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A Quest to Remember

116,000 Americans were killed in World War I. Why has it taken a century to build a national memorial in Washington, D.C.?

By Julie Scharper

Photograph by © AMERICAN PHOTOARCHIVE


Edwin L. Fountain believes a World War I memorial can—and must—be built. He wants people to understand the profound effects of the war, which inspired technological advances, led to greater rights for women and African-Americans, and sowed the seeds for other global conflicts.

Edwin L. Fountain was jogging on the National Mall a decade ago when—for the umpteenth time—he noticed a stained marble dome jutting from a shaggy grove of trees. He'd never given the half-hidden structure much thought, but that day, curiosity stopped him. He pushed through the brush to find out what the faded monument was. There, on the base of the dome, were the names of the 499 residents of the District of Columbia who had been killed in battle during World War I.

Nearby, ringing the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool, striking memorials stood in silent testimony to the other great conflicts of the 20th century. There was the somber gleam of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The startling immediacy of the faces of the stone soldiers of the Korean War Veterans Memorial. The elegant arc of columns that encircles the national memorial to World War II. But this battered dome was the only monument commemorating World War I, a conflict in which more Americans lost their lives than the wars in Vietnam and Korea combined. Fountain, an attorney and student of military history, was troubled.

“It does a disservice to the veterans of World War I,” he said. “It diminishes their service and sacrifice and sends a message that we don’t value it as much as the others.”

The discovery spurred Fountain, now 51, to embark on a crusade to restore the District’s memorial and build a monument honoring veterans of what had once been known as “The Great War.” Fountain, who now serves as the vice chair of the U.S. World War I Centennial Commission, hopes to unveil the first national World War I memorial at a site just a few blocks away from the Mall—a neglected park dedicated to one of the war’s heroes, Gen. John J. “Black Jack” Pershing. The commission plans to announce a winning design in January; Fountain hopes to see the monument formally dedicated on November 11, 2018, the 100th anniversary of the armistice. But many hurdles remain. The commission must choose a design that meets the site’s unique challenges, and it must raise around \$25 million in private donations, a daunting prospect when the veterans of the war—and many of their children—are no longer living.

Edwin I. Fountain, the vice chair of the U.S. World War I Centennial Commission, hopes to unveil the capital's first national memorial commemorating The Great War by the 100th anniversary of the armistice in 2018.  © GASTON LACOMBE


“This is the first memorial built to a generation of veterans who are no longer with us,” Fountain said.

At the same time, Fountain and his commission hope to spark interest in a poorly understood and often forgotten conflict. While World War II was emblazoned in the national consciousness through newsreels, films, and novels, World War I is rarely discussed outside of history classrooms. Many Americans recall that the conflict was sparked by the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand, but few can explain the complex political motives that drew most of Europe, Japan, and eventually, the United States to enter the conflict.

The war introduced the brutalities of trench warfare and chemical weapons, shattering Old World notions of the nobility of the battlefield. Some 17 million soldiers and civilians were killed, including 116,000 Americans, many of them farm boys who had never seen an automobile, let alone a tank, before the war began.

“World War I was harrowing, the psychological devastation of it alone,” said Erika Doss, an American Studies professor at University of Notre Dame. Returning veterans “threw themselves into the culture of the 1920s and tried to forget about it.”

Many soldiers refused to talk about the war at home, unsure of how to express the horrors they had witnessed. They also returned to another crisis, a flu pandemic that killed an estimated 675,000 Americans. And then, there is the ultimate tragedy of WWI, which had been called “The War to End All Wars”—it set the stage for a second and far more deadly global conflict 20 years later. While many towns built small memorials to the war—bronze statues of doughboys in round-brimmed helmets—there was little movement toward a national memorial in the decades immediately following WWI.

(1) The D.C. War Memorial commemorates the District of Columbia citizens who served in World War I. (2) Pershing Park on Pennsylvania Avenue, several blocks from the National Mall, will be the site of a new national World War I memorial.  © GASTON LACOMBE

Perhaps the lack of a national memorial has led to some of the national amnesia around the war. Even Fountain said that until a decade ago, his knowledge of WWI could have “fit on a single file card.” Both of his grandfathers served in the war, including one who had been scheduled to go to the front the day after the armistice. But it wasn’t until Fountain joined the DC Preservation League and began campaigning to restore the local WWI memorial that the war captured his imagination.

That memorial, which was dedicated in 1931, commemorates the 26,000 residents of the District who fought in the war and lists the names of the 499 who died. The marble dome was the only war memorial near the reflecting pool for half a century, until the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was completed in 1982. As it was joined by tributes to the veterans of the Korean War and WWII, the WWI memorial fell into disrepair. The marble grew drab. Cracks appeared. Overgrown bushes cloaked the dome. It was “a forgotten memorial to a forgotten war,” Fountain said.

Spurred by his growing fascination with WWI, Fountain won the support of Frank Buckles, the last surviving American veteran of the conflict. Buckles, a Missouri native, had dropped out of school at 16 and fibbed about his age to

join the Army, then served as an ambulance driver at the Western Front. Until his death at the age of 110 in 2011, he joined Fountain in campaigning to restore the District's memorial and create a national monument to the war.

Fountain and his group managed to secure \$3.6 million in federal stimulus money to pay for repairs. After a year of work, the memorial reopened in 2011 with gleaming marble, tidy landscaping, and a replica of a long-vanished medallion. But Fountain's second quest—to convert the Doric-style structure into a national memorial to the war—was opposed by District lawmakers, including Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton, who wanted it to remain solely a tribute to veterans from Washington.

Undaunted, Fountain and the Commission decided to turn their attention to Pershing Park, named for the commander of the U.S. forces in Europe. Late last year, Congress authorized the park to be a national WWI memorial, although it did not set aside funds for construction.

Detail from the existing memorial in Pershing Park.  © GASTON LACOMBE

Pershing Park sits on Pennsylvania Avenue across from the 200-year-old Willard Hotel, where Lincoln stayed in the weeks leading up to his inauguration and Julia Ward Howe penned “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” When the park opened in 1981, a waterfall trickled into a placid pool ringed with lush plants. But the water was long ago drained, leaving a lake of stained concrete. Pigeons roost in a long-shuttered concession stand.

As heat rose from the concrete on a blistering day last summer, Fountain pointed out the park’s shortcomings. Its sheltered location hides the park from passersby. Steep steps are treacherous and make for uncomfortable seats. The existing statue of Pershing is “static,” said Fountain, and panels of text are hard to parse for the casual visitor. He envisions reinventing the park to create an attraction on par with the war memorials on the mall.

“You have to do something to make this a destination,” he said. “You don’t want the only people who come here to come by accident.”

Nearly every monument on the National Mall can be seen as a war memorial, said Doss, the University of Notre Dame professor and author of *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*.

The Washington Monument commemorates the Revolutionary War. The Lincoln Memorial prompts reflection on the Civil War. Washington, D.C., is a “sort of sacred ground” for Americans, where the nation’s ideals are enshrined in stone, made permanent and legitimate, she said. Once the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was unveiled, veterans of other 20th-century conflicts and their descendants pushed for monuments to their wars.

“From childhood, we’re expected to go to Washington on field trips, to go to the Mall and the memorials,” said Doss. “Part of that is to tell stories and share ideas. And the biggest idea of all is that Americans are warriors.”

The Mall and the surrounding areas are “highly symbolic,” Doss said. But building on that prime real estate can be highly contentious.

A design competition for the memorial brought in some 350 proposals, and the commission announced five finalists in mid-August. One plan would transform the 1.8-acre park into a series of undulating grassy ridges and a grove of 116 gingko trees—one for every thousand Americans who died. Another would feature giant portraits of soldiers and their families jutting from the lawn. A third would include a field of 1,166 bronze markers shaded by red oaks and paper birch trees. Yet another would frame the statue of Pershing with panels of friezes depicting the doughboys. And a fifth hearkens back to the WWI era's aesthetics, with a classically inspired monument surrounded by an ellipse of trees.

But some are concerned about the finalists, all of which call for an overhaul of the park. The Cultural Landscape Foundation, a group headquartered in D.C., supports the revitalization of the original Pershing Park rather than a full redesign.

“Heroes’ Green” is one of the finalists in the design competition for the new World War I memorial.  © MARIA COUNTS AND COUNTS STUDIO

“We believe that it is in fact historically significant and is in fact eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places,” said Charles Birnbaum, the group’s president and CEO.

The park is one of the most important projects by noted landscape architect M. Paul Friedberg, whose Peavey Plaza in Minneapolis was recently added to the National Register. The park’s original plantings, which complemented Friedberg’s design, were planned by the Washington-based firm of Oehme, van Sweden & Associates, which pioneered the “New American Garden” look.


That none of the design competition finalists plan to preserve the park’s original features is disturbing, Birnbaum said. “When you’re talking about the demolition of a historically significant park designed by three masters, that’s problematic,” he said.

The winning design must also be approved by the National Park Service, the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, and the National Capital Planning Commission before construction can begin. The entire process will likely take much longer than the 19 months that Americans were engaged in the war.

Yet Fountain is confident that the memorial can—and must—be built. He wants people to understand the profound effects of the war, which fueled the cynicism of the “Lost Generation” of writers, such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, inspired technological advances, led to greater rights for women and African-Americans, and sowed the seeds for World War II and other conflicts that have raged around the world over the past 100 years.

Fountain, a broad-shouldered man with a military bearing, has seen his own life change as his interest in the war has deepened. He left a career in corporate law earlier this year to become general counsel for the American Battle Monuments Commission, the federal agency charged with protecting American war memorials and cemeteries around the world. He’s also become passionate about sharing the stories of WWI veterans after years of research.

“There’s no particular American mythology built up around the war,” he said, which he attributes, in part, to the humility of the era. Yet the actions of American WWI soldiers were no less heroic than those of veterans of subsequent wars.

Sgt. Paul Maynard, a shipping clerk from Massachusetts, enlisted after a patriotic rally in July 1917.  THE MAYNARD FAMILY

Take, for example, the story of Sgt. Paul Maynard, a shipping clerk from tiny Leverett, Mass. After a patriotic rally in July 1917, Maynard jumped on stage to enlist, according to family and historical records that his great-niece, Lisa Ann Maynard of Washington, D.C., has studied.

After a few months of training, Maynard and other soldiers from New England were shipped to France. He detailed his struggles there in a series of letters home.

In March of 1918, Maynard was temporarily blinded by a gas attack. He was still recuperating at a Paris YMCA camp when he turned 21 a couple of weeks later. “Well, my birthday went by very quietly,” he wrote to his family. “I wonder where my next one will be. I hope the war is over by then. If it is, I intend to be home.”

But Maynard would not live to see his 22nd birthday.

Hours before the November 11 armistice, Maynard—who had recently been promoted to sergeant—and his men were following orders to push forward near Ville-de-Chaumont in northeastern France, part of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. As the squad came under heavy fire, Maynard ordered his men back to the trench, then jumped into a bomb crater to cover for them, his great-niece said. Soon after, word of the ceasefire spread and Maynard’s men hurried out to look for him. His body lay in the crater where he had made a desperate attempt to protect his men.

His great-niece, a 54-year-old paralegal with the Department of Justice, believes that Maynard—and the other 4.3 million Americans who fought in the war—deserve a national memorial. “All the people who fought in it, they need to be remembered,” she said. “WWI has just been lost to history.”

NPCA@WORK

The National World War I Memorial in Washington, D.C., was established last December with the passage of the Defense Authorization Act. A remarkable public-lands provision in the bill, which represents a major victory for NPCA and its partners, creates or expands 16 parks and authorizes eight studies that could lead to additional park sites. It is the largest expansion of the National Park System since 1978. —RM

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