

On the Wings of Destiny: Norfolk Sculptor William Couper

Just five years before William Couper's birth his father founded the Couper Marble Works behind the family home on the corner of Main and Granby Streets in Norfolk, Virginia. This firm specialized in the import and carving of stone from Italy. It was here in the marble works that William often played as a boy, watching the artisans carve works for sculptural display. This experience was to have a profound impact on his life.

One evening at the dinner table his father told the story of a local sculptor, Alexander Galt, who had made a cameo carving on a conch shell. He explained how the artist had used the layers of pink tone in the shell to obtain a remarkably realistic blush to the cheeks and face. The teenaged William was intrigued by the story and, remembering that his brother had a conch shell, decided to try such a carving himself. He set to work and with much patience and determination was able to complete the cameo. His father took it to the town jeweler to have it set as a brooch, but the jeweler asked if he could display it in his shop window. Soon townspeople who saw the cameo were urging young Couper to pursue the study of art.

In 1872, at the age of 19, William Couper began his studies at the Cooper Art Institute in New York City. Then, two years later, he went to Munich, Germany, to attend both the Academy of Fine Arts and the Royal College of Surgery. Seeking a warmer climate he went to Italy the following year. There he became the pupil, and later the son-in-law, of noted Boston sculptor Thomas Ball (1819–1911), and specialized in portraiture, winged figures, and works of an ideal nature. The Ball-Couper studios were a meeting place for writers, artists and musicians; including Daniel Chester French, Christina Rossetti, and the Brownings; and the Anglo-American residents of Florence. In 1897 Couper returned with his family to America, opening a studio with Thomas Ball in New York City. Before his retirement in 1913 he had executed more than 150 works.

William Couper (1853-1942) is best remembered in the South for his heroic *Confederate Soldier* which stands defiantly atop the Confederate Monument in downtown Norfolk, Virginia. "Johnny Reb," who proudly holds the unfurled Stars and Bars at his left side and a sword ready at his right, stares with eyes fixed northward. This symbol of the Civil War measures 15 feet in bronze and is mounted on a 50-foot white carved granite shaft. In the early days the statue was located on busy Commercial Place, at the gateway for the ferries that ran between Norfolk and Portsmouth. In 1965 it was moved to a more central spot when the downtown area underwent renovation. Other heroic works by the artist in the Norfolk area include a swashbuckling bronze statue *Captain John Smith* at Jamestown, and *Recording Angel* at the Couper family plot in Elmwood Cemetery. William Couper had a fascination with angels, inspired by the cemetery monuments he had watched being constructed in his father's marble works and later strengthened by the angels in Italian churches. One of Couper's earliest winged statues, *Psyche*, has small wings of almost botanical quality. He achieved a distinctive androgynous look in his angels, using features both strong and soft, defining the wings with fine anatomical detail. It seems "destiny" had plans for William to become a sculptor, so it is fitting that he became known for his portrayal of winged figures.