Capitol as a record of the Indian culture. 500 years hence it will be interesting.”¹ Meigs further commented about Be sheekee: “He is a fine-looking Indian, with character strongly marked. He wore in his headdress 5 war-eagle feathers, the sign of that many enemies put to death by his hand.”²

Vincenti was among the talented stonecutters who arrived from Italy to work on the decorative carving for the new Senate and House wings, which were then being constructed. Some of these men were especially accomplished; clearly Vincenti was. A young American sculptor working at the Capitol observed Vincenti modeling the bust of Aysh-ke-bah-ke-ko-zhay at the Wren Hotel and afterward carving the marble bust in a Capitol workshop, so it is likely that Vincenti modeled both busts and carved the marbles as well. Considering that the Capitol stonecutters generally worked from the designs of others, Vincenti’s skill at modeling is somewhat surprising, though nothing is known of his training.

The sculpture of Be sheekee was modeled from life the year the chief died. Voucher records show that in February 1855 Vincenti paid \$5.00 to “an Indian chief—Besheke having taken his bust—in three days.” The portrait is supported by a columnar pedestal on which, in addition to decorative moldings, Vincenti deftly carved the image of an Ojibwa

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Francis Vincenti (dates unknown)

Marble, modeled 1855, carved 1856

24½ x 20½ x 15 inches (62.2 x 52.1 x 38.1 cm)

Inscribed (on back of subject's left shoulder): Be sheekee

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

Cat. no. 21.00002





This 1843 lithograph of Be sheekee is titled *Pee-Che-Kir, A Chippewa Chief*.

(Reprinted from McKenney and Hall, *History of the Indian Tribes of North America*, vol. 2. Kent, Ohio: Volair, 1978)

war shield. Behind the shield, and mostly obscured by it, appear a bow and arrows and a rifle. The face of the shield is dominated by a peace pipe adorned with feathers that transforms the implements of war, and by extension the bust that surmounts it, into an emblem of peace. From a frontal head, Be sheekee's drilled eyes direct a forceful gaze slightly up and to his right, in an attitude of imperturbable alertness. There is nothing of frailty in the ancient head, and Vincenti modeled the expressive face firmly and broadly, even while faithfully recording the facial idiosyncrasies. The elaborate headdress undoubtedly attests to the sitter's importance, as do the large ornaments suspended from the slit ears. Feathers are attached to the back of the head, and five short cylinders project hornlike on the crown of the head. Perhaps indicative of wooden originals, they are shown as if strapped to the head by a band that ties under the chin in a bow. The long braids of hair and strings of beads are vigorously carved, animating the stoic, penetrating likeness of Be sheekee. This formidable Native American was also called Great Buffalo, and the adjective was clearly deserved.

Documentary evidence suggests that the marble was carved in early 1856. The piece has been on view in the U.S. Capitol since its creation. In 1858 a related portrait bust was created in bronze by sculptor Joseph Lassalle, foreman of the Capitol's bronze shop between 1857 and 1859. Not a replica of the Vincenti marble, but rather a new work based closely on the original clay model, Lassalle's bust is displayed in the House wing of the Capitol.

Right:

The pedestal for the bust of Be sheekee includes a peace pipe adorned with feathers on the Ojibwa war shield. A bow, arrows, and rifle—other implements of war—are also depicted.

