

LARKIN'S SNOW ANGEL

New Year's Day, 1856, dawned clear and cold in Brattleboro, Vermont. But the few people out on the snow-covered streets of town were soon glad that they had gotten up. They scurried home to wake up family and friends with exciting news.

"Get up! There is something wonderful at the corner of Linden and North Main streets. An angel!"

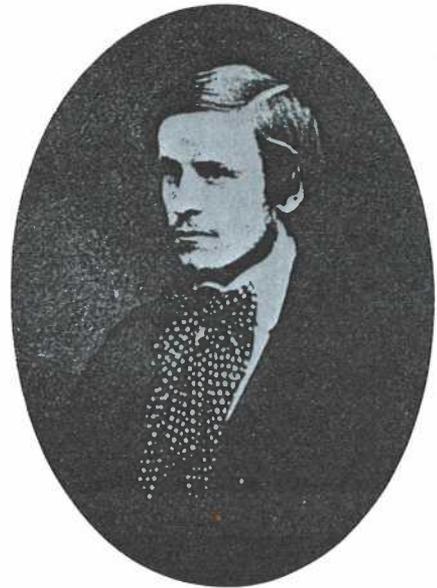
And so there was. It was an eight-foot-high statue with folded wings and a peaceful **expression** on its face. It had appeared overnight, as if by magic. Most marvelous of all, it was made entirely of snow and ice. It was immediately nicknamed the "Snow Angel."

Because the **figure** held pen and notebook in its hands, some thought it **represented** the closing of the old year's record and the opening of the new. So people also called it the "Recording Angel."

Whatever they called it, all who saw the angel were amazed by its beauty and **workmanship**. It was so lifelike that school boys, who **rarely** spared any object, refused to make it a target for their snowballs. An elderly man who never bowed to anyone was seen to tip his hat to the statue in respect as he passed.

But Brattleboro's townspeople were most amazed when they found that the maker of the angel was Larkin Goldsmith Mead, Jr. The son of an important town lawyer, Larkin had been known as a very bashful boy. He had spent much of his time alone, sketching flowers and trees. He had occasionally tried his hand at **sculpture**.

At age nineteen, he had gone to work at a local hardware store. When he wasn't sweeping the floor, weighing out nails, or wrapping up store goods for customers, he passed the time by carving a pig out of a piece of marble he kept behind the counter. An artist, vacationing in Brattleboro, entered the store and saw Larkin carving. He told Larkin that he had talent and helped him to study with a New York City



Larkin Goldsmith Mead, Jr., 1835-1910, *Annals of Brattleboro, 1681-1895*, by Mary Cabot, published in 1922.

sculptor. But, two years later, when Larkin returned to Brattleboro, he found no work for an artist other than giving drawing lessons at the town hall.

Then, on the last day of December in 1855, when Larkin was twenty-one years old, he decided to use his talents as a sculptor to give his community a Happy New Year's surprise. As soon as darkness fell, Larkin set to work by lantern light. With two close friends, Edward and Henry Burnham, whose father owned an iron **foundry** close by, he began to make the angel. The brothers brought him snow, which he added to the figure. When the boys got cold, they fired up the oven in the Burnham Foundry to warm themselves. They also melted the dry, powdery snow to make it stick better.

Sometimes Larkin made a hand or other part separately, so that he could more easily mold it. Then he attached it to the figure with wet snow. Slowly the angel took shape. Pouring water over the statue gave it a smooth, shiny look.

Finally, in the early hours of the morning, they finished. Larkin was tired and wet, but he was also pleased. It would do, he decided. He smiled, thinking how surprised people in town would be when the angel was discovered.

That morning crowds gathered to marvel at the statue. Word spread quickly. Main Street filled with sleighs as people from **surrounding** communities rode in to see the angel for themselves. Stories about the statue appeared in newspapers in Boston and New York, and even Italy.

The statue, made of ice and snow, could not last forever. Two weeks after Larkin created it, a January thaw reduced it to a puddle. But the angel's fame **survived**. Larkin received a **commission** from a man in Ohio to make a copy of his angel in stone. Other orders followed, including one for a wooden statue **symbolizing** agriculture to go on the new statehouse dome in Montpelier.



Main Street, Brattleboro, circa 1860



Larkin G. Mead, Jr., looks at his Snow Angel by lantern light. Illustration from *Picturesque Brattleboro*, edited by Rev. Frank T. Pomeroy in 1894.

Soon the state of Vermont asked Larkin to make a statue of Ethan Allen. He sculpted the figure in a **dramatic** pose. Allen's right arm is raised in anger as he demands the surrender of Fort Ticonderoga. An exact copy of the statue now stands at the entrance to the Vermont State House.

In 1862 Larkin sailed to Europe to study art. He raised money to pay for the trip by sculpting a **bust** of Union General George McClellan, which was sold

in a raffle. In Italy, he was welcomed by Hiram Powers, a Vermont sculptor who made his home there. Powers had grown up in Woodstock. Larkin liked Italy so much that he decided to settle there as well. In 1866 he brought his Italian bride home to meet his parents.



Ethan Allen Statue, Vermont State House, Montpelier. The original by Larkin G. Mead, Jr., was replaced by this copy made by Aristide Piccini in 1941. Photograph courtesy of John Williams, Friends of the Vermont State House.

In 1868 he competed against thirty-six other artists and won a commission to decorate the tomb of President Abraham Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois. He was paid seventy thousand dollars for this work, which took fifteen years to complete. Toward the end of his life, Larkin was elected an honorary professor at the Academy of Arts in Florence, where Michelangelo, the great **Renaissance** sculptor and painter, had taught.

For the 1876 centennial, which celebrated the nation's first one hundred years, Larkin made another statue of Ethan Allen. Today this statue stands in Statuary Hall in the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C., where you can visit it.



VOCABULARY

expression - the look on a face

figure - body

represent - to look like

workmanship - the skill of a workman

rarely - not often

sculpture - a work of art carved or shaped from wood, stone, clay or other materials

foundry - workshop where metal is cast

surrounding - encircling or bordering

survive - to live on

commission - a contract to carry out a job

symbolize - to stand for

dramatic - exciting

bust - statue of head and shoulders

Renaissance - period in European history during 1400s-1600s famous for rebirth of art