



Vinnie Ream, Sculptor and Postal Clerk, circa 1865

Vinnie Ream, the first woman to receive a federal commission for a statue, was one of the first women hired to help process undeliverable letters in the Dead Letter Office in 1862.

Originally from Wisconsin, Ream came with her family to Washington, D.C., at the beginning of the Civil War. To help support her family, she took a job as a clerk in the Dead Letter Office in 1862 at the age of 15. Shortly thereafter, she met the sculptor-in-residence at the U.S. Capitol and, inspired, picked up a piece of clay and created a medallion of an Indian chief's head. Her work was so impressive that she soon began sculpting part-time and had a stream of congressmen and generals sitting for their likenesses. Together, some of these men commissioned a bust of President Lincoln and convinced the president to sit for her. Ream's likeness of Lincoln was so realistic that in 1866 it led to a congressional commission for a life-size statue of the president, for the U.S. Capitol.

Almost overnight, Ream went from being a \$600-a-year unknown postal clerk to the recipient of a \$10,000 federal commission. At age 18, Ream was the youngest artist and the first woman ever to receive such an honor.

To transfer her clay model to marble, Ream went with her parents to Europe, where she was welcomed by the leading artists of the day, entertained by Franz Liszt, and had an audience with the Pope. Her completed Lincoln statue was unveiled to great acclaim at the U.S. Capitol in 1871 in what Ream later called "the supreme moment" of her life.

Over the next decade she completed many other notable works, including a statue of Admiral Farragut located in Farragut Square in Washington, D.C. Marriage at the age of 30 largely ended her career, as she deferred to her husband's wish that she quit work.