

Adelaide Johnson

(1859 – 10 Nov 1955)

The Evening Star, November 11, 1955, p. A20

Mrs. Adelaide Johnson, Sculptor, Dies at 108

Mrs. Adelaide Johnson, famed sculptor and champion of women's rights, died yesterday in District General Hospital at the age of 108.



Adelaide Johnson
c. 1921

Mrs. Johnson had been hospitalized since July when she suffered a stroke during a prolonged hot spell. She rallied after the first two weeks and clung to life, although visibly weakened by the strain.

Until her illness, Mrs. made her home with a friend at 126 C street N.E. Services will be held at 3 p.m. Sunday at the S.H. Hines funeral home, 2901 Fourteenth street N.W. Members of the Adelaide Johnson Foundation will serve as honorary pallbearers.

Private burial services will be held later at Congressional Cemetery at 1801 E street S.E. The plot there was given in honor of Mrs. Johnson to the Adelaide Johnson Foundation by the vestry of Christ (Episcopal) Church, Washington Parish, 628 G street S.E. Members of the foundation had planned to buy

the land there as a final resting place for Mrs. Johnson because they felt this cemetery, in which many great Americans who were alive during her 108 years are buried, was the "one she belonged in."

A memorial service at the National City Christian Church is planned later.

It was not until she was approaching 100 that Mrs. Johnson was willing to reveal her age. She had kept it out of "Who's Who in America" and had refused to discuss it with interviewers, although she wanted to tell them how she met Lincoln in Illinois during his first campaign for the presidency in 1860.

She was a small woman, not much more than 5 feet tall and never weighed far more than 100 pounds. But the strength of her personality which was radiant even in her latter days magnified her.

On the eve of her centenary (that was in September 1947), she told a reporter, "I'll be glad to go. I've been around long enough." She was still doing morning setting-up exercises at the time. She continued in good health almost all the way through the succeeding decade.

Difficult to Believe

A reporter who interviewed her shortly after her 105th birthday wrote:

"It is difficult to believe she is 105. Her cheeks are firm and unwrinkled. It is unnecessary to raise one's voice. She hears it well as anyone in the room. And, she doesn't bother to wear glasses."

Until the end, her hair fell in thick coils to her waist. She was a vegetarian and ate five light meals a day. She attributed her longevity to the fact that she was not contaminated by the supposed poisons in meats and that she never let anything bother her. The last observation probably puzzled the committees of women who almost knocked themselves out trying to save her home and studio at 230 Maryland avenue N.E. which was sold for taxes in 1939. For 14 years they managed to keep her sculptory from being evicted and probably felt they were taking 10 years off their own lives.

She had so long outlived the early suffrage or equal rights movement that few of her latter day acquaintances remembered what it was all about.

Knew Champions

She was much younger than the original champions of women's rights whom she managed to immortalize in marble in the cellar of the Capitol. Susan B. Anthony was 27 years her senior. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 32 years, Lynetta Mott was born in 1793. But she knew all three of them and had spoken from the same platform as Miss Anthony several times, including the International Council of Women in London near the close of the 19th century. She had crossed the Atlantic 78 times.

In the first decade of her start on a second century there were happenings that amazed her and encouraged her in the idea that she was not entirely forgotten. She went to New York in 1943 at 101 to appear on "We the people," a television show on a national network.

In 1951 she was invited to come to New York and appear on a give-away program called "Strike It Rich." She was asked who wrote the Battle Hymn of the Republic. She promptly answered "Julia Ward Howe" and was given a check for \$500. The story of her difficulties was dramatized in the show and she was told that voluntary pledges totaling more than \$1,000 had been made in telephone calls from the listening public.

And in the following year she went back to win \$300 on another TV show, "The Wheel of Fortune."

But all this time, her chances of achieving her ambition of saving her studio and presenting it to the Government as a museum were fading. A bill to enable her to do this by paying her \$25,000 for the work in the basement of the Capitol, although vigorously championed by Representative Wickersham, Democrat of Oklahoma, failed in the 83rd Congress and was left unenacted when the 84th Congress recessed in August 1955.

Into New Home

But her last years were fortunate in that she had an interesting new home and loving care. Just after the war, when Mrs. John was being evicted from the house at 230 Maryland avenue, N.E., which she had purchased 25 years earlier, Mrs. Meta Grace Keebler, an Alabama woman interested in art, asked her to live in her house around the corner of 126 C street N.E. Mrs. Keebler and her husband William C. Keebler, a retired tool engineer, made their home hers and her cause theirs.

Mrs. Keebler devoted herself to lobbying in the Capitol for the bill to pay Mrs. Johnson \$25,000, to obtaining newspaper, magazine, radio and television publicity for her guest. She called her "mama" with a French inflection, and at the end visited her twice daily at the hospital to assist in feeding her.

Mrs. Johnson was born on a farm near Plymouth, Ill., September 26, 1847. She was 13 years old during the hard-fought Lincoln-Douglas campaign of 1860.

Accident Changes Career

She was a "natural" at carving. She went to Chicago and was supporting herself doing wood carving when she had an accident. She fell 15 feet down an elevator shaft in the Chicago Central Music Hall. She broke a hip; sued and obtained \$15,000. She used the money to take lessons in sculpture. Thereafter marble was her medium.

She studied in Rome under Monteverde and Sabi Altini. She traveled a great deal and in London met H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw.

Equal rights was then the goal of "the new woman" in England and here--the right to smoke and earn money for oneself, not for one's husband, as well as the right to vote. Lucy Stone, an American, caused a sensation by insisting on retaining her maiden name. Adelaide Johnson went her one better. She married Alexander Jenkins, an Englishman, 12 years her junior. He changed his name to Johnson. She had 12 "blissful years of marriage," she said, before his death.

The Evening Star, February 5, 1921, p. 2

Memorial For Suffrage Arrives At The Capitol

Large Delegation of National Women's Party Views Statue in Front of Law Library

A large delegation of members of the National Women's Party viewed the suffrage memorial statue representing pioneers in the woman's movement -- Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott -- which arrived at the Capitol today. The statue stands in front of the law library on the east side of the Capitol building.

It is the first memorial to women for their services to women and is to be presented to the capitol February 15 by thirty-six national women's organizations, representing between five and ten million women which are co-operating in this tribute at the invitation of the National Women's Party.

The statue is the work of Mrs. Adelaide Johnson, friend of Susan B. Anthony, who made the original portrait busts from life. The statue has just arrived in this country after a six-week journey from Italy, where Mrs. Johnson has been working on it for the last six months. After the first view afforded the suffragists this morning the statue will be repacked until near the day of its unveiling on February 15.

The Evening Star, November 9, 1895

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Her Birthday to Be Celebrated at Wimodaughsis Next Tuesday

A reception will be given to all who are interested in the progress of women by the ladies of the District Woman Suffrage Society and the Wimodaughsis, from 8 to 10 p.m., at 1328 I street northwest, November 12, to celebrate the eightieth birthday of Mrs. Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The parlors will be decorated with palms and flowers, and light refreshments served. It is thought to be appropriate to solicit contributions for the busts of Lucretia Mott, Mrs. Stanton and Miss Anthony, who stand as leaders in pioneer work for the advancement of women. In no better way, it is believed, can this be done than by giving to the city the marble likenesses of these women, made by a woman of Washington, Miss Adelaide Johnson.

The Washington Post, January 21, 1892, p. 5

Ennobled In Marble

Portrait Busts of Mrs. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Miss Susan B. Anthony

An active effort is being made to complete the fund for the busts of Mrs. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Miss Susan B. Anthony, in order that they may be ready for the World's Fair. There are several busts of Miss Anthony extant, but none of them are considered as approaching in lifelikeness the one by Miss Adelaide Johnson, of this city. All who have seen this bust are unstinted in their praise of it as a true work of art. It was Miss Ellen H. Sheldon, recording secretary of the Woman's National Suffrage Association, who conceived the idea of having the busts of these two eminent women modeled in marble, and it was at her suggestion, in 1887, that Miss Anthony consented to sit for Miss Johnson.

Miss Johnson took the original model to Rome with her and brought it completed back with her in time, as she hoped, to be exhibited at the meeting of the International Council of Women in 1888 in this city. But deeply not only to the regret of the gifted artist, but to the Council, when the box which contained the bust was opened, it was found that the precious marble had been shattered into many pieces. Undaunted by such misfortune Miss Johnson determined not only to rebuild her work, but to make the second better than the first, and has succeeded. Miss Anthony spent much time in her artist's

studio reading and talking with her, and it was at those times that she was able to get the naturalness of expression which is so much admired in her new work.

Miss Johnson says that Miss Anthony cannot pose; it would be unnatural to her. Last September Miss Johnson paid Miss Anthony a visit at Rochester, and there modeled the bust for Mrs. Stanton. Those who saw it there in clay pronounced it as a most excellent life-like resemblance. After the busts have been exhibited in the hall of eminent women at the World's Fair, they will then be brought back here and presented to the Capitol. Mrs. Jane H. Spofford, 1412 G street northwest is the treasurer of the fund, and all contributions should be sent to her, and at the earliest day possible, for as soon as the fund is sufficiently assured Miss Johnson will hasten to Rome to have the models committed to marble. Miss Johnson is no less known for her portrait busts of many prominent people, but also for her entertaining lectures on the "Philosophy of Art."

McMahan, Virgil E. *The Artists of Washington, DC, 1796-1996*. The Artists of Washington, Washington, DC, 1995.

JOHNSON, ADELAIDE

Sculptor born in Plymouth, IL in 1859. She studied first at the St. Louis School of Design and in 1877 she received prizes for wood carving at a state exhibition there. In 1883 she went to England, Germany and Italy for further study. After two years she returned to the United States, settling first in Chicago. By the late 1880s she had moved to Washington, DC, where, except for a brief period around 1905-10, she spent the remainder of her professional career. An avid participant in the women's rights movement, her work consisted primarily of portrait busts and statuary, which she exhibited nationally and internationally. Her busts of suffragists Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were exhibited at the Women's Pavilion of the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago. This composite portrait of the three leaders in the movement is now in the U.S. Capitol building. She also exhibited with the Society of Independent Artists and is represented in a number of prestigious collections. These, in addition to the U.S. Capitol, include the National Portrait Gallery, the White House, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Chicago Historical Society. Her personal papers are in the manuscript division of the Library of Congress. She died in Washington in 1955. REFS: AAA (1909-10, 1940-41); ARCHITECT; FAIRMN; CENSUS (1860); FIELDING; KLOSS; MALLET 1; ARLOR 2; MLKPL; New York Times (obit., 1 Nov 55); WDN (obit., 11 Nov 55); WWAA (v. 1-3); WWA; WWWA; Sherman, Barbara and Carol H. Green, eds., *Notable American Women -- the Modern Period -- A Biographical Dictionary*, Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1980. NOTE: Johnson made a habit of falsifying her age, so all of her obituaries and many other references have an incorrect date of birth and age at death. The year 1859 is correct for year of birth, as it is corroborated in census records from 1890-1920. As a young woman Johnson also changed her name, from Sarah Adeline to Adelaide.