

Daniel Webster in Bronze

By FREDERIC ALAN SHARF

SATURDAY, September 17, 1859, was a cold, rainy day in Boston, hardly a favorable one for the dedication of a much-discussed and long-awaited work of art. But elaborate festivities had been planned, and, in spite of the weather, a bronze statue of Daniel Webster, standing eight feet in height and placed atop a ten-foot pedestal, was presented by a group of subscribers to the citizens of Massachusetts. It still stands where it was dedicated then, in front of the State House on Beacon Hill and overlooking the Boston Common. Few who look at this statue today are aware of the bitter controversy it stirred in Boston during the late 1850's.

Daniel Webster had been one of the state's most popular figures, and his great fame had brought glory to his adopted state. Yet he had repeatedly been denied a chance at the Presidency. When the Whig Convention of 1852 again failed to nominate Webster for the highest national office, a third-party movement had arisen among his Massachusetts supporters. But two weeks before the election, in October of 1852, Webster had died, and the popular movement for his election collapsed. The spirit behind this movement quickly rallied to the support of a plan to erect a suitable memorial to perpetuate Webster's achievement.

A committee was chosen, and, in May of 1853, it was decided that Webster's memorial should take the form of a statue. Hiram Powers was selected as the artist, both because of his world-wide reputation and because he had made studies from life of Webster's head and was thus familiar with the statesman's facial ex-

pressions. In October, 1853, a contract was signed and a price of \$12,000 agreed on. A suit of Webster's clothes was at once dispatched to Florence, Italy, to assist Powers in reconstructing the physical bulk of his subject.

The work progressed slowly. Unfavorable rumors filtered back to Boston from Americans in Europe. Finally in 1857 a finished statue left Leghorn, Italy, bound for Boston. This statue went to the ocean bottom when the ship was lost at sea. Though reports had indicated that Powers' original statue was unsatisfactory, the sponsors immediately used the insurance money to commission a replacement. So much time had elapsed since Webster's death, that it became of the greatest importance simply to complete the work. In the autumn of 1858, Nathaniel Hawthorne was taken by Powers to see the casting of the second version. He was delighted with what he saw: "Happy is Webster to be so truly and adequately sculptured. . . ."

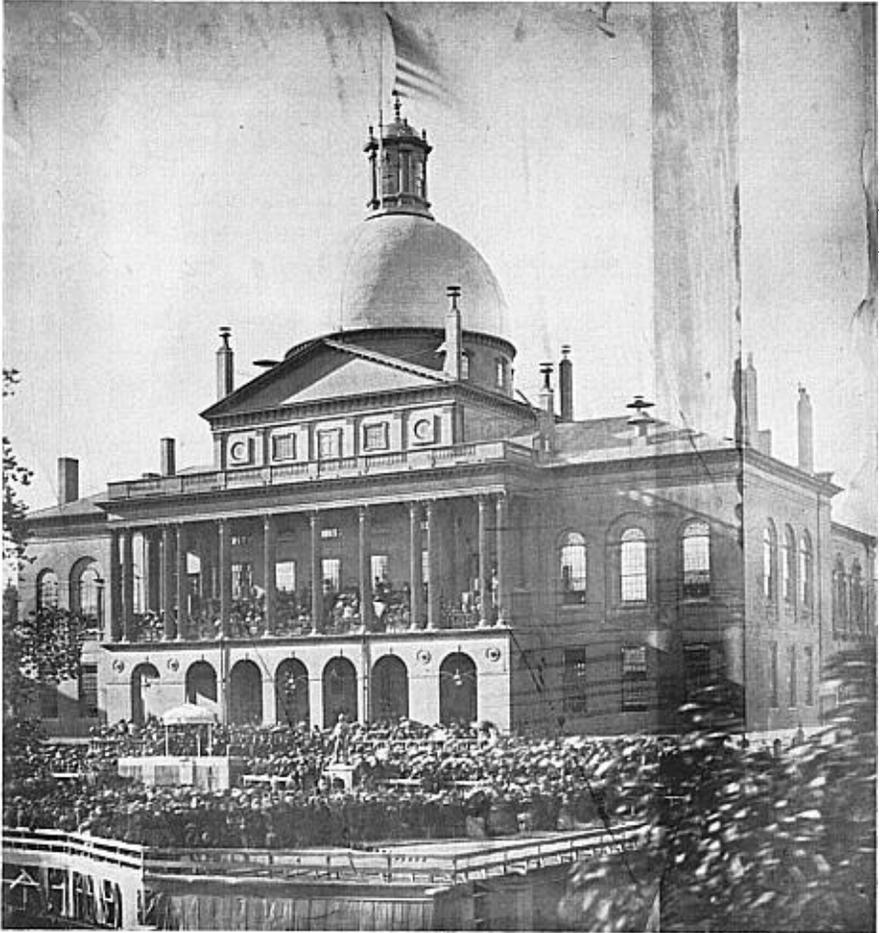
At last, on January 19, 1859, the statue arrived in Boston, amidst an atmosphere of heated discussions as to where to locate it. Suggestions ranged all the way from tearing down the Old State House to creating a special park in the new land of the Back Bay. Temporarily it was taken to the Athenaeum and there uncrated. The first Bostonians to see the statue did not echo Hawthorne's enthusiasm, and by the middle of February *The Transcript* could write that "there is no objection to its being buried from the public eye in . . . any place rarely visited by citizens or strangers."

The Webster statue quickly became an

object for scorn and a favorite target for the Yankee humorist:

An individual from the rural district sauntered into the Athenaeum . . . and looking at the

These critics felt that the statue ought to be melted down into pennies, and an entirely new work commissioned. They maintained that the work lacked dignity,



DEDICATION OF THE DANIEL WEBSTER STATUE AT THE STATE HOUSE,
BOSTON, 1859 (FROM AN EARLY PHOTOGRAPH)

Courtesy of The Bostonian Society, Old State House.

bronze misconception of Webster, asked if that was his statue. "Yes," replied the person interrogated, "that is his *statue*." "Well," retorted the countryman, "I should think that statue needed repealing."

particularly in the detailed handling of the clothing. They objected to the mundane realism of the vest and the swallow-tailed coat; they jeered at the baggy trousers.

The slouching posture of the figure itself appalled them, for they wished to remember Webster as a vigorous, erect, and forceful statesman.

The sponsoring committee, however, was proceeding as if such disapproving critics did not exist. They decided that the statue would look best on the grounds of the State House, and requested permission from Governor Banks to set it there. The Governor went before the legislature in April and received its assent. But so great was the public outcry at this that the sponsors could proceed no further. Not until July 2, 1859, could the sponsors rally enough support to accept the Governor's offer. Ground was broken for the pedestal by mid-August, and a festive inauguration was planned for mid-September, complete with parades, a reviewing stand, and major oratory. So more than six years after it had been commissioned and nine months after it had arrived in Boston, the statue of Daniel Webster finally found its Boston home.

The conflict that it engendered is revealing of the development of American taste in the arts. In examining the history of the statue, one is first struck by the choice of Powers. Although several competent sculptors were then working in Boston, the committee passed them by in favor of a businessman artist who lived in Italy. Hiram Powers was then at the height of his fame: his "Greek Slave" had toured Europe and America amidst great acclaim. He commanded a high price for his labors, and this alone appealed to the materialistic American mind, which equated excellence in art with expense. Working in Italy, a far-off and romantic place, traditionally the home of the arts, gave to Powers an aura of high distinction and authenticity. All

this impressed the sponsors. They felt that the selection of Powers would ensure the artistic superiority of the work, and reflect favorably on the cultural image of Boston.

In the back of the sponsors' minds lay ambiguous and often contradictory objects. Their avowed aim was to erect a memorial to Webster. In choosing a statue as the form they added another object, that of elevating the cultural level of the city. As a memorial, the statue was intended to remind Bostonians of Webster's greatness and serve as an inspiration to posterity. In other words, the commemorative object tended to be literary and historical. Many Bostonians did not see the actual statue at all; rather they saw the aura that surrounded Webster now embodied in some tangible form. They came to the statue with its meaning already in their minds, for, after all, Webster was one of the most famous American public figures. They did not "see" the statue; they simply "read" its message.

Yet the sponsors did have an artistic object, as their calculated choice of an artist indicated. They wanted to encourage the arts and improve public taste in the arts. Every great civilization had been characterized by a rich artistic life and the Webster statue was part of a plan to realize this same richness in Boston. Because of the importance attached to this object, the severe criticism which the statue received was of tremendous concern. The sponsors feared that this criticism would endanger the cause of the "arts" in this country. American artists would be discouraged if they felt that their work was to be tried before a jury of public opinion before it could be accepted. Such a humiliation would deny the artist's basic freedom to exercise his

imagination. So ran the arguments of such a distinguished Bostonian as Edward Everett, who finally concluded that Powers' reputation in itself gave the statue artistic validity and entitled it to admiration.

Unquestionably the central issue in the conflict was the clothing in which Powers had attired his subject. Many Bostonians seemed to feel that anything artistic must be something apart from the workaday world: it must be sublime, ideal, capable of carrying their imaginations far away from State Street and Beacon Hill. Webster was to their minds in the Valhalla of the immortals and surely such immortality called for sandaled feet, a Roman toga, and a crown of wild olives. A statue which was to last for centuries and convey a historical message to posterity must not be dressed in the style of the moment.

The question of proper attire for such a statue was not a simple one, even for such a highly intelligent observer as Nathaniel Hawthorne. His New England conscience was repelled by the idea of nudity; his stern intellect repudiated the idea of shirking the difficult issue and clothing the statue in some meaningless cloak or toga. He hoped that "some conventional costume, never actual, but always graceful and noble," could be developed to solve this thorny problem. But the best he could come up with was a "dressing gown"! He even suggested "the dress he (Webster) wore on his fishing expeditions"! Hawthorne was never able to resolve this matter in his own mind; so he approved the statue as Powers had clothed it.

Contemporary Bostonians could not match the subtle intellect of Hawthorne in dealing with this aesthetic problem, so for them the proper appreciation of the statue became a confusing matter. They focused on the statue's most obvious features: the coat was too loose, the pants too baggy. Inadvertently, they had hit upon a very real problem. The vast mass of clothing should indeed have been a matter for their concern, but only because it covered a serious artistic inadequacy—the failure of Powers to suggest the solid anatomy beneath it. This ineptness in building anatomy, in suggesting physical bulk, made Webster look weak and spineless. The plain fact is that Powers was not a great artist, but merely a clever artisan.

In retrospect it seems too bad that the sponsors had to go so far from Boston, at great expense, to get an adequate memorial and an inadequate piece of sculpture. In so doing, they ignored the native tradition of realism that was evolving all around them. They proved by their own error that America would never develop a satisfactory artistic life by importing its art from abroad. The Webster statue was one of a multitude of such memorials that were materializing all over America. Most of them exhibited the same weaknesses and were subject to the same problems. But out of the discussions and the aroused feelings, there was born an awareness of art and an appetite for it, which stimulated the development of an American tradition.