

# **And the Flag Was Not There; World War I and the ideal of “Living Memorials”**

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In dealing with World War I memorials in southern California, it was disheartening to find little memory in America of the war. Not so in France. On a tour of America’s military cemeteries and memorials of The Great War, I was saddened, but not shocked, to find few visitors to the final resting place of our troops. To locals however, the memory of America was held not just in high esteem; my guide on one occasion cried at the memory of the fighting that had taken place. It seemed like the events had happened twenty years ago, instead of some one hundred. As efforts are underway to recover our memory of this conflict, we should ask questions about why Americans forgot the war in the first place. But where do we begin? Anywhere we can.

Historian Shane Peterson and I can give many fine and well known examples of military memorials dedicated to the memory of the United States' involvement in World War I. Few, in America are as grand as the Liberty Memorial in Kansas City. With its over two hundred foot Egyptian Revival Tower, it has been revered and added to since 1926.<sup>1</sup> Not to mention the Legion of Honor Museum, built “To honor the dead while serving the living” in the San Francisco bay area.<sup>2</sup> Truly these are living memorials.

But it is not the well known memorials that haunt historian Peterson. Peterson loves to start with is the least known, or the forgotten. “That” he says “is entirely the point”. While wine tasting on California’s Central coast, in the town of Los Alamos, he chanced to see the town flagpole. Not the flagpole at the city post office, very much in use and very modern, but something far less grand that may not have carried a flag in many years.

Thought to be on the corner of Centennial and Bell Street, its base is a pyramid of worn rock, holding a galvanized pipe. The only hint of an inscription in the cement and rock is the outline of a year in pebbles, the year of “1918.” Once the center of attention, perhaps with the sound of a military bugle; and a small admiring crowd, the flag pole is a footnote to local history and is now showing signs of rust.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.theworldwar.org/explore/museum-and-memorial>

<sup>2</sup><http://roadstothegreatwar-ww1.blogspot.com/2014/07/why-is-there-replica-of-palace-of.html>

<sup>3</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Los\\_Alamos,\\_California](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Los_Alamos,_California)

Peterson fears that this is more typical of the state of America's World War I era remembrance, even now in the centennial of the war, than many of the grand or rediscovered projects of the past eighty years. The full reasons for the sad state of affairs can and should be debated. We wish to look at the intriguing influence in the 1920s of the idea of the living memorial, rather than the traditional military monument.

An example of this kind of viewpoint was presented in a 1922 issue of *The American Legion Weekly* by the Chairman of the National Commission of Fine Arts, Charles Moore.<sup>4</sup> Without stressing the phrase "living memorial" commissioner Moore wrote "it is fine to keep green the memory of our dear ones; but there is the living present whose problems must be met daily and hourly in the workshop and the field." The main obstacle to this goal, and the fuel for his fear, was the memory of the American Civil War and the mass manufactured Union and Confederate statues that seemed to come, "from the bargain counter." Adding to Moore's distress was the best location for a monument, as the "commanding space" was already taken by the Civil War statue. So what was to be done?

He saw ten ideas for war memorials; first on the list was a flagstaff with a memorial base, and all others had a "well-designed tablet" carrying the names of local veterans as the real center of interest.

Yet his concern for what he called "the spirit of our nation" was for the parts of America, some of them "large" that did not fly the flag. Just where were these areas? He did not say, but implied, it was in the old Confederate states and called the reader to see both the Spanish American War and World War I as a means to reunite the country.

He was right to be concerned. The mid 1920s was a time of peak membership in the white supremacist group the Ku Klux Klan. Numbers vary, perhaps due to the secrecy of the group, but it numbered in the millions and was a force in American

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<sup>4</sup>"The American Legion Weekly" (Vol. 4 No.36) "War Memorials Bad and Good" by Charles Moore, September 8<sup>th</sup> 1922 pp 14-16

The story was accessed on line in September 2018. There appears to be both a PDF record and a google books record. Peterson also accessed the story as part of a Masters Thesis taken at California State University Northridge prior to 2009.

<https://books.google.com/books?id=2yg4AQAAMAAJ>

political life<sup>5</sup>. American Legion chapters in the deep south were segregated and white southern veterans were often members in both the Klan and the Legion.<sup>6</sup>

To make matters more complex, the traditional soldier monuments for Confederates and additional pro-Confederate markers, were still being promoted by groups such as the United Daughters' of the Confederacy. As late as the 1920s the World War was competing with the Civil War for space in the public square. We will later return to the South, to the Mississippi Delta, for a look at two such monuments. One is "living" on a memorial meeting hall and contrast that with another produced by the same delta culture. The role of the living community is key to each monument.

Outside of the Delta South, in places like Los Angeles, the idea of the living memorial was also debated. One idea not mentioned directly by Chairman Moore, was planting trees as part of his flag pole and plaque suggestion. Memorial trees were a common way of honoring the dead, perhaps because they are symbols of long life. Other projects were a city bridge, an olympic sized stadium, renaming a major city park, and a shrine to the memory of President Lincoln.

A generation later, the record of these efforts is mixed. As the roads changed, the "Victory Bridge," usually called the Glendale-Hyperion Bridge, seemed to shrink in memory, as cars and other bridges grew bigger. It is still in major use today, but almost no one seems to know its history, or the wrong war is cited.<sup>7</sup>

In Los Angeles' Elysian Park, the Victory Memorial Grove was a hill top park-within-a-park, with trees planted to honor World War I veterans, including a name tablet and a flag pole. In time the grove of trees mostly died, the tablet of names

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<sup>5</sup>Meacham, Jon *The Soul of America The Battle for our better angels* P. 119 The numbers given range from two million to six million. The most common number that historian Shane Peterson recalls is four million. This number declined sharply after 1925 to thousands and it thought to be at that level today. This may be due to the passage of the 1924 immigration bill backed by the Klan.

<sup>6</sup>Pencak, William *For God and Country The American Legion 1919-1941* (Boston Northeastern University Press, 1989) pp.175-186 Peterson was unable at the time of this writing to confirm the exact page numbers, relaying on his copy of the Master's Thesis, "Lost Cause To Lost Generation: World War I, and The African-American Troops from Adams County, Mississippi" December 2008 at California State University Northridge. A better example of the overlap may be Leroy Curry a Legion official and Klan spokesperson in Missouri in the 1920s, Harcourt, Felix *Ku Klux Kulture American and the Klan In The 1920s* (Chicago and London, The university of Press, 2017) pp 65-66.

<sup>7</sup>A city of Los Angeles newsletter by a councilman on the renovation of a nearby flagpole wrongly stated the bridge was a memorial to the Second World War. Unpublished email 5/26/2018 "ATWATER VILLAGE - Councilmember O'Farrell kicked-off the Memorial Day weekend by raising a new American flag at the World War II Memorial Bridge which was dedicated 100 years ago. Joining the Councilmember: firefighters from Station 26 as well as Rueben Martinez from the Atwater Village Neighborhood Council".

corroded and the flag pole fell into disuse. Yet, here too, with the coming of the centennial of World War I, local enthusiasts re-discovered the grove, and the local groups, including the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) helped to bring it back.<sup>8</sup>

The Olympics came to the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, but it's connection to the war was forgotten. Today an effort is being made to rediscover and rejuvenate the role it had in patriotic exercises such as Memorial Day, growing out of the World War I Armistice Day November 11, 1918.

The city park is still called Pershing Square, made more accessible by the gentrification of the city downtown with its own Red Line Subway Station. The park was renamed in 1918 after General of the Armies John J. Pershing, commander of US forces in France.<sup>9</sup>

The shrine to President Lincoln was well maintained and stands today in Redlands, California. The reason for this was the dedication of the Watchorn family that created it as a memorial to their son, Emory Watchorn, in addition to the 16<sup>th</sup> President. While he died after the war, they blamed his fatal medical condition on his war time service in Italy.<sup>10</sup>

What is the key to a “living memorial?” It would seem the living. As we will see, the memorial, any memorial, needs a group that cares about it, not just to maintain it, but to care that its story is relevant and up to date. We can see this in both Southern California, as well as in the Mississippi delta. Two examples are the Memorial Hall Honor Roll in Natchez, Mississippi as compared to The Victory Arch in New Orleans's old 9<sup>th</sup> Ward, now the upper Ninth. We will begin with the city of Natchez, the seat of Adams County, an old commercial port city on the river.

The auditorium that became the city's living memorial hall, began as a high school auditorium attached to the Natchez Institute. At some point, the hall stood alone and was taken over by the city. By the 1920s, the hall had fallen into disrepair but was brought back as a Great War Memorial Hall with an Honor Roll of over 500 local veterans. Then, once more, it became dilapidated. In 2007, the hall was

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<sup>8</sup>“Save memorial grove project a photo journal” by Melissa Angert, manuscript. The honor roll was of members of the DAR with two local chapters creating the grove. Authors note, Courtland Jindra , a survey of the number of DAR chapters at the time of the post world war I, uncovered some six chapters, with two of the chapters as the likely creators of the original honor roll plate. Perhaps an in depth examination of DAR records may yet uncover more information.

<sup>9</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pershing\\_Square\\_\(Los\\_Angeles\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pershing_Square_(Los_Angeles))

<sup>10</sup><https://www.lincolnshrine.org/the-watchorns/>

reborn as a federal courthouse.<sup>11</sup> In 2011, a new set of Honor Roll plaques were created, to include the names of black veterans that had been omitted in 1924.<sup>12</sup> The key to this transformation was a community that had held the memory of all the men that had served. A very strong local preservation effort continues to this day. This stands in contrast to a more traditional monument, the 1919 Victory Arch, in Bywater, the upper 9<sup>th</sup> ward of New Orleans.<sup>13</sup>

Standing some two stories tall, the neoclassical arch is wide enough to march a column of troops through it and carries an honor roll with both black and white troops on separate name plates. It once stood in the center of a square but was moved in the 1950s onto the sidewalk to make room for a school. Today it is in visible disrepair, with the back story of the veterans on the honor roll little known. The two monuments are in stark contrast, one with a community that cares for it that one time excluded black troops. Citizens made amends for this earlier oversight. The other memorial included black troops from the start, albeit on separate plates. However, this memorial which was progressive for its time, now has little memory in the local population.

Today, perhaps more than any city, in America, New Orleans is not just a contested space for military monuments, it is a battleground, with the Victory Arch caught in the crossfire between two groups. One group taking down Confederate monuments, the other, it would seem, fighting to preserve them and what they believe they stand for. For the moment, the Victory Arch is unfortunately seen as falling into the Confederate camp.<sup>14</sup>

In view of this impasse, Mr. Peterson wonders if the same solution that worked in Natchez might work in New Orleans, working with the currently living community to re-manufacture the plates with the old names in alphabetical order, adding any that can be documented that may have been left off in 1919 from the Upper 9<sup>th</sup> ward?<sup>15</sup>

Given this short look at the memory of how world war I stands in America we can confirm the conclusion of memorial historian Jennifer Wingate. She notes "...the

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<sup>11</sup><http://www.shanepeterson.com/oldweb/natchez-memorial-hall-project.html>,

<sup>12</sup><https://www.gsa.gov/node/78346>, <https://www.natchezdemocrat.com/2011/11/11/wwi-plaque-is-a-wrong-righted/>

<sup>13</sup><http://freepages.rootsweb.com/~neworleans/military/>

<sup>14</sup><https://thehayride.com/2017/09/batiste-now-theyre-trying-kill-victory-arch-9th-ward/>,  
[https://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2017/09/victory\\_arch\\_monumental\\_task.html](https://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2017/09/victory_arch_monumental_task.html)

<sup>15</sup>Personal correspondence with Shane Peterson October 26, 2018.

meanings that memorials convey cannot be isolated from the ambitions, politics, and desires of the present.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Jennifer Wingate, *Sculpting Doughboys Memory, Gender, and Taste in America's World War I Memorials* (Farnham, Surrey, England, Burlington, VT United States, Ashgate Press, 2013) p.189.