



Time, Neglect Leave D.C.'s 'Great War' Memorial in Sorry Shape

By Mike Di Paola

May 24 (Bloomberg) -- It's a warm, cloudless day on the National Mall in Washington. Tourists snap photos in front of the World War II Memorial's ostentatious fountain. Not far away, others pay tribute at the Korean War Memorial, where 7-foot-tall stainless-steel soldiers are frozen in a somber march.

Between these two popular sites in West Potomac Park one monument is largely ignored: the District of Columbia World War Memorial, a classic peristyle nicely situated in a shaded grove. While it has a prime location not far from the Reflecting Pool, few people take the short walk off the more well-traveled paths to have a look. They don't know what they're missing.

Built in 1931, the memorial is made mostly of Vermont Imperial Danby, a lightly veined white marble. Gustavino tiles line the inner and outer dome, which is held aloft by 12 fluted Doric columns. It's a simple, elegant structure, framed by oak and elm trees with colorful patches of azaleas. The names of the 499 D.C. vets killed in the Great War are inscribed around the base.

This impressive and moving memorial is suffering from neglect. A structural survey last year revealed chipped stones, faulty drainage and bacterial growth, among other problems. Today I see stains, cracks in the marble and some weathering on the dome's underside.

'Most Endangered'

In 2003, the D.C. Preservation League put the memorial on its Most Endangered Places list. When no remediation was done, the league included it again last year.

"There's always pressure for new memorials, and there's only so much money to go around," says Rebecca Miller, the league's executive director. The group is exploring ways to raise funds from the private sector for restoration "because it doesn't seem like it's a priority for the Park Service."

While there is some structural damage that needs attention, the site could also use some better signage and lights. "Unfortunately things take a long time to get done," Miller says. "It really comes down to money. All the other monuments are lit, but not here -- and there's not a single sign. This would never happen if this were the World War II Memorial."

I walk over to that bigger, more popular monument, which has its own ranger station. I ask if they have any pamphlets or information on the D.C. Memorial, and for a moment they don't know what I'm talking about. No, they have no pamphlets.

Sousa's Baton

Is this noble little structure overlooked because it's just a D.C. tribute, and not a national monument? It wasn't always that way. When the memorial was dedicated on Armistice Day 1931, Herbert Hoover and General John "Black Jack" Pershing were on hand to honor the sacrifice of D.C.'s fallen. Architect Frederick H. Brooke had designed the monument to accommodate the 80-member Marine Corps Band, and John Philip Sousa himself waved the baton for what must have been rousing renditions of "Stars and Stripes Forever" and the newly named national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner."

"It's safe to say the memorial has a dual purpose," says National Park Service spokesman Bill Line. "It's a D.C. memorial, and at the same time, a World War I monument." While Line admits that signage for the site

could be better, he says he's not aware of any major public complaints.

Perhaps there would be a greater fuss made if a few more souls stopped by for a look at this forgotten memorial. In fact, it's the National Mall's only monument to the Great War -- a conflict that slipped further into obscurity earlier this year when the war's last U.S. veteran to see combat died at 108 years old. Only four other American WWI vets are known to be alive.

The D.C. World War Memorial, unique among the modern statements made elsewhere on the mall, is worth remembering -- and preserving.

(Mike Di Paola writes about preservation and the environment for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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