

Henry Bacon

Henry Bacon was the New York architect who designed the Lincoln Memorial, which stands at the west end of the National Mall as a neoclassical tribute to the 16th President of the United States. The construction of the memorial took eight years to complete, from 1914-1922.

Bacon had spent several years of study in Europe and had grown very fond of the architecture found in ancient Greece. He decided to incorporate that style into his design for the Lincoln Memorial. His true inspiration was the Athenian temple known as the Parthenon. What better way existed to remember a man who struggled to defend democracy, than to model his tribute after one found in the birthplace of democracy?

Bacon insisted on using a variety of stones in the construction of the memorial. The granite at the terrace level came from Massachusetts, the marble of the upper steps and outside façade came from Colorado, while the pink marble floor of the chamber came from Tennessee. One will notice the Indiana limestone on the interior walls and columns of the chamber, and the Alabama marble used for the ceiling tiles (soaked in paraffin to give them a translucent appearance). The statue of Lincoln was carved from Georgia marble. These stones from several parts of the United States, symbolize the importance of the Union to Lincoln.

Daniel Chester French

The nineteen-foot tall statue of Abraham Lincoln emerged from the design of Massachusetts sculptor Daniel Chester French whose attention to detail, accuracy, and composition created a masterpiece. French devoted considerable effort toward depicting Lincoln during the midst of war. He viewed photographs, read eyewitness descriptions, and studied Leonard Volk's 1860 castings of Lincoln's hands, then sculpted several models until he rendered a perfected final product.

As visitors climb the marble steps, pass marble columns, and enter the chamber of the Lincoln Memorial, they are awestruck by Daniel Chester French's enormous marble statue of Abraham Lincoln. To what part of the Georgia marble figure is the eye drawn first? Possibly, the serious look on Lincoln's face will remind the visitor of the critical time of Civil War through which the president guided our nation. Maybe the reeds wrapped together in the arms of Lincoln's chair will prompt the visitor to remember the way that Lincoln wanted to keep us bound together as one nation.

Carl Sandburg, one of America's great authors and one of Abraham Lincoln's well known biographers, described Mr. Lincoln as someone made up of both "steel and velvet." The statue hands that Daniel Chester French carved seem to reflect Mr. Sandburg's portrayal. Lincoln's left hand is clenched in a manner depicting determination. Lincoln was determined to fight the war to its end in spite of the ongoing bloodshed. Lincoln's right hand is open and relaxed. When the war was over, Lincoln wanted to bring the Southern states back into the Union in a peaceful way without looking for revenge.

Among Washington, D.C.'s numerous Daniel Chester French sculptures, the figure of Lincoln certainly stands out. In it, French conveyed great things through simple, well-executed, and careful composition.