

Remarks of AOI President Bill Brown for the 76th Annual Memorial Day Observance

DC War Memorial, Sun., May 20, 2012, 3 PM

General Poss, Mr. Cary, Mr. Kouyeas, Honored Veterans, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am pretty certain that when the Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia was founded 147 years ago, just a short 7 months after the conclusion of the Civil War, did its 31 founders ever imagine that having just witnessed the end of America's bloodiest conflict that a mere 53 years later their successors would be witnesses to another conflict, this time a world-wide conflict that would see 4.3 million American service men and women called to service, see 126,000 of them killed, witness more than a quarter million wounded and mourn the forty-five hundred Missing In Action. Nor would those 31 founders have imagined that their successors would be hosting an event on July 4, 1919 that included the Association of the Oldest Inhabitants Colored, Incorporated, a parallel African-American organization based on our AOI's charter and mission. That unheard-of type of event was inspired by the conclusion of the Great Conflict and a desire to recognize and thank the veterans and the survivors of those District of Columbia residents who died in service to their country regardless of their rank, race or gender.

Personally, I had never given much thought to what is now known as World War I... I had a grandfather who, as a Colonel served in France in 1919 immediately after the War in an administrative position; but, it was not until Memorial Day of 2010 that the Great War, its District Veterans and casualties became even more personal for me. An AOI member, Lee Rogers who recently and sadly passed away, had suggested that the AOI commemorate the 90th anniversary of the 16th Street Tree Memorial – a stretch of 16th Street between Alaska Avenue and Varnum Street where 507 Norway Maple trees had been planted together with granite posts each adorned with a medallion, one for each of the 507 who in 1921 it was thought had perished in Europe. We had a nice turn-out that day, in fact D.C. Council Member Phil Mendelson presented a Ceremonial Resolution that the District Council had passed in commemoration of this 90th anniversary ceremony. Those present that day committed to work with neighborhood groups, the City Council, the Casey Tree Foundation and the Historic Preservation Office with an aim to restore this living memorial before its centennial in 2020. We still have a few years to bring all of that together.

But while this foray into World War I sparked my interest, it was not until I discovered that a grand uncle had served and died of disease during the conflict in November 1918. Raymond Patrick Cady was but 27 years old when he perished but was remembered in 1919 when his mother, my great-grandmother, Josephine Cady accepted an Honor Medal in his name together with other survivors on July 4, 1919 on the grounds of the Washington Monument, within sight of us here today. Seeing Uncle Raymond's name engraved on this monument together with the other 491 men and 7 women who died brought this conflict into clear focus and personalized it for me. With the leadership of the *Evening Star's* Frank Noyes, who was an AOI member and whose brother Ted was an AOI President, and Frank's wife, funds were raised from District residents and its school children to fund

the construction of this memorial. In fact, the names of all 26,000 District residents who served are also preserved, out of sight, in the memorial's cornerstone.

Today, we are here to observe Memorial Day or Decoration Day as it was first called in 1868, 144 years ago by General John A. Logan the Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic (the Union Veterans organization). A day set aside to commemorate all those who have died in all of the wars and military conflicts in service to their country.

So, whether it is the 499 memorialized on the base of this memorial or the 26,000 enshrined in the cornerstone of this memorial, or the near 360,000 nationwide who were killed or wounded of the 4,300,000 who served, whether their service is commemorated here at this memorial or at the thousands of similar, local memorials nation-wide... it is these men, women and their sacrifice that we remember today.

Thank you.