Daniel D. Tompkins

(1774–1825)

Daniel D. Tompkins, sixth vice president of the United States, was born in Westchester County, New York. He was educated in law, and established a practice in New York City. Although Tompkins was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives as a Republican in 1804, he resigned before Congress met to become an associate justice of the New York Supreme Court. Soon known throughout the state as a fair-minded jurist, Tompkins was elected governor in 1807. He was reelected three times, serving for 10 years and winning a number of liberal reforms in the school system, the state militia, and within the criminal and slavery codes.

During the War of 1812, Tompkins used his personal funds to secure troops and equipment when the state assembly refused to appropriate money for the defense of New York frontiers. He rejected an 1814 appointment as secretary of state under James Madison, choosing instead to continue his services as governor and accepting command of a New York–New Jersey military district.

Admired for his patriotism and practical talents, Tompkins was described by novelist Washington Irving, one of his aides, as "absolutely one of the worthiest men I ever knew . . . honest, candid, prompt, indefatigable."[1] At war's end, however, Tompkins was charged with careless record keeping of military finances. Though Tompkins's reputation suffered, James Monroe nonetheless chose him as his vice presidential running mate in 1816. The ticket won then and again in 1820, but Tompkins played an inconsequential role as vice president. Consumed by his financial woes, he spent most of his time attempting to clear his name and recover the wartime funds he had advanced.

Long a resident of Staten Island, New York, Tompkins retired there following his vice presidency. Eventually he was exonerated and reimbursed for personal expenditures on behalf of the public welfare. The funds proved too little, too late. Tompkins died impoverished at the age of 51.

harles H. Niehaus, a successful and prolific sculptor, was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, the son of German immigrants. As a child, he was apprenticed in wood engraving, stone-cutting, and marble carving. After his initial studies in art, he went to Munich and entered the Royal Academy, where he gained a first prize on graduation. He traveled in Europe, then returned to Cincinnati just before the assassination of President James Garfield, also an Ohio native. Niehaus was selected to sculpt two statues of the deceased president for the state of Ohio—one in marble, presented as a gift to the National Statuary Hall Collection in the U.S. Capitol, and one in bronze for the city of Cincinnati. The bronze is often considered his finest work.
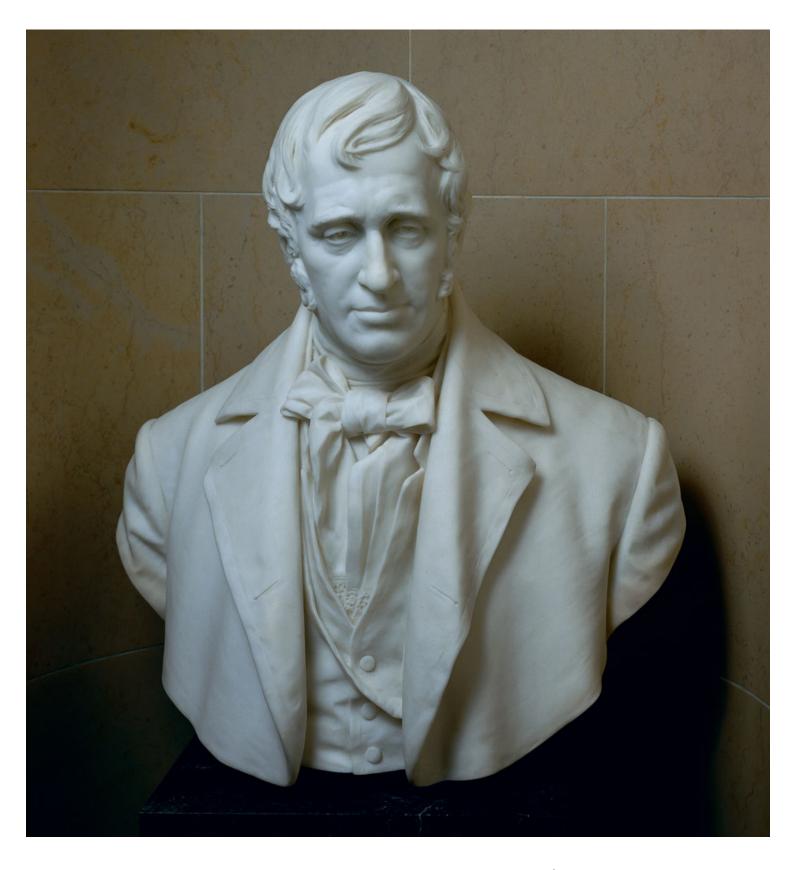
In 1890 the Senate commissioned Niehaus to sculpt a bust of Daniel Tompkins for the Vice Presidential Bust Collection. Niehaus based his likeness of Tompkins on existing visual resources. Key among these was the cast of an early life-sized portrait bust (presumably a life study) made available by Ray Tompkins, the subject's son. Niehaus also had access to any number of other paintings and portrait prints of Tompkins that existed by the 1890s. An exceptionally handsome man, Tompkins had been painted by many of the noted artists of his day, including John Trumbull, Thomas Sully, Charles Willson Peale, Ezra Ames, and John Wesley Jarvis. The Jarvis portrait (now lost) had become the standard source for images of Tompkins published in the popular press. Architect of the Capitol Edward Clark specifically advised the artist to look "among the possessions of the Historical Society in New York" for such images. One of those, a lithograph of about 1840 by William Sharp of Boston, may have been a model for Niehaus.

With these aids, Niehaus completed the marble bust in 1891. He created a genial, plausible portrait with more animation and variety than are found in many posthumous likenesses. The slight turn of the inclined head, the hint of a smile that plays about the lips, the tousled hair, and the casual deployment of the shirtfront and cravat all contribute to a loosening of the frontal pose and a pleasant informality. Niehaus also enhances the sense of physical presence through the wavy rhythm of the wide, pliable lapels and coat front, and by fairly deep undercutting in the costume.

Daniel D. Tompkins

Charles Henry Niehaus (1855–1935)

Marble, 1891
31¼ x 26⅞ x 16⅝ inches (79.4 x 68.3 x 42.2 cm)
Unsigned
Commissioned by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1890
Accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1891
Cat. no. 22.00006

While much of his early sculpture emphasized classical themes, it was for his portrait monuments that Niehaus was best known. These include a bronze statue of Admiral Oliver Hazard Perry in Buffalo, New York; marble likenesses of Puritan clergymen Thomas Hooker and John Davenport in Hartford, Connecticut; equestrian statues of Generals Ulysses S. Grant in New York City and Nathan B. Forrest in Memphis, Tennessee; and bronze statues of German physician Samuel Hahnemann and American naval hero John Paul Jones in Washington, D.C. Niehaus's bust of James A. Garfield (p. 160) is located in the Marble Room in the Senate wing of the Capitol. In all, the artist is represented by 10 sculptures in the Capitol. Besides completing the Garfield and Tompkins busts, Niehaus designed both of Ohio's official statues (Garfield and William Allen) and six other likenesses for the National Statuary Hall Collection.

This ca. 1840 lithograph of Daniel Tompkins by William Sharp may have been used by Charles Niehaus to sculpt the Senate's bust of the vice president.
(Collection of the New-York Historical Society)

Sculptor Charles Niehaus was renowned for his mastery of the human figure.
(Architect of the Capitol)