

The Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of The District of Columbia

Established Dec. 7, 1865

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January 25, 2012

General Merrill A. McPeak, Chairman
American Battle Monuments Commission
Courthouse Plaza II, Suite 500
2300 Clarendon Boulevard
Arlington, VA 22201

Dear General McPeak:

First, I would like to introduce our organization to you: The Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia is the District's oldest, continuously active civic organization, founded Dec. 7, 1865. Currently celebrating its 147th year, the AOI of D.C. serves the residents and civic leaders by preserving and promoting the District's history and civic accomplishments.

The purpose of this letter is to seek the support of the American Battle Monuments Commission in recognizing and designating the American Expeditionary Forces Memorial and Gen. John C. Pershing Park as the National World War I Memorial in time for the coming centennial of World War I.

You, your fellow commissioners and your staff may be aware of the recent flurry of news paper articles concerning the District of Columbia War Memorial (in Ash Grove on the Mall). John Kelly of the *Washington Post* and Tom Howell, Jr. of the *Washington Times* just this week have provided extensive coverage of the controversy surrounding the D.C. War Memorial and efforts through two, similar bills in Congress (H.R. 938 and S. 253) both of which would establish commissions to celebrate the centennial of World War I but which contain provisions which would re-name the D.C. War Memorial to The District of Columbia and National World War I Memorial. Both of these bills (and two similar ones which failed in the 111th Congress) were promoted by the well-intentioned efforts of the National World War I Memorial Foundation to have the, then, poorly-maintained D.C. War Memorial rehabilitated and re-designated in honor of the last of the World War I doughboys, Frank Buckles. In the mean time, fortunately, American Recovery Act funds were used by the National Park Service to completely rehabilitate the memorial and, sadly, Frank Buckles has passed away. The newly restored D.C. War Memorial was reopened on November 10, 2011 to great fanfare and positive publicity.

The Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia -- the District's oldest civic organization -- was established on December 7, 1865, to preserve memories and matters of historic interest. By virtue of our long presence and participation in the city's prosperity and improvement, we continue to work and strive for the city's stability, security and advancement -- to aid in every way the prosperity and well-being of the District while preserving the heritage of its past.

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Since March of 2011 when the AOI of D.C. first became involved in this issue, we have worked diligently to encourage our elected officials and fellow civic and veteran organizations to stand in opposition to the renaming of the memorial as called for in both pieces of pending congressional legislation. First, D.C. Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton submitted her own House Resolution 346 requesting that the D.C. War Memorial not be re-named and, in turn, suggesting another location within the city be found to establish a National World War I Memorial. Prior to the re-opening of the D.C. War Memorial on November 10th, the District City Council passed a Ceremonial Resolution expressing the same sentiments. Both Congresswoman Norton and Mayor Vincent Gray spoke passionately regarding this issue at the ceremony.

On January 24, 2012, the House Committee of Natural Resources Chaired by Congressman Rob Bishop heard testimony from: Peter May, the Associate Regional Director for Lands, Resources and Planning of the National Capital Region of the National Park Service and Chair of the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission; Edwin Fountain, member of the National World War I Memorial Foundation; and Nelson Rimensnyder, Historian for our organization on each entity's support for or opposition to the elements of Representative Poe's bill which would change the name of the D.C. War Memorial. Also on the records of the Committee but not discussed at yesterday's hearing was the fact that the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission recommended against the re-naming of the D.C. War Memorial in their commission's findings on August 2, 2011. Park Service Associate Director May's comments yesterday were focused on the issue of whether re-naming and enhancing the D.C. War Memorial would be in violation of the 2003 Commemorative Works Act. Testimony similar to the above will be, I am sure, repeated before the Senate's Committee on Energy and Natural Resources sometime in the future and certainly at both House and Senate hearings on both pieces of legislation.

Why do we believe Pershing Park would be a fitting national memorial to the Great War and why are we seeking the ABMC's support? Since those initial efforts in early 2011, the AOI of D.C. has sought not only to save the District's War Memorial from being re-named but we have been suggesting what we believe would be a fitting tribute to those who fought and served in World War I. Our suggestion is that the monument to the American Expeditionary Forces and General John C. Pershing (Pershing Park) be recognized and designated as the National World War I Memorial in Washington, D.C. Through Congresswoman Norton's office, I asked that the Congressional Research Service determine if it was the legislative intent of Congress or the American Battle Monuments Commission (who sought to honor their leader and Chairman, General Pershing) to establish the Pershing Memorial as a "National World War I Memorial"; however, there is nothing in those records of the late 1950's or early 1960's that indicates this was the intent. But we believe, particularly in light of the fact that when Pershing Park was dedicated there were no national war memorials on the National Mall where there are now three (World War II, Korea and Viet Nam), that undertaking a campaign to enhance Pershing Park with additional interpretive elements would be a timely and fitting tribute to all who served as we honor the centennial of World War I. We realize that without the endorsement of the American Battle Monuments Commission to proceed with promoting this proposal that we would be calling for the modification of a memorial to General Pershing and the American Expeditionary Forces he lead which would not exist today had it not been for the efforts of your and, of course, General Pershing's Commission.

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But if we are to proceed with this initiative, we are genuinely concerned that time is running out – legislatively – to see most of the elements of the Rockefeller-Poe bills pass in Congress. By my calculations, these bills will expire if not acted upon in 2012. The World War I centennial period commences in 2014, with the United States’ involvement’s centennial commencing April 6, 2017. I have encouraged Edwin Fountain of the National World War I Memorial Foundation’s to work with their congressional sponsors to slightly amend the two pieces of legislation in order they may pass and their elements be implemented.

The bills’ establishment of the World War I Commission and its charge should remain. The re-designation of the National World War I Museum and National Memorial should proceed if, in fact, that is what the Kansas City officials want. References to the District of Columbia War Memorial being re-designated should be dropped and substituted with language that would call for designating Pershing Park as the National World War I Memorial in Washington, D.C. Monies appropriated to or raised by the Commission would be used: 1) to sponsor a design competition for an appropriate sculpture representing the contributions of the men and women who served in the Army, Navy and Nurse Corps; 2) adorn the site with replicas of military hardware (e.g., a replica “Little Willie” tank or a reproduction biplane as a piece of armament would attract children); 3) additional interpretive signage; 4) re-gilding of the existing memorial inscriptions; 5) rehabilitating the existing concession stand into an information kiosk; and, 6) engraving the unadorned wall along Pennsylvania Avenue opposite the White House Visitors Center boldly with, “The National World War I Memorial.” All of these new or improved elements together with the existing memorial to General Pershing, the water features, the landscaping, lighting and seating arrangements would all make for a memorial to World War I of which anyone would be proud. The memorial’s ideal location across from the White House Visitors Center, within three blocks of the National Mall, within view of the White House and the U.S. Capitol together with the aforementioned design enhancements will guarantee it as a ‘destination’ for tourists and veterans groups.

To provide a timeline for our proposal, juxtaposed against the centennial time line, here is what we propose:

1. July 28, 2014 – The World War Commences in 1914: Rededicate Pershing Park as the new National World War I Memorial and announce the winner(s) of the design competition;
2. April 6, 2017 – The United States enters the conflict in 1917: Have new interpretive signage in place;
3. November 11, 2018 – Armistice Day 1918: Unveil the new sculpture(s)/hardware and commemorate the Centennial of the end of the World War at the new, completed National World War I Memorial in Washington, D.C.

“Time will not dim the glory of their deeds...” according to General Pershing, but if we are to commemorate the centennial of World War I in an appropriate and timely manner, we sincerely believe it can best be accomplished by seeking to restore Pershing Park as the National World War I Memorial and that we may count on the advice and endorsement of the American Battle Monuments Commission to do so.

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I have available all of the supporting documents and correspondence which have been created or researched since March of 2011 on this matter and would be pleased to share them with you but wanted to spare you the sheer volume in this initial letter.

I look forward to hearing from you or your staff on this matter of, what we believe to be, utmost importance.

Sincerely,

William N. Brown, President

