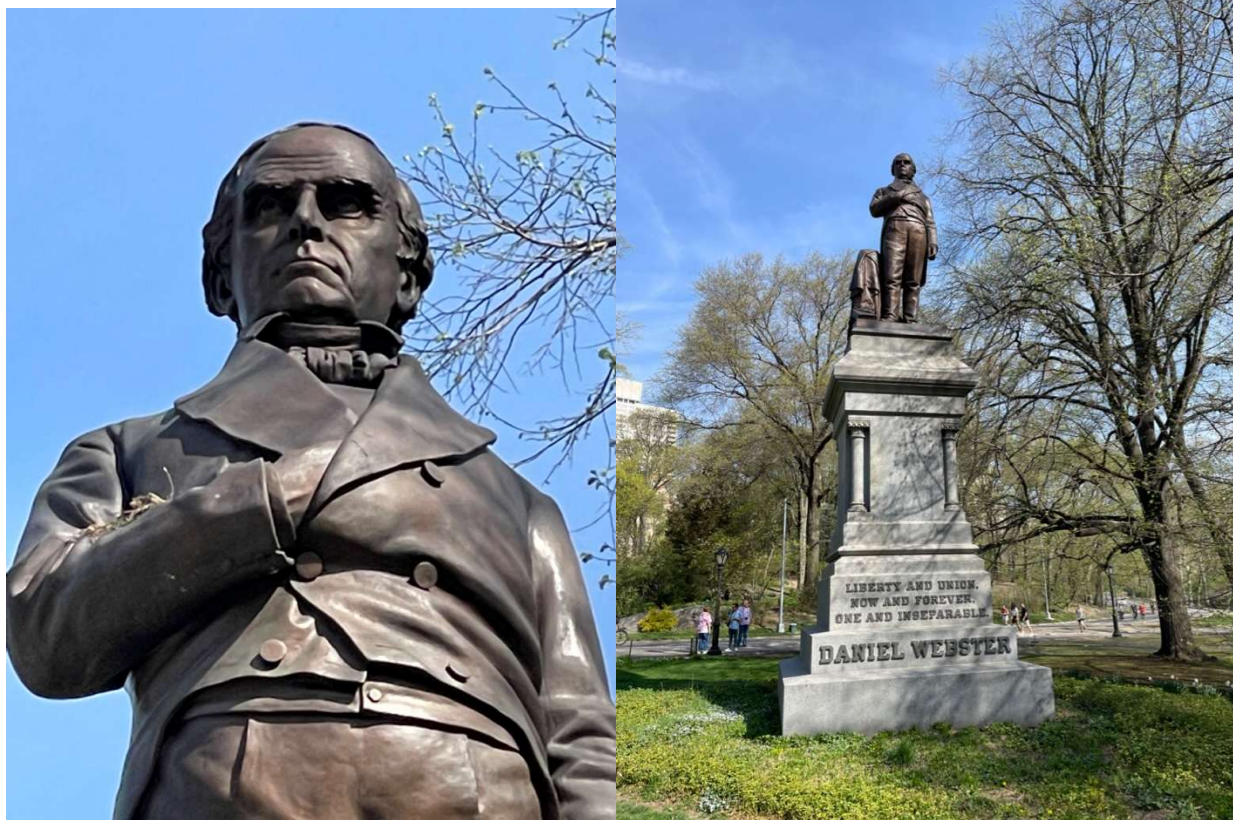


Daily Lenten Devotional
Saturday, March 22, 2025
Written by Rev. Fred Garry



For the last six years once or twice a month I take the train to Penn Station. At Penn I take the subway, the 1 Train, to the 72nd Street stop. Walking toward the park I get a bagel. Once said bagel is finished, I enter Central Park walking through Strawberry Fields. As I descend the slight incline toward the fountain, I spy him. Daniel Webster.

In some ways you cannot miss him. He is not quite a colossus, but this is a huge bronze statue. Often I have lingered and wondered, "who are you Daniel Webster?" His name is just about familiar. He is a hearty looking man, standing as if he were just about to speak. Always I feel like he should be known to me, but to be honest, the only thing I knew for sure was that he was important before the Civil War. Why? Not sure.

Having visited many monuments and memorials I was struck by how random this massive statue feels. It is as if it is not where it should be; it is as if he was placed in a spot while somewhere else was being prepared but then people got distracted and forgot about Daniel Webster. For unlike many, or most, monuments, there is no walkway, no path encouraging the

viewer to come closer, no interpretive plaque. There is a massive, rather uninspired granite base, his name, and then the statue. Webster gazes toward the road leading toward the Bethesda statue, but he doesn't seem to be focused on anything in particular.

There are four statues of Daniel Webster in the U.S. In addition to the statue in Central Park, his statues can be found in Concord, New Hampshire, in Boston, Massachusetts, and in Washington, D.C. His place of birth, where he held office and practiced law, and where he served as senator and Secretary of State, respectively. The Central Park statue is unique in that Webster never lived nor worked in New York City. He didn't spend a portion of childhood or retirement there. Even more unique is that the Daniel Webster statue in Central Park is one of the largest, over thirty feet high.¹

I am intrigued on many counts by this statue. Why him? He was popular in New York, but he was not a New Yorker. He argued against slavery, but he was crucial in forming the Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Act not the stuff of an abolitionist. I am intrigued to wonder if anyone cares. Is there a Daniel Webster society or movement? There is no Daniel Webster Day. That I know for sure.

Considering Webster I am led to wonder if his likeness should have been for a time. Instead of his name listed boldly on the base, what if there had been an ideal or a lesser god or a cause? "Golden Orator!" Not a classic but accurate. "Compromise!" Again accurate, but certainly not a worthy ideal.

Perhaps "American". This was the main rationale for Thomas Burnham who proposed the statue in 1874 and financed the operation. Statues of Shakespeare and Walter Scott and other "foreigners" adorned Central Park prior to 1874, but no American.

"American." That would be intriguing. And with such generality, such an egalitarian title, perhaps the statue could have been repurposed. Webster's likeness could have been for a season, a generation or two, and then the citizens of Manhattan, especially those who love statues, would be led to ask, "is Webster yet our ideal of an American? Or is there someone new?"

In 1912, when the aqueduct for the city's water system was being constructed, workers absentmindedly left seven pounds of dynamite by the massive pedestal of the statue. The New York Times reported the incident and expressed relief that no damage was done and no one was injured. But then the reporter went on to say, had the statue been blown up, "no one would have shed tears over that."²

¹ <http://daytoninmanhattan.blogspot.com/2023/11/thomas-balls-1876-daniel-webster-statue.html>

² <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1912/07/27/104902474.html?pageNumber=6>

Yet, what I find most intriguing in the Daniel Webster statue is where the benefactor wanted it to be placed but was denied by the Park Commission. Burnham wanted the statue of Webster to be at the South-East corner of Central Park. It was his idea that the statue could be the impetus for a grand entrance. This spot in the city would be left undeveloped until 1903 when Saint-Gaudens statue of Sherman and Victory was installed. Not only did the Sherman/Victory statue create the gate into the city, the statue gave rise to the Grand Army Plaza, which would be redesigned and finally completed in the 1930s with the Pulitzer fountain.

The question I find intriguing here is: would the Webster statue had the same effect? Was it the place or the piece of art that transformed a street corner into a plaza? Moreover, Saint-Gaudens statue has true aim and focus. Sherman and Victory are marching south almost as if they were yet in the midst of battle, ever bringing victory to the Union. Webster's gaze goes nowhere. And the goldleaf of the Sherman/Victory monument is just one part of its beauty and inspiration. The grounds around the statue were developed with plaques and pavers and landscape all to say, "come here and remember this one." Webster, again, looks forgotten, almost placed aside.

It is telling that there has never been any movement to invite remembrance or even tell the story of Webster. The story told by his statue seems to tell more of what a monument should not be. Almost 40 years after its installation, at least according to the New York Times, the statue has no value. Perhaps we owe a debt of memory to Webster. But in what form? Honor, gratitude, or penance? Perhaps he, like so much of the antebellum figures after the revolution, is part of the compromise which fueled the slave economy and thus it is not a cause of honor. While he served the nation, he didn't give the "full measure of devotion." What a different statue it might have been had the benefactor sought to embody the failure of the time and not a "great American." Perhaps such a title was premature.