

General Grant National Memorial Interior

Interior Landmark

West 122nd Street and Riverside Drive

Designation Date: January 28, 1975



Photo by the National Park Service

The General Grant National Memorial, the work of architect John H. Duncan, is one of the most impressive monuments in New York City. The interior, incorporating a domed rotunda, is dominated by a center crypt with twin sarcophagi holding the earthly remains of Ulysses S. Grant, Civil War hero and 18th President of the United States, and Julia Dent Grant, his wife.

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.

Before his death, Grant requested burial in New York City. Interment of the body on August 8, 1885, in a temporary vault in Riverside Park was followed by the organization of the General Grant Monument Association to build a permanent structure. After two architectural competitions for the tomb design, John H. Duncan was announced the winner on November 10, 1890.

John Hemingway Duncan (1855–1929), a New York City architect, 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.

While the exterior of the building was inspired by 19th-century reconstructions of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, the interior plan is modeled on the Church of the Dome at the Hotel des Invalides in Paris, final resting place of Napoleon. The interior also reflects the classical monumentality of the exterior.

Cruciform in plan, the General Grant National Memorial is focused about the crypt, visible through a circular opening in the main floor, and set directly beneath the dome.

Each of the four arms of the building, equal in length, is spanned by a coffered barrel vault extending from the dome at the center of the building. The walls, which are lined with white marble panels, are surmounted by a continuous entablature. End walls in the north, east, and west arms are pierced by windows filled with amber-colored glass. Above these windows, in the tympanums formed by the arcs of the barrel vaults, are brightly-colored mosaics executed by Allyn Cox in 1966. They represent Grant's victories at Vicksburg and Chattanooga and Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox. Twin bronze doors fill the end wall of the south arm.

Rising above the center of the building is a great coffered dome resting on pendentives carved with allegorical figures. Executed by J. Massey Rhind at the time the tomb was built, each pendentive depicts two women representing a phase of Grant's life. In the first pendentive, at the southeast corner of the dome, each of the women holds one of her breasts to represent Grant's birth and infancy. Running counter-clockwise, the second shows one woman holding a helmet while the other holds a shield to symbolize Grant's military career. In the third, representing Grant's civil career, one woman carries a cornucopia and the other holds a fasces, a symbol of civil authority in ancient Rome. The fourth which represents Grant's death depicts the women with heads bowed in mourning while a votive lamp shines behind them.

Rising above an enriched entablature, a colonnaded gallery forms the drum of the dome. The gallery is subdivided into 12 balcony openings by pilasters crowned with spread-winged eagles. Thirteen openings were originally intended, each to represent one of the original 13

states. Two Ionic columns in each opening support double-tiered panels decorated with shields and wreaths. A coffered ceiling encloses the top of the dome.

Access to the crypt, set one level below the main floor, is provided by a double staircase at the rear of the north arm. A balustrade, interrupted by supporting piers, separates the public from the red granite sarcophagi. Niches in the outer wall of the passage surrounding the crypt contain bronze busts of five of Grant's generals, all executed in 1938. The busts of Sherman and Sheridan were designed by William Mues, while Jens Juszko was responsible for those of Thomas, Ord, and McPherson.

The northwest and northeast corners of the building are occupied by exhibition rooms on the main floor, which were originally intended as reliquary rooms. Completely round in form, each room is surmounted by a small false dome, not reflected on the exterior.

The Grant Monument Association gave the tomb to the Federal government in 1959, which changed the name to the General Grant National Memorial. It is currently maintained by the National Park Service.

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