

John Cabell Breckinridge

(1821-1875)

First elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from his native Kentucky at the age of 29, John Cabell Breckinridge became the country's youngest vice president when he was elected on the Democratic ticket with James Buchanan in 1856. Breckinridge served as the 14th vice president during a turbulent era dominated by the issue of slavery. While he defended the right of individuals to make their own territorial laws, he also counseled against secession and appealed for national unity. Following a North-South split in Democratic ranks, Breckinridge was nominated for president in 1860 by the Southern faction on a pro-slavery platform. After losing the election, he completed his term as vice president and returned to Kentucky upon Lincoln's inauguration.

Breckinridge then served Kentucky in the U.S. Senate from March 4, 1861, until his expulsion in December of that year for support of the Southern cause. Breckinridge joined the Confederate army and attained the rank of major general before becoming secretary of war to the Confederacy in 1865. Following military defeat, Breckinridge lived abroad for three years. After being granted amnesty, he returned to the United States in 1868 and practiced law in Kentucky until his death.

Indiana artist James P. Voorhees.
(Architect of the Capitol)

In 1896 the Joint Committee on the Library, acting under a May 13, 1886, resolution, authorized the purchase of a bust of Vice President John C. Breckinridge. On advice from the Breckinridge family and Kentucky Senator Joseph Clay Stiles, sculptor James Voorhees was selected for the project. A year earlier, Voorhees had completed the Senate's portrait bust of Vice President Richard M. Johnson (p. 222). His model of the Breckinridge bust was promptly approved, and the work was soon carved in marble.

Talented and versatile, Voorhees was a writer, poet, actor, and sculptor. He also completed studies of Thomas Jefferson and Napoleon Bonaparte, commissioned by the State Department for the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. For 21 years, Voorhees acted as personal secretary to his father, Senator Daniel W. Voorhees of Indiana. The artist's memorial bust of his father, completed as late as 1928, was created to honor the senator's work in support of funding a Library of Congress building, which opened in 1897.



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James Paxton Voorhees (ca. 1855–1936)

Marble, 1896

30 x 28 x 16 inches (76.2 x 71.1 x 40.6 cm)

Signed and dated (on subject's truncated right arm): JAMES / PAXTON / VOORHEES. / Sc. A.D. 1896

Commissioned by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1896

Accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1896

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