Chapter III

THE INTERREGNUM

The economic conditions and the political turmoil of the 1850s kept the Society from raising enough funds for the monument. The controversy that raged between the North and South as they slowly approached war made any consistent or prolonged attempt to raise money extremely difficult. The internal affairs of the Washington National Monument Society had an even more direct effect upon fund raising. Congress accused the Society of mismanaging its funds and using them to buy petty services and trivia. Such charges impugned the integrity of the Society, which, in answering Congress, was frequently placed on the defensive.[1]

The Pope's Stone

But for two events, Congress would have supplied funds despite its general mistrust of the Society. In 1854, the Roman Pontiff, head of the Roman Catholic Church and ruler of the small Italian Papal States, indicated his willingness to contribute a memorial stone to the monument. As early as 1852, the Pope had revealed that a stone from the Temple of Concord in Rome would be sent. Certain anti-Catholic groups in America that despised anything that carried the Pontiff's blessing strongly protested. An 1852 pamphlet argued that the Society should not accept the stone because the Pope was a foreign tyrant. This same publication expressed the fear that as more Catholics migrated to America, the Pope would gain enough power to some day reign here. Fanatical messages of this nature and other expressions of bigotry flooded the Society, urging that the stone not be accepted.[2]

Much of this opposition to the Pope's Stone stemmed from the Know-Nothing Party, formed to prevent immigrants, especially Catholics, from entering the country. The party had its largest following in Baltimore and Washington. In 1854 Washington elected John T. Towers, a Know-Nothing, as mayor.[3] Having made some political headway, this party flexed its muscles at the Washington National Monument Society with impunity.

Despite strong opposition, the Pope's Stone arrived at the monument site in 1854. It was temporarily stored in the lapidarium where two

armed guards were stationed at all times. During the early hours of 6 March 1854, several members of the Know-Nothing Party overpowered the guards and removed the stone. They carried it to the river where they broke off some pieces for souvenir hunters before tossing the rest into the water.

This vandalism created a considerable national stir. The Society offered a reward of $100 for any information leading to the arrest of the vandals. It also fired the watchman after concluding that he was part of the conspiracy.[4] There was no doubt that serious damage had been done to the Society's cause. Anger was widespread among Catholics, who rightfully felt that the vandalism had been directed at them, and among Protestants, who looked suspiciously upon the motives of the Know-Nothings. As a result, contributions to the Society, already meager, ceased altogether.

Control of the Society

The Society's situation could not have been worse in 1854. Nevertheless, its cause might have succeeded had not yet another unfortunate event occurred the next year. In 1854 the Society had appealed to Congress for assistance in raising the money needed to complete the monument. Some in Congress were still receptive, although most lacked faith in the Society. The House of Representatives referred the request to a select committee of 13. On 22 February 1855, chairman Henry May of the committee made an impassioned plea in behalf of the Society, recommending that Congress donate $200,000 to the beleaguered organization. He made it clear that this sum was to be only a contribution towards the monument; Congress did not intend to assume the full expense of building it.[5]

Just as it appeared that Congress would appropriate the $200,000, the Know-Nothings seized control of the Washington National Monument Society. The party called a meeting on the evening of 22 February 1855, which was contrary to the by-laws of the organization, and packed it with Society members who were also members of the party. Arguing that the Society had hired too many foreign born and Catholics, they elected new officers and a new board of managers sympathetic to their political and social views. Superintendent Dougherty refused to acknowledge the authority of the new board of managers and boarded up all the temporary buildings at the monument site to prevent their takeover. The new board ultimately replaced him with Samuel Briggs.[6]

For three years the two societies existed side by side. During that time the old board of managers made every effort to resolve the matter but to no avail. The new board adamantly insisted on its legitimacy. It accused the old board of withholding information and records needed to run the organization; not delivering the treasurer's books and papers; not informing the new board of contracts; permitting tools and machinery to deteriorate; and allowing the marble supply to become exhausted.[7]

Fortunately, as the power and successes of the American Party waned, so did its influence over the Society. The Know-Nothings finally relinquished their control over the Society in 1858 after an unsuccessful attempt to raise money. In the three years they controled the monument, they added only 26 feet of masonry, marble that the master mason had originally rejected as imperfect.[8]

This second embarassing episode taught the Society that an organization designed to collect funds on a national scale could not manage its affairs by a voluntary association of members living so far apart. In 1859, one year after the old board resumed control, Congress wisely incorporated the Society. With this new legality to strengthen and support it, the Society was prepared to move ahead with its fund raising. The ill-fated attempt to gain congressional support for funds, begun in 1855, had to wait another four years. By then it was too late—the war was fast approaching.

Meanwhile, the Society tried to revive public interest and obtain aid for completion. It devised a plan to secure contributions from voters at all municipal and general elections and sought appropriations from state legislatures. Through circular letters, it asked for aid from all political, corporate, or voluntary bodies; the United States Army and Navy; societies; churches; and individuals. Despite these well-meaning efforts, little money trickled into the Society's coffers. At a general election in Washington on 6 June 1859, the Society received contributions amounting to only $150.76.[9] Although appeals for funds were made by the Society from time to time with some minor successes, responses soon stopped completely. The nation torn by a civil war turned its attention towards more pressing matters.

The lack of funds and the conflicts that existed among the old board of managers reopened the question of the foundation's safety and the appropriateness of the design. Despite strong opposition, the Society felt an obligation to the people who had supported the monument project and fought courageously to retain the site and what had been completed. Although the Society had modified the original Mills design, much of this alteration was aimed at forestalling any further temporizing. Lack of funds justified this change. "Let the present generation," said Congressman May in 1855, "at least complete the shaft, and we may then permit those who come after us to finish the whole work."[10] Thus, by 1859, the Mills design had not been abandoned, but only altered to accomodate the current state of finances.

The foundation was a different matter entirely. The foundation had already been built, and the Society had to counter criticisms concerning its safety by calling on engineers and scientists to convince the public of its safety. In 1859, having been given renewed vitality by its congressional charter, the Society asked Secretary of War John Floyd to assign an Army Engineer to examine the foundation. Lieutenant Joseph C. Ives of the Corps of Engineers was selected for this work.

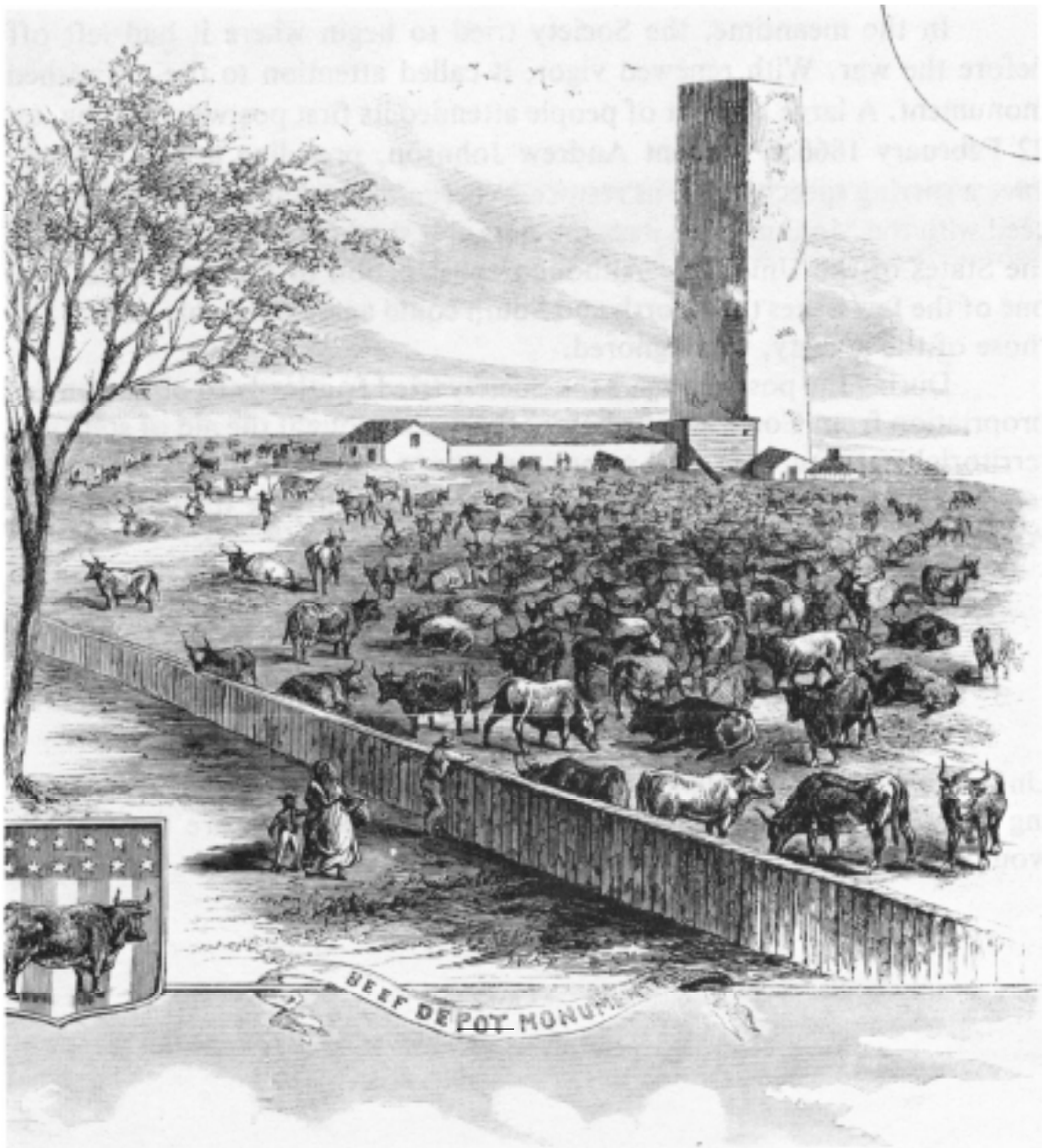
Lieutenant Ives was born in New York City, and graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1852. Early in his career he had been appointed commander of an expedition to explore the Colorado River. The Army later appointed him astronomer and surveyor to a commission that surveyed the boundary between California and the adjacent territories. After his brief but important assignment to the Washington National Monument, he joined the Confederacy and was appointed chief engineer of the coastlines of South Carolina, Georgia, and East Florida. Later he became aide-de-camp to President Jefferson Davis of the Confederacy.[11]

Ives' principal duty at the monument was to study the stability and safety of the foundation. In his report to the Society, he stated that he could not detect any signs of settling or insecurity. The only defects he found were a few chipped blocks of marble in the lowest courses of the shaft, the result of joints being laid too close together. He believed, however, that an adequate base could hide these defective joints.[12] Lieutenant Ives' findings only temporarily alleviated some of the doubts about the foundation's stability. The issue was to be raised again and again.

Although associated with the Society only briefly, Ives also became involved in fund raising. Whether the Society originally intended this or whether Ives later assumed this responsibility, is not clear. In any event, soon after he tested the foundation and reported his results, he became embroiled in fund-raising activities. One writer has said that the Secretary of War permitted him to hold the position of treasurer for the Society while also carrying out his engineering duties. Such a position seems odd for a military person on active duty. Moreover, the Society's historian does not refer to such an appointment. He does say that Ives submitted a plan to raise funds by erecting contribution boxes in post offices throughout the country and designating postmasters as agents for the Society to care for and supervise the funds. At the end of the four months the plan was in operation, the Society collected $2,240 from 841 post offices, far short of its goal. By the end of 1859, the Society's total receipts amounted to only $3,075.[13]

No one could accuse the Society of apathy toward fund raising, but it was difficult to overcome the general public indifference. Construction on the monument had stopped long ago, and the Civil War halted collections. Now the Society had to preserve what had been completed.

During the war the unfinished monument symbolized the break between the states. Union soldiers drilled on the monument grounds. In 1861 the Union Army notified the Society that it needed the grounds to graze cattle to feed the troops. The Army also stored hay in the temporary structures and constructed a slaughterhouse nearby. The Army fenced in the grounds to prevent the cattle from wandering off, but this did not keep Southern sympathizers from communicating with Virginia pickets and intimidating government clerks around the unfinished monument.[14] On 22 February



The monument grounds in 1862, as depicted in *Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. *Library of Congress (photograph USZ62-59908).*

1862, in what was considered to be a heroic feat, a rigger from the Navy Yard ascended the walls of the monument by rope, hand-over-hand, and placed a Union flag at the summit.[15]

At the end of the war, the unfinished monument and its grounds, like the rest of Washington, had been seriously neglected and remained a sorry spectacle. Surrounded by the rubble of broken stones and the debris from the cattle pens and slaughter house, the stump of the monument became an eyesore and a symbol of civic decay. Mark Twain caustically referred to it as a “factory chimney with the top broken off."[16]

In the meantime, the Society tried to begin where it had left off before the war. With renewed vigor, it called attention to the unfinished monument. A large number of people attended its first postwar meeting, on 22 February 1866. President Andrew Johnson, presiding at the meeting, gave a stirring speech. "Let us restore," he said, "the Union, and let us proceed with the Monument as its symbol until it shall contain the pledge of all the States of the Union."[17] Although construction of the monument was one of the few issues that North and South could agree upon, his words, like those of the Society, were ignored.

During the postwar years the Society tried fruitlessly to obtain an appropriation from Congress. As before the war, it sought the aid of state and territorial legislatures as well as private groups and individuals, but the attempts failed abysmally. In criticizing the apparent lack of patriotism in Americans, one writer said:

> There never has been a time when this amount can be raised so easily. The country is full of money, and millions are yearly expended in extravagence [sic] and folly. A little more genuine patriotism would relieve the nation from the ridiculous position in which this unfinished structure places it.[18]

Unfortunately, the problem was deeper than that. The nation was still reeling from the effects of the war; it would take years before the wounds would heal.