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## History, Nationalism, and Public Opinion: The Memorialization of George Mason

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## History, Nationalism, and Public Opinion: The Memorialization of George Mason

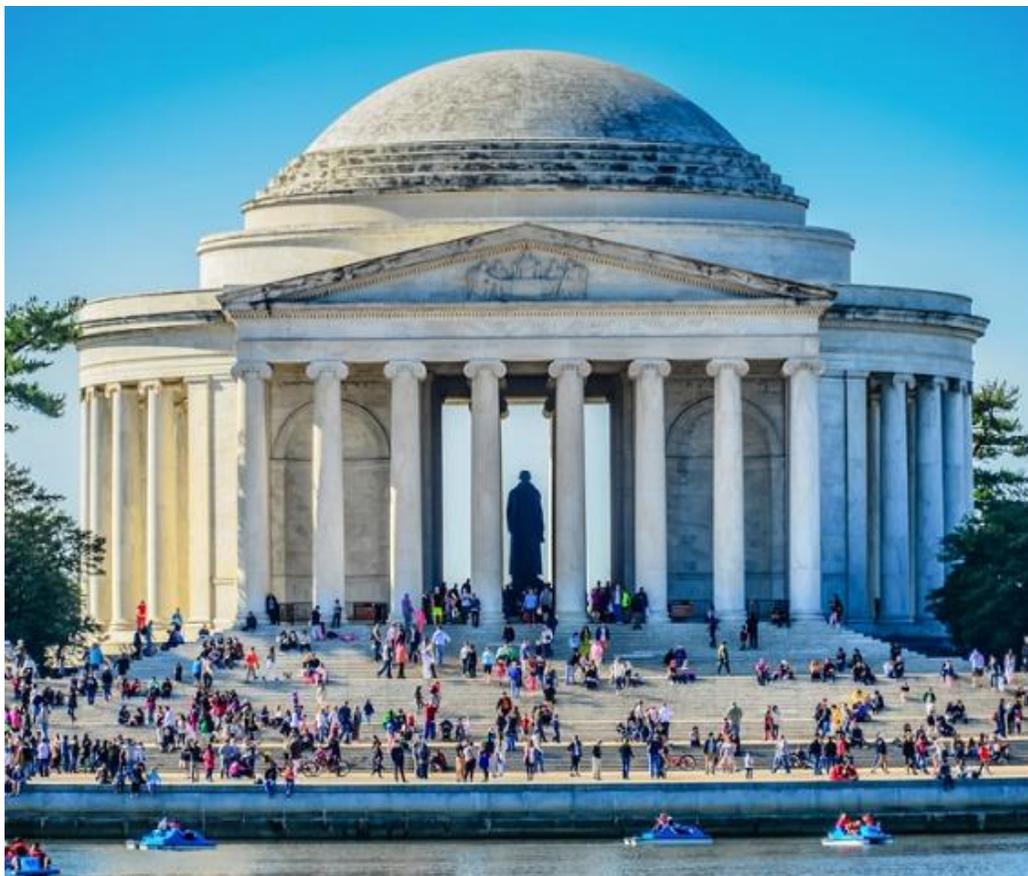
By Kasandra Fager

Advised by Dr. Schocket, American Culture Studies, and Dr. Challu, History

At first glance a bronze statue casually sitting beneath a major highway does not leave much to the imagination as a George Mason statue and his memorial blends into the background. Designed with simplicity in mind, the statue is a small part of the landscape as he sits on the bench in *Figure 1* and seemingly enjoys the gardens around him and looks longingly towards the Jefferson Memorial shown in *Figure 2*. With a face of contemplation, a question arises whether the statue is looking at Jefferson in friendship or an unachievable dream?



*Figure 1:* Wikipedia Commons contributors, *George Mason Memorial*, 2012, , National Mall, Washington D.C., WikipediaCommong.org



*Figure 2: Photo by mbell1975, Jefferson Memorial, 2017, National Mall, Washington D.C., JustFunFacts.com.*

The might of the Jefferson Memorial, the height of the George Washington obelisk, and the beauty of the Lincoln Memorial is seen as a testament of their god-like status in American history. Is Mason a lowly and personable figure like the rest of us, or a figure intentionally left out of the spotlight?

The bronze figure of Mason sits calmly and enjoys the view, seemingly frozen in history. History is always changing, and new interpretations are celebrated to from destroying a character to praising them with arms wide open. Mason is a figure of irony: an agrarian, a slaver, a family man, a politician, and an advocate for the Bill of Rights. He fulfills all the roles often done by more well-known founding fathers from Virginia, so why is he concealed from historical memory? The answer is simple, his refusal to sign the Constitution pushed his character aside

despite having complicated friendships with the other well-known founding fathers of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. Despite his influential words framing the United States foundational documents, the Virginia Declaration of Rights of 1776 and the future U.S. Bill of Rights, Mason is stuck between a battle of legacy and public memory.

This paper explores this public memory by outlining Mason himself, exploring the theories and concepts of memorials in American history, and relates the process of building the George Mason Memorial and the reaction of the public at the time. Historically, George Mason is an educated man in literature, economics and law and owns a 5000-acre estate. Serving in several public roles between 1747 and 1789, Mason served in the country court, the House of Burgesses, and the Continental Congress. His local and national roles inspired him to establish a militia, frame the Declaration of Rights of 1776, and to play an active role in the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. A summary of his biography is followed by several theories of memorialization. They are Seth C. Bruggeman's article, "Memorials and Monuments," David Gobel and Dave Rossell's book, *Commemoration in America: Essays on Monuments, Memorialization, and Memory*, and Nathan Glazer and Cynthia R. Field's book, *The National Mall: Rethinking Washington's Monumental Core*.

Respectively, the three theories explore how a memorial is built with the concepts of traditionalism and individual interests, a reflective design component that connects the past and present, and a manufactured aesthetic. I apply these theoretical foundations to figure out how we understand the decisions behind the design of the 2002 George Mason Memorial and the public's reactions to it. The controversy and intentions of memorials on the National Mall are compared using the George Mason Memorial on the National Mall in 2002. With fundraising by the Board of Regents of Gunston Hall, his plantation home and museum, and congressional work

completed between 1992 and 2002, the George Mason memorial was dreamed of, designed, approved, and built. The memorial visitors explore the several layers of public memory and advocacy hidden beneath an insignificant Washington bridge by featuring a fountain of the past, a trellis of the present, and a bronze statue contemplating the future. Mason's biography, the theories of memorialization, and the memorial itself works together utilizing public participation, local and national politics, literary arguments, and the controversy of the figure himself to explore historical significance and public memory. My project shows that the way we represent Mason's legacy is always a decision that speaks to the present as much as to the historical figure.

### George Mason

A gateway between the young and old, Mason's life and his political achievements are on full display. Born December 11, 1725 in Fairfax County, Virginia, George Mason was raised by his widowed mother, Ann Thomas Mason and his paternal uncle, John Mercer.<sup>1</sup> Spending his days in his uncle's library surrounded by literary classics and legal education books, he developed a knowledge of economics, law, and the general history of Virginia and Great Britain.<sup>2</sup> To further cement his rise in status, Mason inherited his father's 5000-acre estate, Mason's Neck, on the Potomac River. The wheat and wine grape vine plantations are cultivated by three hundred slaves, the largest number held by anyone at the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention.<sup>3</sup> As head of the estate, George Mason desired a quiet lifestyle and eventually built his mansion, Gunston Hall, in 1755 for his second wife, Ann Elibeck, and their children. Built as

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<sup>1</sup> Brent Tarter, "George Mason and the Conservation of Liberty," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 99, no. 3 (1991): 34.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Lee Fleming Reese, "George Mason the True Father of the Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution." *Education* 112, no. 1 (1991): 34.

a representative of balance and surrounded by a large peaceful garden, the private home is “eminently livable and functional as well as beautiful. Gunston Hall had symmetry, style, balance, and is proportional.”<sup>4</sup> Nothing is out of place and everything is to be simple and functional for a man of his stature as a wealthy and domestic family man. Noting the commercial and private dealings along the Potomac River, his neighbors were “George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, the Lees, the Fairfax’s, John Marshall, and other founding fathers.”<sup>5</sup> Owning land and having strong relationships with other founding fathers would be influential in his future political career.

An estate owner with no formal educational background, George Mason entered the public sphere at age 22. Between 1747 and 1789, he served as a trustee for the town of Alexandria, Virginia for twenty-five years, was a gentleman justice of the peace court for twenty years and served in the House of Burgesses, Virginia’s lower legislature house.<sup>6</sup> Mason had no desire to serve unless necessary, so he often turned down political appointments. Instead, Mason played the part of a dutiful husband to his wife and a good father to his many children while focusing on the literary strengths and qualities of humanity, respect, and admiration in his work.<sup>7</sup> Does Mason want to remain in the shadows of politics or is he holding an aloof position held by gentlemen of the time? Is his service out of loyalty and pride for country or simply a power move for status and power? The following career moves prove difficult to frame as an answer to these questions as he pushed beyond local political. Mason is elected in 1775 to “replace George Washington in the Continental Congress in Philadelphia when the General is designated

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<sup>4</sup> Tarter, “Conservation of Liberty,” 286.

<sup>5</sup> Reese, “True Father of the Bill of Rights,” 34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Commander-in-Chief of the Continental forces.”<sup>8</sup> Mason declined the position for an unspecified reason, but he did agree to serve on the Committee of Safety at the Virginia Convention to oversee the executive and legislative functions of Virginia after Crown-appointed Lord Dunmore fled.<sup>9</sup> Slowly gaining national prominence, the politics around the separation from Great Britain would push Mason towards the most significant stage in his career, the American Revolution.

Trying to decide whether to remain in the serene gardens of Gunston Hall or enter the rough politics of the Revolutionary era, Mason left behind an unrealized legacy of inspiration. Utilizing his connections and his social status at the time, Mason influenced his neighbors and founding fathers to push forward in their endeavors. Mason’s national work began in 1774 when he co-wrote the Fairfax Country Resolution with George Washington. According to historian Lee Fleming, the resolution “presented the liberties to which Americans are entitled, reviewed abuses to which they are subjected to, and promised aid to Massachusetts.”<sup>10</sup> The injustice of the British Parliament encouraged Mason to fight for the citizen’s natural rights and laid the foundations for Mason’s political legacy. In 1775, he inspired the colonial forces when Mason organized the Fairfax Independent Company, the first paramilitary organization independent of the Crown’s militia in the colonies and designs the uniforms that would later become the standard dress of Washington’s Continental Army.<sup>11</sup> Even more importantly, in 1776, Jefferson framed the Declaration of Rights by using Mason’s proclamation of the “inherent rights of men” and the “right to abolish an inadequate government,” from the Virginia Declaration of Rights of 1776. Mason also helped write the Virginia Constitution, the first official document to feature a

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

modern day three-branch government of an executive, legislative and judicial branch.<sup>12</sup> His words and ideas would later inspire the framing of other state constitutions and Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. After the war, Mason shaped Jefferson's governance of the Western territories, sat on the Mount Vernon Conference in 1783 to deal with navigation issues on the Potomac River, and signs the Mount Vernon Compact of 1785 to divide jurisdiction of Chesapeake Bay between Maryland and Virginia.<sup>13</sup> Mason was involved in local and national politics, but is often unknown in American politics and history because he did not sign the United States Constitution in 1787.

Mason's words, actions, and experiences guides America's growth in economics and governance, he is elected as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention. At the height of his political power, Mason "speaks 128 times and is ever present and alert" and is marked as a skilled debater by James Madison and Thomas Jefferson.<sup>14</sup> An advocate for his own ideas and supported by Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts and Roger Sherman of Connecticut, Mason proposed a bill of rights in 1787. Denied for its late admission and irrelevance, Mason refuses to sign the Constitution alongside Gerry and Sherman. Cementing his political legacy with a swipe of a feather, Mason is forever the one of the men who did not sign the constitution. Madison, Washington, and other founding fathers remove him from their social and political circles as he faces major public backlash for the first time in his career.<sup>15</sup> Friendships are destroyed, his papers and work are lost, and his historical significance is teetering on the edge of insignificant unless it is a centennial celebration of the Bill of Rights. Rising and falling in such a dramatic fashion, Mason's legacy on public memory is hard to pinpoint, but this presentation of George

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Associated Press, "Forgotten Patriot Will Get His Salute," *The Virginian-Pilot*, July 9, 1990.

Mason's past introduces a larger conversation into the theory of modern-day monuments and the creation of the George Mason Memorial.

### The Theory of Memorialization

American has always been country of commemoration as Washington D.C.'s National Mall is constructed into a "living monument of the past."<sup>16</sup> as Glazer and Field present. The American public honors the larger-than-life statues and their namesakes, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln and honors and reflect on the horrific events of World War Two, the Vietnam War, and the Korean War, by learning to embrace its past through commemoration. Laying flowers beneath the names of the lost soldiers, crying under the gaze of the wreaths of the fifty states, and staring blankly across the sea of grass and visualizing the military members struggling to survive in the forests of Korea, introduces a sympathetic and remembering component to American history and the *Figure 3* map of the National Mall's memorials. The public sees a visceral reaction to the National Mall in two paths, a spiritual pilgrimage to the past and a national acceptance of the future. The paths intersect to create a unique American commemoration technique that captures emotion, nationalism, strength, sadness, and beauty. A national park all its own, the National Mall shown in *Figure 3* protects historic memory. Theories of memorialization help explain the public's "consumption" of national history through the paths of the mall in their pilgrimage to Washington D.C.

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<sup>16</sup> David Gobel and Daves Rossell, *Commemoration in America: Essays on Monuments, Memorialization, and Memory*, (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia, 2013).

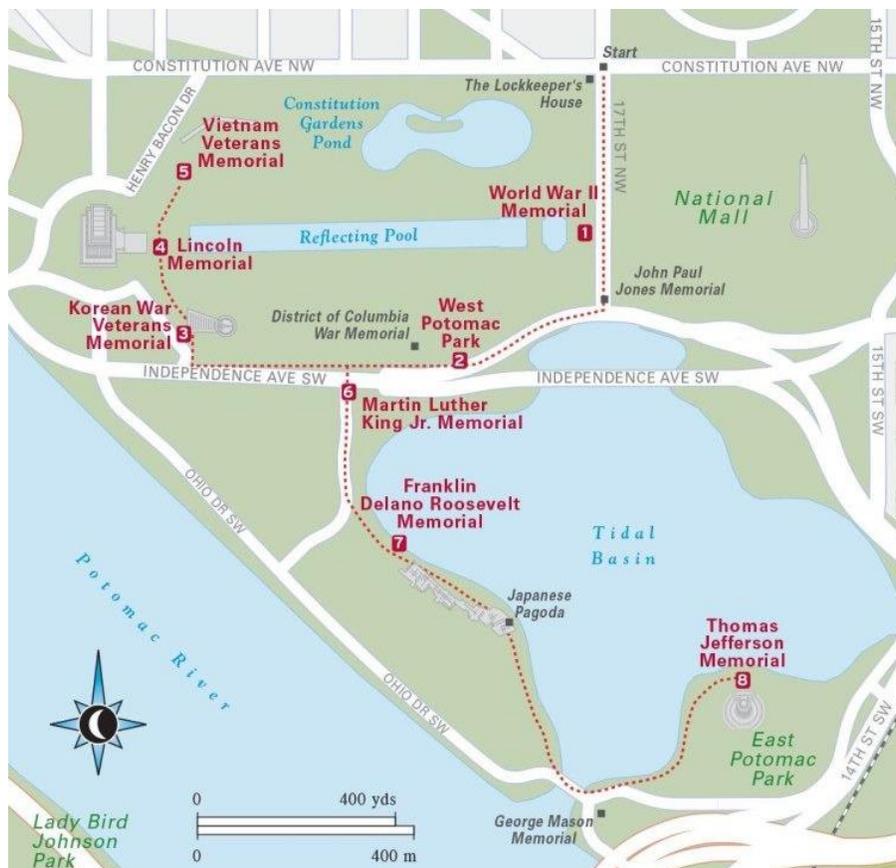


Figure 3: National Mall and Memorials Walking Route, 2021, National Mall, Washington D.C.

Scholars identify a few common arguments within the literature of the memorialization theory about the National Mall. Using Bruggeman’s words as a reference, memorials are monuments that are important for protecting a nation’s fundamental concepts such as stories of the past, life lessons, public memory, and nationalistic views. Statues, cemeteries, obelisks, historic buildings, memorial bridges, national parks, rituals, and other monuments are found across the United States and across the world as sentiments to important events.<sup>17</sup> These different formats represent the individual and collective connections the public has with memory and

<sup>17</sup> Seth C. Bruggeman, “Memorials and Monuments,” *The Inclusive Historian’s Handbook*, Indianapolis, Indiana: National Council on Public History, July 18, 2019, <https://inclusivehistorian.com/memorials-and-monuments/>.

emotions. Relying on group acceptance and individual relationships to explore the art of commemoration allows theorists to go beyond the basic function of preserving history into something deeper.<sup>18</sup> The mix of conservative and creative processes of memorial building and the personal connection of bias, nationalism, memory, opinion, and individual interests in these endeavors work together to push a project forward.

Despite the hidden meanings, controversial takes, and fictionalized perspectives, the traditionalism of a memorial is common. Never specifically called, “traditionalism” in the reading, I use traditionalism to summarize the strong connection to our past with the more conservative types of memorials built throughout history. Every statue must retain the past in conception and execution and thus traditionalism is expected. Originating in the Medieval times with the worship of holy objects of hair and bone and evolving into giving sanctity to cathedrals, mountains, temples, and other centers of worship, the foundation characteristic of memorialization is retained.<sup>19</sup> Public space represents harmony and praise and allows people of all walks of life to honor their heroes and respect their dead. Religion and science are intertwined in society and giving money and time to building places of worship is expected. How can a society reflect on its past and fix the future, if there is no place to process these thoughts? The politics, economy, and cultural consequences of such acts is found in centuries of memorial practices. Traditionally, memorials are a place of worship, but Seth C. Bruggeman’s “Memorials and Monuments” article takes this realization a step further.

Acknowledging the original the divinity of objects in the Christian religion, Bruggeman argues that monuments typically reflect common interests, and the act of commemoration is the “process whereby this typically reflects common interests, and it is also the “process whereby

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

this confluence of individual memories is vetted and repackaged for public consumption.”<sup>20</sup>

Bruggeman argues that having reverence, rituals, and a definition of greatness is necessary to honor the figures they represent.<sup>21</sup> A nation and its citizenship are bound by a community’s collective memory as “a shared set of ideas about the past is: war is noble, our ancestors were great, and remembering patriotic.”<sup>22</sup> The act of establishing memorials is present in the daily lives and language of the people as new projects are constructed and recollections of the past are introduced.

No matter what era a memorial is established in, the purpose of any commemorative infrastructure is to keep alive the legacy of prominent leaders, bloody battles, death, and other honorable services. There is a political need and personal desire to derive such creations, so a theory of modernity is introduced. The emotional impact and survivor’s guilt threaten to overwhelm the public as they face a reality that their friends and neighbors have died in the line of duty. Thus, the living is never satisfied with burials and they are afraid the historical narrative of their struggles will be lost. The death, chaos, and destruction that transformed an entire society can not be captured on page but must be experienced in person in a modern way. In America, this place of reflection is the National Mall and more specifically, the war memorials of WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. These memorials hold different methods of reflection. The Vietnam War memorial’s black marble reflect the visitor’s image back to them as to connect them to the names of the dead. The Korean War statues transports the public back in time as the lack of supplies, the struggles of communication through radios, and the endless trek through the tall grasses isolate the men from the outside world. The circular formation of the World War

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Two portrays a notion of unity as each state and territory pillar boasts a simple wreath and its name. No state is placed above the others and they all work to demonstrate how the country came together in the world's time of need. The National Mall is a bridge between the past and the future teachings of memorials.

Gobel and Rossell's collection of essays, *Commemoration in America* introduces a more modern take on reflecting the past in novel ways. Like my use of traditionalism above, the use of "modern" is not explicitly referred to in the reading, but I use this term to emphasize the relevance of a subject in today's perspective. The essay, "Why Do Contemporary Monuments Talk So Much?" by Dell Upton, argues that commemoration recognizes the effect of dialogue, insight, visual interpretation, and public opinion on the impact of memorials in the public sphere.<sup>23</sup> In their eyes it is enough to build a building or honor sacred objects, but a site should represent the values of a society. Civil monuments and public art "now float in a triangle described by literalism, allegory, and formalism."<sup>24</sup> Monuments push a message that speaks for everyone, but unintentionally they, "say more about the people, times, and places of creation than they do about those they honor."<sup>25</sup> Upton emphasizes that monuments reframe history to make it familiar and easy to process. The public becomes a consumer of history who must walk through the horrors to run towards the hope. It is in this sense that Bruggeman's position can be described as "traditionalist" and Upton's (and the other essays in the Gobel and Rossell collection) represent a "modernist" perspective. The traditionalist perspective sees memorials as static and recalling the past and the modernist perspective focuses on the people's desire to be connected and experience the actions and consequences of a nation's reflections together.

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<sup>23</sup>Dell Upton, "Why Do Contemporary Monuments Talk So Much," ed. David Gobel and Daves Rossell (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 12.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 25.

Reframing history to make it familiar and consumable to the public is widened by the addition of landscapes, trails, and events to Bruggeman's list of figurative objects of statues, obelisks, and museums.<sup>26</sup> The public must walk the path of history while studying the figurative objects of honored people and events. The theories of memorialization from traditionalism to a more modern twist on a rich past and a reflective present is used to understand people's desire to be connected to the land and statues around them.

By diverging the path from traditionalism to modernism, the establishment of memorials creates a new conversation about manufacturing opinions and creative intentions. The beauty of designing memorials threatens to go too far from the original intent of the traditionalist path. Memorials are covered in visual images and quotes and they discourage interpretation. The diversity of the public and social movements can disagree with the purpose of the project and tolerance of the design is harder to obtain. The simple honoring of a subject or the emotional representation of an event is not the only element of memorials to be studied. Nathan Glazer and Cynthia R. Field's book, *The National Mall: Rethinking Washington's Monumental Core*, introduce another element to the conversation. They argue that the public demonstration of honorable memorials is organic, or natural, but the aesthetic unity is manufactured.<sup>27</sup> Both a "living monument and work in progress," the mall encourages simplicity, florid rhetoric, civic activism, and social discontent.<sup>28</sup>

The authors list the symbolism and emotional attraction of large events that have happened in Washington D.C. like the AIDS Quilt Project, Civil Rights Movement, the rallies

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<sup>26</sup> Gobel and Rossell, *Commemoration in America*, 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Nathan Glazer and Cynthia R. Field, *The National Mall: Rethinking Washington's Monumental Core*, (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

against the Vietnam War. Politics and culture influence memorials and give the public another reason to worship the National Mall. It is not just about honoring dead but using their death as motivation to make their lives better. This realization is found in original design plan of the Mall, the 1902 McMillian Plan. It uses green open spaces, the towering figures, and the great east-axis connecting the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial, to make citizens feel responsible for the superiority and harmony of the space.<sup>29</sup> The American public often expects memorial designers to use civic duty and national pride to keep the nation's popular figures alive, but this constraint allows for little deviance from the original aesthetic. A struggle between recreation and professionalism attributes and patriotic and racial tensions plays into the public conversation. The National Mall represents a struggle between recreation and professionalism while celebrating the beauty and the public's pride of the history of the mall.

Traditionalist pride, modernist respect, or manufactured aesthetic is used to argue the worthiness of the monuments on the National Mall. The literature of memorialization is controversial as the public overlooks historical figures and encourages nationalism by choosing who gets honored through a memorial in the "heart of American democracy." Though all three theories have their flaws, the superiority, individual desire, and intentional design of the National Mall looms over the conversation of commemoration. The George Mason Memorial serves as an example to compare the memorialization theories and the public reactions to the monuments on the Mall because Mason is not popular and yet not erased from the past.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 11.

## The George Mason Memorial

A seemingly insignificant figure with his cane and hat to his right and his books to his left, Mason seems inviting to the public. The paper studies how the George Mason Memorial portrays the irony of George Mason's past, the current conversations of racial tension and slavery, and the nation's patriotism towards the Founding Fathers. The information of the memorial is found on the National Mall Memorial Park website. The George Mason memorial was dedicated on April 9, 2002, after ten years of planning and fundraising.<sup>30</sup> Created by Faye B. Harwell, sculpted by Wendy M. Ross, and funded by the Board of Regents of Gunston Hall, the memorial sits on the outskirts of the National Mall in East Potomac Park. Incorporated in the remnants of an old fountain left behind from the 1902 McMillan Commission beneath the dedicated George Mason 14<sup>th</sup> Street bridge sits a life-size bronze statue of George Mason surrounded by a circle of gardens.<sup>31</sup> A simplistic display and an "overall modestly elegant design," the statue sits casually with his legs crossed and his thumb holding a page of a book open.<sup>32</sup> Holding a relaxed pose among the circular gardens of eighteenth-century inspired plant species pays homage to Mason's home, Gunston Hall. Research is a main component of the memorial's design as the plants are selected and the carving of the statue's face is based on early writings of Mason's fourth son, Joh, and a family dinner of twenty-one direct lineal descendants to deduce what Mason would have looked like.<sup>33</sup> A contemplative stance within the forgotten Pansy Garden, one of the McMillan Commission gardens, gives the older landscape a new story

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<sup>30</sup> "George Mason Memorial," National Park Service, National Park Service, April 10, 2015.

<https://www.nps.gov/nama/planyourvisit/george-mason-memorial.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Colleen Kearney Rich, "A Five-Minute Interview: Wendy M. Ross, Creator of the George Mason Statue," *Mason Spirit: The Magazine for Alumni and Friends of George Mason University*, 1995, [https://spirit.gmu.edu/archives/spring08/wendy\\_ross.html](https://spirit.gmu.edu/archives/spring08/wendy_ross.html).

to tell. The theories of memorialization by Bruggeman, Glazer and Rossell, and Gobel and Field work within the timeline of the memorial's establishment process to connect the rich past of Mason to the personal involvement of the public.

A complex project from start to finish, the George Mason Memorial was funded by public and private donations. The fundraising and planning for the memorial was originally started by Mary Lee Allen, Chairman of the Fairfax County Bicentennial Commission in 1987 and First Regent of Gunston Hall, and finished by Judy Herdeg, First Regent in 1994.<sup>34</sup>

According to "A Personal Recollection by Mary Lee Allen," the monument was to "be placed on the National Mall by December 1991 as a celebration of the Bicentennial of the Bill of Rights."<sup>35</sup>

To make this a reality, Allen had to go beyond an idea and enter the realm of politics. She was able to convince Professor Josephine Pacheco of George Mason University History Department and Virginia State Senator Joseph Garland to help pick the perfect location. She was also able to convince the General Assembly to approve \$225,000 of funding for the memorial by allocating \$100,000 from the general fund and the rest from private funds.<sup>36</sup> The project required a \$2 million dollar fundraising campaign, and this was only the beginning. The memorial would continue to be a narrow circle of support until "Senator Ray L. Garland asked Senator Charles Robb to help get the two required bills through the Senate."<sup>37</sup> Senator Robb fulfilled his role by making speeches, appearing in front of committees, and cooperating with other members of Congress. Senator Robb personally introduced S. 1543 on August 4, 1989 to authorize the Colonial Dames at Gunston Hall to establish a memorial to George Mason in the District of

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<sup>34</sup> Mary Lee Allen, "History of the Project for a George Mason Monument in Washington D.C., Area 1, Fountain #4: A Personal Recollection," April 2000, The Mary Lee Allen Papers, Gunston Hall Library, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Columbia and persuaded Senator James Moran of Virginia to sponsor the bill in the house as HR 3687.<sup>38</sup> The Park Service gave the group a list of expectations titled, “24 Steps to Erecting a Memorial in Washington D.C., and support for the project grew.

Lawyers, judges, journalists, historians, and other sectors of the public pushed for a George Mason Memorial to be built. Enthusiasm for the project was growing as booklets, books, letters, requests for sponsors, and the scheduling of committee meetings were written by Gunston Hall Board of Regent members. Senator Garland “felt strongly that a memorial anywhere else than Area I in the District of Columbia would not be worth the effort” and pushed for the Mason memorial to be erected beneath the bridge Allen, Pacheco, and Garland had selected not that long ago.<sup>39</sup> Another History professor at GMU, Professor Robert Hawkes “gave Gunston Hall his sabbatical which allowed him to work at Gunston Hall for six months to set up several Bicentennial projects.<sup>40</sup> His admiration for George Mason pushed him to support the memorial by “attending hearings and meetings, helped write letters and speeches, and appeared before commissions.” His volunteer efforts and the work of Senator Garland made the memorial a local issue by encouraging Fairfax, Virginia to honor Mason during the Bill of Rights Bicentennial, but the political connections of Regents across nearly every state and the constant push by Virginia senators at the time made the memorial a national issue.

American citizens successfully persuaded the members of Gunston Hall, Senator Robb, Secretary of the Interior the Honorable Lujan to pass the required bills to approve the memorial and its location by flooding their offices with newspapers, letters, and speeches. The public’s impact on the respective parties is found among the Mary Lee Allen’s papers held in an archive

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

box in the library of Gunston Hall. The actions of the Regents and the Senators to get the memorial approved by Congress are revealed in the documents Allen saved. Campaign reports tracked the funding efforts of all forty-three states involved.<sup>41</sup> A letter of support written on July 5, 1991 from Mrs. Eldred Martin Yochim, a descendant of the George Mason family, was written to Senator John W. Warner, Senator Charles S. Robb, and Representative Frank R. Wolf was found among Allen's papers.<sup>42</sup> Even a speech by Senator Robb that he presented to the National Capital Memorial Commission was found. The actions by the Board of Regents, Mrs. Yochim, and Senator Robb were key to getting HR 402 and S. 1543 passed to approve the memorial's location by the McMillan fountain. The most influential component was Senator Robb's speech. By using public interest to convince the committee of Mason's historical significance, Robb suggested that a memorial would commemorate the "government's calling of ensuring freedom of its citizens," would represent international democracy, and would secure Mason's "enduring principles" as an educational tool for years to come.<sup>43</sup> The purpose of the memorial's location on the Potomac River was to be convenient for pedestrians, cyclists, and tour buses to pass through. This proximity and easy access would encourage the public to read and contemplate the words of the Declaration of Rights.<sup>44</sup> With unanimous approval, the National Capital Memorial Commission recommended Congress pass their respective bills and they did so with little opposition.

With Congressional approval, the consideration of several designs was underway. As the Board of Regents passed around the letters, models, and drawings of the memorial, several

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<sup>41</sup> National Capital Memorial Commission (1990), 'Speech by Senator Charles Robb,' *Minutes of National Capital Memorial Commission meeting November 8, 1990*, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C., 82.

<sup>42</sup> Yochim to Manuel Lujan Jr., July 5, 1991, The Mary Lee Allen Papers, Gunston Hall Library.

<sup>43</sup> National Capital Memorial Commission, 'Speech by Senator Robb,' 88.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 84.

design components were up for debate. A paper found among Allen's documents explained how different potential designers used angular shapes for strength, the simplicity versus intricate detailing, a comforting presence versus a shocking or radical display, the inclusion of words from the Bill of Rights or the Declaration of Rights, and whether the inclusion of a garden would complement the sculpture.<sup>45</sup> No matter what design they chose the Commemorative Works Act passed by the Senate in 1986 dictated that it "preserve the integrity of the comprehensive design of the L'Enfant and McMillian plans," to "ensure the continued public use and enjoyment of open space in D.C.," and to "reflect a consensus of the lasting national significance of the subjects involved."<sup>46</sup> To fulfill this role, Senator Robb pushed for the memorial's easy access location and Mary Lee Allen advocated that a garden would allow "visitors to contemplate Mason's work and to reinforce their devotion to the Bill of Rights."<sup>47</sup> Also, his presence by Thomas Jefferson would be an inspiring reminder of our government's basic document as it "influenced democratic governments all over the world."<sup>48</sup> Found deep in an archive box of her notes, is a sheet of legal pad that holds Allen's thoughts of why the bridge in Washington D.C. named after George Mason is not enough. Allen points out that nobody knows that the bridge is named after Mason, it does not provide a place to think about Mason's legacy, the moving traffic ruins the experience, and the potential inclusion of overhead signs would intrude on the city's landscape.<sup>49</sup> Instead, Allen emphasizes that the memorial is simply expanding present land and complements what is already there, the fountain beneath the very bridge that holds Mason's

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<sup>45</sup> Robin to Mary Lee Allen, 1989, Mary Lee Allen Papers, Gunston Hall Library.

<sup>46</sup> *Commemorative Works Act*, Pub. L. 99-652, 100 STAT. 3650 (1986).

<sup>47</sup> Mary Lee Allen, "Typed Draft about George Mason Memorial," February 22, 1990, Mary Lee Allen Papers, Gunston Hall Library.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Mary Lee Allen, "Handwritten Notes on Legal Paper," February 12, 1990, Mary Lee Allen Papers, Gunston Hall Library.

namesake.<sup>50</sup> A second page of notes takes the conversation further by noting that there are “more things than wars and presidents that made our nation great.”<sup>51</sup> The spoken word of Senator Robb and the written word of Mary Lee Allen complimented the other as their individual interests and the modern reframing of history shapes the eventual image of George Mason’s Memorial.

As the public stands in the entrance of the Mason Memorial, the path and garden and enter the foreground. The placement of the fountain, the circular sidewalk and plant arrangement seem to naturally guide the public around the memorial. Directly across the water is the trellis and statue. Seven sections, three stone walls, and a relaxed pose draw the eye and yet reverts the eye as the structure tries to blend in with the garden. Bruggeman’s theory of traditional interests, Gobel and Rossell’s theory of familiarity, and Glazer and Field’s manufactured aesthetic is used to understand how the work of the Senators and Regents on the memorial is represented.

The three theories explored in an above section advocates that the desire to educate, the need to create, and the ability to interpret is the goal of all artists when designing a memorial, but the original purpose may not be as clear. Traditionally, a memorial is created as a place of worship to respect the dead and acknowledge what the living has lost. Emotionally, a memorial is a sacred place for personal reflection and prayer. The George Mason Memorial demonstrates Bruggeman’s theory as the design’s simplicity and the privacy of the bridge is a place of contemplation. The natural rights of the Constitution and the origins of American democracy is identified. Building on this national identity is the choice of inscriptions. The quotes features Thomas Jefferson regard of Mason’s character, the Declaration of Rights’ recognition of the rights of protection, liberty, and freedom of the press and religion, and George Mason’s dislike

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

of slavery and support of natural rights. These words surround the bronze statue and support Gobel and Rossell's rich past theory. Mason's support for the people and his demand for a Bill of Rights connects the past with the present. The attributes of the Revolutionary era remain the foundational elements of America's democracy to this day. This weaving of privacy with the words of the past keeps Mason alive but this is manufactured by design. Where is the line drawn between a natural concept of capturing Mason in the memorial and a forced conclusion of purpose?

Realistically, all memorials are manufactured for ease of conceptualization and simplicity of design. Art is a subjective medium and the intention of interpretation is vague. Any element of a project can be deemed artistic choice and thus manufactured and is found in Figures 4 and 5.



*Figure 4: George Mason Memorial, photo by Stewart Bros. Photography, National Mall. Washington D.C., DavisConstruction.com*



*Figure 5: George Mason Memorial with the 14th Street Bridge in the background, photo by Stewart Bros. Photography, National Mall. Washington D.C., DavisConstruction.com*

The harmony of the circular structure of the garden leads the people through the memorial. The shadows of the bridge and the water in the fountain offers a quiet atmosphere for reflection. The placement of the statue at eye level gives a sense of relatability and open access to Mason's character and the inscriptions strengthen a national identity. Whatever the potential interpretation of the site may be, the simplicity or complexity of the site man it embodies is not a strange concept across the National Mall. Harmony, strength, respect, and aloofness is a shared element with the other founding fathers. Looking back, the design choices are unclear as to whether the manufactured aesthetic exists until the public opinion is explored among the pages of various journals and newspapers published in 2002 and 2003.

A contemplative design or an industrial nuisance, the memorial fights to fit either mold in the eye of the beholder. Designed to be reflective with the fountain, personable with the relaxed pose of the statue, and contemplative with the privacy offered by the road above, elements of the

site can be seen in different lights. The *ArchNewsNow* article claims the original circular layout draws a connection to the architecture and gardens of the Gunston Hall Plantation.<sup>52</sup> The *Washington Post* states the bronze statue retains “a certain steely psychological distance no matter how close you get” while noting the different art styles of the Renaissance private and thoughtful character and the contemporary “don’t back down from an argument” attitude.<sup>53</sup> A second *Washington Post* article asserts that the memorial preserves history while simplifying it at the same time with its inclusion of human rights inscriptions and the ignorance of the man’s Antifederalist stance.<sup>54</sup> The *Magnolia Bulletin* calls the site attractive in all seasons as a reflection of his home and a generational linkage to art and architecture styles.<sup>55</sup> The *Magnolia* offers a contemporary approach as the garden coverage,

“incorporates plants sustainable in modern times, elements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century pansy garden, and historic native plants or native derivatives found in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Images from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Victorian era also inspired the design.”<sup>56</sup>

The *Magnolia Bulletin* sees memorial as a transitional piece between Jefferson’s dome and Roosevelt’s linear piece to capture the spirit of the garden and the legacy of the man that crosses historical boundaries. It is important to note that there is very little negative public opinion beyond the Post’s perspective of ignorance and historical simplification. One of the only moments of controversy found among the journals and documents for this essay is in the *Landscape Architecture*.

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<sup>52</sup> ArchNewsNow, “George Mason National Memorial by Rhodeside & Harwell Incorporated,” ArchNewsNow.com, 2002, <http://www.archnewsnow.com/features/Feature13.htm>.

<sup>53</sup> “Washington Post articles on George Mason Memorial,” Wendy M. Ross Website, Ross Scripture Studio, LLC, 2002, <http://www.rosssculpturestudio.com/p148.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Emily Coleman Kangas, “The George Mason Memorial: A Historic Garden on the National Mall,” *Magnolia: Bulletin of the Southern Garden History Society*, 2001, [https://www.southerngardenhistory.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/12/Magnolia\\_Spring\\_2001.pdf](https://www.southerngardenhistory.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/12/Magnolia_Spring_2001.pdf).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

Controversy often surrounds the memorials in the public space of the National Mall and the George Mason Memorial is no different. A battle between Allen Freeman, Faye Harwell, and Daniel Straub marks the pages of the *Landscape Architecture*. Beginning with Allen Freeman's article, "Who Is That Large Man? – And Why is There a Memorial to Him on the National Mall?" Freeman refers to Mason as "a rich Virginian and one smart cookie with high ideals" and does not think highly of his political legacy.<sup>57</sup> Placing him behind Lewis and Clark and Warner Bros animation director Chuck Jones in the running for memorials, Freeman argues that Mason is insignificant and his memorial a disgrace.<sup>58</sup> In his eyes, the trellis is too small, the height of the trellis and statue is "gratuitous and superfluous," the columns are "fatally distracting" and the machine-made brackets look clunky.<sup>59</sup> In response to Freeman's article by Faye Harwell, the statue's artist, immediately lists Mason's accomplishments and the need to stop overlooking him in history and in education. Pointing out the strong support of historians, scholars, and Congress while dismissing Freeman's review as just another way to reduce Mason's legacy, Harwell introduces the controversy that this very paper tries to answer.<sup>60</sup> What should people focus on? The ideas behind the man or the superficial design of the memorial? The next article in the battle, "George Mason's Memorial: Another Take" by Daniel Straub does not answer this question but calls out *Landscape Architecture* for the publishing of the articles above. As a practicing landscape architect, Straub found Freeman's questions about design choice fascinating and Harwell's response "defending the honor of the memorial's subject" a disgrace.<sup>61</sup> He is surprised

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<sup>57</sup> Allen Freeman, "Who Is That Large Man? - And Why Is There a Memorial to Him on the National Mall? [George Mason National Memorial]," *Landscape Architecture* 93, no. 4 (2003): 148.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>60</sup> Allen Freeman and Faye Harwell, "The George Mason Memorial: A Spirited Defense," *Landscape Architecture* 93, no. 6 (2003): 9.

<sup>61</sup> Allen Freeman, Faye Harwell, and Daniel Straub, "George Mason's Memorial: Another Take." *Landscape Architecture* 93 no. 7 (2003): 11.

that the magazine does not protect the debate by allowing the designer to hide behind Mason instead of creating a space to discuss “craft and skill of construction.” To bolster his response, Straub visited the memorial and lists pros and cons about the site. The curved stone entrance is nicely detailed, the placement of the statue and fountain distorts the design, the pose looks uncomfortable, the trellis is poorly detailed, but the stonewall and the gardens are beautiful.<sup>62</sup> Seeing this response as the middle ground of the controversy, Straub brings Freeman and Harwell’s responses together. Representing all three sides of a controversy, the negative, the positive, and the neutral, the *Landscape Architecture* battle is a snapshot of public opinion regarding the memorial. A generic and industrial design or a caretaker of tradition, the George Mason Memorial is as controversial as the man himself.

### The Bigger Picture

The structure of the paper follows a journey of its own as it explores the complexity of Mason’s biography, the methods of interpretation, the process of the memorial’s physical development, and the public reaction following its installation. I use a narrow focus to understand how Americans utilize public space and select historical figures to memorialize. Was Mason chosen for his political achievements, his status as a wealthy family man, or the coincidence that America idolizes the Revolutionary era? Considering, the men on the National Mall include George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Martin Luther King Jr, the choice relies on a combination of all three. It is typical for America to respect the men’s contributions to the nation’s future and the social and political impacts of their actions. The public walks through their memorials or looks up at them, but all

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 12.

the memorials on the mall represent a characteristic or a major event of America's history. Respectively, the memorials represent the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, westward expansion and international involvement, World War Two and the Great Depression, and the Civil Rights Movement. Every site on the national mall has its reason for being there even if the event or figure is considered controversial among today's scholars and public visitors.

Washington D.C. is seen as the birthplace of democracy and controlling the public space helps educate society about America's rich history. The desire to educate, create, and interpret is the reason the George Mason Memorial was built on the National Mall. The creators of the memorial believed Americans needed a place to contemplate the natural rights and foundational elements like freedom of the press and the power to overthrow a corrupt government. The controversy of the Mason's era and figure and the conflicting perspectives of the memorial itself captures the spirit of the National Mall. Without controversy, the complexity of America and its history is lost to the public. Without this paper's narrow representation of the mall, the dialogue of the ideals and patriotism of the larger figures like Washington and Lincoln is too hard to reach and understand. The small size of Gunston Hall and the tall bronze figure of Mason stimulates an underwhelming emotional reaction and encourages the public to slowly contemplate the significance of the figures around them. Placed off the beaten path from the figures of Washington and Lincoln, the insignificant location plays towards Mason's loss of legacy with his refusal to sign the Constitution and the lack of flowers, tears, and blank stares typically held by visitors emotionally reacting to a memorial site. Drawing connections between the memorial and theories of memorialization pushes the need to study the public memory of the site through the visitor's emotional reaction and the level of knowledge they have about Mason's history.

This paper has a narrow focus, but it supports a greater memorialization concept of how the public constructs history. The George Mason Memorial, built on the National Mall in 2002, captures the accomplishments of George Mason, a Founding Father, author of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, and he refused to sign the U.S. Constitution. Identifying Mason's history and exploring the motivations and struggles of the creation of the memorial opens a conversation for public opinion regarding the memorial's physical manifestation. The height of the Jefferson Memorial, the height of the George Washington obelisk, and the beauty of the Lincoln Memorial is seen as a testament of their god-like status in American history. So, where does this leave Mason's memorial? Is he a lowly and personable figure like the rest of us, or a figure intentionally left out of the spotlight? This project answers this question by enforcing the desire to educate a historical past, to create a site for contemplation, and interpreting the layout of the George Mason Memorial. The impact made on the public is supported by the three theories of memorialization, the published newspaper and journal articles about the memorial's opening, and the reports and personal notes taken by First Regent of Gunston Hall, and Senator Charles Robb. Nationalism, individualism, and an organic or manufactured aesthetic is connected to the large picture of memorialization. I believe the public uses memorials to honor and reflect on historical figures by using legacy, individual consumption, and the maximization of public space to contemplate the design of the George Mason Memorial and the National Mall.

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