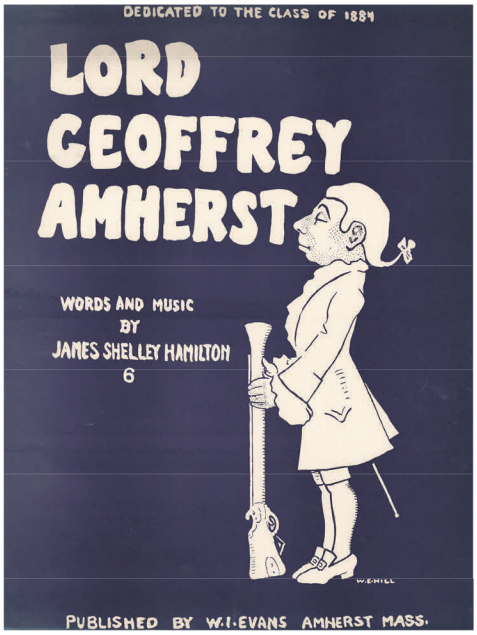
As It Almost Was

Amherst College's Monuments to Lord Jeffery

In the spring of 2013, a group of Amherst College students proposed changing the College's unofficial mascot to something other than "Lord Jeff," or Jeffery Amherst, 1st Baron Amherst (1717-1797), commander-in-chief of British forces in North America. Today, Jeffery Amherst is best known for a deplorable decision: in 1763, during Pontiac's Rebellion (an uprising of Native American tribes at the conclusion of the French and Indian War), Amherst authorized the distribution of blankets infected with the highly contagious, deadly smallpox virus to Delaware and Shawnee Indians. This real Lord Jeff had no connection with Amherst College, founded long after his death and named for the town (a name assigned to the town by the Massachusetts's Governor in 1759 despite the citizens' request for "Norwottuck," the Native American place name.)



"Lord Geoffrey Amherst," 1907
Photo: Archives and Special Collections

The two equestrian statues displayed nearby emerged from a fascinating moment in Amherst College's history, when its students—lacking a real founder-namesake such as an Elihu Yale, James Bowdoin, or John Harvard—embraced Lord Jeff as a mythic founding figure.

> *Lord Jeffrey Amherst was a soldier of the king*
> *And he came from across the sea,*
> *To the Frenchmen and the Indians he didn't do a thing*
> *In the wilds of this wild country*

In 1906, James Shelley Hamilton (Class of 1906) published the Lord Jeff song, and the College began to intensify in earnest its association with the namesake of its namesake town. Benjamin Dwight Hyde (Class of 1894), filled with the class pride endemic to graduates of such a small, close-knit school, saw the new Jeff craze as an opportunity for a lasting gift from his class, which was poor relative to surrounding Amherst College classes featuring J.P. Morgan partners and a future president. In 1914, Hyde visited the Boston studio of sculptor Bela Lyon Pratt (1867-1917) with the intention of commissioning bronze medals bearing Lord Jeff's face. Hyde planned to endow these medals as an annual gift from the Class of 1894 to certain senior prize winners. Pratt showed Hyde a wax model of a related subject: an equestrian sculpture of Lord Jeff commissioned by Frank A. Hosmer (Class of 1875), who proposed to raise funds from alumni to erect a monumental version on campus—a proposal widely reported in the *Springfield Union*, *Amherst Student*, *Boston Evening Transcript*, and elsewhere as a near certainty. Hyde commissioned a bronze casting of the wax model prepared for Hosmer, perhaps identical with the bronze displayed here. No impressions of the prize medal are known.

Writing in March 1914 in response to Hyde's medal suggestion, with its direct association of Lord Jeffery Amherst with Amherst College, Amherst President Alexander Meiklejohn noted:

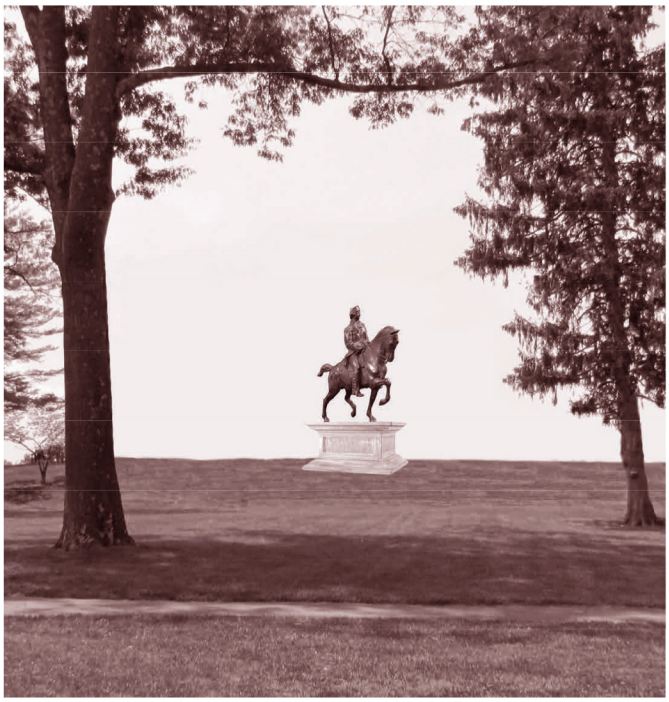
> *The only question I have heard raised is the historical one of the connection of Lord Amherst with the college. We have undoubtedly established such a connection by our well known song and by the enthusiasm that has grown up about it. I think it is quite possible that we may now go further and allow the connection to be officially recognized.*

For the first time, an Amherst College President had explicitly approved Lord Jeff's connection to the College, perhaps opening the door for the equestrian statue.

James Ormsbee Chapin, *President Alexander Meikeljohn,* AC POR.1935.1

Bela Lyon Pratt, *Lord Jeffrey Amherst*, 1913,
Lent by Carolyn and Lindsey Echelbarger '74, P'04

Meiklejohn himself was an instrument of change. Appointed in 1912 as the first non-alum, non-clergyman president, "Prexy" (a common student nickname for president) transformed the school from "an agreeable, leisurely, semi-educational country club where by doing a modicum of work you could spend four pleasant years and come away with a college degree"[1] to an institution where the "behavior of the faculty and students became ironic in the original sense, provocative of questions."[2] Meiklejohn raised professorial salaries in order to bring in young, excited teachers and attempted to revamp the curriculum, replacing ancient languages with modern ones, increasing focus on social sciences and economics, and doing away with the meandering routes students had been taking at a school then without majors or many required courses. Two years into his tenure, "Prexy" was remaking the school and, with World War I on the horizon, military hero Lord Jeff was becoming part of that change.



Pratt's monumental statue imagined as it would have been
Design: Rachel Rogol, Mead Art Museum

In 1912, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead, Jr. —the son of the designer of Central Park—surveyed Amherst's grounds for the College and, among other things, recommended tearing down the Octagon and leveling the hill it stands on. That location became the potential site for Bela Lyon Pratt's proposed statue of Lord Jeff. It would overlook the town, proudly surveying its eponymous municipality from its eponymous college, neither of which Amherst himself ever visited. Instead, the $50,000 needed for materials and construction went to build the statue of Henry Ward Beecher that stands on the spot today, near the still-extant Octagon.

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[1] Adam R. Nelson, Education and Democracy: The Meaning of Alexander Meiklejohn, 1872-1964 (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 69. Quote from a Boston journalist.

[2] *Ibid.*, 75-76. Quote from a contemporary Amherst student.

The dream of an equestrian Jeff withered on the vine. Pratt last mentioned it in a letter to his mother in March, 1914, optimistically saying that "the man from Amherst" had assured him that "the project is perfectly sure to go through in time."[3] Even after his death in 1917, an obituary in the *Springfield Republican* claimed of the statue that "it is possible the work itself may some day be built," only being held up by "the question of funds."[4] Strangely, though, neither Hyde nor Hosmer ever put out a request for funding to Amherst's Alumni through the *Amherst Alumni Quarterly*. No one did. Instead, though Hosmer wanted it on display in the library, Hyde donated the equestrian maquette to his fraternity house, Psi Upsilon, where it sat in prominent display until at least 1937. Beecher proudly inhabited the Octagon hill alone, while the residents of Psi Upsilon likely did not realize how grand were the ambitions of their little statue. Pratt's Amherst sits proudly upright while his steed marches bravely forward. A bronze model (perhaps the Psi Upsilon work, or else the version retained by the sculptor, and possibly the statue shown here) was displayed at a posthumous exhibition of Pratt's work, following the artist's untimely death in 1917 at the age of 49.

Pratt's maquette on view in the Psi Upsilon house, 1937
Photo: Archives and Special Collections

John Quincy Adams Ward, *Henry Ward Beecher*, ca. 1888-89, Photo: Wikimedia Commons

The proposal to erect Pratt's monumental sculpture had been defeated, but the idea of placing an equestrian statue of Lord Jeff on the Amherst College campus was not forgotten. In June 1930, Amherst-born sculptor Sidney Biehler Waugh (1904-1963) began to revive the idea. As the first step in that process, Waugh wrote from his Stockholm, Sweden, studio to Amherst alumnus Ernest M. Whitcomb (Class of 1904), expressing an interest in sculpting "a miniature equestrian figure of Lord Jeffery for you" or else a version of Amherst looking "quite impressive in his uniform, without the horse."

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[3] Letter from Bela Lyon Pratt to Sarah Victoria Whittelsey Pratt, 22 March 1914, <http://belalyonpratt.com/letters-item.php?letterid=1914-0322-BLP-SVWP>, accessed 15 May 2013.

[4] "Death of Bela L. Pratt—Noted American Sculptor," *The Republican* (Springfield, MA), 24 May 1917, <http://belalyonpratt.com/media/articles/1917/1917-0524-TRS.pdf>, accessed 15 May 2013.

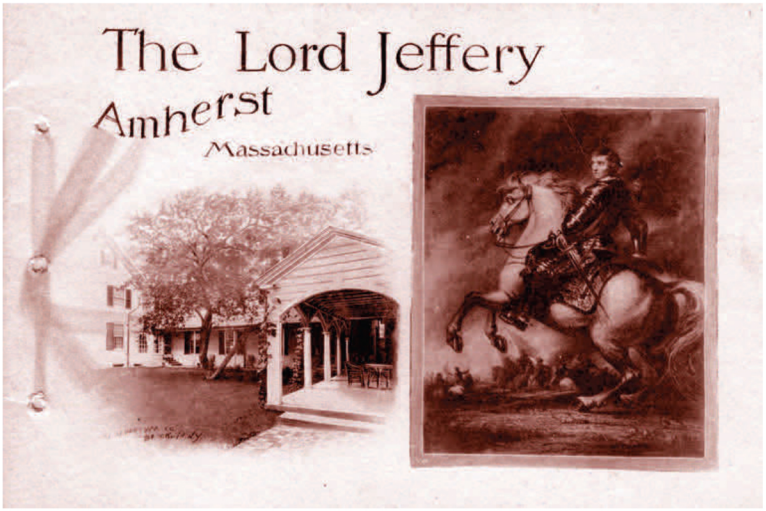
Waugh knew of Whitcomb's interest in Lord Jeff: Whitcomb had played an active role in forming the committee that created the Lord Jeffery Inn (opened in 1926), which featured an image of Amherst on horseback in its early marketing materials. Although Whitcomb appears not to have pursued it, the idea still retained its appeal in November 1959, when Waugh informed then-Mead Director Charles Morgan of alumni interest in the project:

> *Jim Smith, the late Dick Pratt and a number of others have long cherished the idea of having a life-size equestrian statue of Jeffery Amherst set up on the campus. Jim even talks of tearing down the Octagon and making a grand piazza on the top of the hill, with Jeffery facing the common. At other moments it has been suggested that Jeffery and his horse stand in front of Johnson Chapel.*

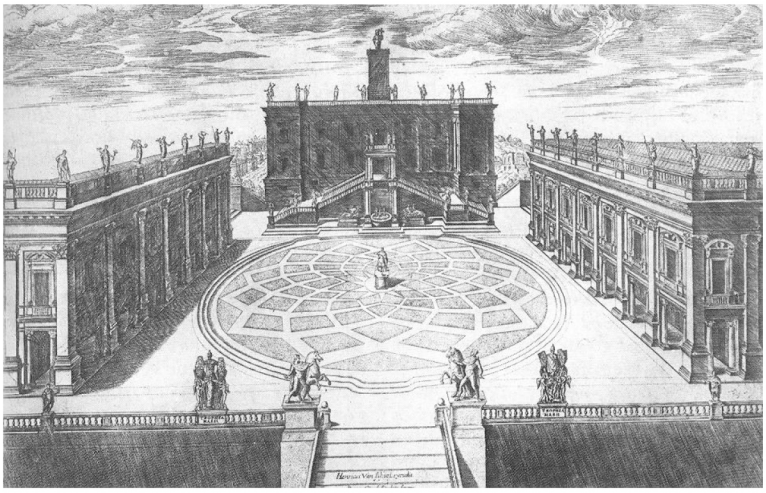
Morgan offered to "do a little jackaling around the fringes of the potential donors" if the alumni proposal should gain momentum, but concluded:

> *Only please, I beg of you, persuade Jim to take his eye off the Octagon. I love that piece of architecture, and think it a whole lot better than any mini campigdoglio that might take its place even if your Marcus Aurelius were to be the center-piece.*

Sidney Biehler Waugh, *Lord Jeffery Amherst*, 1930-36/1956, Gift of Charles H. Morgan, AC 1964.5



Lord Jeffery Inn Booklet, 1926
Photo: Archives and Special Collections



Étienne Dupérac, Campidoglio, 1568. Engraving of the celebrated Roman piazza designed by Michelangelo with the ancient Roman bronze equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius at its center.

In the end, only a bronze casting (commissioned by Morgan to preserve the appearance of a crumbling plaster maquette loaned to a Mead exhibition in 1959) would survive. Morgan donated the bronze to the museum in 1964. That donation came near the end of an era in campus culture: within the decade, students and alumni would begin to question the suitability of the College's unofficial mascot.

At this current moment on the cusp of change, this exhibition unites Pratt's and Waugh's maquettes for the first time, providing a rare glimpse into an Amherst College campus landmark that almost was.

Written by Jeremy Simon, Class of 2013, and Mead Director Elizabeth Barker