

NEW YORK OBSERVED

Let Us Now Praise Sort of Famous Men

By Andrew A. Elrick

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Correction Appended

FOR the last 80 years or so, Samuel Sullivan "Sunset" Cox has stood sentinel over Tompkins Square Park, providing shade to passing pedestrians but little pause for thought. Cox served in Congress for more than 20 years, from two states, and apparently did little to distinguish himself outside of having a swell nickname and championing causes dear to the hearts of mailmen.

Not long after his death in 1889, a group of post office employees collected \$10,000 to have a statue made, and when it was dedicated, mailmen from as far away as New Orleans made the trip to honor their benefactor. A president served as one of his pallbearers, which is more than most of us will ever be able to say, but it seems fair to characterize Cox as the 19th-century equivalent of Paul S. Sarbanes of Maryland: a fine public servant, but statue material?

According to the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, the agency maintains about 300 statues in the five boroughs; another 600 might live outside the bounds of city parks. This means that effigies of long-forgotten politicians and war heroes are everywhere in New York, and as such eventually become as negligible a part of our everyday lives as park benches or lampposts. But you don't have to scratch too deeply beneath their oxidized surfaces to learn that every one of them has a story.

It was with that thought in mind that I set out one morning to pay my respects to a lost sliver of American history, forever immortalized and completely forgotten.

Madison Square Park, which sits in the shadow of the Flatiron Building, is a treasure trove of 19th-century history. Though the park occupies only about three city blocks, it is graced with the likenesses of three men who shaped America in the mid- to late 1800's. (Through

the rest of this year, the park is also the site of four contemporary sculptures by Ursula von Rydingsvard.)

At the park's southwest corner sits William Seward, said to be the first person born in New York State to be honored by the city with a monument. Seward earned it; he was secretary of state during the Civil War, surely one of the more stressful jobs in human history.

Nearby is Roscoe Conkling, a man so powerful and recognizable at his peak that he was responsible for the election of presidents. The undisputed king of the New York Republican political machine, Senator Conkling played a critical role in one of the most hotly contested presidential elections in history. In 1880, James A. Garfield -- a man who enjoyed not one-tenth of Conkling's fame -- was elected president and took with him to Washington as his vice president an even less well-known former customs collector for the Port of New York named Chester Alan Arthur. Were it not for Conkling, Arthur would be even more of a footnote in history than he is.

After enjoying a few moments of solitude in the shadow of Conkling, I strolled north in search of my ultimate prize. I had been aware for some time that Madison Square Park had a statue of Arthur, but I had made no real attempt to locate it. I reached the northeast edge, and there, within a gaggle of oak trees and shrubs, stood the 21st president of the United States.

My interest in Chet, as he was known, is come by honestly. Both of us are from Vermont. Arthur was born in Fairfield, in 1829, and his birthplace is a national historic site; my father once dragged our family the 30 or so miles from our home to see a replica of it.

Twenty years later, here I was, standing in the shadow of the great man, who was looking, as he did in life, as if he had almost nothing to say. Arthur had no designs on the White House, and that he ended up there was a bit of an anomaly.

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Arthur was -- well, sketchy, would be the 21st-century word for it. As noted, his one position of importance before being vice president was customs collector for the Port of New York, though admittedly that was one of the more powerful appointed positions of the day.

Arthur was also a Civil War veteran, though he never got near a battlefield. As quartermaster for the state of New York, he supplied regiments with the necessities of war and made many of the contacts that would serve him so well later in life. He was in many ways a man of his times, and that included a tacit understanding that bribes and kickbacks were as important a part of politics as campaigns and conventions.

FOR that reason, many people involved in American politics at the time regarded with considerable apprehension a situation in which Arthur stood a heartbeat away from the presidency. When Garfield was shot at a Washington train station by the now famously "disgruntled office-seeker" Charles Guiteau, more than a few people were rooting for the president to recover. He lingered for months before succumbing, and suddenly, amazingly, Chester A. Arthur was president.

Having seen a few pictures of the former president in books, I considered his statue an accurate representation of the man. He was rather tall for his day, quite handsome and, from what I understand, always impeccably dressed. Most people agree that though Arthur was one of our least important presidents, he did have great taste; among other things, he hired Louis Comfort Tiffany to help refurbish the interior of the White House.

Taking a spot on a nearby park bench, I thought for a moment about why I had used a beautiful summer afternoon to track down the statue of a largely inconsequential man who just happened to have inhabited the White House at a time when very little was expected of its occupant. The short answer is that we share a common background, but it's more than that. Although presidential historians joke that Arthur did little with his presidency, the truth is, we could learn a thing or two from his time in the Oval Office.

Arthur was the product of machine politics and the spoils system, but he did not use his newfound power to benefit his old pals; he did the exact opposite. Instead of filling his new cabinet with friends and Republican Party cronies, he kept most of Garfield's appointees. In 1883 he became a champion of the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act, which guaranteed that government jobs were handed out based on merit and not political connections. Old friends of his, including Conkling, ostracized him, and he was not renominated in 1884.

With that, Arthur began his slow descent into obscurity, until all that was left to remember him by was a statue, which managed the impressive feat of being completely forgotten despite its location in the middle of the world's most important city. That is why I was there, mining a little bronze nugget of American history that stood in plain view of thousands of New Yorkers who passed it unaware.

Arthur, not unlike his colleague Samuel Cox, has a lesson for us, that even in politics there is redemption. And if we can hope for one thing from our presidents, it's that the job brings out the best in them.

NEW YORK OBSERVED Correction: July 16, 2006, Sunday An article last Sunday about statues in Madison Square Park that honor historic figures omitted one depicting Adm. David G. Farragut, commander in chief of the Navy during the U.S. Civil War.

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