

A Remarkable Life...

Carved from a Coal Mine



Written by: **Bucky Schriver**

In the latter half of the 19th century, more than 12 million people emigrated from Europe in search of a better life in America. Most families who came to Maryland's Georges Creek Valley emigrated from Scotland, Ireland, or Wales. The majority came with the modest goal of finding work to sustain a meager day-to-day existence. The Social Security Act, union pensions, and any hope of a comfortable retirement would not be realized for at least another 50 years. The inconsistent demand for coal and low wages made it necessary for boys to abandon their



Sculptor George Conlon

good fortune, some families would escape the desperate cycle sooner than others.

Ocean Mine No. 1, one mile north of Midland, MD, was one of the oldest mines along Georges Creek.

PHOTO COURTESY ALLEGANY COAL & LAND

education and go to work in the mines at a very early age to help support the family. This often condemned the boys to a life of low-paying drudgery and an early grave from black lung, due to prolonged exposure to coal dust. For most families, it would be generations before they were able to break the coal miner's cycle of poverty. Through the combination of innate talent, hard work, and



James Conlon emigrated from Ireland in 1878. In 1886, James married Cumberland native Clara Bowers, and the couple made their home on Railroad Street in Lonaconing. In the early 1890s, the family moved to a rented house in Ocean, one-mile north of Midland, where James found employment in the Consolidation Coal Company's No. 1 Mine, better known as the Ocean Mine. Four of James and Clara's eight children were baptized at St. Mary of the Annunciation Catholic Church in Lonaconing. The other four were baptized at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Midland. The couple's second child, George Alphonsus Conlon, was born on June 25, 1888, in Lonaconing.



A few of George Conlon's sculptures: General John "Black Jack" Pershing (top left); President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (top right); poet Robert Frost (bottom left) and Amelia Earhart posing with her sculpture (bottom right).

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY GEORGE CONLON FAMILY

In 1902, 14-year-old George Conlon joined his older brother Thomas and their father James as employees of the Consolidation Coal Company, at the Ocean Mine. James worked as a clerk and teamster, Thomas was a driver, and George worked as a slate picker and trapper boy. By 1910, the family was able to purchase a home on Broad Street in Midland. James Conlon and his sons Thomas and James all worked as coal miners to support the family. By this time, George Conlon's life had taken a dramatic change of direction.

At an early age, George manifested a precocious artistic talent. Working from a photo of Maryland Governor

Edwin Warfield, he decided to create a bust of the governor from clay that he had found in the mine. George's cousin Lorena Bowers said, in a 1927 interview with the *Cumberland Evening Times*, that the photo came from one of the governor's campaign buttons.

On June 12, 1906, Governor Warfield visited the State Normal School in Frostburg where he met the graduating classes of the Normal School and Beall High School. Afterward, the governor was given a tour of the Ocean Mine. He was shown George Conlon's sculpture and was so impressed that he sponsored George's enrollment at the



George Conlon in his Paris studio, working on his General John "Black Jack" Pershing bust.

PHOTO BY PAUL KORUNA

George Conlon's General Pershing sculpture is permanently on display at the American Legion National Headquarters in Indianapolis, Indiana.

PHOTO BY LUCAS CARTER/THE AMERICAN LEGION



Maryland Institute for the Promotion of the Mechanic Arts (renamed in 1959 the Maryland Institute College of Art). While attending school at the institute, George was employed at the Fidelity and Deposit Company in Baltimore. Upon graduating with distinction in 1911, George was awarded the Rinehart Scholarship to study in Paris. The scholarship included a \$1,000 annual salary. George's passport to travel to France was issued on August 11, 1911. He lived in an artist's colony in Paris, and studied under renowned sculptors such as Paul Wayland Bartlett, who created the *Apotheosis of Democracy*, which is displayed on the pediment at the U. S. Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. Bartlett finished the work in 1916, the same year in which George Conlon returned to the United States.

On February 24, 1916, George Conlon and his bride of two months, Marie Rose Gilson, departed from Bordeaux, France, aboard the passenger ship *Chicago* to escape the ravages of World War I in Europe. Marie was a native of Crozant, France. The couple arrived at the port of New York on March 10. George and Marie settled in Baltimore, and celebrated the arrival of a daughter, Georgia Ruth Conlon, on January 6, 1917. Georgia Ruth Conlon was affectionately known to her family members as "Babou."

On December 30, 1918, George was working at his studio in Baltimore while his wife and daughter were alone in the family's apartment. Marie was tending to a gas-fired heater when it malfunctioned, causing a large flame to leap from the front which caught her clothing on fire. People in the area rushed to Marie's aid when they saw her run from the building while carrying her young daughter. Bystanders wrapped Marie in a blanket to extinguish the flames, but not before she had suffered serious burns. Marie Conlon

passed away on January 9, 1919, three days after her daughter's second birthday. On January 20, 1919, 11 days after his wife's death, George's passport for a return trip to France was issued. George and his daughter would return to Paris again, where George could work in his studio while his mother-in-law helped raise little Georgia. George and his daughter would not return to the United States for another 22 years.

Meanwhile, the life of the Conlon family in Midland had also taken a turn for the worse. Between 1910 and 1920, coal production at the Ocean Mine had fallen by more than 60 percent, and employment had decreased proportionately. James and Clara Conlon decided to move to Columbus, Ohio, where they would spend the rest of their lives. James passed away on February 10, 1919, only a month after the death of his daughter-in-law Marie.

In 1926, George Conlon then married Mary Wilhowska, the daughter of a prominent Polish engineer.

During his second tenure in France, George created most of his greatest works. In 1927, the same year that Charles Lindbergh made the first non-stop transatlantic flight, George Conlon was commissioned to create a bust of Lindbergh for the American Embassy in Paris.

According to George's Conlon descendants, he had an affinity for aviators. Working from a photo taken when Amelia Earhart visited Paris, Conlon created a bust of the famous female flier.

On October 5, 1937, the 20th anniversary of the American Legion's pilgrimage to France, American ambassador to France William C. Bullitt presented the legion with George Conlon's sculpture of General John "Black Jack" Pershing. The bust is on permanent display at the American Legion's National Headquarters in Indianapolis.

On June 9, 1941 (which happened to be George's mother Clara's 76th birthday) George and his daughter Georgia arrived at the port of New York on the passenger ship *Excambion*. The ship had departed from Lisbon, Portugal, ten days earlier. The Conlons left Europe to escape the Nazi occupation of France. George's wife Mary remained in southern France to visit her sick

mother, with plans to join up with George and Georgia later. Due to the World War in Europe, communication between France and the United States ceased. On January 13, 1944, Cumberland Mayor Thomas F. Conlon received a cablegram from Bern, Switzerland, through the Red Cross, saying that his sister-in-law, Mary Wilhowska Conlon, had died on June 27 of the previous year. Thomas Conlon was burdened with the responsibility of telling his brother George that his wife was deceased.

Soon after returning to America, George began work on a bust of U. S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull. Completed in 1942, the sculpture was presented to the office of the *Cumberland Evening Times and Cumberland Sunday Times*. In December 1944, the bust was offered for display at the U. S. Capitol by Senator Millard Tydings, and was accepted by a joint resolution of the 79th U. S. Congress on January 3, 1945. John J. McMullen, publisher, and J. William Hunt, editor, represented the Cumberland newspapers at the congressional session. The bust of Cordell Hull was



George Conlon's bust of FDR's U. S. Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, was completed in 1942 and presented to the office of the *Cumberland Evening Times and Cumberland Sunday Times*. The bust was bronzed and is on permanent display in the reception room of the United States Senate. A bronze replica also resides at the newspaper office in Cumberland, MD.

PHOTO BY BUCKY SCHRIVER

bronzed and is on permanent display in the reception room of the United States Senate. According to George Conlon's obituary in the *Cumberland Evening Times*, the Cordell Hull sculpture had previously resided in the office of the Vice President of the United States for many years. The inscription on the base of the sculpture reads, "Presented to the nation by the *Evening and Sunday Times*, Cumberland, Maryland, 1944." Cumberland native David Lynn, architect of the Capitol, was credited with clearing some of the legislative hurdles for acceptance of George Conlon's sculpture. A bronze replica of the Cordell Hull bust was unveiled at the *Cumberland Times-News* office in Cumberland on New Year's Day, 1945. George and Georgia Conlon were the guests of honor at the unveiling. In a letter to John J. McMullen, Hull expressed his gratitude for the tribute paid to him. Cordell Hull was awarded the Nobel Peace

Prize in 1945 for his role in the founding of the United Nations.

George Conlon never remarried. George and Georgia settled in Washington, D.C., where George found work with the U. S. Geological Survey until his retirement in 1958, at age 70. George continued to indulge his passion for sculpting in his studio apartment on M Street, in the area of Dupont Circle. Due to his failing health in his later years, Georgia moved her father into her own Belmont Street apartment, so that she could attend to him. George Conlon passed away on December 14, 1980.

Georgia Conlon was an avid equestrian and was multilingual. Georgia, who never lost her lovely French accent, worked as an interpreter at the Russian embassy in Paris. After returning to America in 1941, she was employed at the French Embassy in Washington, D.C. Georgia was an avid bibliophile who had a huge collection of books and an encyclopedic knowledge of art and world history. She was intimately familiar with the museums and art galleries

of Paris. Her cousin, Thomas Conlon, Jr., recalled feeling intimidated by Georgia's sophistication when he met her for the first time.

On Friday, July 20, 2012, Georgia Conlon's saga came to an end when she passed from this world at her apartment in Washington, D.C., with her beloved cat Sila and her cousin Frank at her side. George, Georgia, and Marie Rose Gilson Conlon are buried together at the New Cathedral Cemetery in Baltimore.

George Conlon also created sculptures of such famous people as Dwight D. Eisenhower, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Robert Frost, Shirley Temple, Clarence Darrow, Will Rogers, Marie Curie, and Ferdinand Foch.

Artistic talent and a proclivity for personal achievement were traits that characterized many of the Conlon family members. After losing his job in the underground coal mines,

George's older brother, Thomas F. Conlon, went on to work as an insurance agent, and later served a two-year term as mayor of Cumberland, Maryland, from 1942-1944. Thomas Conlon, Jr. followed in his father's footsteps and served two terms as mayor of Cumberland, from 1966 until 1974. Mary Conlon, daughter of Thomas Conlon, Jr., graduated from the same Maryland Institute College of Art as her great uncle George.

Governor Edwin Warfield's tour of the Ocean Mine in 1906 would set George Conlon's life on a dramatically different course. George's remarkable artistic talent allowed him to rise from the dark, damp confines of the underground coal mines to live in exotic places and interact with some of the world's most famous people. Many of his artistic creations are still displayed at prestigious places around the globe. In words taken from a *Cumberland Evening Times* article on



Georgia Ruth Conlon
(January 6, 1917 – July 20, 2012)

PHOTO COURTESY FRANK CONLON

June 20, 1916: "Schoolbook stories of artist's careers, over which every child has marveled, hold no more romance than the rise of George Conlon."

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