

Leagues, Lodges and Troops: A Stranger's Guide to the District of Columbia Memorial Stones

by Mark Brewer

Among the 193 memorial stones in the Washington Monument are fourteen tablets donated to the Washington National Monument Society from citizens of the District of Columbia. Intended by those who offered them to, in the words of one local citizen, "perpetuate their reverential respect for the memory of the great and good Washington,"(1) the tablets have become curiosities to modern visitors to the Monument. But the freemasonry of white male citizens who sought to commemorate their respect achieved an additional result as well--they testify through these stones to the early days of the District of Columbia. Friends and neighbors, the mechanic and the businessman--apart from the countless boardinghouse politicians and federal shorttimers--built here in the city a thriving community. Leading citizens and ordinary men, the well-to-do and the wage-earner, the mayor and the stonemason, the newspaper publisher and the grocer joined together into numerous social organizations. They formed themselves into militia troops, masonic lodges, benevolent societies and other associations of one stripe or another. A small number of these groups gave tablets to the Monument Society and they participated in many local celebrations, funerals and other public events. Many of these were held on the grounds of the Washington Monument. These tablets, or memorial stones, offer us a glimpse of nineteenth-century Washington otherwise lost. Although not all fourteen are included here, we will learn about two of them.

One reminder of early Washington actively sought to preserve the city's past--the Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia. This group traces its origin to the period immediately following the Civil War, having been founded on December 7, 1865.(2) The Oldest Inhabitants began as a local history society that sought also to promote civic pride and to improve the city. Its stringent membership requirements excluded the transient politicians and the many other newcomers drawn to the capital during the War. Since the War had brought great changes to the city, including increased population, the deforesting of surrounding woodlands, confiscation of private buildings for government use, and poverty to many, the Oldest Inhabitants looked to nostalgia as well as civic action to erase the effects of sudden change. Their membership requirements assured that prospective members shared the common bond of age, race, gender, and length of residence. Members were required to have lived in the city for not less than forty-five years, to have obtained the age of fifty, to pay the one dollar annual fee, and to be white.(3) Most of the members, consequently, were of an advanced age.

The Oldest Inhabitants took seriously their task of preserving Washington's past. They were avid collectors of objects pertaining to city history, and accumulated numerous artifacts throughout the century. One precious relic in their archives was the measuring chain used by Major Andrew Ellicott and Benjamin Banneker in laying out the city's streets and avenues.

Their headquarters, or clubhouse, buildings acquired in this century, included two historic fire houses.(4) It is significant that one of the Oldest Inhabitants' charter members was Peter Force, a highly renowned collector and publisher of historical tracts dating to the American Revolution. And at their monthly or annual meetings the members recited traditional texts well known to all Americans at the time, but worthy of repetition all the same. Traditional patriotic ceremonies on Independence Day and Washington's Birthday included the reading of the Declaration of Independence or Washington's Farewell Address. The monthly meeting on October 6, 1866 included a "demonstration of the old dances, a thing which seemed to create much surprise, since evidently some thought the old gentlemen had passed the age when they could trip the light fantastic."(5) Another early meeting was held at the home of William A. Bradley on Analostan Island, or as we know it today, Theodore Roosevelt's Island. The serious nature of the proceeding was demonstrated by the Oldest Inhabitants absorption in a fast game of marbles, followed by a furious round of leapfrog.(6)

Many prominent residents of the District were active members of the Oldest Inhabitants. Former Mayors of Washington Roger Weightman, William A. Bradley, and Peter Force, were among the earliest members. Benjamin Ogle Tayloe was the Inhabitants first president and one of the earliest residents of the city, claiming to have arrived in 1801.(7) Tayloe is recalled today by the landmark building on Lafayette Square, near the White House, that was his home. One writer asserts that Tayloe owned the old City Hotel and employed Henry Willard. Willard is said to have bought the Hotel, revived it and passed his name to this justly famous hotel near the Washington Monument.(8) Tayloe was also instrumental in various public works. As owner of the Washington and Rockville Corporation, he succeeded in "paving" Georgia Avenue in 1852. Using 3 to 4 inch thick hemlock boards 8 feet long the company covered the Avenue from Florida Avenue to the District line.(9)

Two other well-known members were Benjamin "Ben" Perley Poore and Benjamin Brown French. B. B. French's journals were published in 1989 as Witness to the Young Republic, A Yankee's Journal, 1828-1870, providing readers with invaluable insights into political and social Washington. French was a significant player in local and federal politics. Two less prominent members of the Oldest Inhabitants

were Jacob Veihmeyer and William Bradley. As local stonemasons, they employed stonecutters who worked on the Monument both before and after the project was completed. Bradley won the contract in 1885 to construct the boiler house, what we Rangers know as the Survey Lodge.(10) Stonecutter Richard Rothwell, who cut marble on the Monument from 1882 to 1884, once gave an address before the Oldest Inhabitants on the life and times of George Washington.(11)

During most of the nineteenth century the members of the Oldest Inhabitants met in "their rooms" at the City Hall or the Corcoran Building.(12) Sometime prior to 1915 they acquired an historic fire hall built in 1837 by the Union Engine Company at the corner of H and 19th Streets, N.W. Here they housed many of their collectibles and held meetings.(13) In 1959 the Inhabitants used the stone building at 3210-3212 M Street, N.W., although this building is no longer in their possession. The Union Fire Hall was demolished to make way for the current occupant of the block, the International Monetary Fund. The bricks from the hall were saved in anticipation of rebuilding the building elsewhere, but were lost by the construction firm that had agreed to store them.(14)

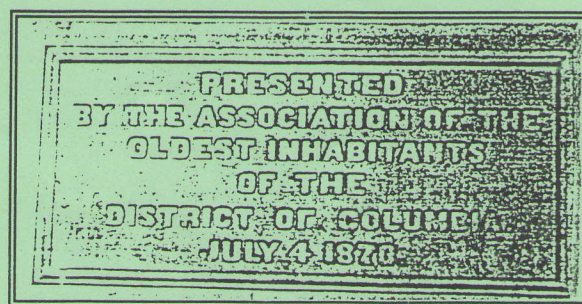
The esteem and influence of the Oldest Inhabitants is evident from their meeting in City Hall of the Corcoran Building, owned by William Corcoran, "Washington's first philanthropist."(15) The President's annual open house at the White House, traditionally held on New Year's Day, brought the Oldest Inhabitants out in force to greet the President. After cabinet officers, foreign ministers, the Supreme Court, various Senators and House Members, D.C. officials and officers of the armed officers had trooped through to pay their respects, the Oldest Inhabitants were admitted. After shaking the President's hand they delivered a brief address. Thereafter, the doors were thrown open and the general public was admitted.(16) This tradition came to an end at the turn of the century.

In other ways modernity has caught up with the Oldest Inhabitants, as the traditional pieties and the local aspect of celebrations in the city have faded. Their by-laws no longer require the reading of the Declaration of independence, and few members can be drawn away from their families and the festivities that now dramatize Independence Day. Once both women and blacks were excluded; today their constitution permits both to join the Oldest Inhabitants. Moreover, the Parallel group--"separate but equal"--the Colored Association of the Oldest Inhabitants has apparently disappeared along with their records and archives which tell the unique story of the African-American in the District.(17)

On the Fourth of July, 1870, the Oldest Inhabitants presented a block of Vermont marble, suitably inscribed, to the Washington National Monument Society. Benjamin Brown French, who had officiated twenty-two years before as Grand Master of Masons in rites incident to the laying of the cornerstone at the Monument, participated in and recorded this latter event. According to French's journal entry the Oldest Inhabitants were joined by the Monument Society upon a large stage set up at the East wall. Between the audience and the stands sat their marble block on wooden skids. Oldest Inhabitant and Georgetown grocer, M.R. Goddard, read the Declaration "in the best possible style and manner (without any spread eagle about it)." Whereupon, "the Orator of the day (that was I) stepped forward and Orated for about twenty five minutes, and it may not be improper, in this private journal, to say that his remarks were received with manifestations of pleasure."(18)

French's address was the topic of Independence Day celebrations; he said that not until 1812 was the occasion marked by regular public celebrations. French and several other speakers chided the country and the government for failing to complete the Washington Monument and expressed the hope that their grandsons would see the Monument finished.(19) In fact, it would be another ten years before the next stone would be set on the shaft and fourteen years before the capstone was finally set in place. But a grandson would indeed one day see the building completed; the descendant of Oldest Inhabitant member, John Hamilton, recently visited the Monument as a member of the Washington National Monument Association during this year's (1993) Washington's Birthday Ceremony.(20)

The memorial stone from the Oldest Inhabitants can be found above the landing at the 240 foot level, on the west side. Unlike many other tablets from local groups, it was installed without ceremony, having been installed by contractor Dennis O'Leary sometime in 1885.(21)



Commemorative Stone from the Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia

Twenty years before the Oldest Inhabitants offered their tablet, a similar event took place on the grounds of the Washington Monument, this time with less happy results. On Independence Day, 1850, the Corporation Council of

the City of Washington presented a block of marble to the Monument Society. George Washington Parke Custis, Washington's adopted grandson, stood before an assembly of several thousand ladies and gentlemen from this city. Gathered under a broad awning upon an extensive stage were many United States Senators and Representatives, the Mayor of Washington, D.C., and members of the Corporation Council. Among this gathering of federal and local officials was President Zachary Taylor.(22)

Custis was reported to have delivered a patriotic and eloquent address and to have remarked upon an unusual gift to the Washington Monument Society from Poland. The gift was a "box containing earth from the great monument mound at Cracow (sic) reared to the memory of the brave [Tadeuz] Kosciusko [Polish Brigadier General who fought for the Colonials in the American Revolution]...a portion of which was placed on the block by Mr. Custis, to enter into the cement which should bind the stone in its place and form part of the monument to Pater Patriae."(23) With this simple gesture the struggle for independence in Europe was symbolically bound to the then-flourishing ideal of the United States as a city on a hill, providing an example of human liberty and progress to those remaining in the Old World.

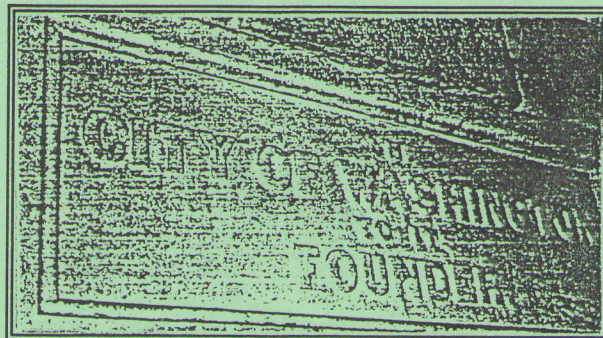
Tragically, soil was the center of a recent ceremony at the Holocaust Museum. Though we moderns are disconnected from the soil (rarely do our fingers feel the texture of the soil beneath our feet, crumble it or smell its scent) the gesture of handling earth from hallowed ground retains its symbolic power for us. At the Holocaust Museum, soil scooped by hand from the earth by survivors of death camps such as Treblinka and Buchenwald, was sprinkled into a repository beneath the eternal flame in the Museum. Said one survivor who participated, "I felt each grain of the soil cry out, 'Remember. Don't let them forget.'"(24) One hundred forty three years of European history separates George Washington Parke Custis' gesture of hope from this cry.

President Zachary Taylor took part in the festivities at the Monument that July fourth, and later the same day he fell ill. Contemporary accounts of the sickness and his subsequent demise agree that Taylor overindulged himself.

While at the Monument Taylor reportedly drank "copious amounts of iced water" and exposed himself unduly to sun and exercise. Upon returning to the White House, he "ate heartily of cherries and wild berries, which he washed down with copious draughts of iced milk and water." At supper, against the counsel of his physician, he again "applied himself to the cherries." Within the hour he was stricken. Five days later, July 9th, he was dead of cholera. His death was a lingering one and his last words were said to be "I have endeavored to do my duty, I am prepared to die. My only regret is leaving behind me the friends I love."(25)

Taylor's body was exhumed recently to settle a dispute over the cause of his death. It was determined that he had not died of arsenic poisoning as had been claimed. The Washington Light Infantry led President Taylor's funeral procession.

The tablet from the City of Washington can be viewed from the landing at 80 feet, on the west side. It was inserted in the Monument on or about the day it was offered to the Monument Society, July 4, 1850.



Commemorative Stone from the Corporation
Council of the City of Washington

Endnotes:

1. The Evening Star, July 5, 1870, J.B. Blake, president of the Oldest Inhabitants.
2. Constitution of the Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia, 1892.
3. op. cit., Articles II and III.
4. John Clagget Proctor, The Sunday Star, July 3, 1949.
5. op. cit. Proctor, 1949.
6. op. cit. Proctor, 1949.
7. "Local News," The Evening Star, December 8, 1865.
8. op. cit. Proctor, 1949.
9. op. cit Proctor, 1949.
10. Report of Operations 1885, Record Group 42, Letters Sent, Volume 3, Number 3099, and op. cit. Constitution, 1892.
11. The Washington Post, February 23, 1878. See RG 42, Box 498, Number 1586 for Rothwell's letter of reference dated 2/28/81. Hired 7/19/82.

12. See for example *The Washington Post*, February 22, 1878, February 22, 1882, July 5, 1884, February 23, 1895, and February 23, 1915.
13. op. cit., Proctor, 1949.
14. Personal communication, Harold Grey, current president AOIC, December, 1992.
15. Thomas Froncek, ed. *The City of Washington*, p. 119
16. "The President's Reception," *The Evening Star*, January 1, 1868.
17. op. cit. Grey, 1993.
18. Witness
19. *The Evening Star*, July 5, 1870.
20. Personal communication, February 22, 1993. *The Washington Post*, July 5, 1884: "John Hamilton presented a paper to the society containing a list of toasts drunk at a banquet on the first Independence Day, July 4, 1813. Mr. Hamilton said that his father was marshall of the occasion and he remembered that he wore buckskin breeches and top boots."
21. RG 42, Letters Sent, Volume 3, no date, Number 2932; Dennis O'Leary was contracted to install 53 memorial stones at a cost of \$1,825.
22. *National Intelligencer*, July 6, 1850.
23. op. cit. 1850.
24. *The Washington Post*, February 23, 1993.
25. *The Life of Zachary Taylor*, H. Montgomery: Derby, Miller & Co., 1851. *The National Intelligencer*, July 7, 1850.

As governmental agencies go, the Park Service is a good one, far superior to most. This I attribute not to the administrators of the Park Service-like administrators everywhere they are distinguished chiefly by their ineffable mediocrity-but to the actual working rangers in the field, the majority of whom are capable, honest, dedicated.

Edward Abbey. *Desert Solitaire*. 1968.

Personal Perspectives...

The Thomas Jefferson Press Conference and 250th Birthday Celebration, April 11--15, 1993

by Timothy Amoroso

On Sunday, April 11th, through Tuesday, April 13th, the National Park Service and the American Historical Theater presented seven press conferences with Thomas Jefferson. These conferences were designed to give the public the opportunity to ask questions of the Third President, Thomas Jefferson.

The press conferences, which took place in a large tent on the east side of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, were a great success. Two hundred chairs were provided for the visitors to enjoy the press conferences. Attendance for the conferences was as follows: five were standing room only, one was filled, and the last was in front of the Memorial with at least 300 people present.

Several people shall be thanked for making the press conferences so successful:

The actor, Bill Barker, portrayed Thomas Jefferson in excellent style. His mannerisms of the third president were precise, and his knowledge of Thomas Jefferson and his contemporaries were also complete. He did an excellent job. Thank you, Mr. Barker.

Bruce Stocking, our acting Assistant Site Manager, contributed a lot to make the program successful. He spent many hours educating me on how to perform certain tasks, who to call to get something done, and even how to stand in front of the public. Mr. Stocking also taped the show, making it possible for all to view it in the library. Mr. Stocking was also responsible for coordinating this show with several other shows that took place during those days. Perhaps, however, the biggest asset Mr. Stocking was to the event is the simple fact that he was there. As long as he was there, I knew the event would work and be a success.

Erin Broadbent, our acting Site Manager, listened to me when others surely would not have. There have been many times I have gone and talked to her; she would sit behind her desk patiently, letting me put forth pent up frustrations. When I was done, she would calmly inform me how she could help, or what I needed to do to solve the problem. Her ability to be there at critical moments and get things done was a valuable resource.