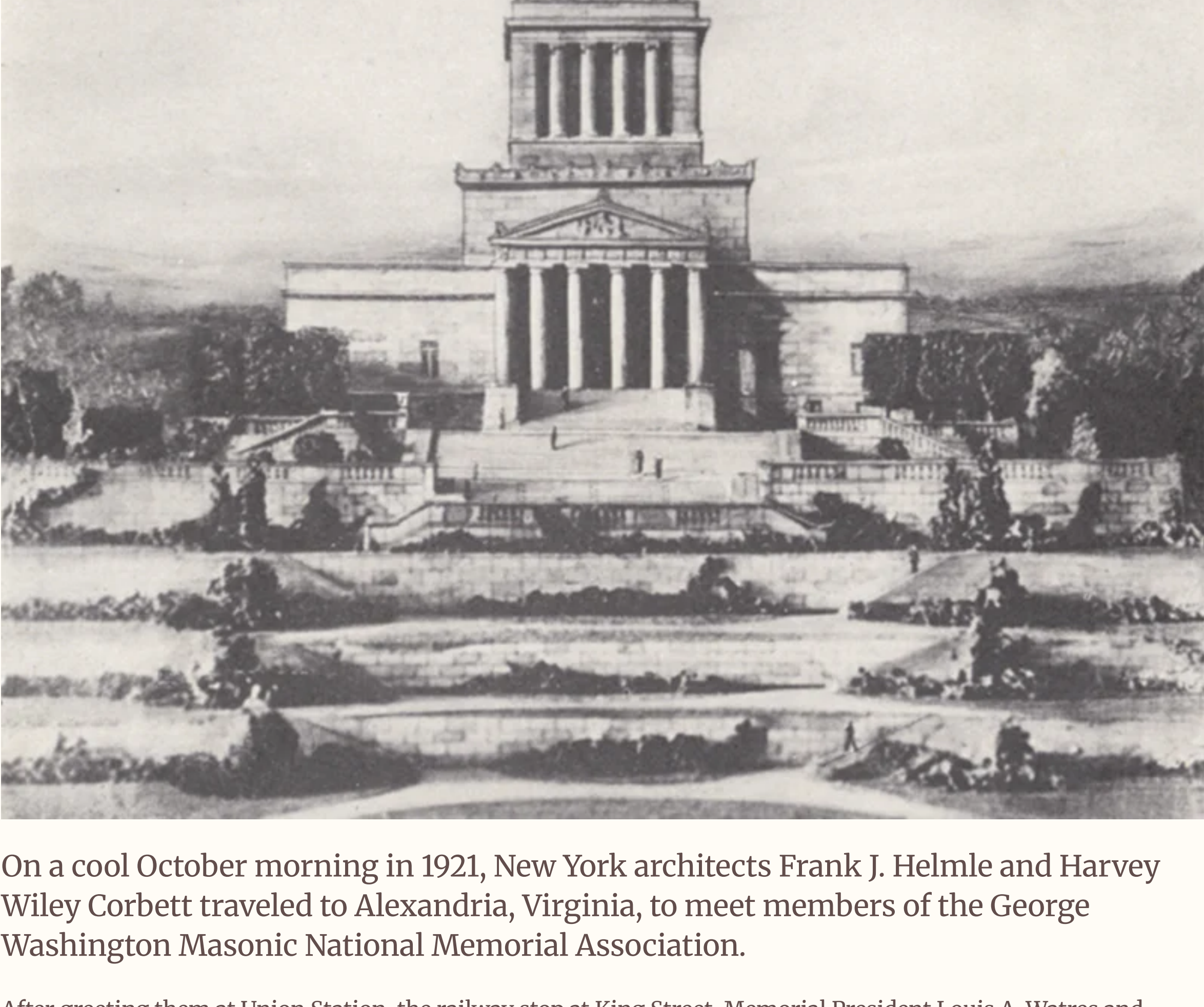




Items of Interest

The Memorial Temple: The Designer and the Design, 1920–1921

October 23, 2016



On a cool October morning in 1921, New York architects Frank J. Helmle and Harvey Wiley Corbett traveled to Alexandria, Virginia, to meet members of the George Washington Masonic National Memorial Association.

After greeting them at Union Station, the railway stop at King Street, Memorial President Louis A. Watres and Charles Callahan led the way to nearby Shuters Hill. As they walked up the grassy slope, Waters and Callahan expressed their vision for a great stone Masonic memorial temple dedicated to George Washington. Watres, a Past Grand Master of Pennsylvania, and Callahan, then Grand Senior Warden of the Grand Lodge of Virginia, peppered their conversation with many symbolic ideas that must have been new to the two architects, who were not Freemasons. The conversation must have changed to patriotic sentiments when they reached the summit. There, they beheld the Potomac River Valley stretching from the obelisk of the Washington Monument in the north, to nearby church spires of Alexandria, and then downstream toward Washington's Mount Vernon in the south.

Descending the hill, they next visited Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22's apartments and museum on the second floor of City Hall. They viewed many valuable Washington artifacts, including the silver trowel used at the 1793 cornerstone ceremony for the United States Capitol. After an enjoyable lunch, Helmle and Corbett caught an afternoon train home. Along the way, Corbett made his first sketch of the memorial temple (see page 6 of the last issue for an image of this drawing). Back at their offices, they quickly developed the sketch into design drawings. A few days later, at the October 29th meeting of the Memorial Association's Executive Committee, they presented their design.

Building a Partnership

Helmle's and Corbett's partnership began in 1912. Frank J. Helmle (1869–1939) was born in Marietta, Ohio, and studied at Cooper Union and the School of Fine Arts of the Brooklyn Museum. In 1891, after briefly working for McKim, Mead & White, he opened his own studio. Partnering with other architects, Helmle worked on many buildings in Brooklyn and Manhattan. His reputation for designing fireproof, multistory buildings may be why he and Corbett were so highly recommended to Louis Watres.

Although both Helmle and Corbett worked on the Memorial's plans, the overall design was Corbett's vision. Corbett (1873–1954) was a native Californian who graduated from the University of California and from the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. In 1900, he began his career working for Cass Gilbert (1859–1934), who had designed the Minnesota State Capitol (1895) and would design New York's Woolworth Building (1913). Corbett's first major commission was the Springfield Municipal Group in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1913 (see page 6 of the last issue of LIGHT). By 1920, he had partnered with Helmle and had built the Bush Terminal Co. buildings in New York and London.

After finishing the design for the George Washington Masonic National Memorial, Corbett would initially assist designing 30 Rockefeller Center before concentrating on the Metropolitan Life North Building in lower Manhattan. Originally designed to be a 100-story skyscraper, the onset of the Great Depression caused it to be downscaled to 32 floors. Also in the 1930s, he designed the New York City Criminal Courts Building and chaired the architecture committees for both the 1933 Chicago and 1939 New York World's Fairs.

Corbett's work is still greatly admired. He is remembered for his many step-back skyscrapers. His modernist aesthetic has influenced generations of urban planners, and his futuristic visions continue to inspire science fiction writers and movie set designers.

A Lighthouse Takes Shape

On November 26th 1921, the Memorial Association's executive committee re-convened at Helmle & Corbett's office. Consulting architect S. Eugene Osgood also attended. Together, Helmle and Corbett presented detailed drawings and a scale model of their George Washington Memorial Temple. The design incorporated elements of different classical buildings, but its basic shape was that of a lighthouse, as is fitting for a monumental structure in a port city named Alexandria. Corbett did not, however, follow the design of the ancient Egyptian lighthouse. Instead, he modeled the three-step tower on the ancient lighthouse of Ostia, the port of Rome. Each step of the tower created a smaller temple, with the top ending with a gabled roof. The three temples would employ different architectural orders: climbing up from Doric to Ionic to Corinthian.

The Memorial's broad base, or podium, had at its center a portico in the Doric order inspired by the Parthenon of Athens. As at the Acropolis, to reach the temple visitors would ascend several flights of stairs. After passing through great bronze doors, they would enter Memorial Hall and encounter a colossal statue of George Washington. The total cost to erect the Memorial was estimated at \$5 million (\$67 million in 2015 dollars).

Although the executive committee approved the design, Eugene Osgood expressed concerns and made several recommendations to reduce the size and overall cost of the construction. Between the November meeting and February 1922, Helmle and Corbett met with Osgood and Keiper, the Association's Secretary/Treasurer, to refine the design and reduce the budget. During this period, Corbett was initiated, passed, and raised a Master Mason in Sagamore Lodge No. 371, New York City.

Planning the Interior

But it would not be the external design alone that would recommend the Memorial for approval. From December 1921 to January 1922, Corbett laid out the internal floor plans. The Memorial Hall would be supported by eight Composite columns and contain a thirty foot high niche for the Washington statue. Near the entrance would be Alexandria-Washington's Replica Lodge Room, a space to permanently display many priceless Washington artifacts owned by the lodge.

He placed Masonic lodge rooms to the north and south of Memorial Hall. The south would be for the exclusive use of Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22, and the north would be available to all area and visiting Masonic bodies. The ground floor was planned for administrative offices and a large reception hall supported by massive solid granite Tuscan columns. A Roman-style theater, two stories in height, would be built to the west.

The tower floors presented many design challenges. The first issue to solve was the construction method. Helmle's expertise allowed the building to be composed of steel-reinforced concrete. Concrete would be less expensive than blocks of stones, and it would also allow for more floor space. A granite façade would protect the concrete and affirm Freemasonry's enduring principles. Corbett's design enclosed the lower two tiers, with one designated for a museum and the second a library. The top "temple" would be an open-air observation level.

“It Shall Tower Above”

The twelfth annual convention of the George Washington Masonic National Memorial Association opened on February 22, 1922. President Watres called the meeting to order, with Grand Masters of most American jurisdictions present. Harvey Wiley Corbett unveiled a scale model of the building and grounds of the proposed Memorial. The attendees were invited to examine the model and ask questions, then and during the luncheon break.

Prior to recessing for refreshment, President Watres spoke:

It was our beloved [President & Brother] McKinley who said, “Every monument to Washington is a monument to patriotism.”

Our monument to Washington will be that, but it will be more than that. As it shall stand in its beauty and majesty on the banks of the Potomac, it will emphasize, because Washington subscribed thereto, the basic teachings of Freemasonry, to wit, the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man.

As it shall rise above its beautiful environment on King's Highway and in plain sight of the Nation's Capital, it will eloquently speak of the fundamental principles of our fraternity, principles upon which our government is founded—Liberty, Justice, Equality.

As it shall tower above the City of Alexandria, and in view of historic Mount Vernon, it will bring to mind another of our tenets, the immortality of the soul.

Reconvening at 1:30 p.m., Corbett addressed the assembly and answered a few last questions. On a motion by Cooper H. Prickitt, Past Grand Master of New Jersey, the Association unanimously voted to approve the model and plans in principle. It had been just four and a half months since the Executive Committee had first set foot in Helmle & Corbett's office.

A million details and several million dollars stood between the groundbreaking and the dedication, but with the blessings of Deity, and the fixed and steady purpose of Louis Watres and Charles Callahan, the Freemasons of America had designs upon the tracing board.

The 1922 convention adjourned. The assembled brethren then “made a pilgrimage to Mount Vernon and there placed a wreath of flowers on the tomb of Brother George Washington.”

Mark A. Tabbert is the Director of Archives & Exhibits of The George Washington Masonic National Memorial Association.

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