

## **Joseph G. Butler and the Founding of the Butler Art Institute**

### **Rebecca Rogers**

Joseph Green Butler was born in Mercer County, PA in 1840, son of a blast furnace operator. His father moved to Niles, Ohio, in 1841 where the Butlers were associated with the first rolling mill in the Mahoning Valley and associated blast furnaces. "Uncle Joe" Butler made his fortune in both the iron and steel mills of the Mahoning Valley, helping found both the Ohio Works of Carnegie Steel and Youngstown Sheet & Tube. A founder of the Iron & Steel Institute, Butler was a member of the fraternity of early steel magnates whose wealth, influence and knowledge he tapped for his pet projects.

The two biggest projects were the construction of the McKinley Memorial at Niles in 1916 and the founding of the Butler Art Institute which opened in a McKim, Meade and White foundling hospital design in 1920.

Butler began collecting contemporary, representational art in the 1870s, had a large enough collection to establish an at-home gallery in the 1890s and made plans for a public gallery in 1916. He held learning and experiencing art in high regard. Thus, he sponsored an "institute" where art classes and art clubs met, rather than a gallery which only showed paintings.

His was the first museum of American art. The subject seems to have been chosen to foster and celebrate nationalism and to present subjects that would be understood by all the visiting public.