
The title, Monument Wars, evokes the excitement and intensity of combat—perhaps slightly misleading considering it takes almost half the book just to get the Washington Monument built. The obelisk’s journey from a mere point on Pierre L’Enfant’s 1791 plan for the capital city to its dedication in 1885 is certainly epic. The committee wrangling and negligence that resulted in what was for decades an enormous stump, however, does not necessarily suggest the immediacy and passion of the battlefield. Nevertheless, the title effectively dramatizes not only the construction of Washington, D.C.’s memorial landscape but also the evolution of the memorial experience and the meaning of national public space. Monument Wars offers an engaging chronological history of Washington beginning with L’Enfant’s vision for the city through the development of the Mall and its monumental core to the completion of the World War II Memorial in 2004.

Equestrian statues dotting the city served to commemorate war heroes as well as establish nodes of public grounds around which the city’s commercial and residential life blossomed. The McMillan Plan of 1901 refocused development on Washington’s central axis, transforming what was a picturesque forested park into the formally organized space we know today. The Mall became a place for national engagement nurtured by “victim monuments,” which instead of honoring the heroic acts of an individual, provided sites for reflection on collective loss and struggle. The text is generously supported with black and white reproductions that provide sometimes-jarring visuals (deer in the once forested Mall, cars cruising down the Mall on roads that are now pedestrian paths) and help to vividly illustrate the evolution of the city. Scholarly apparatus include a table of contents, index, an extensive bibliography, and a list of illustrations.

Rick Savage is Professor and Chair of the Department of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh; hence his well-researched book is scholarly in content and tone. The prose is accessible enough for a general reader with an interest in the history and development of Washington D.C., but it is especially appropriate for libraries collecting in the fields of architecture, urban planning, and American studies. His work fits in with a number of other critical works investigating the complex history and cultural meaning of the Mall, including The National Mall: Rethinking Washington’s Monumental Core (ed. Nathan Glazer and Cynthia R. Field) and The Mall in Washington, 1791-1991 (ed. by Richard Longstreth).

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