

Independence in Action: Depictions of Destroying the Statue of King George III

**Abstract**

This virtual exhibition focuses on how one famous moment in American history, the tearing down of the statue of King George III, has been portrayed in the centuries that followed. This proposal is for the presenting of a collection of artistic portrayals of this key event. By learning from the various depictions and the history that we come to know because of this exploration, this exhibition will not only allow viewers to greatly understand this historical moment, seeing many perspectives on what the event looked like and the commonalities these various illustrations share, but also to be able to realize how artistic depictions of events can also have questionable accuracy which can, and should, be detected.

## Exhibition Narrative

On July 9, 1776, a group of soldiers and civilians who called themselves the Sons of Freedom were emboldened after the Declaration was read aloud, so they marched over to the statue of King George III, who ruled over England at the time of the Revolutionary War. The statue had stood in Bowling Green, which is a small park that is in Lower Manhattan, New York City, and was originally made only six years earlier to celebrate King George helping to repeal the Stamp Act.<sup>1</sup> Patriots trespassed the fence that was guarding it, tied many ropes to it and pulled it down while surrounding crowds cheered and celebrated the momentous occasion. Ultimately, parts of the shattered statue would be converted into musket balls. In 2015, testing was able to authenticate nine musket balls, further establishing that the statue was indeed used as ammunition against the British.<sup>2</sup> Some parts are unaccounted for, such as the head, which was supposedly returned to England and mysteriously disappeared. George Washington was apparently not so thrilled about the pulling down of the statue, admiring their support for independence while insisting that patriots should not appear like rioters.<sup>3</sup> According to *Scientific American*, these were groups that mainly had “people of lower social and economic means” who could not otherwise be able “to sway politicians on their behalf.”<sup>4</sup>

Since the statue was no longer intact, parts of which having been converted into musket balls, curious historians are left only with clues as to what the monument to the then-king of England looked like. As will be discussed, evidence does give us an idea, to some extent at least, what the statue may have looked like, including major aspects such as whether the king was riding a horse. This will allow observers to dismiss certain illustrations as untruthful rather quickly if the artist gets a basic detail like that incorrect. Regardless, considering how artists at the time did not know for certain, they necessarily had to take liberties, using their own discretion to determine how exactly to portray the statue of King George III.

Objects 1 and 2 are quite similar in their depictions of the event, with one appearing to be based on the other. We see patriots pulling down the statue, which displays the king on a pedestal, with his crown and robe, scepter in hand, riding a horse while holding its reins. The patriots are waving their hats at this demonstration of secession from the monarchy. In Object 1 we also see that three soldiers are at ease, as if taking in the gravity of the moment. However, there are key differences, as these soldiers are missing in Object 2 as well as there being more buildings in the background. The fencing debris has changed as well in the latter. Notice how

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<sup>1</sup> “Pulling Down the Statue of George III by the Sons of Freedom,” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/756hpr-f9dbb3e06697bdb/>

<sup>2</sup> “‘Melted Majesty’ Musket Ball Discovered at Monmouth Battlefield to be Displayed at Museum for July 9 Anniversary,” Museum of the American Revolution, <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/press-releases/melted-majesty-musket-ball-discovered-at-monmouth-battlefield-to-be-displayed-at-museum-for-july-9-anniversary>

<sup>3</sup> “A Horse’s Tail: How a Legendary Piece of a King George III Statue Landed at the New-York Historical Society,” New York Historical Society, <https://www.nyhistory.org/blogs/horses-tail-new-york-historical-got-legendary-piece-king-george-iii-statue>

<sup>4</sup> D’Costa, Krsytal. “The History behind the King George III Statue Meme,” *Scientific American*, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/anthropology-in-practice/the-history-behind-the-king-george-iii-statue-meme/>

these two only have one rope that is shown, whereas almost certainly there were more people and ropes at work when the statue was pulled down. Both illustrations also show a giant cloud of smoke in the background from a celebratory bonfire.

Object 3 is one of the more detailed of the depictions of this incident, including several ropes and many people working to tear down the monument this time. Only one man is seen waving his hat, and the rest of the crowd is reacting to this demolition with mostly cheers. We are shown a bonfire, as well as a couple of people talking, and in the foreground a few people seem to be nervous about where King George is going to fall, and one child can be seen pointing at the statue. This engraving was based off of Object 4, the original painting, which is by Johannes Adam Simon Oertel. Notably, that child was not pointing in the original painting, and on the left, quite noticeably, is a Native American family who the engraver of Object 3 appears to have neglected to include — a decision that must have been a conscious one. Rather, there can be seen half of a Native American, due to him being blocked by the hat-waver, which is quite a step backward when it comes to including them in the scene. The engraver's motivations are not certain, however the inclusion of the Native American family at the scene in the first place may very well have been a fabrication. Consider an analysis of the painting provided by the New York Historical Society, which explains that “the Native American family depicted leaving the scene at left might suggest the passing of one phase of American history and the dawning of a new era.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, this could have been just a symbolic message showing how the Native Americans no longer have a major political presence in the region of the American colonies, with these decisions, wars, and celebrations instead being the product of white British citizens, now to be staunchly Americans themselves.

Object 5, a postcard, is one of the simpler ones. There is no environment or background, but rather just a block of land. Many patriots use a lot of ropes to tear down the statue, with one hat-waver and a few others cheering as well. It is possible that this could have been based on Object 6, which shows a similar angle for the viewer of the illustration. They both have a similar style of fence that is shown, with part of it being bent in where the patriots had breached and began to pull the statue, which is portrayed to occur in the same location in both depictions. The statue does look slightly different between the two.

Object 7 is the earliest known illustration of the taking down of the statue of King George III, by artist Franz Xavier Habermann. One might quickly notice that, instead of white patriots pulling the ropes, portrayed here are African American slaves doing the work. However, there are very obvious problems with this recreation of the event. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, analyzing a version of this illustration, explains how “The Baroque architecture is more characteristic of a large European city from that era than Anglo-Dutch colonial New York.” Interestingly however, the MET seems to agree with the inclusion of slaves, stating that “this imaginative recreation of that event correctly shows enslaved and free Black men performing most of the labor.”<sup>6</sup> It appears the MET is saying that slaves may have been the ones to actually

<sup>5</sup> “Pulling Down the Statue of King George III, New York City,” New York Historical Society, <https://emuseum.nyhistory.org/objects/3909/pulling-down-the-statue-of-king-george-iii-new-york-city>

<sup>6</sup> “The Destruction of the Royal Statue at New York on July 9, 1776.” The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

do the physical work of tearing the statue, a view of the event that would be inconsistent with most accounts and the artistic consensus of the event. According to Arthur Marks in “The Statue of King George III in New York and the Iconology of Regicide,” a mere “glance reveals that Habermann’s engravings are pure fantasies,” including details that “seem to go beyond normal allowances for the documentary transcription of such occurrences.”<sup>7</sup> So ultimately what was one of the original illustrations of the demolition of the statue is almost akin to a fiction. Perhaps the most obvious evidence of this, as we are about to see, is Habermann’s depiction of the statue itself.

Consider Object 8, which is an image featured in Marks’s article which shows actual remaining fragments from the statue of King George III. One of the pieces that we see is a horse’s tail, which was lost until a century later when, among other remains of the statue, it would be discovered in a swamp.<sup>8</sup> The fact that a horse’s tail was part of the statue proves that Object 7, Habermann’s representation of the incident, is wholly inaccurate when it comes to what the statue looked like. Further information on the statue comes from Object 9, another image featured in Marks’s article, which is of a statue of Marcus Aurelius in Rome. According to Marks, the statue of King George III was modeled after this one, giving us a good idea as to what the monument truly looked like.<sup>9</sup> Historian Wendy Bellion provides a description of the statue in an article for *Smithsonian Magazine*, explaining that locals could not miss its size and its oddity, especially when considering that “George appeared in the guise of an ancient Roman emperor.” He also “sporting a suit of armor and stretched one arm out in a gesture of imperial benevolence.”<sup>10</sup> This is a description that contradicts the artists of Objects 1-7, who instead don their illustration of the king in British royal wear. If accurate, then the statue would have looked most like Object 10, which is a depiction from around 1912 of the statue of King George III. This is also the version of the monument on display at the Museum of the American Revolution.<sup>11</sup> Considering all the information we can see that the illustrations of the statue in Objects 3 and 4 (the Oertel painting), as well as Objects 5, 6, and 10, are rather realistic, and altogether what we know for certain in combination with the reasonable estimations from those artists allows us to have a good idea of what the statue and the event of pulling the statue down looked like.

It also appears that the various depictions of the tearing down of the statue of King George III seem to strive for some degree of truth in their illustrations, which can especially be concluded when the statue is made to be as accurate as possible. So, we can trust that they

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<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/666015>

<sup>7</sup> Arthur S. Marks, “The Statue of King George III in New York and the Iconology of Regicide,” *The American Art Journal* 13, no. 3 (Summer 1981): 74.

<sup>8</sup> “A Horse’s Tail.” New York Historical Society.

<sup>9</sup> Marks, “The Statue of King George III,” 63.

<sup>10</sup> Wendy Bellion, “A Toppled Statue of George III Illuminates the Ongoing Debate Over America’s Monuments,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/a-toppled-statue-of-george-iii-epitomizes-the-ongoing-debate-over-americas-monuments-180979463/>

<sup>11</sup> “The Road to Independence,” Museum of the American Revolution, <https://www.amrevmuseum.org/exhibits/the-road-to-independence>

provide at least a cursory account of how the scenario played out, which demonstrates how history can be told visually as well. There are also many commonalities among the various depictions, such as a broken fence, at least one person waving his hat, usually several people involved in pulling down the statue, a celebratory bonfire, the king riding a horse on a pedestal, and a crowd cheering as the statue is torn down. So we can derive, just from looking at Objects 1-6, a basic understanding of the event that day: patriots breached the fence guarding the statue of King George III riding a horse on a pedestal and pulled it down with ropes. People were cheering as well, celebrating with bonfires and waving their hats.

### **Value to Visitors, Historians, and Public History**

This exhibition demonstrates how art can indeed be used to allow viewers to understand at least a cursory description of a historical event. Observers can see in this exhibition a consistency among various illustrations of the event, in addition to learning about the extent to which artists strive for accuracy, and how one may be able to detect a more realistic representation of a given historical happening. In the case of pulling down the statue of King George III, one navigating the exhibition can see how, even without knowing with certainty what the statue or the celebration that day looked like, artists can create accurate depictions based on the information available and to some extent can adequately relay a story to the audience.

Upon exploring this exhibition, observers will be able to understand much more about both the story of the statue's removal and the history of its depictions. This exhibition can bring historical value in that it shows that artists, for the most part, strive to ensure their portrayals of significant objects like the statue of King George III are as accurate as possible, which can bring historians insight into the scholarly integrity of artistic representations of a given historical event. There is little discussion of the various illustrations of tearing down of the statue of King George III. "Independence in Action: Depictions of Destroying the Statue of King George III" can change that, and covering these depictions of the statue's demolition can bring a unique contribution to the public body of historical knowledge and shed new light upon the history, evidence, and portrayals of this significant and symbolic event in American history.

**Object 1: Celebration of Independence at New York in 1776**

MCNY

Accession number: 29.100.1776

Unique identifier: MNY178991

Date: 19th Century

Medium: engraving (print)

Physical dimensions: H: 2.2", W: 2.11"



Patriots are seen here cheering on as two men tug down the statue of King George III with a rope. Soldiers are at ease, and several people can be seen cheering and waving their hats. A bonfire is in the background.

**Object 2: New York. Statue of George III Demolished.**

MCNY

Accession number: 29.100.1777

Unique identifier: MNY178992

Date: 19th Century

Medium: engraving (print)

Physical dimensions: H: 1.8", W: 2.1"

This one is very similar to Object 1, with the statue looking almost identical, as does the crowd that is tugging the rope. Missing are the soldiers, and there are more buildings in the background, drawn slightly differently as well.



**Object 3: Pulling Down the Statue of George III by "The Sons of Freedom".**

MCNY

Engraver: John C. McRae; Published by Joseph Laing

Accession number: 29.100.2337

Unique identifier: MNY6623

Date: 1859

Medium: engraving (print)

Physical dimensions: H: 20 2/5", W: 30 9/10"



Several people holding many ropes pull down the statue of King George III riding a horse on a pedestal, with one man seen waving his hat and a large crowd cheering on. Two people are having a conversation, and others appear to be in fear as they are possibly in the path of collapse. Smoke from a bonfire rises up from the left, and a little closer to the viewer is a mother with two children, one pointing to the statue about to be torn down. We see the fences guarding the statue have been dismantled as well.

**Object 4: Pulling Down the Statue of George III, New York City**

[https://www.americanrevolution.com/gallery/other\\_images/legacy\\_images/other/pullingdown\\_george\\_iii\\_by\\_oertel](https://www.americanrevolution.com/gallery/other_images/legacy_images/other/pullingdown_george_iii_by_oertel)

The original painting Object 3 was derived from, by Johannes Adam Simon Oertel, includes a few details that seem to have been forgotten: the child at the front does not point at the statue, and there seems to be another sibling with him. We see a Native American family on the left, and there is a tree missing in the background. The crowd behind the statue seems to have been expanded upon in Object 3, and so too a few buildings.



**Object 5: Float - Destruction of the Statue of George III**

MCNY

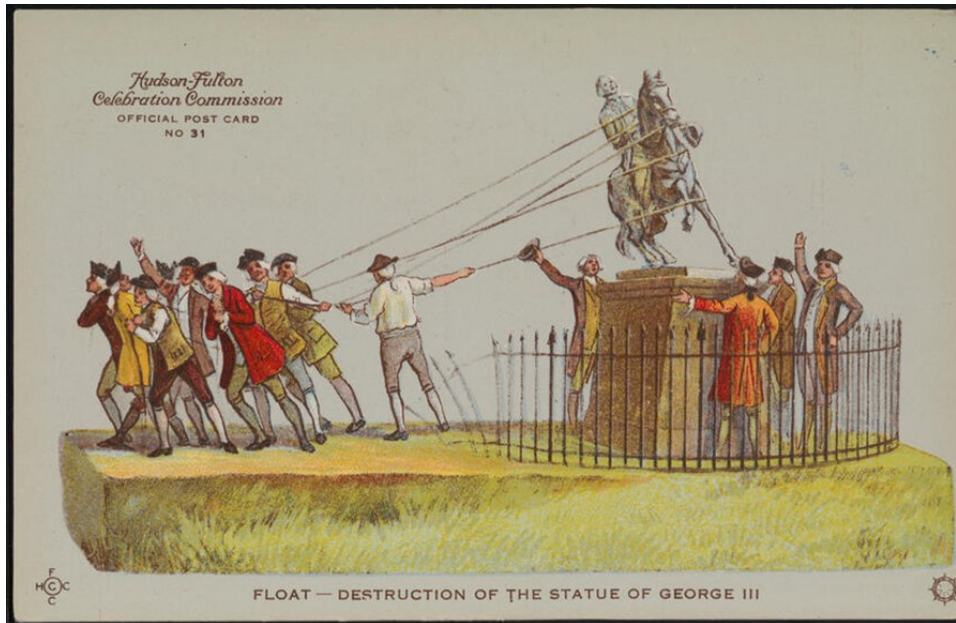
Creator: Johannes Adam Simon Oertel

Accession number: F2014.18.403

Unique identifier: MN159555

Date: 1909

Physical dimensions: H: 3 1/2" W: 5 1/2"



A block of land upon which many patriots use several ropes to pull down the statue of King George III — a statue that shows the king riding a horse on the pedestal. One man is waving his hat on the other side of the statue, and three others cheer on.

**Object 6: Patriots**

**pulling down the statue of George III in Bowling Green.**

MCNY

Creator: Redfield Brothers, Inc.

Accession number: X2011.34.1430

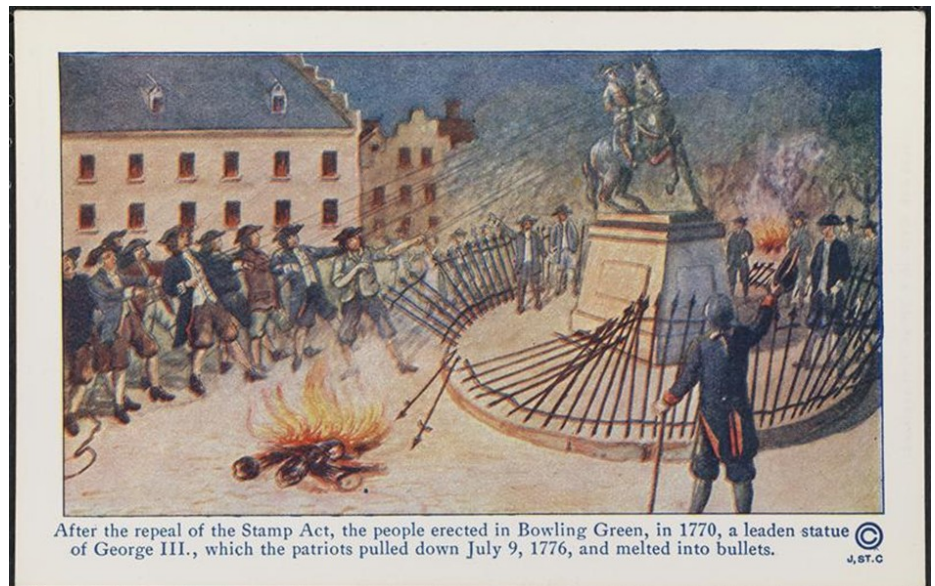
Unique identifier: M3Y43231

Date: N/A

Medium: not listed

Physical dimensions: not listed

The fence is bent in as patriots on the left use many ropes and collectively pull the statue, which is of the king riding a horse on a pedestal, down. What is unique compared to the other depictions is that this one has a fire that can be seen on both sides of the statue.



**Object 7: La destruction de la statue royale a Nouvelle Yorck. Die Zerstörung der königlichen Bild säule zu Neu Yorck**



MCNY

Creator: Franz Xaver Habermann

Accession number: 32.405

Unique identifier: MNY9325

Dated: ca. 1780

Medium: line engraving (print)

Physical dimensions: W: 15.875", H: 9.875"

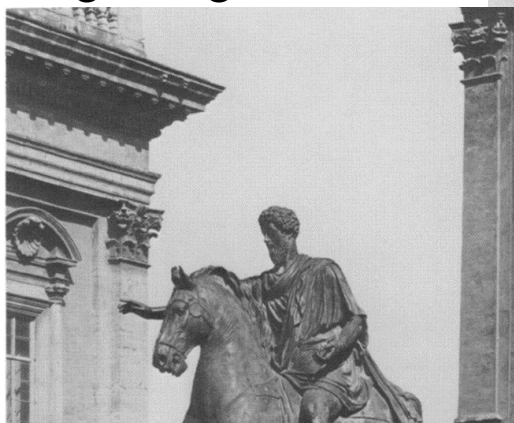
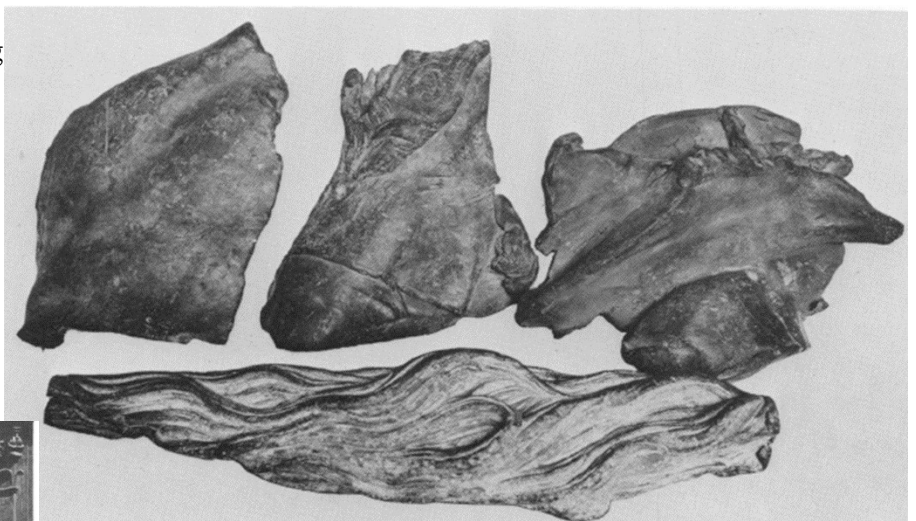


This is the first known depiction of the toppling of the statue of King George III. African-American slaves appear to be the ones doing the work of pulling down the statue, showing the king standing on a pedestal. European in origin, scholars can tell the architecture portrayed in this illustration is not that of New York's.

### Object 8: Fragments of the statue of King George III:

Arthur S. Marks, "The Statue of King George III in New York and the Iconology of Regicide," *The American Art Journal* 13, no. 3 (Summer 1981): 62.

Four pieces that remain from the actual statue of King George III. On the





Arthur S. Marks, "The Statue of King George III in New York and the Iconology of Regicide," *The American Art Journal* 13, no. 3 (Summer 1981): 63.

A statue that is believed to be the model on which the artist of the King George III based his work.

Object 10: Equestrian Statue of King George III, Bowling Green, New York City

<https://emuseum.nyhistory.org/objects/16191/equestrian-statue-of-king-george-iii-bowling-green-new-yor>

An illustration from around 1912 of what the statue of King George III looked like, which evidence shows to have been fairly accurate.



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