

Remarks at the Rededication of the Thomas MacDonough Memorial On the Occasion of the 200th Anniversary of the Battle of Plattsburgh

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I've been asked to say a few things about the history of the building this memorial, this monument, which was finished and dedicated in 1926.

In 1913 the Plattsburgh Centenary Commission was created for two purposes. The first was to plan and carry out a Battle of Plattsburgh centennial celebration the following year and this it did with great success with help from about \$50,000 appropriated by New York State and the federal government. The second purpose was to plan and erect a suitable monument to commemorate the American victory at Plattsburgh.

The first step in this process was to choose a suitable site and, very quickly, the Commissioners saw the potential of erecting a monument here, near the mouth of the Saranac River, where the visitor could take in Plattsburgh Bay, the site of MacDonough's victory, and where, right on this site itself, some of the "sharpest fighting that occurred between land forces" had taken place.

Offering this site as a blank canvas, the Commission then invited twenty architects to submit design proposals and, after reviewing them, unanimously selected the plan presented by John Russell Pope from New York City, a plan that included a towering obelisk for the site. You'll hear more about Pope and his design in a minute.

But mind you, there were two city blocks here at the time, on what was then called North River Street, so to build the monument here, the Commission had to condemn and acquire eleven parcels of land, and this they did by about 1916 at a cost of \$62,400. They also demolished the buildings and did initial site preparations the same year.

After Pope's monument design was selected by the Commission, he was also hired to design a new city hall, which was made possible thanks to a generous bequest from Loyal Smith. Pope's design for the new city hall was based on the Pantheon in Rome, with a central domed space and a projecting columned portico facing the street. Like making way for the monument, the city had to acquire and clear almost an entire city block for this project, too. This kind of remaking of the city with grand monumental architecture was rooted in the City Beautiful movement, popular during late 19th and early 20th centuries. This movement believed that, by opening up vistas, by letting air and light into the streetscape, and by designing grand architecture, one could inspire and uplift people and even create better moral and civic virtue in the city.

As a preservationist I shudder to think of what may have been torn down to make these projects possible but I do appreciate the idea that architecture can and should be beautiful and inspiring and that these projects said something very important about the community – that it embraced and honored its past and was optimistic about itself and its future.

Said the Commission report, in talking about the new City Hall, “this municipal building will be a model of good taste, a triumph of architecture, and will harmonize with the monument to be erected nearby.”

The monument and City Hall planning and the Battle of Plattsburgh Centennial also inspired William Miner to purchase the Kent-Delord House and to create a public museum there and the D&H Railroad created an underpass so that there would be a continuous path from this monument to the Champlain monument at the mouth of the river.

Unfortunately, World War I interrupted the progress of the monument project, because it relied completely on government funding, but City Hall was finished in 1917.

So what had attracted the Commission to the design of John Russell Pope and where did his design come from?

Pope was a New York architect, who was trained at Columbia University and at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He was a big proponent of neoclassical design and he designed country homes, office towers, college campus plans (like for Yale), and – more importantly – monumental civic and government buildings. He would eventually be known for hugely important design work in Washington DC – the Jefferson Memorial (1939), the National Archives (1935), and the National Gallery of Art (1941) – but these would all come later.

Before winning the Plattsburgh competition, Pope had already unsuccessfully submitted designs for two other monuments – the Monument of the Great Lakes (1905) and the Perry Memorial in Ohio (1912).

By the time Pope presented his obelisk plan, the obelisk was already a wildly popular architectural form, widely used for cemetery monuments and to create memorials to honor great (mostly) men and great events in history.

The obelisk is an ancient Egyptian monument – a tapering, four-sided shaft topped by a pyramidal cap. For the Egyptians, it was a symbol of the Pharaoh's right to rule and his connection to the divine. Inscriptions and relief carvings on these stone obelisks also told stories of the Pharaoh's exploits and power. In the early 19th century, when ancient Egypt was increasingly revealed to the West, the western world became fascinated with all things Egyptian.

Such was the fascination with Egypt and ancient Egyptian obelisks that when a 75' obelisk from Luxor was transported to Paris in 1836, 200,000 people, including the king and queen, watched its re-erection on the Place de la Concorde. Then both London and New York got their own ancient Egyptian obelisks, too.

The first monumental obelisk in America and the second in the world was Solomon Willard's Bunker Hill Monument – 220' high and completed in 1843 to commemorate the famous Revolutionary War battle fought there. By “monumental obelisk” I mean that these were taller structures, made not from solid often single pieces of stone like the Egyptians but these were made by many stones and often were hollow inside, making it possible to have an internal stairway and an

observation tower at the top. For battlegrounds especially these observation decks afforded grand views across the fields of battle.

Thus began a kind of “obelisk building fever” in the United States.

There was an obelisk as part of the Lincoln mausoleum (1871); obelisks were built to commemorate the battlefields at Groton Heights (1881), Saratoga (1882), and Bennington (1889), and four were built in North Carolina over a fifteen year period. Then there’s the granddaddy of all obelisks, the Washington Monument, completed in 1885 and at 555’, it is the world’s tallest stone structure and the tallest true obelisk.

So by the time the MacDonough Monument was designed the monumental obelisk had become the structure of choice for commemorating important people and events, they had come to symbolize military prowess, democracy, endurance, independence, and they reached to God and the heavens.

In the dedication of the obelisk monument to President William McKinley in Buffalo, New York in 1907, the great American poet Carl Sandburg wrote a poem for the occasion that included these lines:

*A forefinger of stone, dreamed by a sculptor, points to the sky.
It says “This way, this way”*

– that was his poetic expression of how such monuments might guide and inspire us.

I was also surprised to learn that, compared to erecting other kinds of memorial structures of the time, with their classic colonnades and highly carved and ornate surface, obelisks were a more affordable choice for monuments.

So in 1921, after the end of the war, the monument project was taken up by a new group of commissioners and its building was placed under the authority of the United State District Engineers in New York City.

When the project first went out to bid, the bids were rejected as too high, so the plans were modified to eliminate the ornamental, semi-circular retaining wall along the river. A second time it went out to bid and these bids too were rejected, so the plans were redrawn again and the monument was brought closer to the street, further reducing the amount of site work. Finally the project was awarded to John Young, Jr. of New York City. Work commenced – there are wonderful photos of the monument under construction rising with a great scaffolding system along one side of it - and the monument was finished and dedicated in 1926.

This monument is 135' high, is 14' square at the base, is made of Indiana limestone, has carved relief panels, and is topped by a bronze eagle with a wingspan of 22'.

In discussing the choice of the eagle on top of the monument, the Commission noted that the eagle seemed to be just alighting after a long flight “conveying the thought that this Republic, which for a quarter of a century following the close of the Revolutionary War has been little more than a group of separate struggling states, had finally been welded together by the War of 1812 (brought to a successful ending by the battle at Plattsburgh) the into a strong determined nation which had finally found permanence, safety, and peace. The Eagle had alighted.”