

WWI MEMORIAL IS FORGOTTEN AMONG BIGGER MONUMENTS

District's tribute to valor

Story and photos by JEAN GOSSMAN

Observer Essay



Amid the massive monuments on the National Mall, steps from rushing traffic, a rather small Doric temple set back from Independence Avenue offers a quiet oasis in the heart of Washington. The District of Columbia War Memorial honors the 26,000 men and women from the District who served their country in the armed forces during World War I. A list of all of

their names is embedded on one block of the memorial.

The sides of the temple are inscribed with the names of the 499 men and women who gave their lives in the War to End All Wars. Significantly, for the era, their names were included regardless of race or gender. None of them, white or black, male or female, had the right to vote even for president of the United States—their commander-in-chief. (District residents were not granted the right to vote for president until the 23rd Amendment to the Constitution in 1961.)

It is easy to miss the memorial, and it is not well marked. There are no surviving World War I veterans to gather around it in the memorial grove as the U.S. Marine Band plays inside the temple space on Armistice Day. The quietly stirring memorial was funded by a public subscription campaign, and the District's school children were exhorted to give 5 cents each. Now the memorial is deteriorating, and the [D.C. Preservation League](#) recently added it to its list of “most endangered places” for the third time.

Water damage and the passage of time have fostered mold growth and cracked the marble. In some spots, there is severe damage over the names of the dead.

A few years ago there was a tree growing out of the dome, but that has since been removed. There are no benches; the flagstone paths are cracked and broken; and litter is often strewn about because there are no trash cans.

President [Herbert Hoover](#) dedicated the memorial at 11 a.m. on the 11th day of the 11th month in 1932.

“However great our desire for peace, we must not assume that the peace for which these men died has become assured to the world or that the obligations which they left to us, the living, have been discharged,” he said.

“This monument stands for the men who fought not alone for their country, but to establish the principles of justice and peace. We pay tribute here to their valor. We honor them for their sacrifice. We respect their memory by renewing our obligations to the purposes and ideals for which they fought.”

Trash, mold and cracked marble cannot take that away.