

Chapter I

THE IDEA OF A MONUMENT

Hostilities in the War of Independence came to a conclusion with the defeat of the British at Yorktown in October 1781 but not until 1783 did the Treaty of Paris officially end the war. The young nation faced numerous problems. The Continental Congress—the only semblance of national unity—had to disband troops and out of an empty treasury had to pay those who remained under arms as well as the domestic and foreign creditors. It had to manage extremely shaky foreign affairs, adjust state boundaries, and deal with jealousies and bitterness among the states.

Despite these serious problems, the American people deeply appreciated their independence, which they sincerely felt they owed to one man—George Washington. Washington had not yet left his country's service for his beloved Mount Vernon when on 6 May 1783, Arthur Lee, delegate to the Congress from Virginia, proposed that an equestrian statue be erected in his honor. Congress immediately appointed Lee, Oliver Ellsworth of Connecticut, and Thomas Mifflin of Pennsylvania, to prepare a plan for such a statue "where Congress shall fix their residence."¹ With surprising speed, the committee reported within two days, but the entire Congress took longer. Undoubtedly it had more pressing matters to consider than a statue, but the delegates' chronic lack of attendance may also have prevented more attention to the plan.

On 7 August 1783, with ten states represented, Congress unanimously passed the committee's report authorizing the erection of an equestrian statue of Washington. The congressional resolution specifically required:

that the statue be bronze: The General to be represented in a Roman dress, holding a truncheon in his right hand. . . . The statue to be supported by a marble pedestal, on which are to be represented, in basso relievo, the . . . principal events of the war, in which General Washington commanded in person. . . .²

Because America had few artists skilled enough to sculpt such a statue, the resolution directed that a European sculptor under the guidance of the American minister at the Court of Versailles execute the statue and

that the United States treasury cover the cost. Congress also directed Charles Thomson, Secretary of Congress, to obtain for the American minister at Versailles the best possible portrait of Washington as well as an accurate description of the events that were to become a part of the base relief.³

The 7 August resolution could not have been more specific about congressional plans for a memorial to Washington. The site of the future capital remained unsettled, however, for several more years. Meanwhile, the many problems facing the young nation, particularly with an empty treasury, prevented any further realization of the resolution.

The next several years were critical ones for the United States. The Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia in 1787, and after extensive deliberations enough states ratified the Constitution to make it effective. Established in 1789 in New York City, a new government, more serious than its predecessor, examined the question of a site for the new capital. In 1790, it selected an area on the Potomac River for the future city of Washington.

Pierre Charles L'Enfant, a sensitive and egotistical Frenchman, but an able engineer, received a commission from General Washington to draw up a plan for the capital. In 1791, he submitted his design, which even included an equestrian statue of the general. He placed the proposed statue approximately where the Washington Monument stands today, noting that this was the memorial that the late Continental Congress authorized in its resolution of 1783.⁴ This statue of Washington would be a center of attraction because of its location between the Capitol and the President's mansion.

While Federal City, as Washington, D.C., was then called, was slowly rising, little was done to realize the dream of the old Continental Congress. Indeed, some of the fault lay with George Washington himself, who would not accept the idea of a memorial while he was alive. While Charles Peale and other American artists were busy painting and sculpting busts of Washington, the equestrian statue remained a dream.

In the meantime, Washington served two terms as President and returned to Mount Vernon, where he died in 1799. His death shocked the nation. Perhaps as much from a feeling of guilt because nothing had been done to honor him as from a feeling of adoration, voices rose from every corner praising the lost hero. In Congress, where political parties had yet to develop distinct philosophies, members rose to honor Washington. Among them was John Marshall, then a representative from Virginia but later to become one of the greatest justices of the United States Supreme Court. Following his impassioned speech, the House of Representatives appointed Marshall to a joint committee that was to present a plan showing what "respect ought to be paid to the memory of the man first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen..." The committee's

report, submitted on 24 December 1799, recommended that a marble monument be erected in Washington, and that Washington's family be requested to permit his body to be deposited under it. The report also suggested that "the monument be so designed as to commemorate the great events of his military and political life."⁵

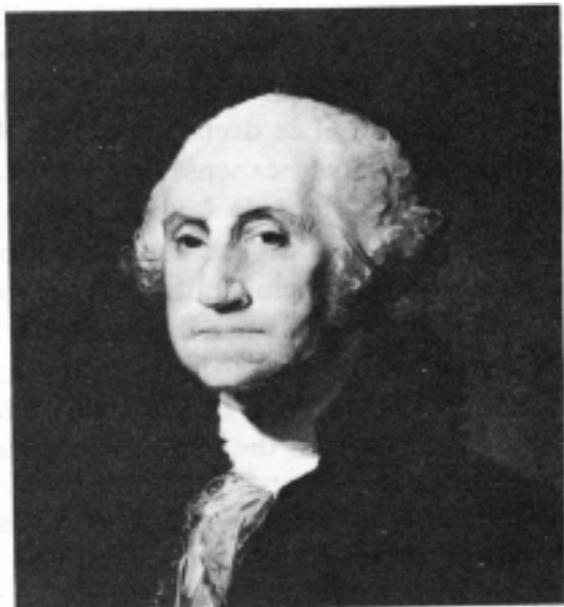
Henry Lee, a fellow Virginian, rose in the House of Representatives to support the resolution. He cautioned his colleagues that Congress should suppress any differences over the design of the monument for the sake of unanimity and action. Anticipating that many quarrels and disagreements would ensue on this issue in the years ahead, he said:

one hope is cherished, that whatever is done, will be unanimously adopted... A difference of opinion will naturally prevail. This difference of opinion, however, commendable, upon ascertaining the mode of public mourning; ought to be suppressed when we come to act; for unanimity then is... most to be wished for..⁶

Both houses of Congress approved the resolution on the same day, but problems were about to begin.⁷

The 1799 resolution differed in two major respects from the 1783 proposal. First, it directed that the statue be built inside the Capitol, then under construction, and second, that Washington's body be laid to rest there as well. Although Martha Washington reluctantly agreed to have her husband's remains moved to the Capitol, Congress failed to act. For years afterwards, Congress considered several proposals, but did not enact any legislation because of a depleted treasury, the international situation drawing America closer to war, and disagreements over the design of the monument.

George Washington in his later years.
Painting by Gilbert Stuart.
Library of Congress.



On 8 May 1800 Henry Lee offered a proposal supporting the 1783 resolution and stating that the government execute an equestrian statue and place it in the center of a designated area in front of the Capitol. Another House member, Robert Goodloe Harper of South Carolina, moved to amend the resolution by substituting a mausoleum for the statue. The House adopted the latter plan.⁸

The House quickly appointed a committee to study the matter. On the following day it reported a bill that provided that the mausoleum base be 100 feet long and of a proportionate height. Harper, the author of this plan, had asked Benjamin Latrobe, the eminent exponent of Greek revival architecture in Philadelphia, for advice. Latrobe suggested a design of a "pyramid of one hundred feet at the bottom, with nineteen steps, having a chamber thirty feet square, made of granite, to be taken from the Potomac, with a marble . . . sarcophagus in the centre, and four marble pillars on the outside, besides other proportionate ornaments." He believed that such a design would cost \$62,500. In spite of strong opposition to Harper's bill, it passed after a third reading, but Congress did not appropriate any money to carry out the legislation.⁹

At the following session, a group of congressmen led by Henry Lee introduced a similar bill to construct a mausoleum. By now, however, there was some controversy over whether to construct a mausoleum or erect a monument. Heretofore the House had favored a mausoleum, but now some preferred a monument that would commemorate Washington's military and political careers. Much of the discussion centered around expense. To some, even Latrobe's estimate of \$62,500 seemed excessive. Congressman John Nicholas, motivated largely by economy, favored a simple, plain monument.¹⁰ Congressman Abraham Nott did not believe that a mass of stones in a mausoleum would add to Washington's reputation or express any more national affection than would a simple marble monument. This being the case, he preferred the latter, which would be less expensive.¹¹

When Willis Alston proposed an amendment to build a less expensive monument, Lee declared that the bill should remain unchanged. He maintained that no expense was too much for so great a man. Nathaniel Macon retorted that he favored the amendment because it was more rational and economical and conformed to the intentions of the old Congress. The committee concluded its meeting without reaching a decision.¹²

Many in Congress feared that a mausoleum housing Washington's remains would prove far more costly than originally estimated, perhaps as much as \$150,000 or even \$200,000. William Claiborne, the group's exponent, suggested that the public would view such an undertaking as a "profuse and useless expenditure of the public money." He felt that principles of economy better justified a statue similar to the one that the Continental Congress originally recommended and that the American people would ultimately support it.¹³

The debate over the type of commemoration continued throughout December 1800 amid bitterness and recrimination. Some members favored a mausoleum, others wanted a monument, and a third group suggested both. Congress also disagreed over the artistic details. Cost was at the heart of much of the argument, although those who urged economy wished to avoid the stigma of being considered too parsimonious in eulogizing so great a man.

The final vote was a close one. The House agreed upon a mausoleum, and on 1 January 1801 passed an appropriation of \$200,000 for its erection. The Senate, however, failed to act upon the measure and the issue remained unresolved.¹⁴ Momentous political and diplomatic questions then absorbing the attention of Congress and the country continued unabated until the War of 1812 and made the senators reluctant to vote for a structure that many people considered extremely costly.¹⁵

The question of erecting a monument or a mausoleum remained dormant for 15 years. On 16 February 1816, Congressman Benjamin Huger, who had served on the 1799 monument committee, rose to ask what could be done to resolve the problem. Congress appointed a joint committee. The committee approved a resolution to build a marble monument "in the centre of the great hall of the Capitol," presumably meaning the rotunda, where Washington's remains would ultimately rest. Congress again failed to pass the resolution.¹⁶ The divergent feelings on the subject had changed little since 1800.

Three years later the Senate revived the question and adopted a resolution to build an equestrian statue of Washington, as proposed in 1783, "in the Capitol square," but it postponed and eventually dropped the matter after the House proposed amendments.¹⁷

An impassioned speech by the young congressman James Buchanan in January 1824 failed to arouse Congress. The House tabled his resolution but resurrected the one passed in 1799. Years later, after becoming President of the United States, Buchanan reminisced:

When, thirty-four or thirty-five years ago, I was a member of the House of Representatives, at that time a young man and a new member, I introduced a resolution, the object of which was to redeem the plighted faith of the country to erect a monument to him to whom its warmest gratitude was due. I do not remember at whose instance I did this, but it was undoubtedly at the instance of some respectable citizens of Washington, who remembered the obligations which had been incurred by the previous action of the national legislature. Being then, as I have said, a young man, there was, perhaps, something of the sophomore in my dealings with the subject, but I pressed it with all the ardor of my youth. It was considered at that time, and was so remarked in Congress, that it was rather an indignity that any effort should be made to raise a monument to the

honor and memory of Washington besides that which existed in the hearts of his countrymen. I do not remember what was done, but I do remember the extreme mortification which I suffered from the ill success of the movement.¹⁸

James Buchanan. *Library of Congress.*



In 1832, the centennial of Washington's birth, Congress appointed a joint committee of both houses to prepare a proposal for a fitting monument. The committee recommended, among other things, that John A. Washington, a descendant of George Washington, agree to move the remains of his illustrious forebear from Mount Vernon for interment in a mausoleum beneath the nation's Capitol, which had been provided with a simple vault. The usual arguments arose, but John Washington ended the debate by refusing to allow the removal of the remains. Once again, Congress failed to memorialize Washington in the manner suggested in 1783 or 1799.¹⁹

In other lesser respects, however, Congress succeeded. It agreed to commission John Vanderlyn, a well-known artist from New York, to paint a full-length portrait of Washington, which eventually hung in the Hall of Representatives opposite the portrait of Lafayette. Vanderlyn copied the head from Charles Stuart's famous painting of Washington. During that same session, Congress commissioned Horatio Greenough to sculpt a statue partially copied from Houdon's famous bust of Washington. Although Greenough designed the statue for the rotunda, it stood on the east grounds of the Capitol in later years.²⁰

The Vanderlyn portrait and the Greenough statue were minor attempts to commemorate Washington during his centennial, but they were not intended to fulfill the resolutions of 1783 or 1799. However, some individuals later argued that the Greenough statue was a sufficient memorial. Congressional attempts to fulfill earlier Washington memorialization pledges occurred later, but the results were feeble and negative. A monument to Washington would have to wait.