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Artist: Emily Ewing Peck (Class of 1877)

Work: Statue of General Shurtleff

Location: S. Professor St., on bank above Plum Creek

Emily Ewing was born in Randolph, N.Y., in 1855. Two years after graduating from the Literary Course at Oberlin she married fellow student John Fisher Peck. He had received both his A.B. and A.M. from Oberlin and had been appointed tutor of Latin and Greek in the Preparatory Department. Emily may have taken the College's linear drawing course as an undergraduate and perhaps she worked with oil or watercolors, but it was not until a two-year visit abroad in the 1890's that she became seriously interested in sculpture. She studied first in Geneva and then in Paris, the center for sculptural activity in Europe, where there was a considerable colony of American artists. She joined a studio and had her work accepted for criticism by the great Auguste Rodin. Over a half-century later her daughter, Helen Peck Lyon, recalled a visit to the master: "One of my girlhood memories is of our driving out to Mendon (sic), where he lived, in a fiacre, with a clay bust carefully propped between us, covered with its wet cloth. Then into his studio we went with it, and the man who looked so gruff and abrupt, was actually so kindly. He always began by making encouraging remarks. . . . "This is good—you have done that very well—perhaps this other could be improved a bit—so—"

European training conferred a special aura upon Emily. Throughout the 19th century study abroad gave the American artist status in the eyes of the public at home. Combined with her skill in portraiture, she achieved at least a local reputation. She was, after all, probably Oberlin's first sculptor, and as such it was recognized that she performed a service to the community in introducing the art form to those who had not the cultural benefits of travel. As in many other towns and villages, the opportunities for viewing original sculpture firsthand were extremely limited. The alternative at Oberlin were the exhibitions of photographs of world art collected and arranged by faculty members Adelia Johnston and Charles B. Martin.

There is no evidence that Emily Peck received any commissions for works she sculpted in the years following her return to Oberlin in 1896. She seems to have sculpted for study or pleasure alone. Her portraits were of relatives and friends. The probable fate of some of these is suggested in this passage from the Reminiscences of Charles B. Martin: "The best portrait of President Fairchild was a bust modeled in clay by Mrs. John Fisher Peck. As there were no funds to cast it in bronze or carve it in marble, the bust was destroyed." As the local expert on classical sculpture, Martin's opinion was highly valued. But before the portrait bust was destroyed, photographs were taken and copies made available to admiring students and alumni.

While permanence for her works would undoubtedly have brought satisfaction, Emily had the desire to go beyond mere portraiture and use it as the means of expressing a high ideal. Listening one morning to her small daughter recount stories she had learned in school, Emily was particularly impressed with one of the tales, a lesson in loyalty, courage, heroism. "This story set me thinking," she later related, "that it is the beautiful things in real life that are the best material for art. Wherever there are human beings there is beauty of some sort that could be fixed and made lasting in story, or verse, or color, or form. We might somehow save the lovely things that occur everywhere."

It seemed to her that there were those in Oberlin whose lives represented the ideals she wished to express and once she committed herself to the work she selected a model. She chose her friend Giles W. Shurtleff (A.B. 1859, Sem. 1862), then at the end of a long association with the College. While a student in the Seminary and a Latin tutor in the Preparatory Department, Shurtleff had entered the Army in 1861 immediately after Lincoln's request for volunteers. Captain of Co. C, consisting of Oberlin students, he had been captured and had spent a year in a prison camp. Following an exchange of prisoners he had returned to Oberlin and rejoined the Army. In 1863, the Ohio governor asked Shurtleff, J. B. T. Marsh and John M. Langston to organize the first "colored" regiment in Ohio. He became its commander and the regiment took part in the long siege and victory at Petersburg.

He was then aged 32. Thirty-five years later he again put on his army uniform and heavy sword and posed during long hot afternoons in Mrs. Peck's studio on Main St. She thought his patience during these sessions the crowning grace of his life. The statue of the general was to be part of a group. The second figure was to be a young negro about to take the rifle offered to him by Shurtleff. "The interest which each man has in the other should be shown in the slight inclination of the bodies toward each other, but their supreme interest is

in the action to which the general is pointing, to which both are looking." The analogy was to Petersburg, but the intended battle was symbolic. Emily had spent a long time searching through books for a motto that would express her meaning, finally choosing "Freedom cannot be given, it must be achieved."

Locating a model for the second figure which suited her conception proved difficult. In the meantime the clay figure of Shurtleff was cast in plaster and exhibited at Spear Library in September of 1898. At the reception Mrs. Peck had the opportunity to explain what the finished work would look like and she expressed her feelings that it should be in bronze and placed out of doors.

That winter she left Oberlin for Chicago to work and study, expecting to complete the group in the near future. Among the portraits executed in the following years were those of President William Harper of the University of Chicago and Jane Addams, founder of Hull House. But the general's companion never appeared.

Shurtleff died in 1904 and his widow decided to make the plaster portrait permanent. On Memorial Day 1911 the statue in bronze was dedicated. Set on a granite block, it was placed on the lawn below the house that had been his home, overlooking an area intended for a village parkway. The unveiling was the main event of the activities of that day. The general's small granddaughter, who had whimpered with tedium during the ceremonies, pulled on the drapery enclosing the work.

There were, no doubt, few who disagreed with Mme. Johnston, the authority on art matters, that it was a perfect likeness of Gen. Shurtleff. It was a graceful depiction in metal of an older gentleman of dignity and moral strength. But of Emily Peck's original conception there was nothing. She had intended the portrait to be a means to an end but it was now the end itself. The portrait alone could not carry the ideal she wished to express. Without the second figure the relationship of the carefully chosen phrase to the statue was lost. The sculpture had become a monument to a specific hero. Mysteriously gesturing north Shurtleff was no longer preceptor pointing to Petersburg and destiny. He assumed rather the position familiar in public sculpture of the 19th century, that of the orator, a remnant of left-over neo-classicism. The left hand which was to have held the rifle, physically uniting it with the other figure, now held an unexplained rolled document.

Since the appearance of the plaster cast in Spear Library in 1898, the statue has been the mute participant in periodic mischief. In the winter knitted caps have been placed on its bare head. Graduating seniors have posed with the outstretched right arm over their shoulders. The College Archives staff feels the statue has been looked upon with affection and not ridicule. But it troubled Shurtleff's daughter, Laura Shurtleff-Price (1893), who wrote to the College in 1950: "...a terrible worry to my sister and me ... I don't think that statue, with outstretched hand and meaningless should stand there to be laughed at. It should be preserved somewhere as the statue of a long ago Oberlin graduate done by another long ago Oberlin graduate. But it should be in an inconspicuous place and there should be some explanation what Mrs. Peck intended to do."

Somewhat belatedly this grievance is redressed and we remember for awhile the ideal sculpture it was to have been and the name of the artist whose initials are carved modestly and discreetly at its foot.