

THE PAST IS

prologue

By
Abigail Tucker

Photograph by
Gabriella
Demczuk

AMERICAN ICON

Tragic Figures

The unfinished
Civil War memorial
that became a
symbol of peace—
and a scene of
insurrection

Mars and
Neptune
frolic at
Victory's
feet in the
elaborate
monument
designed
by a Union
admiral.



A



AFTER THE STORMING of Congress in early January, some rioters were apparently surprised to learn that the mere “traffic circle” where they were being arrested was, in fact, the Peace Monument, and part of U.S. Capitol grounds. Mostly unnoticed on ordinary days, the ghostly, eroded statue at the end of Pennsylvania Avenue became a focal point in the news footage of the violent afternoon and remains an enigmatic emblem of its aftermath.

The Peace Monument, strangely enough, got its rocky start as a war memorial, in honor of lost Union sailors and marines. It was conceived by Adm. David Dixon Porter, a famous commander, who intended it for the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, where he served as superintendent. He personally raised funds and, in 1871, commissioned the sculpture, even sketching out his own vision—and taking fire for it. Porter “knows more about the high seas than he does about high art,” one critic sniped.

An amalgam of classical allusions and Victorian funerary motifs, the sculpture remains something of a puzzle to modern eyes. “It’s a mishmash monument,” says Elise Friedland, a George Washington University scholar, who is researching a book about the capital city’s classical art and architecture.

At the top, which reaches around 44 feet, is the bookish muse of History, consulting a tome inscribed “they died that their country might live.” Another female figure, believed to be Grief, cries on History’s shoulder. Below gloats Victory; at her feet are cherubic versions of Mars and Neptune, toying with sword and trident.

And where is the figure of Peace? Tacked onto the back of the sculpture like an afterthought.

Swept away by passion for his memorial project, Porter waited until his final fundraising efforts had

▲ The Peace Monument, in a photo taken between 1909 and 1919, once served as a streetcar stop.

all but capsized to share his plans with Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles. The two men had a contentious relationship—Welles “served his country in its darkest hour with fidelity and zeal, if not with conspicuous ability,” Porter once wrote—and Welles vetoed Porter’s plan. The Naval Memorial, as it was called, would not sail to Annapolis after all, nor be installed at the academy. But Congress scrounged up funds and found a second-best spot, at the foot of Capitol Hill.

Sculpted by the prolific Maine native Franklin



Attack on the Capitol

BRITISH TROOPS TORCHED THE BUILDING DURING A CHAOTIC 26 HOURS IN THE WAR OF 1812. BUT THE SYMBOL OF DEMOCRACY STOOD

By Ted Scheinman

MORNING OF AUGUST 24, 1814



ON THE MARCH ▶

Twenty-six months after the United States declared war on Britain, 4,500 British troops under Maj. Gen. Robert Ross serve a humiliating defeat to U.S. forces at Bladensburg, Maryland. Ross orders the redcoats to march the six or more miles to Washington, D.C.



THE CITY EMPTIES

President James Madison, who rode with the American troops at Bladensburg, leaves the field for the capital city, but will promptly flee as will his cabinet. About 90 percent of the population is gone by the time the enemy arrives.

**WE HAVE A SPECIAL
RELATIONSHIP TO
THOSE STATUES.
WE ANIMATE THEM
WITHOUT KNOWING
WHO THEY ARE.**

Simmons at his studio in Rome, the star-crossed monument was shipped to the District of Columbia in pieces and finished in 1877. The statue of Peace was in fact a last-minute addition, and faces the Capitol in an inexplicably topless state. (“Why is Peace naked?” Friedland wonders.) Peace was per-

haps a political compromise, added to mollify former Confederates in Congress who weren’t eager to support a tribute to the Union cause. Porter shot off a note to the Architect of the Capitol: “If this statue don’t make members of Congress feel peaceful I don’t know what will.” A novelty in a city full of war memorials, this makeshift

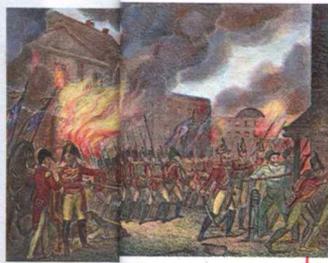
peace shrine was not formally dedicated or even quite finished; the design called for bronze dolphins that still haven’t surfaced.

Made of Carrara marble, a material as vulnerable to the elements as peace itself, the monument has not handled acid rain and pollution well. The human faces have blurred. A marble dove at Peace’s feet flew the coop long ago. Body parts have snapped off and been replaced. Making sense of the elaborate artwork has never been straightforward. “This is the issue with these allegorical monuments,” says University of Pittsburgh art historian Kirk Savage.

“They can kind of mean anything.” It’s inevitable, he says, that the monument would “be appropriated for other reasons and uses.” (Besides, he adds, “it seems pretty easy to climb.”) In 1971, Vietnam War protesters scaled the monument and rested with flags at the top, looking like statues themselves. During the insurrection this past January, somebody slung a scarf around Victory’s neck and a guy wearing a cowboy hat and holding a bullhorn loomed over baby Mars, god of war.

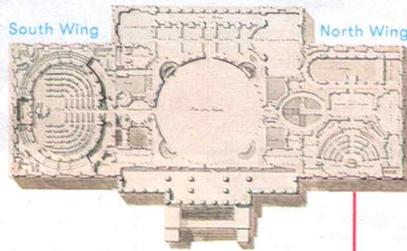
Contemporary peace memorials tend toward radical simplicity—an installation outside Oslo City Hall, where the Nobel Peace Prize is handed out, is a smile-shaped arc. But some artists see immense power in antique statuary. Krzysztof Wodiczko, who works with video projections and has beamed the faces of traumatized soldiers onto the Lincoln Memorial in New York City’s Union Square Park, says the Peace Monument’s human forms have a hold on us. “We have a special relationship to those statues. We identify with them. We animate them without knowing who they are. We want them to witness what we want to say. Sometimes we sit on their shoulders and put flags in their hands.”

In the days after the Capitol riot, a new face appeared at the Peace Monument: Brian Sicknick, the Capitol Police officer who died of injuries sustained in the mob attack. Mourners left photographs of him beside cut flowers and American flags. A cardboard sign said, “Rest in Peace.” ♦



← VICTORY

Toward evening, American troops fire on British forces approaching the capital from the northeast, killing several soldiers and Ross’ horse. Still, the invaders prevail before nightfall and are able to raise the Union Jack over Capitol Hill.



← TAKING THE SENATE

In the **North Wing**, soldiers burn the Library of Congress (3,000 volumes), torch the Senate chamber and topple marble columns. The heat nearly crumples exterior walls, some of which will be incorporated into a restored and expanded Capitol in coming decades.



DAWN,
AUGUST 25, 1814

← THE SIEGE ENDS

British Rear Adm. George Cockburn—who had wanted

to burn far more of the city, before Ross declared private property off-limits—infamously stands atop the chair of the House speaker while whipping up his troops. But the occupation doesn’t last: A powerful rainstorm the next day prompts British troops to withdraw from the capital. Four months later, British and American delegates will sign the Treaty of Ghent, putting an official end to the war.

← DEPARTURES
James
who rode
American
Bladens-
the field
capital city
ptly flee,
cabinet.
0 percent
ulation is
time the
y arrives.



THE PEOPLE’S HOUSE

Inside the original Capitol, which was opened to Congress in 1800, British soldiers lay waste to the east side of the **South Wing**, home to the House of Representatives. The building is largely brick and sandstone, but they slather gunpowder paste on wooden supports and structures and ignite bonfires. The heat is so intense the roof falls in.

