

Newburyport Volunteer (Newburyport, MA)

By Alisa Matyunina

An eight-foot soldier, standing atop a rugged granite boulder of almost the same height, casts his gaze across the greenery of Atkinson Park in the coastal city of



Newburyport Volunteer statue, The Museum of Old Newbury

Newburyport, Massachusetts. This young man has his left hand stuffed into his pocket, his right steadies a rifle which is flung over his shoulder; trousers tucked into his socks, his top shirt buttons remain undone, so that his shirt blows slightly open to reveal a glimpse of a muscular torso. As he marches forward, trampling a pine tree branch in his path, he looks as though he will spring to life and jump off the pedestal.

In its design, this monument still appears strikingly modern. It doesn't look at all like those standing soldiers at parade rest with perfectly laundered uniforms, their faces stern and glassy-eyed. Rather, the gaze of 'The Volunteer' is careless and his youthful face hints at a boyish innocence. The informal atmosphere of 'The Volunteer' serves as a radical departure from earlier representations of stoic-looking soldiers, which sprung up across the United States in the 1880s and 1890s. Another aspect of the monument which was strikingly unusual was the sculptor behind it. Dedicated at the turn of the century, this monument is the first statue to a common soldier known to have been sculpted by a woman: [Theodora Alice Ruggles Kitson](#).

According to the chorus of enthusiastic journalists who celebrated the monument's creation, Kitson's monument was incredibly well received when it was dedicated on

July 4 1902. One reason for its immense popularity may be its attempts to restore the individuality of the common soldier. Many monuments to the war had struggled to identify the most adequate ways in which to honor the unidentified battlefield dead. During the war itself, countless families were left without bodies to bury, and many grappled with the ways in which the personal identities of their loved ones had suddenly been subsumed into larger narratives of cause and nation. Historian Drew Gilpin Faust reminds us of the many ways in which the Civil War's countless battlefield deaths challenged the personal mourning traditions of the antebellum period. In the past, the dying would have been given their last rites before being laid to rest in a cemetery near their home, where they could then be visited by grieving family members. Following the war, families were confronted with the horrific anonymity of what Faust calls the 'sudden and all but unnoticed end of the soldier slain in the disorder of battle, the unattended deaths of unidentified diseased and wounded men.' In many ways, Kitson's unusual monument responds to this agonizing reality by attempting to bring back the individuality and innocence of sons and brothers who had suddenly disappeared forever.

So what was it about this monument that introduced a sense of individuality to the soldier? Most of the contemporary reviews of 'The Volunteer' comment on the 'life-like' representation of the soldier, which was seen by veterans as a true representation of the bodily experience of war: one which was arduous, physically and mentally testing, and not easily summed-up by the parade-ready, clean and laundered uniforms worn by new recruits and monumental standing soldiers alike. It was also a way of recuperating the dead, who are almost brought back to life through Kitson's reimagining of the common soldier. One correspondent for *The Neenah Daily Times*, writing shortly after the dedication, found much to praise about Kitson's figure, which seemed, to him, to honor the *real* Union soldier in his physical strength and patriotic demeanor:

The tucking of the trousers into the woolen socks, an expedient familiar to all the old campaigners among the sand Dunes of the South, yet probably never represented in sculpture before, afforded an opportunity to destroy the stovepipe rigidity of the trousered legs, which is ever the horror of the sculpture, and the perfectly natural negligé of the flapping blouse, and the partially opened shirt front, compressed tightly at one point, across the breast, by the straps supporting the haversack and canteen, reveals the fact that there is un-mistakably a well-developed, manly form beneath the garb. The lifelike and inspiring swing of the soldier in light marching order has been the theme of admiration with all who have seen the work.

Commenting on Kitson's remarkable eye for detail, this onlooker was struck by the soldier's movement, his physical force: unlike the standing soldier's rigidity and pomposity, this soldier's rugged character was visible in his very form. The strong masculine form of the soldier is also echoed in the boulder beneath it. A report on Kitson's monument in Lexington – 40 miles south of Newburyport – from where the granite boulder for 'The Volunteer' was shipped, saw fit to draw special attention to the boulder itself: 'The rough field stone base serves in a measure to assimilate the pedestal with the sturdy, rugged, liberty loving people of those early days [...] An immense boulder has been cut to suit the posture of the figure'.

Ruggedness seemed, to many onlookers, to capture the essence of this soldier's attitude: a review of the monument in the *Boston Globe* also remarked on the 'rugged, masculine strength' across Kitson's Civil War sculptures. The soldier's posture is rough-hewn like the rock, suggesting that he has been made more resilient, more mature and masculine by his experiences during the War. The soldier is a continuation of the granite boulder; the ruggedness of the unpolished stone blends with that of the soldier whose strong torso seems to almost be carved from the rock. The plaza, around the boulder, is circular with a carefully trimmed lawn around the perimeter of the statue.

The land upon which plaza, boulder, and soldier stand was initially gifted to the city, over a century ago, by Eunice Atkinson Currier and stood disused for twenty years

until in 1893, the [Bellville Improvement Society](#) organized a beautiful garden full of trees and shrubs to be planted in its place. [Mary Baker](#), an artist and history enthusiast from Newburyport comments on how it was transformed from 'a neglected field' into 'the gateway to the City of Newburyport'. It seems significant, then, that the rough masculinity of a soldier who has volunteered to fight, rather than been conscripted by the Federal government, should be harmoniously associated with the landscape and appears dedicated to the protection of a particular place. He is dedicated not simply to an abstract idea of nationhood, but to the tangible landscape of his home state. Like Adam who was formed from dust and clay, the soldier has been molded from his home ground: he is a product of the Massachusetts soil, and representative of its values of dedication and valor. In many ways, then, the monument links the relationship between the soldier as dedicated to and shaped by the values of his nation with that of his status as an individual.

Indeed, as the admiring comments of journalists and veterans suggest, Kitson's soldier seems to have represented a larger idea of patriotism, masculinity and national feeling that was in the air at the beginning of the new century. Theodore Roosevelt had captured that feeling just before the twentieth century begun, when he described the merits of a 'strenuous life': ruggedness, he had argued, was central to American character and to creating a country capable of the endurance and effort necessary to securing a place on the global stage.

These sentiments are echoed in John E. Gillman's speech of on 4 July 1902, at 'The Volunteer's' dedication. Gillman had been a soldier in the 12th Massachusetts infantry and had wanted to enlist when volunteers were first called up; since he was under-age, though, his parents stopped him from joining the other boys who lied about their age in order to get to the front-lines. Gazing at Kitson's statue, he spoke emotionally of the figure as promising hope for the future even as it remembered the bravery of soldiers past: 'This memorial will stand, not only as a symbol of the bravery of the men of '61, but as a lasting example of the patriotism of the men and women of

1902,' he told the dedication day crowd: 'Men will look upon it and receive fresh inspiration to strive for the further glory of their country'.

Evoking Hannibal, who lead the Carthaginian army across Southern Europe, Gillman reflected on the significant role the Civil War's monuments had to play in inspiring future generations to take up arms for their nation:

As Hamilcar brought his nine year old son the great Hannibal, to the Temple of the Gods, that, with childish bands uplifted, he might swear undying enmity against Roman tyranny, so years hence, when we have passed away, will the patriotic fathers of Newburyport bring their little sons to this altar of liberty, that here they may be filled with the spirit of universal freedom, and raising their childish hands, vow eternal constancy to their country and their flag, and everlasting hostility to treason and oppression.

Gillman related the Civil War to those historical conflicts and triumphs which have been remembered for centuries: war's tragic loss and the epic heroism it inspires take on legendary proportions as Gillman promises that the bravery of the Civil War dead will always be remembered – and, more importantly, honored by generations to come. As Gillman saw it, the monument, like the men it commemorated, would find its purpose in motivating future generations to sacrifice their lives, or those of their loved ones, for their nation, again and again, generation after generation.

The need for that sacrifice may have seemed pressing to Gillman, just as it had seemed pressing to [Roosevelt](#), whose comments on national ruggedness followed in the wake of the Spanish-American War. As the U.S. turned its gaze to international relations and foreign conflicts, both speakers recognised the seemingly constant threats that America faced – and the dedicated citizens needed to protect the country and partake in expansionist endeavors. In approaching this soldier, the citizens who had travelled to its dedicatory celebrations were invited to experience a sense of awe at his loyalty and readiness to give the ultimate sacrifice for the freedom of future generations. Since he volunteered to lay down his life for us, shouldn't we do the same so that others can live?

Promoting a sense of unity after the division of the Civil War was also crucial to consolidating a feeling of nationhood and strength as envisioned by Roosevelt. It is well-documented that soldiers from Newburyport fought for both the Union and Confederate causes. While a monument to [William Lloyd Garrison](#), an abolitionist from the city, stands in a prominent place in the center of Brown Square, there was much opposition to the abolition of enslavement in Newburyport. The economy of the coastal city was heavily dependent on enslavement: as a port, the town, with its merchants and tradespeople, relied on spending from the ships, and giving up this source of income would have been a terrifying prospect for many inhabitants.

This tension within the city is not commented on in the surviving journalistic reports of the dedication ceremony, nor recorded in the monument, which bypasses the experience of African Americans who fought in the war. Indeed, while the body of 'The Volunteer' is hardened and strengthened by conflict, his expression is free of enmity. The soldier is white and speaks to the spirit of reconciliation between white Confederate and Union veterans at the end of the 19th and early 20th century. Kitson's work in promoting the government's rhetoric of reconciliation through her work became more evident in her copy of ['The Volunteer'](#) which was placed in Vicksburg National Memorial Park, Mississippi in 1903, as the first state monument to be erected within the park. Journalists who were at the dedication ceremony in Mississippi remarked on the presence of both Confederate and Union veterans, and the speaker, Governor Bates, made an explicit appeal to reconciliation: 'we recognize the sacrifice and valor of all engaged in that conflict, wherever they fought, and whether they wore the blue or the gray'. During the ceremony, Kitson asked the daughter of a Confederate veteran to stand alongside her in a reconciliatory gesture.

But what role did Kitson, a female sculptor, have to play in this celebration of masculine strength and in the reconciliantionist acts dedicated to pulling North and South together again? On the front of the boulder we find the name of the sculptor: 'Theo A. Ruggles Kitson'. While the 'A' stands for Alice, this careful abbreviation

makes the name sound like a man's. It appears as though Kitson wanted it that way, at least initially: whenever she wrote her letters she signed them without the 'Alice' and received replies addressed to 'Theobald'. In fact, according to newspaper reports, it seems that even after Kitson was commissioned to design and create 'The Volunteer', the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument Association was still under the impression that she was a man.

At the dedication ceremony, however, much fanfare was made of the fact that the sculpture was made by a woman: 'Mrs. Kitson, though a Bostonian, is beautiful, somewhat after the Spanish type, being a brunette, with luxuriant wavy black hair and liquid eyes of a remarkable brilliancy and depth of blackness' remarked one reporter. 'The first of her sex to have sculptured a soldier's monument [...] personally Mrs. Kitson is young, grateful and modest', wrote another. Her delicate femininity, exemplified by her modesty and gratitude to the veterans, complements her act of commemoration: she depicts a certain feminized perspective on veterans as strong and youthful, which plays into a flattering depiction of wartime masculinity. Kitson was not the first woman to have sculpted a Civil War memorial, but the fact that she appears to have been the first woman to have made a statue to an ordinary soldier was clearly the object of much excitement amongst journalists, veterans and residents of Newburyport, adding to the sense that this monument was special, and that the soldiers who had died had not been subsumed into the mass of nameless dead, but were able to retain their individuality through the unique qualities of the monument.

But then came copies. Soon after 'The Volunteer' had been dedicated, copies started appearing across Massachusetts: [Ashburnham in 1904](#), [Sharon in 1908](#), [North Attleborough in 1911](#), [North Andover in 1913](#) and [Townsend in 1932](#). In 1903, a copy was also unveiled in [Vicksburg National Military Park](#), Mississippi. Produced by companies such as Gorham Manufacturing Company in Rhode Island, these would have been substantially cheaper than the first 'Volunteer' at Newburyport, and as

historian Kirk Savage suggests, were a more affordable means of commemorating the war dead for communities across the States. Rather than being produced en masse by foundries, as was common at the time, they were re-cast by Kitson who made alterations to some of the figures. [‘The Volunteer’ in North Andover](#), for example, is stepping forward with his rifle clasped in both hands, whilst the [monument in North Attleborough](#) is almost an exact copy of ‘The Volunteer’ in Newburyport.

Despite the striking homage to the dead that Kitson’s monument made possible for communities across Massachusetts, local reporters expressed a great deal of disappointment about these new volunteers. And it wasn’t just Kitson’s copies that rankled. Alterations made to the ‘The Volunteer’s’ simple surroundings – the addition of two cannons, which would flank the monument from 1903 onward – also provoked public ire. One reader writing to the *Newburyport Herald* all the way from Alaska, commented on the heated discussions that the copies of Kitson’s monument, and the original’s new embellishments, had prompted amongst the local community:

“The Volunteer” is so very fine, standing alone, as it did when we saw it, it is a great pity to put anything but nature herself about him. It seems like putting a gaudy frame on a beautiful picture. A frame or setting should always be so simple as not to attract attention away from the central object. I question the correctness of the article speaking of Mrs. Kitson having put copies of the Volunteer in other citys [sic]. It would, of course, be very nice for Newburyport to have the only copies of the statue, but I think an artist is at liberty to sell replicas of his work, which are always understood to be not the original but the replica of its given statue or picture.

Directing their wrath towards Kitson – and not towards other towns graced with copies of ‘The Volunteer’ – the Newburyport population evidently felt that the sculptor had betrayed them *and* her professional integrity by selling copies to other places. Material practicalities are not considered by the anonymous correspondent, unsympathetic both to towns who would have struggled to bear the financial burden

of a truly unique form of commemoration, but also towards Kitson, who, due to her husband's illness, was the chief breadwinner of a household with three children.

So what prompted such an emotional response to the practical act of making copies of Kitson's Newburyport monument? 'The Volunteer', which was unique both in its rejection of conventions around the appearance of Civil War monuments and in the gender of the sculptor, brought out the male soldier's individualism and, ultimately, American individualism. Within the context of a national cause that seemed to require selflessness and the abandonment of a distinct sense of identity, 'The Volunteer' offered to bring back the person – the father, the brother, the son in the photograph who was missed.

Were it not for the dates etched on the rough boulder, 'The Volunteer' could have been built at the start of the 21st century. It captures a particular view of American character and individualism which is still relevant today. Designed to inspire admiration amongst the future generations who gaze up at its muscular form, the carelessness of the soldier's open shirt and the lightness of his stride suggest a confidence about what he can achieve. His strenuousness and vitality paired with his innocent youthfulness capture a particular cultural memory of the Civil War and vision of America's future as built on the rugged strength and dedication of its white male population. We don't know who the soldier is, but in his optimistic, care-free face we see a young man who could have been a son, a brother, a husband or a neighbor. In many ways, the statue captures the power and vitality of soldierly sacrifice that many poets, artists, and commentators celebrated early on in the war. More than an object of mourning, a reminder of death, Kitson's soldier works to bring back voices and names – those individuals who were lost on battlefields and in hospitals far away from home – and inspire future generations with their presence.

Reading and Further Resources

Contemporary Newspaper Reports

"A Famous Sculptor", *The Neenah Daily Times*, Sep 2, 1902, 2. Accessed via Newspapers.com.

"As to Memorials," *Newburyport Daily News*, July 1, 1900, 2. Accessed via Newspapers.com.

"Boston's Woman Sculptures," *The Boston Globe*, October 2, 1894, 31. Accessed via Newspapers.com.

"Evokes Much Comment: Genius of Mrs. Kitson Shown in Newburyport's Volunteer," *Newburyport Daily News*, July 7, 1902. Accessed via Newspapers.com.

"Letter to the Editor," *Newburyport Daily News*, June 18, 1904.

This letter from Alaska constitutes evidence of discontent around the monument as it expresses disappointment in regards to the placement of cannons in front of the monument and the casting of copies.

"Massachusetts is First in Vicksburg Battle Park," *The Vicksburg Herald*, November 15, 1903, 1. Accessed via Newspapers.com.

This article comments on the placement of a copy of the monument in Mississippi.

"Miss Theo Ruggles Kitson at Work," *The Boston Globe*, July 16, 1891, 9. Accessed via Newspapers.com.

"Mrs Theo Ruggles Kitson One of the World's Best Sculptors: Fashioned 'The Volunteer,' Which is the Pride of Newburyport," *The Boston Globe*, July 2, 1902, 4. Accessed via Newspapers.com.

Neal, Christine. "Sculptor Theodora Alice Ruggles Kitson: 'A Woman Genius.'" Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University, *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, Volume 44, No. 1, Winter 2016, 2-29. Accessed via Newspapers.com.

"New England Women," *The Boston Globe*, October 23, 1915, 8. Accessed via Newspapers.com.

"One of the Best: Newburyport's Volunteer Appeals Strongly to the Sailor," *Newburyport Daily News*, July 9, 1902. Accessed via Newspapers.com.

“Statue Unveiled,” *Newburyport Daily News*, July 5, 1902, 6. Accessed via Newspapers.com.

A summary and number of quotes from the dedication speech are provided in this account of the dedication ceremony.

“Soldiers Monument Dedication: Programs for the event of July 4 as perfected to date,” *Newburyport Daily News*, June, 26, 1902. Accessed via Newspapers.com.

This article details the programme of the dedication ceremony.

“Theo Alice, Sculptor: ‘Talented, and though a Boston Woman, Beautiful’,” *The Indianapolis Journal*, August 24 1902, 22. Accessed via Newspapers.com.

“The New Kitson Memorial to the Newburyport Soldier,” *Newburyport Daily News*, January 4, 1901, 2. Accessed via Newspapers.com.

“The Soldier’s Monument,” *Newburyport Daily News*, The Soldier’s Monument, Dec 20 1900. Accessed via Newspapers.com.

“WILL GIVE \$100. City Improvement Society Helps Along the Soldiers’ Monument,” *Newburyport Daily News*, Dec 21, 1900. Accessed via Newspapers.com.

Very little information is available on the cost of the monument and the breakdown of funding by organisation. This article briefly notes the sum provided by the City Improvement Society.

Archival Images

Digital Commonwealth, Massachusetts Collections Online, “Civil War Soldier, Atkinson Common.”

<https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth:tq57qh56b>

Contemporary images of the monument.

History Newburyport, “Atkinson Common.”

<https://historynewburyport.com/atkinson-common/>

Contains research from local historians about Newburyport and images of Atkinson park before and after the placement of the monument.

Smithsonian Archives of American Art. “Henry Hudson and Theo Alice Ruggles Kitson Papers.” <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/henry-hudson-and-theo-alice-ruggles-kitson-papers-7186>

Contains images of the Kitsons and documents related to their work.

Further Reading

"Atkinson Common," *Newburyport Parks*, <https://newburyportparks.com/atkinson-common.html>.

Contains images of the park and area next to the monument being recently used for commemorative activities.

Brown, J. Thomas. "Confederate Monuments in National Perspective," Dec 29, 2019. <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/173917>

Gilpin Faust, Drew. *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*. New York: Vintage Books, 2008.

See for a detailed study of how the Civil War affected ways of grieving on a massive scale and challenged conventional mourning rituals.

Hallett, William. *Newburyport and the Civil War*. Charleston: The History Press, 2012.

A popular overview of the role of those who lived in Newburyport in both Confederate and Union causes.

Heller, Jules and Nancy G. *North American Women Artists of the Twentieth Century: A Biographical Dictionary*, 305.

One of the few publications to include biographical information on Kitson.

Massachusetts Civil War Monuments Project. "Newburyport". June, 11, 2018. <https://macivilwarmonuments.com/2018/06/11/newburyport/>.

McDonald, Matt, "Q&A," *The Boston Globe*, November 16, 2003, 126.

Savage, Kirk. *Standing Soldiers Kneeling Slaves*, New York: Princeton University Press, 1999.

A detailed examination of the memory of enslavement as present in public forms of commemoration.