

Remarks By Honorable Peter W. Agnes, Jr.
Acceptance of the Sacco and Vanzetti Memorial
August 23, 1997

Governor Cellucci, Mayor Menino, distinguished guests and friends.

We are here today to recognize the achievement of an extraordinary American artist, Gutzon Borglum, to remember that it was a grave injustice visited upon two immigrant Italians who lived and worked in this Commonwealth that inspired him to create this magnificent work of art, and to celebrate the decision by an Italian-American mayor and an Italian-American governor to accept the Borglum Plaque.

Today is much more than a commemoration; much more than a photo opportunity. Today, a vision of something conceived "in the last hour of agony" suffered by Sacco and Vanzetti is being realized.

Now some will say there should be no memorial and no honors bestowed on these men until the debate over their guilt or innocence is finally settled and until it is demonstrated conclusively that they were innocent. Frankly, the debate makes no sense. As a legal matter, when defendants such as Sacco and Vanzetti are deprived of a fair trial -- i.e., when the trial judge makes up his mind that the defendants are guilty before the trial begins, when the government withholds vital evidence from the defense until after trial, and when witnesses are manipulated to create an impression of certitude when in fact the evidence was a sea of doubt, the verdict of the jury is not reliable. And since the defendants cannot be tried again, the question of guilt or innocence cannot be determined.

However, there are three important questions that we can and should ask today. Who was Gutzon Borglum? Why did Borglum create this work of art? And why should the city accept it?

First, the artist, Gutzon Borglum was an American. He was born in Idaho at the close of the civil war and his life spanned the period from reconstruction to the beginning of world war two. He was educated in the public schools of the west and mid-west. As a young man, he studied art in San Francisco. He then traveled to Paris in 1890 where he met with immediate success as a sculptor and painter. He traveled between America and Europe touring Spain, England and France until 1901 when he settled in New York.

It is reported that he was much admired by his contemporaries and received over 170 commissions for significant public monuments. He was passionate about America and American themes. His most well known work of course is the memorial to four presidents carved out of a mountainside in Blacks Hills, South Dakota. The Rushmore Memorial consists of four colossal heads of Presidents Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt -- it was an enormous undertaking for Borglum and occupied him for more than a decade. He also is the sculptor of the head of Lincoln that was placed in the United States Capital by an act of congress. Borglum also created a famous seated statute of Lincoln which is housed in a memorial in Newark, New Jersey and an equestrian statute of confederate general Phil Sheridan in Washington, D.C.

Second, why did Borglum undertake this project? Like so much about the Sacco and Vanzetti cases, there is some mystery and many unanswered questions. Following the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927, the Defense Committee conceived a plan for a memorial building in Boston to be known as the "Freedom House" to commemorate not only the Sacco and Vanzetti cases but other notable cases involving a grave injustice from the annals of Massachusetts history. Mr. Gardner Jackson, the secretary of the Sacco and Vanzetti Defense Committee was a friend and great admirer of Borglum. He may have enlisted the support of Felix Frankfurter to persuade Borglum to accept a commission for a bronze, bas relief for exhibition on the "Freedom House." Borglum himself as a well traveled artist who was in communication with artists from around the world must have had a sense of the International impact of the Sacco and Vanzetti case. And it is reported that he was deeply moved by their execution. In any case, Borglum was so enthusiastic about the proposal that he agreed to undertake the commission in 1927 without a fee.

A bronze relief was indeed produced and completed by 1930. It is believed to have been kept on the Borglum family estate in Connecticut. It also was reported to be part of a collection of Borglum's works in keystone, South Dakota, but it has apparently disappeared. Some say it was destroyed because of the controversy surrounding the Sacco and Vanzetti case.

The plaster model we see here today differs in several details from the bronze. This plaster model may be the one which was exhibited at the first Sacco-Vanzetti memorial meeting in Boston on this day in 1928. Thereafter, its exact whereabouts are unknown. In 1960, an unknown junkman brought it to the printing shop of Aldino Felicani who was the founder and treasurer of the defense committee. It was shown again 51 years later at an exhibition held at the community church of Boston on December 12, 1979. Since that time it has been part of the Boston public library's collection of Felicani, Sacco and Vanzetti material.

The third and final question is the most important: why should the city accept the Borglum relief? The answer is that this act by Mayor Menino, endorsed by Governor Cellucci, serves, in the haunting words of Vanzetti inscribed by Borglum on the relief, "as a tremendous lesson to the forces of freedom." By accepting this work of art, by promising to produce another bronze and by resolving to place it in a prominent location in the city of Boston, Mayor Menino is carrying out the dying wish of Sacco and Vanzetti – gain as inscribed by Borglum on this plaster model – "that our suffering and death will not have been in vain."

Today, ladies and gentlemen history is made; another chapter in the never ending story of Sacco and Vanzetti is closed. Thank you.

And now it is my great pleasure and my distinct honor to introduce Mayor Thomas Menino.

**CITY OF BOSTON • MASSACHUSETTS
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR THOMAS M. MENINO
Remarks of Mayor Thomas M. Menino
Acceptance of Sacco and Vanzetti Memorial
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Thank you, Judge Agnes. Welcome, everyone, to this historic occasion. Governor Cellucci, thanks you for being here today. And I'd like to express my thanks to Judge Agnes and the Massachusetts Dante Alighieri Society for your efforts to bring about this event.

The Dante Alighieri Society does important work for the Italian-American community, and it's thanks to events like this one that the Italian-American community in Boston remains active and thriving.

On behalf of the City of Boston, on the seventieth anniversary of the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, I am pleased to accept this work of art.

It's an honor to accept and publicly display a creation by the sculptor of Mt. Rushmore, to add to the terrific art and resources in our fine library.

The City's acceptance of this piece is not intended to reopen the debate about the guilt or innocence of Sacco and Vanzetti. We are accepting it to acknowledge this case's impact on the course of justice. I hope it will serve as a reminder to all of us about the importance of a fair trial.

Whether you believe in the guilt or innocence of Sacco and Vanzetti, we must all recognize their crucial role in history. As Judge Agnes has told us, historians and legal scholars everywhere discuss this case as a turning point in the effort to eliminate prejudice from the legal process. Ensuring fairness in the judicial process is important not only for immigrants, not only for minority groups, but for all Americans.

Boston is famous for the high value we've always placed on education and the free exchange of ideas. This library was the first free library open to the public in the United States. Its mission is – and I quote – "to preserve and provide access to the historical record of our society, and to serve the cultural, educational, and informational needs of the City and the Commonwealth."

This work of art – which you'll get a chance to see in a minute, don't worry – commemorates a significant moment in the history of our region. It belongs here, in the library, where people can come reflect on it, and decide what it means to them. It will certainly stimulate debate and discussion, as any library material should.

And now it's my pleasure to introduce the Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Argeo Paul Cellucci.

**A Statement From the Family of Aldino Felicani
On the Formal Acceptance of the Gutzon Borglum Sacco
Vanzelli Plaque By Mayor Thomas M. Menino on Behalf of the City
of Boston at the Boston Public Library, August 23, 1997**



Robert Felicani deeply regrets that he cannot be present upon this historic occasion. On behalf of the Felicani family, he wants to express great satisfaction that the wish of his late grandfather, Aldino Felicani - the formal acceptance by the City of Boston of the Gutzon Borglum plaque that commemorates Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti - has finally been realized on the 70th anniversary of their execution. The Felicani family thanks Mayor Thomas M. Menino and the Boston Public Library for bringing this about. It also wishes to recall and acknowledge the efforts of countless others who have helped to preserve the memory and the cause of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti.