



Lee urges soldier's artistry; He survives poverty, anti-Semitism, battle to be sculptor.(TRAVEL)(THE CIVIL WAR)

Article from: [The Washington Times \(Washington, DC\)](#) Article date: [January 26, 2008](#)

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"I hope you will be an artist, as it seems to me you are cut out for one. But, whatever you do, try to prove to the world that if we did not succeed in our struggle, we are worthy of success, and do earn a reputation in whatever profession you undertake," Robert E. Lee told a young Moses Ezekiel.

Although mostly forgotten by moderns, Moses J. Ezekiel was one of the most renowned artists of the 19th century. Ezekiel was an ardent American patriot and, at the same time, an unrepentant Confederate. He was the first Jewish cadet to enroll at Virginia Military Institute.

Stan Cohen and Keith Gibson's concise yet thorough book about the American artist and Confederate soldier provides us with a fascinating glimpse into Ezekiel's life and work. The book is divided into two parts: Part One is about Ezekiel's life.

Col. Gibson's connection with Virginia Military Institute, both as an alumnus and in his current positions as historian for VMI and executive director of Museum Programs, allows him to bring a unique and close perspective to this study of Ezekiel. Mr. Cohen has authored or co-authored more than 76 books, many about the Civil War, and also serves on the board of three museums.

Col. Gibson writes in his introduction: "Over thirty-five years ago, I first walked up to the imposing bronze likeness of 'Virginia' staring down from her stone pedestal on the post of the Virginia Military Institute (VMI). I recall a passing cadet stopped and proudly explained that the statue was the work of a VMI alumnus, Moses Ezekiel."

Most would have thought Ezekiel's eventual entrance into VMI and his subsequent worldwide respect as a sculptor unlikely. As Col. Gibson notes, Moses Ezekiel "grew up in a poverty-stricken neighborhood, part of a very large Jewish family."

His family immigrated to the United States in 1808 from Holland and settled "in a poor, mixed neighborhood of slaves, Jews and Christians. Here, Moses Jacob Ezekiel was born on October 28th, 1844, the seventh in a family of 14 children."

He took art lessons in Richmond at age 12 "where he learned the process of reverse glass painting." A year later, at 13, young Ezekiel did his first sculpture, "a clay bust of his father. Praise for this piece would plant the seed for future vocation."

But in pursuing his future vocation, Ezekiel would have to contend with not only poverty, but with much of the country's anti-Semitism, as well. Col. Gibson illustrates this attitude by quoting from an article that ran in an 1860s Richmond Examiner:

"One has but to walk through the streets and stores of Richmond, to get an impression of the vast number of unkempt Israelites in our marts - Every auction room is packed with greasy Jews - Let one observe the number of wheezing Jewish matrons - elbowing out of their way soldiers' families and the more respectable people in the community."

Col. Gibson is quick to point out, however, that this vile attitude did not prevent "over 10,000 men of Jewish descent" from joining the Confederates. Moses Ezekiel would be one of those men.

After pleading with his parents to let him attend VMI, his mother stated that she "would not have a son who would not fight for his home and country." Ezekiel enrolled at VMI in September 1862, part of a class that originally numbered 147 and "included the son of a Virginia governor and sons of the upper crust of Virginia society." Young Ezekiel benefited from a need-based scholarship known as "state cadetships." Barely 18, he was soon marching off to defend, not slavery, but hearth and home. Col. Gibson writes:

"Moses did not necessarily believe in defending slavery, which had been protected under state law since 1670. He wished to defend the state if Virginia seceded to avoid providing troops to the Union to, as he said, 'subjugate her sister Southern states.' "

Ezekiel made his views on the subject clear later in life:

"The question of slavery had long been assigned to its proper position. Virginia has prohibited the bringing of slaves as far back as the times of Thomas Jefferson, and in reality, no one in the South would have raised an arm to fight for slavery. It was an evil we inherited, and that we wanted to get rid of, in a way that would be just to the Negroes and just to ourselves."

Ezekiel had the sad duty of serving "as Corporal of the Guard by the casket of VMI's beloved teacher General Thomas J. 'Stonewall' Jackson" and would later honor the Confederate Joshua with two bronze statues: one in Charleston, W.Va., and the other at VMI in Lexington.

Ezekiel fought in the battle that would forever immortalize Virginia Military Institute cadets' role in the War Between the States - the Battle of New Market - where 10 cadets gave their lives. Col. Gibson recounts the oft-repeated story of young Ezekiel's unenviable duty to recover his dead and wounded comrades after the battle:

"After the battle, Ezekiel was detailed to recovering the dead and wounded. He first wandered the battlefield with Cadet Benjamin A. Colonna to search for their mutual friend, Ezekiel's roommate Thomas Garland Jefferson, a descendent of President Thomas Jefferson. They found Jefferson with a serious chest wound and took him to a nearby home. For two days Ezekiel tended to his roommate. By candlelight on the evening of May 17th, young Ezekiel read to his dying Christian friend his requested passages from the New Testament - 'In my Father's house are many mansions ..' Moments later

Jefferson died in Ezekiel's arms"

After the war, Ezekiel returned to VMI, graduating in 1866. It was upon his return to Lexington that Robert E. Lee admonished Ezekiel to pursue his artistic talents. He did so with vigor.

The second part of the book focuses on the actual work of Ezekiel, and it is quite amazing to consider. The authors write: "The body of Ezekiel's work can be grouped into three major categories: religious subject matter, works devoted to the Confederate cause, and heroic portraits." The authors further note: "Ezekiel's feelings for his native state of Virginia and the Confederacy approached a religious devotion."

Ezekiel studied in Europe, becoming the first American to win the coveted Prix de Rome. He set up his art studio (and residence) in the ancient Baths of Diocletian in Rome, and his studio became a popular site for American tourists, including Teddy Roosevelt and Ulysses S. Grant.

The book is filled with beautiful photographs and images of Ezekiel's work, much of which is displayed in some of the most renowned museums and galleries in the world. One of Ezekiel's better-known works is that of the Confederate Monument in Arlington National Cemetery. At over 32 feet, it is the tallest bronze monument in the cemetery. The monument was unveiled in June 1914, commemorating the 106th birthday of the Confederacy's only president, Jefferson Davis.

The authors' write of this monument:

"Ezekiel created a monument rich in symbols. Standing atop the 32 foot monument is a larger-than-life figure of a woman representing the South. Her head is crowned with olive leaves, her left hand extends a laurel toward the South, acknowledging the sacrifice of her fallen sons. Her right hand holds a pruning hook resting on a plow stock. A biblical message is inscribed at her feet: 'And they shall beat their swords into plow shares and their spears into pruning hooks.' "

Ezekiel must have believed paying tribute to the men and the cause for which he fought one of his most important works. After his death on March 17, 1917, longtime friend and fellow Virginian Thomas Nelson Page found a sealed envelope among the artist's papers. Upon the envelope were inscribed the words, "To be opened after my death." Ezekiel revealed that he wished to be buried "amongst his Southern comrades at Arlington National Cemetery" where his Confederate monument had been dedicated earlier.

Today, beside the Confederate memorial is a small headstone with these simple words:

Moses J. Ezekiel

Sergeant of Company C

Battalion of the Cadets

Virginia Military Institute

Ezekiel never adopted the faddish trends that led to artistic modernism at the end of the 19th century, preferring "a traditional, romantic style." Although largely forgotten today, Ezekiel did, as Robert E. Lee advised him, "prove to the world that if we did not succeed in our struggle, we are worthy of success, and do earn a reputation in whatever profession you undertake."

Moses Ezekiel's works are beautiful and worthy of study, as is the man. This book would be a good place to start.

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SOLDIER, RENOWNED SCULPTOR

By Stan Cohen and Keith Gibson

Pictorial Histories Publishing Co. Inc.

\$14.95, 172 pages, illustrated

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CAPTION(S):

Moses J. Ezekiel attended Virginia Military Institute, served in the Confederate army including at the famed Battle of New Market that killed 10 cadets, then returned to earn his VMI degree before becoming a sculptor. [NO CREDIT]

Ezekiel was the first Jewish cadet at Virginia Military Institute. [NO CREDIT][PHOTO FROM THE BOOK COVER SOLDIER, RENOWNED SCULPTOR]

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