

## Where is the Truth and Justice?

### A Search for Charleston's John C. Calhoun Statue

By David Brinkman - 2011



The above stereoview<sup>1</sup> (made about 1858<sup>2</sup>) is of the magnificent John C. Calhoun marble Statue as it stood in Charleston's City Hall. The caption on the back of this early stereoscopic photograph fails to tell the dramatic story behind the toga covered Calhoun and the amazing journey this piece of stone took as the nation fell into civil war.

John C. Calhoun was a South Carolina U.S. Senator and two-time Vice President under Presidents Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams. There has never been a bigger political figure in South Carolina than Calhoun. Calhoun led the South's fight for State's rights and nullification which would allow states to reject Federal laws that they deemed unconstitutional. Among the changing tides of the time was the issue of slavery which was fully allowed and supported by the Constitution.<sup>3</sup> Ten years after his death, Calhoun would be a strong inspiration to the secessionists of 1860. In fact, the Banner of the South Carolina Secession of 1860 shows (top center) the image of this Calhoun statue.<sup>4</sup> Almost 100 years later,

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<sup>1</sup> John C. Calhoun statue stereoview held at the New York Public Library. Part of the Robert N. Dennis collection of stereoscopic views. An Image is available at:

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sculpture\\_of\\_John\\_C.\\_Calhoun\\_by\\_Hiram\\_Powers\\_in\\_city\\_hall\\_\(later\\_removed\\_to\\_Columbia\\_and\\_destroyed\\_when\\_Sherman\\_entered\\_the\\_city\),\\_from\\_Robert\\_N.\\_Dennis\\_collection\\_of\\_stereoscopic\\_views.png](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sculpture_of_John_C._Calhoun_by_Hiram_Powers_in_city_hall_(later_removed_to_Columbia_and_destroyed_when_Sherman_entered_the_city),_from_Robert_N._Dennis_collection_of_stereoscopic_views.png)

<sup>2</sup> The Charleston Mercury reported on 12/24/1857 that the pedestal for the statue was ready and that a new left arm (which had been lost in the wreck of "The Elizabeth") was just received. This means the stereoview must have been taken sometime after the date of the article as the photo shows a repaired statue on a pedestal.

<sup>3</sup> Thurgood Marshall speech at the Constitutional Bicentennial Celebration in 1987

<sup>4</sup> "The secession banner presided over this state's withdrawal from the Union 150 years ago" by Harlan Greene : [http://www.charlestonmag.com/charleston\\_magazine/feature/history\\_unfurled](http://www.charlestonmag.com/charleston_magazine/feature/history_unfurled)

a 1957 Senate committee selected Calhoun as one of the all-time five greatest U.S. Senators. Committee chairman John F. Kennedy praised Calhoun for being a "forceful logician of state sovereignty" and a "masterful defender of the rights of a political minority against the dangers of an unchecked majority."<sup>5</sup>

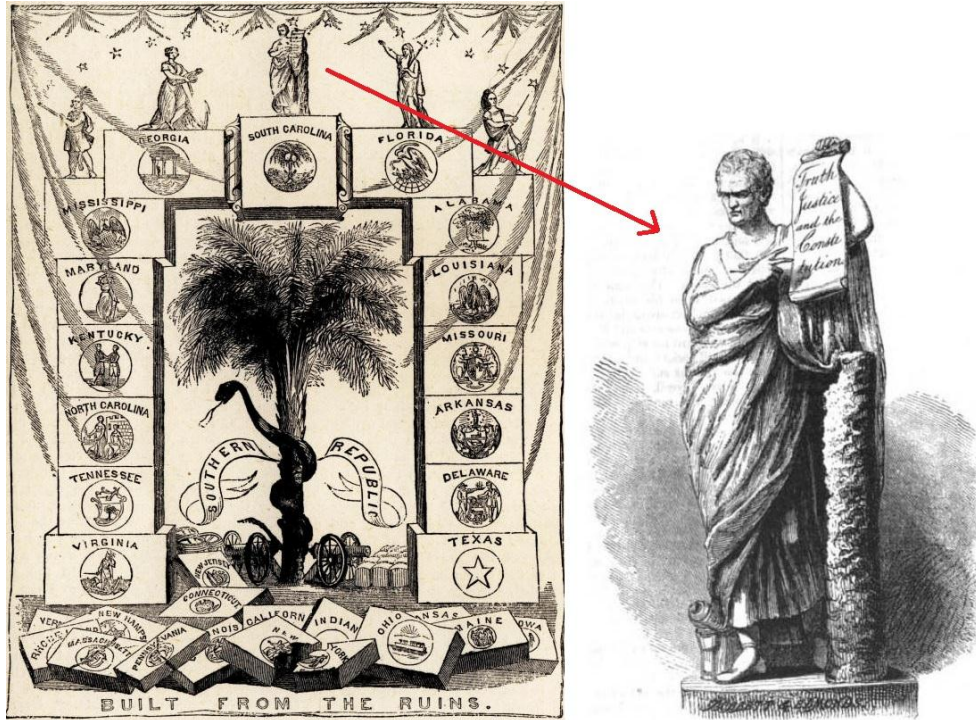


Figure 1: Banner of the South Carolina Secession (left) and drawing of Calhoun Statue (right)

There was little mystery in the political life of Calhoun but this American-designed and Roman-made sculpture would go through an incredible and tragic journey before being lost in the burning trail of General William T. Sherman’s March through the South. After being lost for almost 100 years, did a significant part of Charleston’s statue reappear in a North Carolina Museum? It’s a forgotten mystery now brought back to life.

### The Statue’s unfortunate voyage

The statue’s blueprint was based on a portrait bust of Calhoun that was made between 1835 and 1837. The life-size (plus a few inches) composition was commissioned by the City of Charleston in 1844 and a plaster version of it was created, later that year, by the great American sculptor, Hiram Powers. The final massive marble construction was completed in Rome, also by Powers, in 1849.<sup>6</sup> Powers was born in Woodstock, Vermont and was of Irish descent. He permanently moved to Florence, Italy in 1837 where he established a studio. His most famous work was the statue “The Greek Slave” (also known as the first nude American statue) which he completed about the time he finished the plaster Calhoun piece. The fame he achieved from “The Greek Slave” would be a distraction, thus, explaining a 4 year delay in

<sup>5</sup> John C. Calhoun: A Featured Biography: United States Senate Site: [http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/Featured\\_Bio\\_Calhoun.htm](http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/Featured_Bio_Calhoun.htm)

<sup>6</sup> Archives of American Art: Hiram Powers papers, 1819-1953, bulk 1835-1883: Correspondence with H. Gourdin of Charleston.

delivering the Calhoun marble statue. How Charleston chose Powers for the job was probably born of the friendship and working relationship that Powers had with the Preston family of Columbia, SC. John Preston personally financed the first years of Powers' work in Florence. Preston instructed Powers: "do not work for money, at least for several years." During this period, Preston had Powers complete busts of Preston family members and several other marble items that can be seen today in the Hampton-Preston Mansion in Columbia.<sup>7</sup>

As the Calhoun statue was going through its final cuts and polishing in Rome, the first woman foreign correspondent, Margaret Fuller, was also finishing her work on the Italian Revolution; A history of the short-lived Roman Republic. Fuller was a teacher, writer, and editor from Cambridgeport, Ma. Fuller was a strong advocate of equality for women and she became the first woman journalist for the New York Daily Tribune. In 1848, at the age of 38, Fuller married Roman nobleman Marchese Giovanni Angelo Ossoli. A year later, they had a son and settled in the American sector of Florence, Italy. It was there that Fuller finished her work and planned her return to America to have her Roman piece published. As fate would have it, the Calhoun Statue and the Ossoli family would be given the merchant ship "Elizabeth" as their transport to America.



On March 31, 1850 the South Carolina Statesman, John C. Calhoun, died at the age of 68. On May 17, 1850, his great marble image and the Ossoli family (with Margaret Fuller's manuscript in hand) departed Italy. Just days before the departure, Fuller wrote: "I am absurdly fearful and various omens have combined to give me a dark feeling ... It seems to me that my future upon earth will soon close."<sup>8</sup> She also told her dear friend, Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "But our ship is called the *Elizabeth*, and I accept the omen"<sup>9</sup>. Shortly into the two-month journey, Smallpox began spreading through the ship killing the captain. On July 19th, as the ship approached land, and into a storm, the new and inexperienced ship's commander thought he had spotted the Cape May Lighthouse off New Jersey. He was wrong. It was the Fire Island, New York lighthouse and the ship hit an unexpected sandbar causing the "Elizabeth" to break apart.<sup>10</sup> Margaret, her family, and manuscript, were lost. "Fuller might have saved herself by swimming to shore with the aid of a sailor, but she refused to leave her husband - who couldn't swim - and she refused to be separated from her two-year-old son, who couldn't be carried in the rough sea."<sup>11</sup> The tragic loss of the Ossolis would be the inspiration of the epic poem, *Aurora Leigh*, by Elizabeth

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<sup>7</sup> Archives of American Art: Hiram Powers papers, 1819-1953, bulk 1835-1883: Correspondence with John and William Preston of Columbia, SC.

<sup>8</sup> Slater, Abby. *In Search of Margaret Fuller*. 2-3: New York: Delacorte Press, 1978. ISBN 0-440-03944-4. Also at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret\\_Fuller](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Fuller)

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Fuller By Margaret Bell, Mrs Franklin D. Roosevelt; pg. 310

<sup>10</sup> McFarland, Philip. *Hawthorne in Concord*. New York: Grove Press, 2004: 170-171. ISBN 0-8021-1776-7 Also at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret\\_Fuller](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Fuller)

<sup>11</sup> American Poetry in the Age of Whitman and Dickinson: <http://ampoarchive.wordpress.com/tag/margaret-fuller>

Barrett Browning.<sup>12</sup> In another incredible coincidence, just before the fateful voyage, Fuller had viewed the Calhoun statue and joked with Powers about his heavy statue traveling with her on the *Elizabeth*.<sup>13</sup>

The sinking of the *Elizabeth* also sent the Calhoun Statue to the bottom of the sea but no one knew exactly where. John C. Calhoun was not well liked by all and it was easy for many to see the statue as the cause of the great tragedy. Some said the massive tribute to Calhoun shifted its position in the strong storm causing the ship to capsize. A group of men, believing they knew the location of the sunken sculpture, went out in boats and dropped large stones into the water hoping to destroy Charleston's precious cargo. To save the statue, it would take something special. Charleston was not about to sit back and let their masterpiece be lost to the sea. The search for "the Calhoun" became a regular item in newspapers around the country.

About 6 weeks after the sinking of the *Elizabeth*, the *New York Times* and *Charleston Courier* reported that the U.S. Revenue Cutter *Morris* had located the Calhoun in its box. Attempts to raise it, however, failed. James A. Whipple of Boston was soon employed to take on the recovery of the statue. Whipple was an engineer and inventor who had made significant improvements to submarine armor (diving suit). Initially, the weather proved to be the biggest problem for Whipple. Many attempts were made to raise Calhoun's statue but it wasn't until October 31, 1850 that the sea finally settled and Whipple lowered five one-hundred pound grappling hooks to the bottom. Unable to grab the item from the surface, Whipple put on his submarine armor and took on the dangers of the deep. With the hooks put in place by the engineer himself, the Calhoun statue was pulled up to the surface.<sup>14</sup> Initially, it was reported that the only damage to the statue was a fractured right arm, which would soon be repaired.<sup>15</sup> When the Statue was finally delivered to City Hall, however, the *Charleston Courier* reported that the top portion of the scroll (with the words: "Truth and Justice") had been broken off and the left arm from the elbow down, was missing.<sup>16</sup> It would be another 8 years before Charleston would have all the necessary parts to repair the damage. The statue originally stood at the "westerly end of the hall"<sup>17</sup>. After the repairs, in 1858, the statue finally took its place "in the recess near the stairs",<sup>18</sup> on the pedestal as can be seen in the 1858 stereoview photograph.

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<sup>12</sup> Florin.ms's Twelve websites about Florence: TUONI DI BIANCO SILENZIO (THUNDER OF WHITE SILENCE): <http://www.florin.ms/tuoni.html> : "One vast piece in Carrara marble of his, the John C. Calhoun, which Margaret Fuller had earlier described as 'full of power, simple and majestic in attitude and expression', then caused the shipwreck of the 'Elizabeth' off Fire Island drowning Margaret, her young baby Angelo Ossoli and her consort, the Roman Marchese. Elizabeth Barrett Browning had yearned to write an epic poem with a modern setting, had suffered guilt and anguish at the drowning of her brother, Edward Barrett Moulton Barrett, heir to the family's Jamaican slave estates. Margaret Fuller's surrogate death released Elizabeth to write Aurora Leigh, whose two heroines resemble Margaret Fuller and herself."

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Fuller By Margaret Bell, Mrs Franklin D. Roosevelt; pg. 311

<sup>14</sup> Stryker's American register and magazine, Volume 5; Pg. 160:  
edited by James Stryker. Also at:

[http://books.google.com/books?id=J2tBAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=J2tBAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)

<sup>15</sup> Steamboats are running everything: Sunk with Margaret Fuller:  
[http://www.steamthing.com/2003/06/sunk\\_with\\_marga.html](http://www.steamthing.com/2003/06/sunk_with_marga.html)

<sup>16</sup> The *Charleston Courier*; November 15, 1850.

<sup>17</sup> The *Charleston Mercury*; Funeral of Hon. Langdon Cheves; June 1857.

<sup>18</sup> The *Charleston Mercury*; 12/24/1857

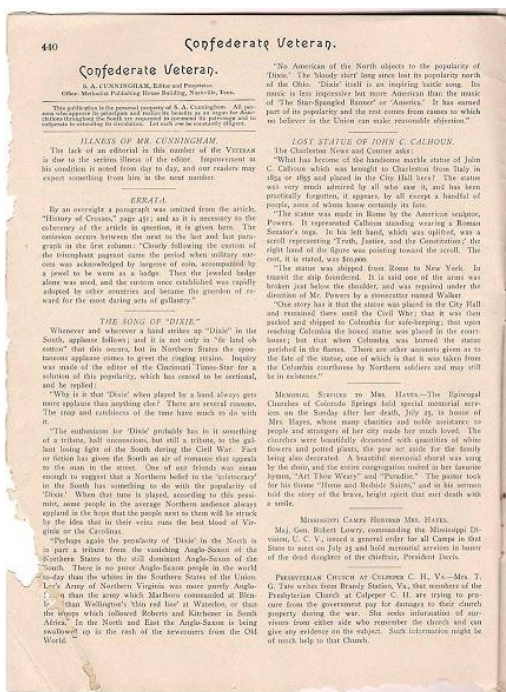
## It's not over yet

You might think that the story ends here. One problem.. that would be a prophecy of John C. Calhoun himself. In Calhoun's last years, he predicted that war between the North and South would be inevitable if the North pursued making slavery illegal in the South.<sup>19</sup> He saw it as a violation of The Constitution and another double standard that had become a standard of aggression against the South. On April 12, 1861, the prophecy was fulfilled when Southern troops opened fire on Fort Sumter.

With Charleston at the center of the war, many of the city's treasured items were moved to locations outside of the city. One of those items was the Calhoun statue which was moved to Columbia, SC. Some accounts say it was stored in the courthouse in Columbia and other accounts say the old State House. No one, at the time, could foresee the fate of the war would bring to the Capital city of South Carolina.

"Bull Street was on fire, five blocks east of Assembly. The old State House burned like a chunk of fat-lighter, and the new granite-walled State House blistered. Marble sculptures of eminent South Carolinians, the pieces noted by Simms, including a statue of John C. Calhoun in a Roman toga, personifying the genius of liberty, dissolved, Royster reports, "in a quicklime puddle."<sup>20</sup>

Years later, the last references (from this generation) to the great Calhoun statue appeared in 1909. In the September 1909 issue of the Confederate Veteran Magazine:



*"The Charleston News and Courier asks: What has become of the handsome marble statue of John C. Calhoun which was brought to Charleston from Italy in 1854 or 1855 and placed in the City Hall here?"*

*The statue was very much admired by all who saw it and has been practically forgotten. It appears, by all except a handful of people, none of whom know certainly its fate. The statue was made in Rome by the American sculptor, Powers. It represented Calhoun standing wearing a Roman Senator's toga. In his left hand, which was uplifted, was a scroll representing 'Truth, Justice, and the Constitution,' the right hand of the figure was pointing toward the scroll. The cost, it is stated, was \$10,000.*

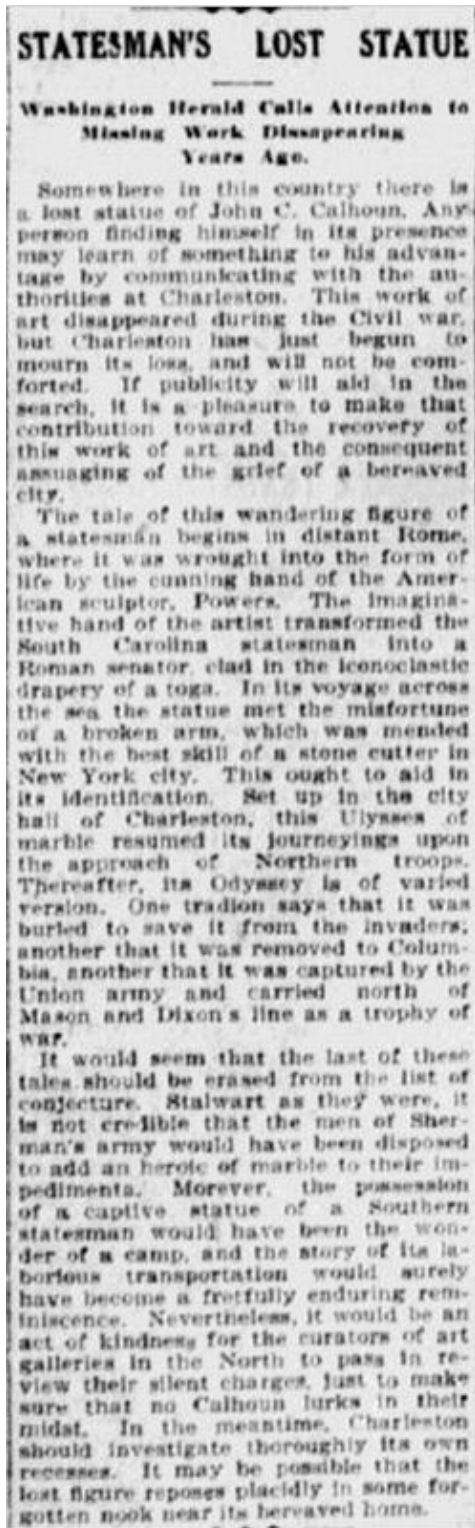
*The statue was shipped from Rome to New York. In transit the ship foundered. It is said one of the arms was broken just below the shoulder, and was repaired under the direction of Mr. Powers by a stonecutter named Walker.*

*One story has it that the statue was placed in the City Hall and remained there until the Civil War, that it was then packed and shipped to Columbia for safe keeping, that upon reaching Columbia the boxed statue was placed in the courthouse, but that when Columbia was burned the statue perished in the flames. There are other accounts given as to the fate of the statue, one of which is that it was taken from the Columbia courthouse by Northern soldiers and may still be in existence."*

<sup>19</sup> The American Journey: Chapter 5, pg. 8: "If Congress admitted California as a free state, Calhoun warned the Southern states had to leave the Union."

<sup>20</sup> New Views on the Burning of Columbia, Theodore Rosengarten: South Caroliniana Library: <http://library.sc.edu/socar/uscar/1993/addr93.html> Note: Marble melts at the temperature at which wood burns.

Also in 1909, was a plea from the Washington Herald for any knowledge of the missing statue:



Printed in The State (8-22-1909):

"STATESMAN'S LOST STATUE

*Washington Herald Calls Attention to Missing Work Disappearing Years Ago.*

*Somewhere in this country there is a lost statue of John C. Calhoun. Any person finding himself in its presence may learn of something to his advantage by communicating with the authorities at Charleston. This work of art disappeared during the Civil war. Charleston has just begun to mourn its loss, and will not be comforted. If publicity will aid in the search, it is a pleasure to make that contribution toward the recovery of this work of art and the consequent assuaging of the grief of a bereaved city.*

*This tale of a wondering figure of a statesman begins in distant Rome where it was wrought into the form of life by the cunning hand of the American sculptor, Powers. The imaginative hand of the artist transformed the South Carolina statesman into a Roman senator, clad in the iconoclastic drapery of a toga. In its voyage across the sea the statue met with misfortune of a broken arm, which was mended with the best skill of a stonecutter in New York City. This ought to aid in its identification. Set up in the City Hall of Charleston, this Ulysses of marble resumed its journeyings upon the approach of Northern troops. Thereafter, its Odyssey is of varied version. One tradition says that it was buried to save it from the invaders; another that it was removed to Columbia, another that it was captured by the Union army and carried north of the Mason and Dixon's line as a trophy of war.*

*It would seem that the last of these tales would be erased from the list of conjecture. Stalwart as it were, it is not credible that the men of Sherman's army would have been disposed to add an heroic of marble to their impedimenta. Moreover, the possession of a captured statue of a Southern statesman would have been the wonder of camp, and the story of its laborious transportation would surely have become a fretfully enduring reminiscence. Nevertheless, it would have been an act of kindness for the curators of art galleries in the North to pass in review their silent charges, just to make sure that no Calhoun lurks in their midst. In the meantime, Charleston should investigate thoroughly its own recesses. It may be possible that the lost figure reposes placidly in some forgotten nook near its bereaved home."*

For the next few decades, the Statue remained missing. Most people believed it had been destroyed in the Columbia fire. The statue, and the amazing story behind it, were soon forgotten. Years later, a google search turns-up a Hiram Powers marble bust of Calhoun in, of all places, an art museum in North Carolina:

“According to the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, the North Carolina Museum of Art once owned a marble statue of Calhoun by Powers, which was only 29 inches tall, but it's currently listed as "unaccessioned.”<sup>21</sup>

North Carolina Museum of Art<sup>22</sup> :

John C. Calhoun (1782-1850) Date: originally modeled 1835, carved 1859

Related People:

Artist: Hiram Powers

American, 1805-1873, active in Italy 1837-1873

Dimensions: H. 29 1/2 in. (74.9 cm)

Medium: Marble

Credit Line: Presented to the State of North Carolina by Wharton Jackson Green, 1861; transferred to the North Carolina Museum of Art, 1956

Object Number: SC.56.3.1

Today, this piece is actually on display at the North Carolina Museum of Art. The Museum presentation includes very limited background information. It falls far short of the history of the original Charleston statue but it is still from the same era. If you do some basic mathematics, the 29.5” museum piece, as a complete human physique, would stand about 6 feet tall. The Charleston statue was said to be a few inches taller than real size. Calhoun, the man, was a little taller than average. 6 feet seems to be the right size. Now, looking closer at the details, it’s obvious that the statue and the North Carolina bust are almost identical. Just look at the facial features, the curls in the hair, and the folds in the toga.

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<sup>21</sup> Steamboats are running everything: Sunk with Margaret Fuller:  
[http://www.steamthing.com/2003/06/sunk\\_with\\_marga.html](http://www.steamthing.com/2003/06/sunk_with_marga.html)

<sup>22</sup> North Carolina Museum of Art catalog: <http://collection.ncartmuseum.org/collection11/view/objects/asitem/id/283>



Figure 2: The Charleston Calhoun statue on the left and the North Carolina bust on the right.

Could the North Carolina piece be the salvaged upper portion of the Charleston Statue? It seemed possible except for one detail. If you look at the side of the North Carolina bust, where the right arm would be, the North Carolina bust contains marble that could not have possibly been part of the Charleston statue. Could someone have attached extra marble to the North Carolina bust? There's no sign of any repair work.

Further research settles the case. The original plaster bust, made by Powers, was found in the Smithsonian American Art Museum. It is identical in all details to the North Carolina piece. Did Powers make multiple copies of this plaster bust, maybe using a "pointing machine" (a copying method/instrument used since Classical Greek time)<sup>23</sup>?

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<sup>23</sup> How Marble is carved: <http://www.jasonarkles.com/process/>





Figure 3: Powers' Plaster bust on the left and the North Carolina Marble bust on the right. The metal inserts on the plaster bust are probably for attaching the "pointing machine" when Powers made a marble copy of the bust.

More research led to the Hiram Powers papers (1835-1883) in the Archives of American Art. Powers left a nice paper trail including what appears to be an entire set of International correspondence with his customers. Among them: John C. Calhoun, the Preston's, H. Gourdin (the man Charleston put in charge of having the Calhoun Statue made), and Wharton Jackson Green (the man who donated the North Carolina piece to the state of North Carolina). The letters reveal that Calhoun, himself, decided on the scroll text (Truth, Justice, and The Constitution) as a short description of his life and what he stood for. The letters between H. Gourdin and Powers show Charleston's anxiety and frustration in getting the statue completed in a timely fashion. And finally, the letters between Wharton Green and Powers prove that the North Carolina piece is a copy of the original plaster bust. It is a separate work which did not start until 1858...long after the Charleston Statue was completed.

100 years after the last bit of hope was lost in finding Charleston's great Calhoun Statue, the new search ends in the same place...the ashes of Columbia. Still, the story is worth telling. And, as many of us in Columbia know, there are fascinating items sitting in Columbia homes that have tales of how they survived the great fire. Some of these items may have been taken legally, some not. Maybe there is still

a slight chance that something of Charleston's Calhoun does survive. If nothing else, under the sand in 12 feet of water, off the coast of Fire Island, NY, there lies a marble scroll fragment with the words "Truth and Justice".

In October 2010, the 1858 stereoview photograph was taken to Charleston's City Hall where Lindsay M. Partin (Docent, Council Chamber, City of Charleston)<sup>24</sup> recognized the shutters behind the statue as the shutters that currently cover all the windows on the second floor of City Hall. She also pointed out that the walls in the photo were plaster and not wood like today's walls. City Hall, originally, had plaster walls but they were badly damaged in the 1886 earthquake and replaced with wood paneling. Ms. Partin also pulled an inventory of past items (held in City Hall) and found a record and picture of a miniature version of the Calhoun statue. This record mentioned that the miniature was based on a life-size statue of Calhoun that was in City Hall before being moved to Columbia where it was lost in the 1865 fire.

Now... what happened to that miniature Calhoun?

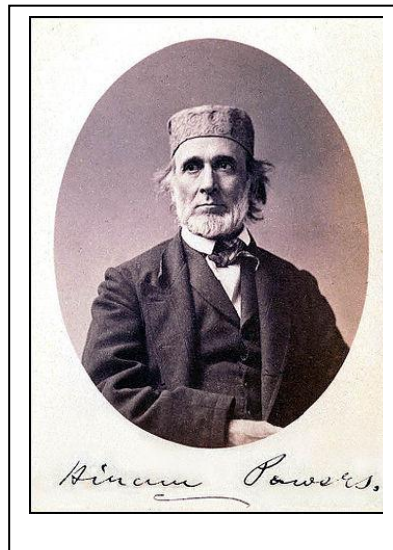


**From City Hall Files:**

Hiram Powers - John C. Calhoun Parian ware statue

Parian ware, diameter of base: 15.5 cm, height: 42.8 cm

The Parian ware statue (left) is modeled after Hiram Powers' life-size statue of Calhoun. These replicas were imported and made available in places like G. & H. Cameron on Meeting Street in Charleston. Parian ware is a hard white unglazed porcelain that resembles Parian marble. Powers was one of the first sculptors to produce Parian ware figures. These little statues could have been mass produced but it appears that the Calhoun Parian was very rare.



**Ironic side-note:**

From the Hiram Power's Papers (Archives of American Art): In a 1871 response to Mrs. William Sherman about a requested art job, Hiram Powers states: "I am glad to learn that General Sherman is coming here and I assure you I shall have great pleasure in making a personal acquaintance with the man who made the wonderful march through the southern states. I follow him in the spirit with the most intense interest."

Figure 4: The 17 inch tall "Parian ware" version of the Calhoun Statue

<sup>24</sup> Lindsay M. Partin, Docent, Council Chamber City of Charleston, partinl@charleston-sc.us