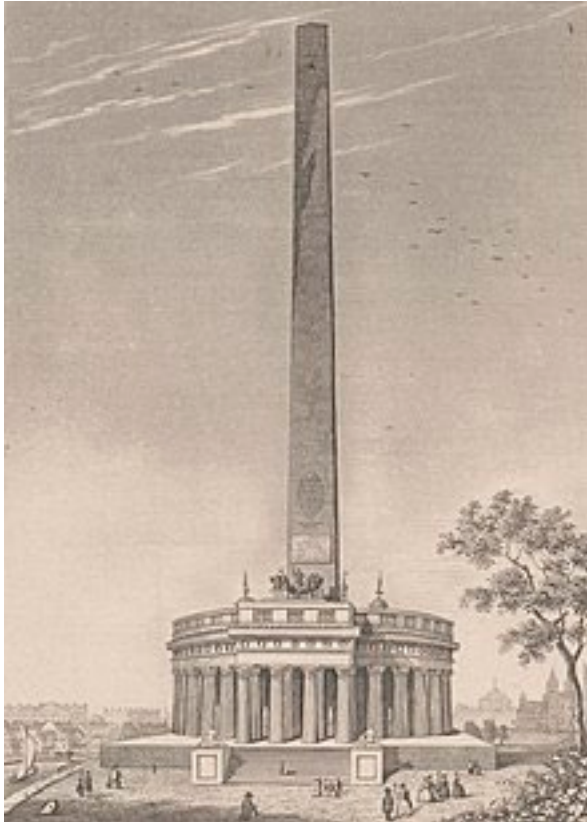


The story of Washington's Monument is as important as the monument itself. What it became can only be seen in what it did not become.

It took nearly 50 years for the proposal of the monument to reach an agreed to design. The original design is vital to appreciating what the dedicated monument would become. This is Robert Mills' design of 1845-1848.¹



Here is the monument prior to the Civil War and where it would languish at less than a 1/3 of its intended height.

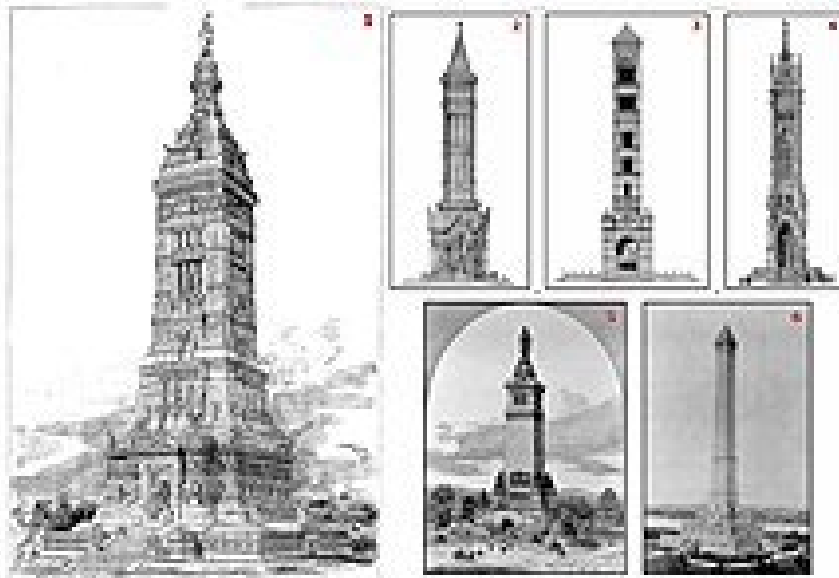
¹ All photos and images are from the Wikipedia page for Washington's Monument.



In 1885, this was the monument that was dedicated.



Even more telling is to consider the proposed alternative designs submitted once the project received adequate funds and was restarted.

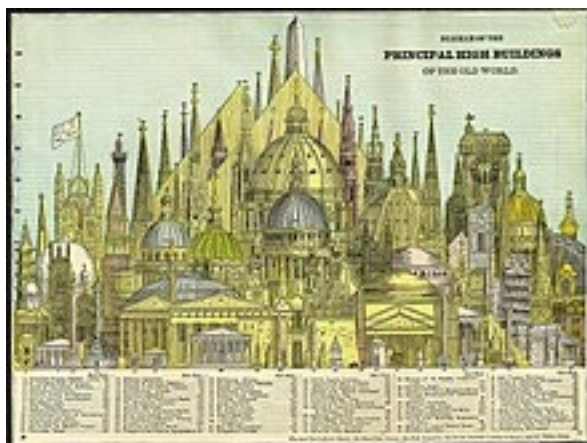


Washington Monument Proposals around 1870/1879

Six alternatives after the the American Civil War halted all work on the monument

- | | | |
|--------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Arthur Matthews | 2. William Weinsore Story | 3. John Frazer |
| 4. M. P. Huggood | 5. Paul Schulze | 6. Henry Robinson Searle |

Lastly, consider this wonderful image of how the monument stood in relationship to the massive buildings of the world.



You can see Washington's Monument in the back standing above all the rest.

The Initial Debate

Shortly after Washington died there were calls for a monument. Statues were designed, built, and dedicated to him. But that didn't seem to satisfy. There was a great desire for something massive, something to embody not only the life and achievements of Washington, but also something to capture the spirit of the young nation, the ambition, the sense of possibility.

For nearly 50 years this debate continued with efforts to raise the estimated million dollars ² to complete the monument languished. The debate was not over design or placement or meaning, but over whether or not there should be a monument at all. It was as if the biblical debate between David and Nathan to build a temple for God, as opposed to the temporary tabernacle holding the Ark of the Covenant, was alive and well.³ How can the spirit of Washington, and thus the spirit of the nation be captured in stone?

The Initial Design

When compared with later proposals, the initial design of Robert Mills is modest in its effect. The base of the obelisk would be a round, colonnaded temple. In some ways this base would be executed in the Jefferson Memorial which was originally designed as a temple of liberty to enshrine the Declaration of Independence. In a similar fashion, Mills' base creates a place of contemplation and adoration.

Yet, before the temple could be completed, the obelisk itself needed to be constructed. Designed to reach 500 feet in height, it was the tallest building in the world upon completion. (Although it was quickly surpassed four years later by the Eiffel Tower.) The obelisk would languish at 150 feet for nearly twenty years because of political rivalries as well as the Civil War.

The Rebeginning

There is no way to prove a direct influence or practical impact of the construction of Washington's Monument upon the nation in the 1870s, yet there is a sense that this monument set in motion the nation's return after the Civil War. At the time of its construction communities in all the states that fought in the Civil War began the process of monument and memorial design. As Washington's life marked the beginning of the nation, it was as if his monument marked the rebeginning.

As such, the new proposals for its completion are important to consider. Coming some 30 years after the original, and more importantly arising from the ashes of profound loss, the new designs seemed to embody a different spirit. There was ornament and embellishment, grandeur and complexity. Most of the leading alternatives abandoned the simplicity of the obelisk for something more akin to a tower. There is a campanile quality, suggesting a more

² 30 million today.

³ 2 Samuel

Christian motif as opposed to the Egyptian. The new proposals invite the visitor not only to wander the base, but also enter the tower as well.

The Engineer

When work on the obelisk and its base recommenced in 1879, it was led by the army corp of engineers under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Lincoln Casey. Casey's leadership had two aspects. First, he redesigned the foundation of the monument so it would absorb the 40,000 tons of the finished obelisk. Next, and more importantly, he ignored, rejected, or did not consider the embellished base nor the alternative proposals as part of his purview. Casey was directed to build an obelisk and that is what he did. He focused all energies and worked without "undue haste or delay" to complete the task. It was almost as if he said, "you want an obelisk; here's an obelisk."

The result of Casey's focus was to offer a completed monument that was in essence incomplete. The base as designed by Mills was never constructed. And true to form, his focus is singular. There is nothing that embodies the image of Washington no ornament that speaks to America. There are no eagles or fasces or goddesses of victory or peace. The monument was a pure symbol. But of what?

Interpretation

I have always been struck that our national anthem is the only one whose core declaration is question: Does that banner yet wave? The lyrics of Francis Scott Key are meant to evoke the answer, "yes, yes it does, 'over the land of the free and the home of the brave.'" When I consider the unintended clarity of the unadorned obelisk, its lack of completion, there is an echo of the anthem. It is as if Washington's Monument is both a declaration of the past and the future. Something remarkable happened. A man who could have been king laid aside the temptation of power and passed his office to the next citizen. The ideal that a land conceived in liberty could be framed and constituted came to life. A glorious moment to remember.

And then there is the future. The unfinished monument seems to goad the viewer into believing there is something great ahead. It as if the monument is an invitation to embody the spirit of the obelisk, to reach unto eternal life. How does one reach, who will be the one who begs us to rise? The obelisk has no answer as it has no words, no declaration. It is like Maya Lin's wall a poetic space to imagine, to listen, to wonder.