

General Grant National Memorial (Grant's Tomb)

Individual Landmark

West 122nd Street and Riverside Drive

Designation Date: November 25, 1975



General Grant National Memorial (Grant's Tomb). Photo by Lorraine Colbert.

The General Grant National Memorial, the work of architect John H. Duncan, is one of the most impressive monuments in New York City. Located on a spectacular site overlooking the Hudson River and Riverside Park, it houses the earthly remains of Ulysses S. Grant, Civil War hero and 18th President of the United States, and Julia Dent Grant, his wife, in sarcophagi laid side by side.

Ulysses Simpson Grant (1822-1885), trained at West Point, began his professional life as a career soldier in the Mexican-American War. Discontented with Army life, he retired to the family business in Galena, Illinois, until the outbreak of the Civil War. Enlisting as a colonel in an Illinois regiment, Grant quickly rose in the ranks because of his successful campaign operations in the Mississippi Valley. Major victories at Vicksburg and Chattanooga led President Abraham Lincoln to give Grant supreme command of the Union armies in 1863.

Grant's personal direction of the Army of the Potomac ultimately led to the final battle of the war, and Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox on April 9, 1865. Grant's renown as a war hero led to his election as President, as the candidate of the Republican Party in 1868 and again in 1872. The years in the White House were shadowed by political passions bred by the war and the Reconstruction period. Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of Grant's administration was in the field of foreign relations, where serious disputes with Great Britain were peacefully arbitrated. Following his second term, Grant's last years were spent in a two-year world tour, an unsuccessful business venture, and in the writing of his personal memoirs.

When Grant died, he left a note requesting that he be buried at West Point, New York, Galena, Illinois, or New York City, and that his wife be buried next to him. Mrs. Grant preferred Washington, D. C., as his final resting place, but her son persuaded her to follow the General's wishes. West Point was rejected because Mrs. Grant could not have been buried there, and Galena because it was a rather inaccessible location for visitors.

Once New York City was chosen, it became necessary to find a site. Many favored a Central Park location, either in the Mall or on Watch Hill at West 108th Street. A location in Riverside Park prevailed, however, because an architectural monument that would dominate its surroundings was desired. On July 29, 1885, the site decision was announced, and on August 8, after being transported down river from upstate, General Grant's body was buried in a temporary tomb on Riverside Drive at West 123rd Street, following a ceremony attended by thousands, including President Grover Cleveland. The tomb was a brick structure, designed by architect Jacob Wrey Mould.

Shortly after the burial, it was felt that the site was inappropriate and would lend an unfortunate funerary air to this part of Riverside Drive, which had been considered a gala promenade. Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of Riverside Park, and Calvert Vaux were particularly concerned.

Meanwhile, the General Grant Monument Association had been organized to build the permanent structure. On September 13, 1885, several prominent architects wrote to the *New York Times* proposing that a competition be held to determine the final design of the tomb. In February, 1886 the Association was formally incorporated, and by June, 1887 a competition was announced. The terms of the competition were sharply criticized by the Architectural League the next year. The Association had provided no cost estimate for the monument, so that the architects did not know how much they could spend when designing it. Designs of any scale had also been accepted which made it hard to judge them. Worst of all, the Association kept all of the drawings and encouraged the architects to underbid each other for their services.

The Association extended the deadline several times but the competition was finally closed in 1889. Finally, the Association declared that none of the more than 100 designs which had been submitted was deemed suitable. While New York procrastinated, a bill was introduced in Congress to have Grant's remains removed to West Point. Although the bill was defeated, it lent some urgency to determining the form that the tomb would take. In an editorial on February 21, 1890, the *New York Times* pointed out that the major flaw with the original competition was the fact that the entrants were not recompensed for their submissions, consequently, only amateurs had participated. Accordingly, a new competition was announced a month later, with the firms of Carrere & Hastings, Charles W. Clinton, Napoleon LeBrun, J. H. Duncan, and John Ord submitting designs for a tomb to cost about \$500,000. On November 10, 1890, John H. Duncan was announced the winner.

John Hemingway Duncan (1855-1929), a New York City architect, had achieved professional success with his design for the Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Arch at Grand Army Plaza,

Brooklyn, built in 1889–92. His success with this Civil War monument may have led to his invitation for the Grant Monument competition. He later designed the Knox Building on Fifth Avenue, and many handsome townhouses.

Duncan's design for the Grant Monument was similar to several others in plan and also had a general similarity on the exterior to the design of J. A. Schweinfurth. Both designs borrowed the stepped dome feature from the famous Mausoleum at Halicarnassus. Schweinfurth's design was more massive in scale than Duncan's, which was reportedly chosen because work could be halted at either of two points if funds ran out: after the construction of the crypt, and after the construction of the main body of the tomb, but before the construction of the dome.

Ground was broken on April 27, 1891, Grant's birthday, in a ceremony attended by 10,000 people. As Grant's tomb was under construction, an attempt by Congress to move his remains to Arlington National Cemetery was easily defeated.

On April 27, 1892, President Benjamin Harrison attended a ceremony marking the laying of the cornerstone. The afternoon of that day was declared a state holiday. The cornerstone contains copies of the US Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, a Bible, Grant's memoirs, a Memorial Day pamphlet from 1886, the Mayor's proclamation, the half-holiday resolution, and various medals and newspapers.

As construction proceeded, the neighborhood was also being developed. The area around the lonely site was acquired by Columbia University, Barnard College, Teachers' College, St. Luke's Hospital, the Home for Old Men and Aged Couples, and the National Academy of Design. In addition, the Episcopal Diocese of New York was planning to build a new Cathedral at Amsterdam Avenue and West 112th Street.

On April 18, 1897, the body of General Grant was quietly transferred to the new structure, in accordance with the family's wishes. Finally, on April 27, the new tomb was dedicated by President William McKinley. Bad weather kept the speeches short and the size of the crowd small. Nonetheless, there was a naval parade up the Hudson, and 60,000 men marched in a land parade, including a contingent of Confederate veterans marking the national reconciliation that had taken place, while 250,000 spectators looked on.

The monument, constructed of granite from North Jay, Maine, appears today much as it did when it was completed in 1897. The basic disposition of forms—cube, cylinder, and cone—is largely based on reconstruction drawings made of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, with which most architects of the time were familiar, although the proportions are modified. The cube, which acts as a base, is the main body of the composition. A broad flight of steps approaches the hexastyle Doric portico in front. Fluted Doric columns support a typical Doric entablature with triglyphs and metopes containing circular bosses surrounded by laurel wreaths. The level cornice is surmounted by stone blocks, placed one above each column. These blocks were originally intended to serve as bases for equestrian statues of Union generals.

The main cube of the mausoleum rises up behind the portico and is, in turn, crowned with a cornice above which rises a low parapet. At the front, this parapet is slightly pitched toward the center to permit the insertion of a small tablet containing Grant's famous words when accepting the Republican nomination in 1868: "Let us have peace." This tablet is flanked by the figures of lamenting women, reminiscent of those in the Medici Tomb in Florence, by Michelangelo.

The cylindrical upper portion of the building, above the main cube, forms a base, or drum, for the crowning, stepped cone. A circular Ionic colonnade surrounds it, and has an entablature with elaborate cornice ornamented by bosses surmounted by palemettes. The inner wall forming the drum rises above this peripheral colonnade; where seen exposed above the colonnade, it is decorated with pilasters in the form of fasces set between panels.

The stepped cone above the drum is especially reminiscent of reconstructions of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus and is, for this country, a most unusual feature. It was originally intended to crown it with a quadriga statue of General Grant.

The three remaining sides of the main cube of the building are similar to the front but have blind Doric colonnades instead of porticos. Between the columns are small square windows which light the interior. A small cornice at the top of the portico and the main cornice at the top of the cube are carried completely around the building. Panels, set above each colonnade, were originally intended to contain inscriptions. The parapet also continues around the top of the cube but, unlike the front portion, is level. The rear is similar to the sides, but is slightly more elaborate, due to the introduction of a fret molding which extends under the colonnade.

In the opinion of John Duncan, it was of primary importance that the design be funereal in character, and that it be unmistakably a tomb. To lend it an imposing sense of dignity he used the classic idiom: the Doric order for the large columns of the portico and colonnades and the Ionic order for the smaller columns of the peripheral screen around the drum. Likewise, the distinctive stepped roof was intended to convey the feeling that this was a tomb. Most contemporary sources referred to it as a "pyramid" although, being circular, it is obviously a cone. This was perhaps because similarly stepped square pyramids functioned as tombs for the kings of ancient Egypt. The combination of orders and elements which Duncan used from both classical and Renaissance sources reveal that his inspiration for the monument was not so much derived from antiquity as it was from the contemporary French Beaux Arts style.

The design for the monument, which was very successful, brought Duncan great fame. It was published in the *American Architect and Building News*, one of the major architectural magazines of its day, and repeatedly pictured in architectural portfolios. It was also much published in travelers' guides.

In 1929, the Grant Monument Association commissioned John Russell Pope to complete the facade. His plans, never carried out because of the Depression, called for a pediment to be placed over the front portico, replacing Duncan's proposed equestrian statues. He also proposed placing candelabra on the wing-walls flanking the steps where the eagles are now located. These eagles were originally located on large stone blocks at each end of the

parapet . In 1938, they were moved to their present position, when the WPA carried out some restorations and alterations. These changes were done under the direction of Aymar Embury II, who followed Pope's plans quite closely, while simplifying them for financial reasons.

The most important work in 1938 affected the landscaping around the tomb. Gilmore D. Clarke, the landscape architect, followed Pope's plans for having the plaza in front of the tomb widened and the walkway around it made narrower. This change set the tomb off more from Riverside Drive, while planting trees around it served to integrate it better into Riverside Park, resolving the objections that Olmsted raised in 1885.

In 1959, after New York State authorized the City to convey the land on which the monument stands to the Federal Government, and, after Congress passed a law authorizing its acceptance, the City deeded the land to the Department of the Interior. At the same time, the Grant Monument Association, which owned the building, transferred ownership to the Federal Government, which named it the General Grant National Memorial, to be maintained by the National Park Service.

[Read the full NYC LPC designation report here.](#)