A Monument to a Deceased Project

When the French designer Pierre Charles L’Enfant arrived at the future site of the U.S. capital in the spring of 1791, he came “to change a wilderness into a city.”¹ The site Congress had reluctantly authorized—after a series of contentious votes—was in the upper South, straddling the border between Virginia and Maryland. President George Washington, whose own plantation was nearby, chose the precise spot: the Potomac River at its “fall line.” Here the upcountry hills abruptly met the tidewater plain and created an ecological platter of amazing richness. The woods teemed with game, the river with sturgeon, shellfish, and waterfowl. The flocks of ducks and geese were so immense that the sound of their wings as they took off was “like the rumble of thunder.”² Washington imagined this dense habitat transformed into a great port, which would one day connect the western rivers to the eastern seaboard and become the commercial hub of North America. L’Enfant, tramping through the forest and the remnants of old tobacco plantations, imagined a sprawling empire of a city, filled with grand boulevards and monuments. For both men, the new capital was to be an enactment of the civilizing process, one that would tie the nation’s internal factions together and extend its control outward over vast continental distances.³

The capital city that emerged in the early nineteenth century fell far short of their dreams. Soon after the capital moved from Philadelphia in 1800, Washington, D.C., became a locus of national contradictions. From the start, the city’s claim to represent an “empire of liberty” clashed with its location in the very cradle of American slavery.⁴ The only interstate commerce that flourished in the capital was the traffic in human chattel. Yet the economic engine of the slave trade—the spectacular expansion of the nation’s territory—had little effect on the city’s fortunes. Even as the nation pressed toward the Pacific coast, the federal government remained small and weak and the city grew slowly, its great streets and squares disappearing into dust.
Thomas Doughty’s sketch of the city center, lithographed in 1832, gives some notion of the village character of what was supposed to be the “national metropolis” (figure 11). Charles Dickens, visiting from England in 1842, saw the city as a ruin in the making: “a monument to a deceased project, with not even a legible inscription to record its departed greatness.” A few decades after its inception, the capital was fast becoming a memorial to its own failure.

**Occupation**

The United States was a newfangled political experiment with old-fashioned territorial ambitions. Conventional wisdom dictated that a republic—a form of representative government whose power was vested in its citizens—worked only at a small scale, but President Washington and many others thought that their republic could defy precedent and conquer North America. For the American republic, occupying the continent was not simply a matter of taking control of the ground from Indians and European powers. Americans had to reconcile two competing impulses: imperial aggrandizement, which fed on expansion and change, and republican restraint, which rested on social stasis and thrift. Was the United States to be a classical republic of farmers—modest, frugal, self-restrained, and self-contained—or an empire with visions of eternal growth and progress? The act of occupation put this question to the test, becoming in the process both a military endeavor and a task of the imagination. L’Enfant’s 1791 map of the new capital brought these two dimensions of occupation together in brilliant fashion. His plan of Washington was at once a street system meant to establish possession of the city and a cognitive map for the new national empire (figure 12). In his vision, public monuments would play a key role in fueling the city’s development and justifying the nation’s expansion.

L’Enfant himself was a multidimensional talent—an artist who had studied at the French Academy, an architect, a mapmaker, and a military man who had served in the Revolutionary Army’s corps of engineers. A few years before Washington tapped him for the capital job, L’Enfant had proposed a national Corps of Engineers that would be responsible for military fortifications as well as public works. City planning did not yet exist as an independent discipline, so L’Enfant’s route into it was not that unusual. In the European tradition, military engineers had played a key role in the design of cities because defense concerns were critical in shaping city form. Although L’Enfant himself told Washington, “the sciences of Military and Civil architecture
are so connected as to render an Engineer equally serviceable in time of Peace as in war,” the military aspect of his thinking has received relatively little attention from scholars who have exhaustively studied his methods and precedents.  

L’Enfant’s plan created two street systems, one superimposed on the other. The first was the rectangular grid plan beloved by Thomas Jefferson and many others. The second was a scattering of coordinates—in the form of squares and circles—from which great avenues radiated in diagonals, cutting through the gridded streets at odd angles. Most of these coordinates were located on high ground and were to hold a symbolically important building or commemorative monument. The two most important were the Congress’s House, located on the biggest hill near the Potomac River, and the President’s House, located on another rise about a mile away; the great diagonal boulevard Pennsylvania Avenue connected the two. But there were many other symbolic coordinates dispersed throughout L’Enfant’s city plan, some devoted to federal institutions and others to the fifteen individual states that comprised the Union at that time. The states, L’Enfant thought, would get into the act by sponsoring monuments to their own heroes. Each one of these monumental coordinates occupied a square or circle from which avenues radiated to other squares and distant points of the city.
Scholars have long studied L’Enfant’s aesthetic debt to French models of urban and garden design, especially the axial planning of Paris in the mid-eighteenth century and the radial vistas of French palace towns, royal gardens, and hunting grounds.\textsuperscript{7} But from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, it was even more commonplace to note that L’Enfant had devised his plan to make the city easier to defend against internal insurrections. As a Parisian, the thinking went, L’Enfant knew about popular uprisings and understood how violent resistance flourished in densely packed neighborhoods that could be barricaded against the royal army. Thus his plan was seen as a counterinsurgency tactic in the context of urban rebellion. The wide diagonal boulevards that cut through the denser grid were supposed to open up these local pockets to surveillance and long-distance weapons. Along these great streets artillery could be moved into place to command the entire city. Some Americans even argued that L’Enfant was the precursor of Baron Georges Haussmann, Napoleon III’s urban planner, who blasted huge boulevards through the old working-class quarters of Paris after the Revolution of 1848.\textsuperscript{8}

Few recent scholars have repeated this line of argument. For one thing, L’Enfant never wrote explicitly about urban insurrection. That is hardly surprising; the prospect of civilian rebellion was unlikely to enter into his promotional discourse. Yet military language did creep into L’Enfant’s official plan. The “observations” appended to his map explained that the various coordinates were all on “advantageous ground, commanding the most extensive prospects,” and that “lines or avenues of direct communication have been devised to connect the separate and most distant with the principal and to preserve through the whole a reciprocity of sight at the same time.” Although the passage is shot through with military concepts of command, communication, and surveillance, scholars have read these terms to refer to an aesthetic ideal of open vistas or to a political ideal of democratic interconnectedness.\textsuperscript{9}

The other objection to the nineteenth-century argument is that it credits L’Enfant with impossible foresight. The urban insurrections in Paris of 1830 and 1848 obviously colored the thinking of nineteenth-century observers, but L’Enfant’s plan predated these by decades. While the Parisian tradition of rebellion by barricade did stretch back to 1588, the practice disappeared in the eighteenth century until its revival in 1795, four years after L’Enfant created his scheme. Nevertheless, the point cannot easily be dismissed. The whole European tradition of cutting straight streets...
through dense urban areas, as Spiro Kostof has observed, had roots in military preparation against internal insurrection. Radial street planning probably originated as a military tactic, gaining new urgency with the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789, as the specter of mob action loomed in many minds. Even before the Revolution, Jefferson’s experience of Paris had left him with a sour view of life in the metropolis: “The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores to the strength of the human body.”

Even if urban warfare was not uppermost in L’Enfant’s mind, his plan of Washington is a nearly perfect diagram of the military principles of territorial occupation. Occupation is always a question of controlling a large area of ground with limited resources; there are never enough soldiers to put everywhere. The classic solution to that problem is to establish control over various key points, usually on high ground, dispersed across the surface, and to create clear lines of communication between those points. By defending the lines and the points, the occupier controls the infill areas and dominates the whole territory. L’Enfant conceived of his planning task in similar terms, as a way to enable the city to “extend over a large surface of ground.”

The squares and circles formed the points, the boulevards the lines connecting them, and the grid the infill area. Without the principal points and the avenues between them, the grid would be lost and aimless and actually impede the city’s expansion. By dispersing the points over every quadrant and widening the connecting boulevards to 160 feet, L’Enfant made the system transparent at a mere glance at the map. He summarized his scheme as a “mode of taking possession of and improving the whole district.”

By planning to install “statues, columns, and obelisks” at many of these coordinates, L’Enfant also created a system of landmarks that made the abstract relations of the map readable on the ground in a concrete way. The typical L’Enfant boulevard did not set up a closed vista terminating in a large structure, or an open vista leading to infinity. Instead his radial boulevards would lead from one relatively slender vertical landmark to another. In a street 160 feet wide, the monument would direct the vista but not interrupt it, always luring the eye and the feet (or carriage) from one landmark to the next. As they were erected, the monuments would enable people on the ground to measure the extension of the boulevards and the spread of the city.

The dispersal of squares and circles around and beyond the federal precinct also extended the symbolic system outward, creating a vast multiplicity of centers that echoed the nation’s imperial project. The monuments that were to fill these centers would occupy—literally and figuratively—the high ground of national self-representation. Some were designated specifically to represent federal power. In a square one mile
east of the Capitol, an “itinerary column” (point B) would establish the national station from which every point in the expanding nation would be measured (figure 13). On the Eighth Street axis were monuments to the nation’s military prowess and valor. Where Eighth Street terminated at the Potomac River, a column celebrating the navy would “stand a ready monument to consecrate its progress and achievements” (point C); this was a time when naval forces held the balance of power in Europe. On the northern segment of Eighth Street L’Enfant located a “national church,” clearly modeled on the Pantheon in Paris, which would house monuments to national heroes, including soldiers who gave their lives in the Revolutionary War (point D). This was one of the few points in the center of the city that was so important that its structure closed a vista.
In the fifteen far-flung squares representing the various states, L’Enfant intended the states themselves to erect monuments to homegrown Revolutionary war heroes and to others “whose usefulness hath rendered them worthy of imitation.”¹⁴ Like the federal military monuments, these too would serve to justify the nation’s possession of the continent. They represented national expansion not as the brute imposition of authority but as the providential spread of moral exemplars, waiting to be imitated. The dispersal of monuments to great men and martyrs over the full extent of the city would represent territorial occupation as a civilizing process, both physical and moral.

The plan’s symbolic mode of possession also had a pragmatic rationale. Each coordinate in L’Enfant’s scheme was to be a hub of new development. The monuments marking each coordinate would give them prestige and help attract real estate buyers and developers. L’Enfant was familiar with French examples such as the royal square, built around a statue of the monarch, meant to stimulate the speculative development of luxury housing surrounding it.¹⁵ In the real estate language of today, monuments were high-profile “amenities.” For L’Enfant it was important to scatter them widely to encourage development across a large extent of the city. Real estate calculations like these actually shaped planning decisions from the start. Lacking a commitment from the federal government to fund the city’s development, President Washington needed to finance its public works from the proceeds of land sales. Jefferson’s alternative vision of an intimate town with its major government branches clustered close together in a simple grid plan was just too modest; Washington needed a spectacular infusion of private investment capital.¹⁶ L’Enfant’s genius lay in his ability to wrap the many elements of this project into one seamless package. The military premises of the map did not negate its aesthetic, political, ceremonial, and economic aspects; all of these went hand in hand.

The Enlightened Center

While L’Enfant was eager to disperse monuments and hubs across the city, he also planned for a strong federal center—the ultimate source of power from which the satellite centers radiated and spread the nation’s reach. But even in this federal precinct L’Enfant designed a multiplicity of centers each with different functions, a conception much different from the unified monumental core that was completed in the twentieth century, supposedly to restore L’Enfant’s scheme. It is often observed that he balanced federal representation between the “President’s House” and “Congress’s
House,” both of which were great hubs of radiating avenues (see figure 13). (The Supreme Court was a poor cousin at this time and did not appear in the officially published description of the plan, though L’Enfant had earlier discussed a site for it.) More specifically, however, L’Enfant’s plan actually included three designated center points, all on the east-west axis, each with a different reference. Congress’s House—the Capitol building—was the central reference point for the city’s map, at the exact center of the capital’s four quadrants. From there the sequence of numbered and lettered streets in the grid originated. Point B, a mile due east of the Capitol building, was to be the itinerary column marking the nation’s meridian, the designated reference point from which all other points on the continent’s surface would be measured. Point A, a mile west of the Capitol, was the apex—in mathematical terms, the orthocenter—of a right triangle whose two other points were the President’s House and the Capitol.

Nowhere were L’Enfant’s elegantly interlocking metaphors more evident than at point A, reserved for the most important monument of all—an equestrian statue of George Washington as military commander of the Revolutionary Army. Point A
marked the precise spot where the east-west axis from the Congress’s House met the north-south axis from the President’s House. Unlike other points on L’Enfant’s map, most of which followed local topography, this one was purely a geometric fancy. The point fell on the south bank of Tiber Creek—today an underground sewer—near where it emptied into the Potomac (figure 14); the spot was probably under water for at least some period of the year. To put a major monument there L’Enfant planned to alter the natural hydrology by redirecting the creek into a canal. There were several compelling reasons for taking all this trouble. Aesthetically, the monument would culminate two vistas, one from the President’s House and the other from Congress’s House, the latter a long, wide “avenue” to the river that was already being dubbed by others a “mall” (H in figure 13).18 Ceremonially and politically, the statue focused the gaze of the executive and the legislature on the example of the founding father. Positioned cardinally, the image would be a moral compass for the nation’s leaders. Like an ancient cult figure, it would guarantee that astronomical, mathematical, and political orders were all in alignment.

The focus of all this visual attention was a military image of command. Washington would appear not as citizen-president but as army commander, riding a horse, wearing a laurel wreath, and holding a truncheon, the ancient Roman symbol of command; on the pedestal would be bas-reliefs illustrating the victories he had commanded in person. This was the statue approved (but never funded) by the Continental Congress in 1783, and L’Enfant simply summoned the perfect site for it. He knew the type well, because it was the same one chosen for kings in France, and, like those royal equestrians, was to be erected in the leader’s own lifetime. The difference was that Washington had voluntarily relinquished his military command, but the man himself was still president of the country at the time L’Enfant concocted the scheme. Located at the very heart of the capital, point A would constantly remind everyone in the federal center that Washington was the moral force behind the civilizing scheme that spread out and occupied the city, and by extension, the empire.19

Thus the Mall was born, conceived as a clearing that would create a formal vista between the Capitol building and the nation’s most important hero monument. At the time L’Enfant developed the idea, an oak forest covered the land between these two points. His avenue would be not only an aesthetic exercise but also a literal imposition of power, as in the so-called grand manner of European landscape design, which L’Enfant knew well.20 In that tradition, great axial avenues typically were cut through royal forests or through the dense winding streets of medieval quarters. The formal vista created by this act of destruction embodied power in two distinct senses.
One was the brute physical force to clear a level pathway through the fabric of nature or of other people’s lives. The other, a consequence of the first, was the command of extensive sight lines, the ability to see through the metaphorical thicket of daily life to more important, more symbolic objects. The first was the simple power of conquest, the second, the enlightenment that supposedly springs from conquest and in turn justifies it. In L’Enfant’s Mall, the two kinds of power were both meant to be visible, so intertwined as to be indistinguishable.

The Stakes of Commemoration

L’Enfant’s spectacular plan ran into difficulties on the ground right away. First, L’Enfant was fired by President Washington for insubordination. Then the real estate bubble Washington needed to make the plan work never materialized. This meant there was little money for even basic improvements to the city’s infrastructure, let alone for public monuments. As Andrew Ellicott, L’Enfant’s successor, complained shortly after the Frenchman’s dismissal, the plan simply had too many avenues and too many public squares.21 When Congress arrived at the new capital in 1800, and for years thereafter, L’Enfant’s ceremonial Pennsylvania Avenue remained at times impassable by carriage or foot. For decades, the great squares and circles of the plan lay empty, the city becoming a mixture of “perplexing dust and triangles,” as one girl wrote to her friend in sophisticated Philadelphia. Washington had “more the appearance of several distinct villages than a city,” according to a correspondent in 1842.22 Livestock roamed and foraged in the streets. The Mall was undeveloped “waste ground,” a largely unregulated zone where people dumped trash and tended their own vegetable gardens; the journalist George Alfred Townsend later claimed, rather luridly, that it was “patrolled by outlaws and outcasts.”23

In this climate there was little chance that L’Enfant’s “statues, columns, and obelisks” could be erected. His memorial landscape was nowhere to be seen. Point B never came into prominence as L’Enfant had envisaged; Jefferson set the meridian line through point A instead, and later in the century the meridian moved again, to the Naval Observatory.24 Where the itinerary column was meant to be, the square remained undeveloped until after the Civil War. The costly equestrian statue meant for point A never materialized. A successor project, radically different in scale and type, did eventually emerge in the Washington Monument, but it took decades to complete and was located slightly off point A, on higher ground. Not until the twentieth
For most of the nineteenth century, point A was merely a scraggly spot on a riverbank. A simple stone marked the spot, erected there by Jefferson to establish the new meridian line. For decades this modest stone, used to moor boats in Tiber Creek, stood silently mocking the grandiose ambitions of L’Enfant’s scheme.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, while the capital seemed to languish, the United States was fast taking possession of its continental empire. Grabbing new territory proved to be far easier for the new republic than coming to grips with the consequences of its own enlargement. As the nation expanded from a cluster of states along the Atlantic coast to a behemoth that reached across the continent, its appetite for land created political and cultural problems of self-definition that could not be avoided in the fishbowl that was Washington. There the young nation’s internal contradictions were put on display.

Nowhere were these contradictions more magnified than in the project for a national monument to George Washington. Deciding on a fitting monument to the republic’s founding figure engaged the deepest questions about what kind of republic he had founded. As we shall see, commemoration is almost always more about the present than about the past. “The act of remembering,” Andreas Huyssen observes, “is always in and of the present.” Or, as the historian Michael Kammen has famously remarked, “Societies in fact reconstruct their pasts rather than faithfully record them, and they do so with the needs of contemporary culture clearly in mind—manipulating the past in order to mold the present.” But in the case of Washington’s monument, this familiar process proved almost impossibly difficult. The story of the monument project spans nearly the entire nineteenth century and the first half of this book, an unparalleled example of a cultural and cognitive site where people could pour out their hopes and fears and discover disagreements they might not even have known they had.

The first idea for the monument, the equestrian statue, was originally approved by the Continental Congress, flush with its victory over Britain in the Revolutionary War. When L’Enfant later proposed to situate the statue at point A, Washington himself must have blessed the idea, because the two of them seem to have worked closely on all aspects of the city plan. Nothing more monarchical could have been imagined. Although in the 1790s, when Washington was serving as president, this monarchical image should have been a major provocation, there was never any serious opposition to the idea even from quarters where one might have expected outrage.
Republican revolutionaries had systematically torn images of King George III off public buildings and had toppled and destroyed his equestrian statue in New York City, the only equestrian statue erected in the territory of the future United States during the eighteenth century. When the firebrand Thomas Paine later proposed a “coronation” of the Constitution, the rite—featuring a crown above the law above a Bible—would show that the new republic was a government of laws, not kings. Not even the crown would survive the ceremony, though, for it was to be smashed to bits and distributed to the people, “whose right it is.” American republicanism was deeply affected not only by the Enlightenment appeal to reason, but by the Protestant tradition that elevated the biblical word to supreme importance. In this tradition, the word gave the individual direct access to divine (or human) law, while images came from intermediaries, who used them as counterfeits to augment their own power and block access to the truth. The republicans’ distrust of political imagery thus verged on outright iconoclasm.  

Republicans objected to images of George Washington on coinage, and public celebrations of his birthday, and the lavish scale of the “President’s House” as planned by L’Enfant. Yet they did not dare attack the idea of the equestrian statue. Jefferson, the intellectual and political leader of the republican faction, actually tried on several occasions to secure a European sculptor who could carry out the commission. If L’Enfant’s proposed placement of the statue at the key point A gave Jefferson pause, he never said so openly, and indeed he pressed the commissioners of the federal district to consider financing the statue by lot sales in the capital. Ironically, the only criticism, muted as it was, came from a leader of the opposing faction, the Federalists. The Federalists were proponents of a more vigorous centralized authority. Worried that the national union of independent states was headed toward disintegration, these men believed that only a strong executive and symbolic head could help hold the republic together. Federalist John Jay, the secretary of foreign affairs, supported the equestrian project, but he reported to Congress in 1785 that the monument would be less costly and more “laconic” if the bas-reliefs on the pedestal glorifying the general’s victories in battle were replaced with the simple image of a book inscribed “Life of Washington.” Below the book would appear the inscription “Stranger read it. Citizens imitate his example.” Jay’s proposal was an interesting early example of the effort to balance imperial imagery of aggrandizement with a “laconic” message of republican restraint. His notion of Washington as a book, a virtual Bible—a life so exemplary that it explained itself and needed no pictures to glorify it—shows just how widely iconoclastic republicanism infused the culture of the period. But the fact
remains that Jay’s proposal left intact the idea of the statue itself, in all its monarchical glory.  

As the statue proposal languished for want of funds, the focus shifted to a different commemorative issue: the question of where to inter Washington’s body. By 1793 Washington himself had approved a plan for the Capitol building by William Thornton that included a ground-floor tomb for his own remains. The crypt would occupy the exact center of the capital, where the city’s four quadrants met, and in the rotunda above it Thornton indicated a new location for the equestrian statue. The implications of this plan were far reaching, no longer simply about Washington’s image but about his actual body and how it could be put to the service of the nation. Pantheons holding tombs of national heroes were not a new idea. By this date they were emerging as a full-fledged type in sacred structures, such as Westminster Abbey and Saint Paul’s Cathedral in London and the Église Sainte-Geneviève in Paris, renamed the Pantheon. As we have seen, L’Enfant proposed a “national church” along these same lines. But the Capitol project took the idea to a new level. Envisioning Washington’s tomb in “Congress’s House” made the hero’s body not merely the nation’s cultural patrimony but also a talisman of republican governance. The double monument of equestrian statue and tomb would have cemented the importance of the Capitol building as the unrivaled symbolic center of the nation.

Washington, who was a Federalist in spirit, could not openly advocate the tomb idea because he would appear to be sanctifying himself, like the pharaohs of old. Accordingly, his will specified burial at Mount Vernon, his family home. Similarly, Jefferson could not openly attack the idea for fear that he would appear ungrateful to the nation’s founding father. Neither could show his hand publicly. As the scholar C. M. Harris has argued, however, they each found proxies in their architects. Thornton, the architect of record for the Capitol, answered to Washington and developed the tomb concept, while the superintendent of construction, Étienne Hallet, answered to Jefferson and sabotaged it. Eventually Hallet was fired for his role in this little drama, but the issue did not disappear. In fact, the tomb question rose to the top of the national agenda when Washington died unexpectedly in December 1799, shortly before Congress was to move to the new capital.

Played out against the backdrop of an escalating battle between the Federalists and the Republicans, the debate in 1800–1801 about how to commemorate Washington represented the high-water mark of republican iconoclasm and a stunning rebuke to the hero worship embedded in L’Enfant’s plan. The divisions between the Federalists and the Republicans deepened during the presidential electoral crisis of 1800,
the most bitterly contested presidential election before the Bush-Gore contest of 2000; several of the most vocal participants in the dispute over the monument were also actively working behind the scenes for and against the election of Jefferson. Because Congress had finally moved to the capital city in the fall of 1800, the increasingly acrimonious debate took place within the very building where Washington was supposed to be laid to rest.\(^3\)

After Congress had initially agreed to ask Martha Washington’s consent to move her husband’s remains to the capital, the Federalists sparked the first controversy by enlarging the proposed burial scheme from a relatively modest tomb inside the Capitol building to a much grander freestanding mausoleum outdoors, which would have become even taller and more imposing than the Capitol itself. In the spring of 1800 they unveiled a proposal by the architect Benjamin Latrobe for a hundred-foot-tall stronghold with a square interior chamber containing “a plain Sarcophagus” and “a statue of the General.” Latrobe’s ink-and-watercolor perspective drawing shows a finely stepped pyramid atop a square base, with the entrances framed by Doric columns and the whole elevated on a podium of thirteen steps (figure 15). Subsequent elevation and section drawings developed a clerestory lighting scheme above the square base and exterior terraces at the clerestory level reached by winding stairs. Latrobe’s proposal was a study in mixed metaphors. The ancient Egyptian motifs—the pyramidal top, the projecting cornice, and the battered walls of the base—all evoked the eternal presence of divine kingship, while the Doric columns were a standard
symbol of republican simplicity and restraint. By combining them, Latrobe worked to fashion a visual language for a conceptual oxymoron: a grandiose republican monumentality. Surviving documents indicate that Latrobe had a specific site in mind on the bank of Potomac, not point A but a higher spot upstream, where the Naval Observatory would later be located. In the perspective drawing, a riverside scene occupies the right middle ground, and a public building in the far distance resembles the projected design of the Capitol with its dome. (The actual Capitol building at this time was still unfinished and much more modest.) A screen of trees isolates the monument and incorporates the structure into a sylvan setting, remote from the world of government affairs suggested by the background. Visitors to the monument would be able to see the monumental city in the distance but would feel removed from it.34

After Latrobe submitted this initial proposal, the well-known British architect George Dance refined and enlarged the scheme, dispensing with the Doric columns but retaining the statue of the hero in the interior space (figure 16). Dance’s purer pyramid form emphasized the building type’s core significance, its declaration of everlasting stability, which in this case referred not just to the immortality of its occupant but also to the permanence of the nation that he represented. The height of Dance’s monument—150 feet—would have made it by far the most imposing structure in the city, significantly taller than the Capitol building of that time. Though Dance’s drawings did not suggest a site for his project, its scale demanded the sort of independent, open site Latrobe had in mind.35

For the Federalists, then, the monument was not merely a sign or set of motifs; it was an extraordinary place in its own right, deliberately set apart from daily life to create a special impact on its beholders. With its impervious walls, unusual geometry, indirect light, and huge scale, all in a quasi-natural setting, the monument would “impress a sublime awe in all who behold it.”36 The more awe-inspiring the hero’s monument, the Federalists argued, the more forcefully it would teach the citizenry to emulate his virtues and love his country. But even if it failed to pacify the population, the pyramid would remain an eternal stronghold, an insurance policy for the federal government. The monument would never be toppled, as George III’s statue once was. Ironically, given the Federalists’ antipathy toward France after 1789, their idea had much in common with the latest French Revolutionary models of commemoration, especially Charles de Wailly’s proposal of 1797 to transform the Église Sainte-Geneviève into a pyramidal pantheon.37 The problem of the monument in both cases was similar: how to replace devotion to the monarch with devotion to the nation. The likelihood that the Federalists were considering an independent site on the
riverbank rather than on the Capitol grounds suggests that they were trying to counterbalance the authority of the legislature with a separate, quasi-sacred site for the executive, whose mystical presence would personify the nation. Washington’s body would not be appropriated by a democratic assembly but would stand, metaphorically, on its own.

The enlargement of the project into a huge mausoleum independent of the Capitol polarized the debate and drove the Republicans to articulate a far more sweeping iconoclasm than they had dared to articulate before. While the equestrian image had retained some connection to Washington’s biography—he was, after all, a military commander, though not a Roman general with a truncheon—the pyramid removed the man from history altogether and apotheosized him in a cult setting. The Federalist proposal recruited Washington for the larger purpose of inflating central authority, so magnifying the image of the federal state that it virtually crushed the individual republican citizen into insignificance. The Republicans had to strike back. Genuine national memory, they claimed over and again, belonged in
people’s hearts, not in piles of stone. The fiery Republican Nathaniel Macon argued on the House floor in December 1800 that print in the modern era had made monuments redundant. History books were a more “rational” way of spreading Washington’s memory. If the nation really wanted to teach Washington’s example, Macon concluded, it would be more “honorable” to take the money budgeted for the monument and spend it instead educating the poor how to read. As we have seen, Macon was arguing for a “public sphere” in Habermas’s sense, a sphere of rational discussion among the people independent of state authority. In this sphere the word would reign triumphant, uncontaminated by official images meant to “impress” themselves on susceptible minds.\textsuperscript{39}

The most extraordinary extension of this reasoning came from congressman John Nicholas of Virginia, a close ally of Thomas Jefferson. Nicholas asked rhetorically, “Was the memory of that great man [Washington] to be perpetuated by a heap of large, inanimate objects?” The answer seemed obvious. As Nathaniel Hawthorne would later remark after a visit to Westminster Abbey in London, “The fame of the buried person does not make the marble live,—the marble keeps merely a cold and sad memory of a man who would else be forgotten.” Masonry, no matter how impressive, could not keep Washington alive in collective memory; only the people themselves could accomplish that. Nicholas therefore suggested a monument that “had never before been done.” Over Washington’s tomb in the Capitol he proposed installing “A plain tablet, on which every man could write what his heart dictated. This, and this only, was the basis of his fame. It was not to be blazoned by figures or representations of any other sort. It consisted in the undecaying recollection of his virtues. It must live in the national feeling.”\textsuperscript{40}

Here was the ultimate iconoclastic monument, with no images whatsoever. But its iconoclasm went beyond mere “plainness,” beyond even Jay’s “laconic” book. Nicholas’s tablet would have no message of any kind; the audience itself would generate the content. His idea thus struck down the whole didactic premise of the hero monument, which was to provide moral exemplars for imitation. His proposal, moreover, rejected the premise of permanency, the idea that the monument could hold memory forever, long after actual social memory had died away. Nicholas proposed instead an “animate” monument, one that lived only as long as Washington’s memory “lives in the national feeling.” The enlightened iconoclasm of Nicholas and Macon and other Republicans stemmed from the belief that an intelligent citizenry—generally envisioned as an agrarian population of independent landowners—no longer needed images to prop up its patriotism the way illiterate masses or decadent aris-
tocrats had once needed imagery to spur their religious devotion. A free and rational people could write its own monuments in its own words.

This rhetoric has resonated ever since. The Republicans’ argument anticipated by several decades Victor Hugo’s famous declaration, in his novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), that the invention of printing would kill architecture. “The book of stone,” he wrote, unwittingly echoing Nicholas, “was going to make way for the book of paper.” Hugo argued that “in the era of architecture”—from the ancient pyramid builders to the medieval cathedral masons—mankind’s “thought made itself a mountain and took powerful hold of a century and a place. Now [in the era of the printing press] thought turns into a flock of birds, scatters to the four winds, and occupies at once every point in air and space.” It was precisely this faith in the modern circulation of thought and memory, rather than their deposit in some fixed sacred place, that brought the Republicans to such an ardent defense of iconoclasm. Nicholas’s proposal to replace the architectural monument with a people’s book entailed a total break with the past, with the old era of pyramids and cathedrals. That is why his idea had the prescience to foreshadow the “living memorial” movement of the early twentieth century and the “countermonument” phenomenon of the late twentieth century. In all of these movements the main desire was to tap an authentically modern popular memory. Along with this desire came a suspicion that traditional monuments, in their very fixity, must impose a false, obsolete collective memory—a devotional façade behind which people might actually be apathetic or ignorant or even hostile. As we shall see, this suspicion never really died, even as public monuments became more accepted.

The votes in Congress on the mausoleum project strictly followed party lines, the Federalists in favor and the Republicans opposed. The day before Jefferson was inaugurated as president, ending the prolonged electoral crisis, the Senate refused to concur with the House’s version of the mausoleum bill and the matter died. Jefferson’s role in this remains mysterious: his voluminous letters reveal nothing except for one sly reference to the mausoleum when the electoral crisis was at its peak. On New Year’s Day, 1801, he speculated that the ongoing mausoleum debate would help distract Congress from the crisis, which was fine with him; he did not want Congress meddling in the election. A decade later, pinning the blame for the mausoleum’s downfall on the “Jeffersonians,” several Federalist newspapers claimed that Jefferson and his allies could accept the equestrian statue of Washington only because it was a military image; but their pride would not allow a monument that would make Washington the first statesman of the land. It is doubtful, though, that Jefferson or
his allies saw the debate merely as an electoral sideshow or as a personal competition with Washington. The way to commemorate the Revolution, they repeatedly suggested, was not by constructing tombs or pyramids but by living according to its principles. “A just and solid republican government maintained here,” Jefferson wrote shortly after he assumed the presidency, “will be a standing monument & example.” In a similar vein, others later argued that the capital city itself was Washington’s monument—in the words of the *Washington City Weekly Gazette*, “a living, intelligent, monument of glory,” which, unlike a “useless pyramid,” would “freshen with the current of time.” Iconoclasts continued to worry, though, that the city’s grandiose public architecture might send the wrong message. As *Poulson’s American Daily* argued in 1811, the expanding Capitol building was “proportioned rather to the extent of our territory than to the quantum of our population—to the pretensions of Royalty than to the profession of Republicanism.”

*Slavery, Progress, and the Monumental Capital*

If both the republic and the capital were living memorials, as the Republicans hoped, they were living with a contradiction in their midst. The presence of slavery in the very heart of the nation had mocked Republican rhetoric from the start. Despite all their populist talk, Macon, Nicholas, and many other critics of Federalist aggrandizement were themselves unapologetic slaveholders. Owning slaves constituted the ultimate aggrandizement of personal power, without any checks or balances—despotism in its purest form. Americans found innumerable ways to misrepresent or mystify the power relations of slavery, however, and to bring it in line with classical republicanism, which had also coexisted with slavery.

Washington, too, was a slave-owner, along with many of the Federalists who supported him. When the controversy over his tomb first erupted, advocates and opponents of slavery were not yet divided along partisan or regional lines. New England merchants were deeply involved in the Atlantic slave trade, and slavery was still legal in many Northern states. But in the early nineteenth century the geography of slavery changed substantially. Slavery was abolished or drastically curtailed in the Northern states, while the cotton gin fueled the expansion of large-scale plantation slavery south to the Gulf of Mexico and west to Texas. The expansion of plantation slavery made America look less and less like Jefferson’s ideal republic of small independent farmers. As the nation spread westward, the key question facing the re-
The public was whether newly acquired territory would be turned over to the planter-slavers or occupied by a free citizenry. On this question of occupation hinged not only the political balance of North and South, but also the future definition of the nation.

The same question reshaped the debate over Washington's monument as well. As the issue of his tomb resurfaced repeatedly over the first third of the nineteenth century, there were still Northerners and Southerners in Congress on both sides of the debate, but the balance was tipping. Increasingly, Northerners led the effort for the federal tomb and Southerners led the opposition. Southerners rehearsed the same old antimonument rhetoric, but that rhetoric now seemed to mask a different agenda. For example, Nathaniel Macon's speech in 1800 eloquently attacking the whole idea of monuments continued to endure in national memory and was still quoted in newspapers as late as 1821. Yet in the late 1810s, this slaveholder from North Carolina helped his home state procure an elaborate monument to Washington for the State House in Raleigh, perhaps the most ambitious sculptural monument erected in the United States to that date—a seated figure in Roman military garb designed by the most famous sculptor in Europe, Antonio Canova. This was an amazing act of self-promotion for North Carolina, aggrandizing the local planter elite who claimed Washington as one of their own, though in typical "republican" fashion the monument misrepresented the plantation's social order by depicting Washington, in a subsidiary image, as a modest farmer outside a rude cabin.

Iconoclasm, it seems, could easily be discarded if the right opportunity arose. The real issue for a firebrand like Macon was no longer whether to build a monument but where to build it. A national monument to Washington in the capital had the distinct potential to strengthen the federal government's stature at the expense of the states, an outcome that was increasingly problematic for Southern planters who based their right to own slaves on state sovereignty.

At the same time, the institution of slavery began to insinuate itself into the landscape of the capital in various ways. When Washington had occupied the office of president in Philadelphia in the 1790s, he kept his own house slaves in the executive residence amid the two hundred or so slaves who still remained in the city after Pennsylvania's Gradual Abolition Act of 1780. In the District of Columbia, slavery and the slave trade remained fully legal, so one would expect slavery to have had a much greater impact on the image of the city. Yet the daily life of slavery in the capital was largely hidden in back alleys and yards not visible from the street, and its coercive apparatus—jails, auction houses, chain gangs—was deliberately kept remote from the official city. This began to change in the 1820s and 1830s as the city became...
an important regional market in the expanding interstate slave trade, and as abolitionists began to draw attention to the anomaly of human traffic in the capital of a supposedly free republic. With plantation slavery extending into new states and territories, slaves from Maryland and Virginia were funneled through markets in the capital to meet the ever-increasing demand for fresh slave labor in the growing regions farther south and southwest. Even free blacks were ensnared in this traffic, victims of nefarious dealers who confiscated their identity papers and sold them off to cover the “costs” of their bogus imprisonment. Seventh Street, in the heart of the city, became the local hub of this miserable traffic. There slave pens sat right on the edge of the Mall, and slave coffles—groups of slaves chained together—shuffled across the Mall’s “waste” on their way to loading docks on the river. What L’Enfant had imagined as a glorious avenue leading to the equestrian image of Washington was now a scrubland pockmarked by the visible traces of the slave trade. The symbolic possession of the continent, built into L’Enfant’s plan, looked increasingly like the possession of human chattel. Standing at the Seventh Street crossing of the Mall near a well-known slave pen and gazing east at the domed Capitol on the hill, one could visibly connect the private commerce in human flesh to the political bargaining in Congress that sustained the trade. Abolitionists used illustrated broadsides to juxtapose the monumental pretensions of the Capitol with the miserable reality of the traffic in slaves, undertaken in plain sight (figure 17).

At this same time, a quasi memorial to Congress’s bargain with slavery emerged in the very center of the Mall near the Capitol. Completely unrecognized in histories of the city, this intervention in the landscape marked the outcome of the first of the grand bargains struck by Congress to solve the problems created by slavery’s expansion into new territories. The Compromise of 1820, or Missouri Compromise, admitted Maine as a free state and Missouri as a slave state, and prohibited slavery in the Louisiana Purchase everywhere north of the 36° 30’ parallel, excepting Missouri. The memorial came in the form of two street names created after some Congressional wheeling and dealing to raise money for public works. Congress had authorized the city to sell off some of the public land at the east end of the Mall and create several large new residential blocks. The deal created two new diagonal avenues within the Mall, each one an inner spoke that shrank the boundaries of the Mall between Third and Sixth Streets (figure 18). (These diagonal streets and the resulting blocks of mostly residential buildings were all razed in the early 1930s. The sites are now occupied by the National Gallery of Art and the National Museum of the American Indian.) In the 1820s the city council named the new avenues after the two new states that had been admitted to the Union by the 1820 Compromise: Missouri, the slave
state, and Maine, the free state. For reasons unknown, the northern street was named Missouri and the southern street Maine. For more than a hundred years, this pair of radiating avenues framing the east entrance to the Mall marked the ultimately futile effort to contain the political crisis wrought by slavery.  

While the Capitol building served as the setting for a whole series of compromises
and deals on slavery up until the Civil War, the intensifying sectional crisis made compromise on Washington’s tomb impossible. If we think of the dispute over Washington’s body as a proxy for the sectional conflict over slavery, it is ironic that the battle lines in the “symbolic” dispute would be even more sharply drawn than the battle lines in the “real” dispute, where actual lives were at stake. Commemorative projects are polarizing because they claim to be about essential truths, which by definition admit no compromise, whereas the normal business of politics involves bending principles and negotiating details. The object of the tomb was the “true” Washington rather than the historically nuanced, politically calculating individual. Already abstracted from history, the “true” Washington became molded by events taking place well after his death. As slavery expanded relentlessly westward, the republic he knew ceased to exist and fractured into two sections with fundamentally different definitions of freedom. The true Washington could not sit in both camps simultaneously. He had to take a side—in a dispute he never encountered or foresaw. This is why, even though Washington’s grave at Mount Vernon was only a few miles downriver from the capital, the symbolic distance might as well have been an ocean.

The issue came to a point in 1832, the centennial of Washington’s birth, which demanded a national reckoning of some kind. As one congressman from Georgia summed up the majority mood of the Southern delegation, the proper solution was not to transfer Washington’s body to the halls of Congress but to transfer his “spirit”—whatever that might be. Washington’s heir categorically refused to move his remains from Mount Vernon, even after Congress mustered enough Northern votes to overcome the Southern opposition and make the request in early 1832. From this point onward the focus shifted to a project for a colossal statue to be installed in the Capitol Rotunda, above the crypt where the tomb had been intended to go. The statue project passed with less opposition from the Southern delegation, though Northern congressmen were far more enthusiastic in their support. It was a watershed moment: the first commemorative statue ordered by the federal government that actually came to completion.

Horatio Greenough’s soon-to-be-infamous statue of a seminude Washington, seated rigidly on a huge throne in the posture of Jupiter, has gone down in the annals of American art history as the most reviled public statue ever erected (figure 19). Installed in 1841, it lasted less than two years in the Rotunda before being banished to a makeshift location on the Capitol grounds. Despite learned defenses by well-known intellectuals such as Edward Everett of Massachusetts, the statue ended up accomplishing almost nothing in the continuing quest to build a national monument.
to Washington. “It is a ridiculous affair, and instead of demanding admiration, excites only laughter,” one correspondent observed in 1844. Later in the century it was tolerated, almost affectionately, as “that marble absurdity called Greenough’s Washington.” Yet Greenough’s work cannot be so easily dismissed: despite its misfires, it was the earliest statue monument to deal with the complex question of national expansion. The work aimed to build a bridge between Washington’s classical republican character and the modern nation that had already replaced the world from which he came. Greenough intended his statue to reveal Washington’s true mission on the world historical stage.51

For the central figure of Washington, Greenough turned the ancient pose of Jupiter, which was all about the display of power, into a classic republican gesture of “self-abnegation.” With one hand pointing to heaven, the other returning a sheathed sword, Washington voluntarily relinquishes his military power so that a republic of free, self-governing citizens can live and flourish under Providence. This central narrative of self-restraint and power in check was then counterbalanced by its opposite, an epic tale of national expansion, revealed in the subsidiary sculpture on Washington’s throne. On the sides of the throne were two relief panels, one showing Apollo driv-
ing his chariot and the other representing the infant Hercules battling with a snake while his half brother Iphiclus shrinks in fear. Apollo was an allegory of enlightenment, spread by the United States under Washington’s example; according to Greenough’s own description, Hercules stood for a courageous North America and Iphiclus a cowardly South America. On the back of the throne were two small figures, one a downcast American Indian contemplating the vanishing of his race. The other was originally to have been the figure of a “negro.” In contrast to the Indian supposedly vanishing from the New World, the black figure was taking his place as plantation slavery spread across the continent, the engine of U.S. expansion into the Louisiana Purchase and the Mexican territories. Greenough’s “negro” would have connected Washington to slavery, something no monument had ever done or would ever do. But the figure would also have connected Washington to a particular vision of national expansion guided by slavery, a vision that Washington himself did not share. Washington had belonged to a generation, before the invention of the cotton gin, that thought that slavery—like the Indian—was vanishing. In Greenough’s scheme, however, the “negro” would make Washington appear to be the founder of a nation whose destiny was both to civilize and enslave the New World. The melancholy Indian and the cowardly South American are left behind to vanish or languish as the forces of Anglo American civilization sweep across the continent in a historical movement that Greenough may have thought of as “progress” but today could just as easily be characterized as “ethnic cleansing.” Greenough’s friends, notably the soon-to-be-famous abolitionist Charles Sumner, convinced Greenough to remove the negro figure. He replaced it with the much safer choice of Columbus, thereby making Washington the bridge between white discovery of the New World and Anglo American domination of it.  

Greenough was representing in allegorical form the idea of “manifest destiny,” years before the term was first coined, in 1845. The notion was emerging in the 1830s to describe the world historical mission of the United States, a mission steeped in assumptions of national and racial superiority. Politically, “manifest destiny” was associated closely with the Democratic Party, which had coalesced in the 1820s to support the presidential candidacy of General Andrew Jackson, an expansionist who became famous (or infamous) for his expulsion of Indian tribes from the southeastern United States. In 1846, barely five years after Greenough’s statue arrived in the Capitol, one of Jackson’s successors, President James K. Polk, decided to invade Mexico to fulfill the nation’s historical mission. By early 1848, Mexico had ceded almost half its territory to the United States, from Texas to California. In the process, huge new tracts of land became available for cotton cultivation, further intensifying
the crisis over the expansion of slavery. Washington’s nation now stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific, bringing to completion the very narrative Greenough’s monument had foretold and setting in motion the historical forces that would lead to the Civil War. Poor Greenough received no credit for anticipating the nation’s destiny because his neoclassical figure seemed so rooted in a distant, easily ridiculed past.

The Failure of the Capitol

By the early 1840s the Capitol building and its grounds seemed to be one of the few bright spots in an otherwise straggling capital city. It was the largest and grandest public building in the United States, beautifully situated on a hilltop overlooking the rivers and landscape around it. After being burned by the British in the War of 1812, the building and its collections had seen a period of steady growth, prompted by the nation’s expansion and the corresponding increase in size of the Congress. The list of commemorative undertakings at the Capitol became far more ambitious than anything attempted elsewhere in the country. In the Rotunda an ongoing series of oil paintings and sculptural reliefs commemorated the Revolutionary War and the earlier history of white settlement. On the west front outside stood the capital’s first free-standing public monument, the Tripoli Memorial, privately financed and erected there in 1831; it was a wedding cake assemblage of allegorical figures commemorating a half dozen naval officers who had died in 1802 in a trade war with North African Muslim potentates (figure 20). (The monument was removed to Annapolis in 1860.) On the east front, Greenough’s Washington took up position in 1843 after its brief stay in the Rotunda, followed by Luigi Persico’s sculptural group of Columbus’s Discovery of America in 1844 and Greenough’s pioneer-themed Rescue in 1851. Aside from the bronze statue of Jefferson installed on the president’s lawn in 1847, no comparable commemorative sculpture existed elsewhere in the city in the first half of the century.

Though unrivalled as the commemorative center for the capital and the nation, the Capitol complex had some serious problems. The failure of Greenough’s Washington was symptomatic of a much larger failure of artistic imagination and of public reception. The Capitol dodged all representation of the slave system that helped fuel national expansion. While Indians were emblazoned on the building, inside and out, slavery was absent from view but a source of tension within the decorative program. What was on view increasingly became a target for criticism coming from all directions.
The building and its monuments were not protected from ordinary life and its profane tendencies. Boys played on the statues outside. Hawkers sold oranges and root beer in the hallways inside. “Idlers” lounged in the Rotunda and made jokes about the patriotic art on display. Well before Greenough’s *Washington* and Persico’s *Columbus* appeared, one congressman complained of the “reckless levity that is witnessed everyday at the pictures” in the Rotunda; in his view, this was a reason against placing any monument to Washington in the space.\(^5\)\(^6\) The Capitol’s artistic repository fell prey not only to popular irreverence but to elitist criticism as well. Even guidebooks could be unsparing in their criticism of particular works. Hawthorne in the early 1860s wanted “to banish those stiff and respectable productions” in the Rotunda, but other critics were even more blunt. As late as 1875, the *New York Times* wrote that “the Capitol is a sort of museum of failures in painting and sculpture . . . a huge
national joke. It has exercised the powers of ridicule of great and small wits ever since Persico’s theatrical base-ball player, otherwise ‘Columbus,’ was set up to adorn the great central portico.”

The examples most frequently ridiculed were the allegorical or “ideal” works, in which human figures stood for abstract ideas not in a realistic narrative but in a rhetorical argument. In Europe such works were standard fare in the public landscape. In the United States the audience had some notion of the allegorical game but typically refused to play it. Although the works had some eloquent defenders, more often than not they became the butt of deliberate misreadings: Washington with his loincloth slipping down was waiting for his clothes; Columbus with his globe held up was bowling ninepins. Misreading the monuments not only produced a laugh but also mocked the pretensions of officialdom.

Despite its grandeur, then, the Capitol building often failed to inspire the reverence expected in a great commemorative center. Nor had it found a convincing way to connect the nation’s republican origins with its expansionist tendencies built on slavery. The commemorative program was micromanaged by a legislature and bureaucracy that were also split on sectional lines. No wonder point A, still undeveloped a mile away in a virtual no-man’s-land, would continue to beckon to the imagination of later generations as it had to L’Enfant’s decades earlier.

The Beginning of the Monumental Core

In the late 1840s the contrast between the nation—a muscular republic triumphantly spanning the continent—and its capital, paralyzed by the growing conflict over slavery, could not have been greater. But in reality these were two faces of the same coin. Although the social and political contradictions of the nation might be resolved temporarily by balancing new territory between slave and free labor, those same contradictions in the concentrated landscape of the capital city became all too noticeable. Where L’Enfant had used the power of sight as a governing principle of his plan—the legislative and executive branches were supposed to survey each other and the monumental example of George Washington—the growing political crisis now made sight problematic. Beginning in the 1830s, abolitionists had turned the power of sight against official stagecraft; in broadsides and speeches they focused attention on the disparity between the capital’s monumental ambitions and the sordid reality of slavery in its midst. Proslavery apologists did their best to suppress references to
slavery in the public record and in the Capitol complex, and they simply refused to see the traces of slavery that could not be hidden from view. *Willful blindness* was the term used to describe the phenomenon by the *National Era*, an antislavery newspaper that opened in the city in 1848. To counter that blindness, the paper told exactly where to cross the Mall to find the most notorious slave pen right on the edge of L’Enfant’s public ground. Ironically, it was near the Smithsonian, the new national scientific institute under construction at that moment in the western end of the Mall, not far from the creek and marshland surrounding L’Enfant’s point A.\(^5\)

Out in that unlikely wilderness, another project for a national monument to Washington got under way, this one the most ambitious and problematic of all. Whereas Greenough’s statue was financed by the federal government, this undertaking was sponsored by a private association led by a handful of prominent Washington residents. They envisaged a monument that would not only dwarf Greenough’s statue but become the tallest structure in the world. Their Washington National Monument was meant to be the ultimate act of monumental aggrandizement, outshining the Capitol and dashing the building’s claim to the commemorative center.

The design by the longtime federal architect Robert Mills, adopted in 1845, combined an obelisk reaching six hundred feet high with an immense Doric-colonnaded “pantheon” at the base, surmounted by a colossal sculptural group of Washington driving an imperial chariot (figure 21). The design did everything humanly possible to steal the Capitol’s thunder. The pantheon would hold battle paintings and statues of Revolutionary heroes, thereby rivaling the Capitol Rotunda. The project included an observatory at the top of the obelisk (reached by a “railway” whose mechanism went unexplained) and a subterranean gallery in the pantheon that could hold Washington’s remains if his heirs ever allowed the removal of his body in the future. The price tag of $1.2 million was to be paid entirely by voluntary donations of the American people.\(^6\)

Mills’s elaborate design was certainly an affront to republican restraint, and its eclectic mixture of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian elements carried contradictory messages. The portico featured the republican symbolism of Doric columns, as in Latrobe’s pyramid design, yet they were coupled with the imperial Roman motif of the chariot, which suggested conquest and expansionism. Far from accidental, these inconsistencies were fundamental to the nation’s own problem of self-definition as it
tried to reconcile territorial expansion and large-scale slavery with the more modest vision of a stable republican order of independent farmers.

The scale and ambition of this immense commemorative project gave artists a reason to imagine the Mall anew, from the vantage of the river on the west rather than the Capitol on the east. The earliest such vista to include the monument was probably an 1847 lithograph after Joseph Goldsborough Bruff’s *Elements of National Thrift*.
and Empire (figure 22). Unlike Latrobe’s drawing of 1800, which sequestered the mausoleum in its own sylvan setting, Bruff’s fanciful view integrated the monument into a new civic scheme. His image used a lot of topographical rearrangement and wishful thinking to visualize a true central core for the capital, organized around the Washington Monument, the Smithsonian, and the Capitol. Together the three structures (two of which existed only on paper) represented the pillars of a successful society—patriotic memory, scientific and artistic advancement, and good government. Here for the first time the center of the capital was imagined as a national core symbolic of ideal institutions and values for society. Of course it was an image in which the reality of slave traffic in and near the Mall had to be erased.

Bruff’s image shows that the managers of the monument society had set in motion a powerful fantasy—a new way to project the nation’s image from an alternative center. To make the fantasy come true, the managers of the society had to overcome understandable opposition from Congress, which was highly reluctant to bestow its approval on a privately funded association with little accountability for how it raised and spent its money. The managers used subscription agents, paid on commission, to fan out across the country gathering donations; it was impossible to know how much they pocketed for themselves. By 1848, after several years of fund-raising, the society had $87,000 on hand, enough to persuade Congress finally to
donate the public reservation that included L’Enfant’s point A.\(^{61}\) President Polk, fresh from his epochal victory over Mexico, formally deeded to the society the site at the west end of the Mall. But point A proved untenable. Mills and the monument managers sited the foundation on higher ground about four hundred feet away, shifting the monument off both of L’Enfant’s axes and creating headaches for planners ever since. The managers also scaled down the project to the obelisk only, leaving the question of the pantheon to a future date.\(^{62}\) Even so the monument, if finished, would still be the most commanding structure in the capital, the ultimate landmark, visible for miles around.

On July 4, 1848, the ceremonial laying of the cornerstone took place before a crowd of many thousands that included the president and vice-president of the United States, congressmen, representatives of Indian tribal nations, and other dignitaries. Such ceremonies were important occasions, carefully planned especially when the monument depended on voluntary contributions, for here the nation gathered ritualistically to launch the monument’s construction and confirm its importance. Hand-sewn state flags from as far away as Texas were brought by special delegations. Elaborate letters of invitation went out across the country; replies of equal gravity came back and were duly archived for publication.\(^{63}\)

Perhaps the most important element in the ritual was the choice of orator for the occasion, who had to be someone who could overcome his sectional or partisan affiliation and speak as a unifier. This was no easy task in 1848, following a war that had divided the country along party lines (the Whigs generally opposed, the Democrats in support). Even more alarming, the vast increase in national territory owing to the war had reignited the debate over the expansion of slavery, which threatened to make the growing divide between North and South even more intractable. These divisions particularly troubled the local sponsors of the monument, who were deeply invested in the capital city; they knew that Washington could survive and grow only if sectional conflict was overcome and the national Union cemented.

The monument society eventually settled on the Speaker of the House, Robert Winthrop of Massachusetts, a well-known orator and a Whig. Winthrop had argued against the extension of slavery into the Southwest, famously declaring in a speech of 1845 that he was “uncompromisingly opposed . . . to adding another inch of slave-holding territory to this nation.” At the same time, he resisted abolitionism and tried to steer a middle ground on the war with Mexico. In the climate of 1848 that made him a compromiser, the sort of politician who could speak across the growing rifts of party and section.\(^{64}\)
Winthrop’s speech was remarkable for what it did not say. He said nothing about manifest destiny or the recent war with Mexico. He talked a great deal about current events, but all in Europe—the latest revolution in France and the reformist stance of the Vatican. These great liberation movements, he argued, owed their origins to the example of the United States and George Washington. Although he spoke eloquently of the Declaration of Independence and its premise of equality among all men, Winthrop said nothing about Washington’s slaves or the institution of slavery. In this forum, Winthrop the compromiser was not about to solve that contradiction, which had haunted the republic from its inception.

Yet at the end of his speech he could not help circling back to the great national crisis spawned by slavery’s expansion. “The extension of our boundaries and the multiplication of our territories are producing, directly and indirectly... so many marked and mourned centrifugal tendencies,” he lamented. In the figure of Washington he hoped the Republic could find “the all-sufficient centripetal power” that would hold the Union of states together. “Let the column which we are about to construct be at once a pledge and an emblem of perpetual union!”

In coining the term *all-sufficient centripetal power*, Winthrop had put his finger on the most powerful recurring dream for the capital, beginning with the Federalists’ idea of raising a pyramid monument and continuing with the efforts of future generations to carve out a monumental core from L’Enfant’s original Mall. Winthrop seemed to believe, with the Federalists, that a pile of masonry could somehow unify a nation, as if this gigantic obelisk—associated with the sun in ancient Egyptian culture—could be the central star that would hold its satellites in orbit. But as he moved toward the speech’s climax, he changed his tack and veered back toward republican iconoclasm. The work of memory must not stop with this monument, he argued. “Think not to transfer to a tablet or a column the tribute which is due from yourselves. Just honor to Washington can only be rendered by observing his precepts and imitating his example.... This wide-spread Republic is the true monument to Washington.”

In the end this blueblood Whig, descendant of the great Massachusetts Federalist tradition, echoed the rhetoric of the Republican slave-owner Thomas Jefferson. No obelisk, Winthrop understood, could save the Union. Only its people could, through their living commitment.

Three years later, a quiet image of “Washington’s monument,” dated “16 Nov. 1851” and drawn by Seth Eastman, suggests the mixed outcome of Winthrop’s exhortation (figure 23). While Eastman’s drawing echoes Bruff’s print by compressing the three great national structures—the monument, the Smithsonian, and the Capitol—
into one frame, the bird’s eye vantage of Bruff’s view here comes down to earth. In the foreground a seated fisherman with his line in Tiber Creek sets the slow pace of the scene. In the middle ground the flag is still, work on the monument proceeding sluggishly amid a ragtag scene of sheds, people, and animals below. Ironically this stump, a little over a hundred feet high, would remain essentially unchanged for three decades. The monument had not even reached a third of its projected height when the Civil War broke out thirteen years after Winthrop’s oration. During the war years, and long afterward, the unfinished stump stood out, visible from all directions, as an emblem of a broken nation, scorning Winthrop’s “all-sufficient centripetal power.”

Just visible in Eastman’s drawing, on the opposite bank of the creek, is Jefferson’s old meridian stone, planted at L’Enfant’s original point A. This unassuming stone, apparently forgotten in its swampy surroundings, is the perfect representation of Dickens’s “monument to a deceased project.” Hints and premonitions of failure seem to permeate the image, as if registering the nation’s inability to overcome its internal contradictions. Yet such interpretive hindsight hides as much as it reveals. The real work of occupation, like the work around the monument grounds, in fact continued. Even in the 1850s the nation and the city pushed forward to fill their territory. With that push a distinctive memorial landscape would eventually begin to take shape in the national capital.
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