

THE BUILDING OF THE WASHINGTON NATIONAL MONUMENT

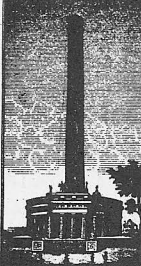
By
Ruth Preston Rose

More than a century passed between the time when a memorial to George Washington was authorized by the Continental Congress in 1783 and the completion of the Washington National Monument in 1885. The memorial structure was started by citizens who collected funds throughout the United States. It was finally completed by the United States government.


The Continental Congress decided to erect an equestrian statue to honor the man who was considered the father of his country, and a site for the memorial was designated by Pierre L'Enfant in his plans for the city of Washington.¹ Sporadic efforts by the Congress failed to get the statue erected, so in 1833 a group of prominent Washington citizens organized the Washington National Monument Society for the purpose of collecting funds and erecting a suitable monument on the grounds designated for that purpose. Contributions were made by citizens all over the country in the form of \$1.00 annual membership fees to the society. Those contributing that amount were given certificates of membership in the society. Some state legislatures authorized contributions to the society; collection was taken from members of the armed services, from visitors to the Centennial celebration in Philadelphia, and from citizens as they were counted for the 1850 census. By 1850 \$100,000 had been spent on the monument, the collections of 1835-1836 having been invested in stocks, with accrued interest reinvested annually until the original investment had more than doubled. Most of that money had been spent on construction of the monument, and the treasury was low in 1850 when a new fund-raising drive was under way.²

The Washington National Monument Society selected a monument design by the architect Robert Mills. It included a circular building with a center obelisk to rise to the height of 500 feet. The cornerstone of the monument was laid on July 4, 1848 at an elaborate ceremony which included a long parade reviewed by President James K. Polk. The Orator of the Day was Robert C. Winthrop of Massachusetts, Speaker of the House of Representatives. Others present were Mrs. James Madison, Mrs. John Quincy Adams and Mrs. Alexander Hamilton, who was then ninety years old. These three ladies had helped collect contributions from the women of the United States. Also participating in the ceremony were Chief Justice Roger B. Taney and George Washington Parke Custis, the adopted son of George Washington and proprietor of the Arlington estate.³

THE MONUMENT COMPLETE
WITH THE PANTHEON



WASHINGTON
NATIONAL MONUMENT

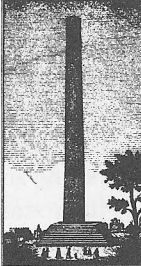


has contributed one Dollar
in aid of the erection of the
WASHINGTON NATIONAL MONUMENT
which entitles him to all the
privileges of Membership in the

Washington National Monument Society.

J. Taylor President
Geo. Wattenston Secretary
Elisha Whidbey Genl. Agent
W. D. Taylor Agent

THE OBELISK
OF THE



WASHINGTON
NATIONAL MONUMENT

Engr. by E. White A.C. Robinson

CERTIFICATE OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE WASHINGTON NATIONAL MONUMENT SOCIETY

Persons who contributed one dollar or more to aid in the erection of a national monument in George Washington's honor were awarded membership in the Washington National Monument Society. The certificate of membership reproduced above is among the records of the Society in the National Archives, Washington, D. C.

(National Archives Facsimile No. 11)

Items placed in the cornerstone included current newspapers, a description of the telegraph, some daguerrotype photographs of members of the Washington family, a medal with a likeness of George Washington on one side and of the monument on the other side, and a flag made by the Young Ladies of Galveston. The flag was sent to the monument society by Senator Sam Houston, who wrote, "It is the flag that guided her [Texas] amidst the gloom by which she was surrounded, the star that led her pathway in her achievements."⁴

By 1854 the monument had reached 154 feet in height, but its construction was halted by a dispute which arose within the society. The dispute followed an incident which occurred on the night of March 5, 1854 when ten or twelve men in disguise broke into the lapidarium of the monument, overpowered the watchman and took a block of African marble which had been presented by the Pope to the Monument Society. The interior walls of the structure were being decorated with individual memorial stones donated by foreign countries as well as states and citizens' organizations. The Pope's stone, on which was engraved "Rome to America," had arrived in the United States during a period of American hostility toward Europe in general and toward Catholicism in particular. An outcry arose against acceptance of the Pope's stone.⁵ An

example of the oratory directed against the acceptance of the stone may be seen in the pamphlet, "The Pope's Strategem: 'Rome to America,' an address to the Protestants of the United States, against placing the Pope's block of marble in the Washington Monument," by John F. Weishampel, Sr.⁶ On June 25, 1852, Weishampel had appeared at a mass meeting in Baltimore. After the meeting a petition was sent to the Washington National Monument Society from the people of West Baltimore protesting the acceptance of both the Pope's stone and the stone sent by the government of Switzerland. The petition made the statement that "the American people are justly jealous of any foreign intermeddling in our domestic affairs and especially in the erection of this the National Monument of our undying regard and love for the 'Father of his Country'; and seriously object to any materials from other countries being used, no matter under what pretense they may be offered."⁷

The thieves who took the Pope's stone were never positively identified and the stolen block of marble was not recovered. In 1883 a man who claimed to be one of the thieves told a reporter from the *Washington Post* that the stone had been broken into pieces and thrown into the river by members of the know-nothing party.⁸ A few weeks after the theft a popular ditty, set to the tune of "Jordan Am a Hard Road to Travel," was sung on the streets of Washington. It went:

Oh that Pope of Rome
He sent a stone
To be placed in the monument accordin'
But know-nothings thought it best
Not to let it rest,
But to pitch it on the other side of Jordan.⁹

After the disappearance of the Pope's stone the Washington National Monument Society was in disarray. By paying the \$1.00 membership fees, the know-nothings infiltrated the organization and took control, ejecting the former board of managers. Because of division within the society, the United States Congress, in 1855, withheld the \$200,000 which had been requested for completion of the monument. The know-nothings managed to add six more feet to the height of the structure, but that portion was later removed.

No further construction took place until after the Civil War was over. The use of the monument and its grounds may be deduced from the following excerpt from a letter of May 7, 1861 to John Carrol Brent, Secretary of the Washington National Monument Society:

Lieut. Beckwith of the U.S. Army presented an order from the President directing him to use the Monument grounds for Cattle belonging to the Government. They have some forty five head now in the enclosure. They have a man in charge of the cattle, from sunrise to sunset, so it will not prevent visitors from visiting the

Monument. They have *hay* coming, and have selected one of the out houses for storing the same.¹⁰

After the know-nothings relinquished control of the Washington National Monument Society, Congress granted the society a formal charter of incorporation. William W. Corcoran, the art patron, became one of the incorporators and, when the war had ended, he actively promoted the completion of the monument. Corcoran had the sculptor W.W. Storey design a portico which included statues of Liberty and George Washington. Mills had died in 1855, and the central obelisk was all which remained of the original design for the monument. Congress appropriated funds for completion of the obelisk, but Storey's plan for a portico was rejected, causing Corcoran to remark that the "friends of the chimney have prevailed."¹¹

One of the "friends of the chimney" was Robert C. Winthrop, who had been called upon to deliver the oration at the laying of the cornerstone of the monument in 1848 after the death of John Quincy Adams, who had been the intended orator. In 1878, Winthrop wrote, "I had no small part in inducing the Building Committee, many years ago, to omit the Pantheon at the base, and to confine the design to a simple obelisk." His response to a new design was:

To tear it all down, with a view to improve the design was abhorrent to me. Story called to see me when he was in Boston, & I told him that, so far as I was concerned, my first wish was to finish the Monument as a simple Obelisk; but that, if a change was unavoidable, owing to any insecurity of the foundation, his idea of turning it into an ornamental Lombard Tower was the best plan I had seen suggested.

Winthrop added a comment which aptly expresses the effect of the Washington Monument in its completed form:

I am sure that what is called "advanced art" looks with scorn on anything so simple and bold as an obelisk, more especially when it is made up of a thousand pieces, instead of being a monolith shaft. Yet the Bunker Hill Monument, of which the design was furnished by one of our earliest & best artists — Horatio Greenough, is one of these composite obelisks & Webster was proud to apostrophize it as "the true 'orator of the day'." when he was pronouncing his own incomparable oration.¹²

William W. Corcoran was an active fund-raiser for the Washington National Monument Society during the years preceding the completion of the memorial. In 1871, he held a ball at his art gallery (now the Renwick Gallery) to raise money for the society. The ball was "as distinguished a party as ever assembled in this or any other city in the country on any similar occasion," according to a local newspaper. The "bounteous banquet," paid for by

Corcoran, was said to have cost more than the profit from the ball.¹³ Present at the party were the President and Mrs. Grant, foreign ministers and government officials. Party-goers arrive in "magnificent equipage" drawn by horses in "daintiest livery" along the "broad sweep of the smooth wooden pavement" from the Capitol to the Treasury. After dancing the lancers, the galop, the quadrille, the waltz and other period dances, the revelers were served a midnight meal accompanied by fine wine. A reporter wrote, "The night hours glided by, and the light of the early dawn was breaking over the East before the last gay reveler had left the scene; and those who participated in it will ever retain a memory of the joy, the brightness, and the bloom of the grand ball at the Corcoran Art Gallery."¹⁴

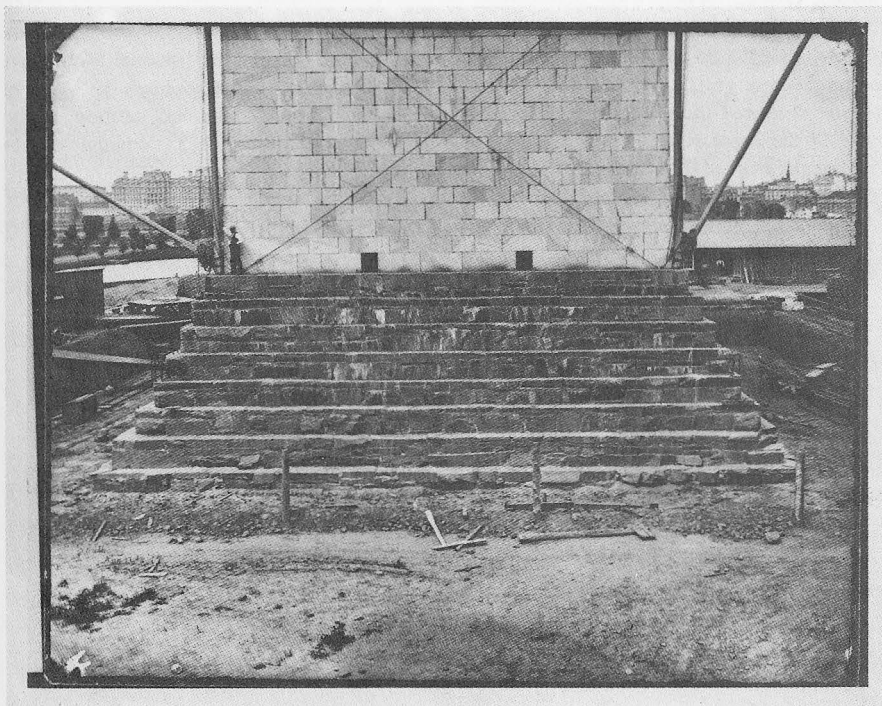
The Congress had hoped to finish the monument in time for the Centennial celebration, but it was decided that the weight of a 500 foot stone structure was too great for the existing foundation, so completion was delayed while Lt. Colonel Thomas Lincoln Casey, of the Army Corps of Engineers, directed reinforcement of the foundation, removing earth and old stone rubble from below the structure and replacing them with slabs of concrete. It was a major engineering feat for Col. Casey, who then completed the work on the monument. In addition to reinforcing the foundation, Casey recommended the filling of nearby Lake Babcock in order to prevent excessive settling of the structure on the side near the water.¹⁵

During the long period of time between 1854, when work stopped on the monument, and the completion of the structure, the unfinished work was an object of curiosity. Mark Twain, on visiting the Capitol in 1874, applied his usual wit to a description of the Washington Monument as it appeared at that time. He wrote:

Still in the distance, but on this side of the water and close to its edge, the Monument to the Father of his Country towers out of the mud — sacred to the soil is the customary term. It has the aspect of a factory chimney with the top broken off. The skeleton of a decaying scaffolding lingers about its summit, and tradition says that the spirit of Washington often comes down and sits on those rafters to enjoy this tribute of respect which the nation has reared as the symbol of its unappeasable gratitude. The Monument is to be finished some day, and at that time our Washington will have risen still higher in the nation's veneration, and will be known as the Great-Great-Grandfather of his country. The Memorial Chimney stands in a quiet pastoral locality that is full of reposeful expression. With a glass you can see the cowsheds about its base, and the contented sheep nibbling pebbles in the desert solitudes that surround it, and the tired pigs dozing in the holy calm of its protecting shadow.¹⁶

In 1876 the Federal government took control of the monument, which was finally completed and was dedicated on February 21, 1885. The Orator of the Day was again Robert C. Winthrop, who was not able to appear because of illness. His speech was read by Congressman John H. Long of Massachusetts. A former resident of Arlington, George Washington Custis Lee, the son of Robert E. Lee and the great-great-grandson of Martha Washington, was invited to the dedication but wrote that he regretted that it would not be in his power to be present for the "interesting occasion."¹⁷ When the capstone was in place, the obelisk had reached a height of 555 feet and 5½ inches, the tallest man-made structure since the Tower of Babel, which had been 668 feet tall, according to the *Washington Evening Star*.¹⁸

The Washington Monument stands today as a landmark in the city of Washington, not only a memorial to the Father of His Country but a tribute to the efforts of citizens who worked for so long to construct an appropriate monument to their first president.



The Monument on August 14, 1879

(From the National Archives)

FOOTNOTES

¹James M. Goode, *The Outdoor Sculpture of Washington, D.C.* (Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 1974), p. 267.

²Washington National Monument Society, Secretary's Correspondence, Record Group 42 National Archives, Box 7.

³*Evening Star*, Washington, D.C., 21 February 1885, p. 1.

⁴*Journal of The Washington National Monument Society, 1833-1858*, Record Group 42 National Archives, p. 203-204.

⁵*Memoranda Relative to the Block of Marble Sent by the Holy Father to the Washington National Monument and its Destruction*, Record Group 42 National Archives.

⁶Published in Philadelphia, 1852.

⁷Washington National Monument Society, Correspondence of Secretary Whittlesey 1849-1889. Letters Received on Memorial Stones. Record Group 42 National Archives, Box 8.

⁸*The Washington Post*, Washington, D.C., 30 September 1883.

⁹*Evening Star*, 21 February 1885, p. 8.

¹⁰H.D. Morgan to John Carrol Brent, Washington National Monument Society, Secretary's Correspondence, Records Relating to the Buildings and Grounds 1850-1890, Record Group 42 National Archives, Box 12.

¹¹*Corcoran* (Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1976), p. 22.

¹²Robert C. Winthrop to Justin S. Morrell, 1 August 1878, Washington National Monument Society Secretary's Correspondence, Record Group 42 National Archives, Box 12. Daniel Webster delivered the oration, which became the model for the "occasional" oration, at the laying of the cornerstone of the Bunker Hill Monument on June 17, 1825. Whether or not Greenough designed the monument seems to be a matter for debate.

¹³*The Daily Patriot*, Washington, D.C., 21 February 1871.

¹⁴*The Sunday Morning Chronicle*, Washington, D.C. [24] February 1871.

¹⁵*Evening Star*, 21 February 1885, p. 8.

¹⁶George C. Hazelton, Jr., *The National Capitol, Its Architecture, Art and History* (J.F. Taylor, New York, 1879), p. 63.

¹⁷Washington National Monument Society, Secretary's Correspondence, Record Group 42, National Archives, Box 12.

¹⁸*Evening Star*, 21 February 1885.