

The History of Memorials

Kathleen Dory & MaryAnn Ruggiero
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Professor Catherine Lavender
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Traditional Memorial

C.O. George Motchan Corner



Spontaneous Memorial

Angels Circle



According to The New Oxford Dictionary of English, a memorial is “something, especially a structure, established to remind people of a person or event”.¹ The past is not “Preserved” but is “Socially Constructed” through archives, museums, monuments, school curricula, and public displays.² What happens in the past is continuously being reconstructed in the context of the present. Every one of us encounters certain “markers” of the past that help us remember and give meaning to our lives. Graves, cemeteries, monuments, and religious places of worship are all examples of such “markers”. “A memorial may be a day, a conference, or a space, but it need not be a monument. A monument, on the other hand, is always a kind of memorial”.³ Memorials focus on certain people or events and the place that a memorial is constructed is just as important as the people or events themselves. Memorials become landmarks that provide a symbolic place for remembrance. If a memorial is placed at the town’s center, the importance of its memory becomes very clear.

We are all aware of what a memorial is. In writing this paper, however, we were interested in researching the history of memorials. Specifically, we were determined to understand why memorials were first constructed and which people or events they were built in honor of? From which we are aware, the earliest existence of a memorial in the United States dates back to the times of the Civil War (1861-1865). In the North and South during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries numerous monuments were dedicated in big cities and in small towns. These monuments were designed to keep the memories of martial sacrifice alive, and to give meaning to the great loss that still resonated in

our culture.⁵ “Statue-mania”, or the rage for commemorative statues, peaked in 1870-1914 throughout Europe and North America. The construction of all of these memorials attained social and political roles that had not been seen since the days of the Roman Empire. Monuments allowed for “collective remembering” in sites that acted as a place of common memory.⁶

Those being remembered and honored in such memorials were the many soldiers who lost their lives in battle. They were the Heroic figures of combat and became the symbols of rights and liberties. By constructing a monument to these heroes, our nation represented a connection to the importance of the past. It gave the nation a visual memory of what had happened. These commemorations are intimately tied to the feeling of nationalism and heroic symbolism; they can also instill a sense of community.

Wolfgang Braunfels, who wrote about the designing of monuments, feels that they cannot be built for strangers. This means that history cannot be planned in advance. The monument should represent the accomplishments of the person or persons who have perished. Braunfels feels that a monument should be clear and simple. It should portray the quality of “touching the heavens”. It should be well constructed and built for the ages. He feels it should have no other purpose but than being a vehicle of ideas. Most of all, it should fill people with admiration and awe.⁷

Monuments can last forever but sometimes be the sites of arguments between the laws of physics, social change, and human psychology. These structures wherever they may be placed remain a fixed point both to the physical

as well as the experience or feeling of the surrounding landscape. Monuments attempt to mold a landscape of a combined memory to preserve what is worth remembering and eliminating the rest. In their own way, monuments stop time. They seem to have longevity and power, but its meaning is not really everlasting. A monument and its significance are constructed in a particular time and place; it covers one historical moment in time.⁸

Ultimately, the witnesses to these commemorations, the workers on these sites, are ordinary people that come to visit the memorials and place flowers, wreaths, notes, or words of endearment, etc. The officials or soldiers who attend or perform at these official ceremonies are usually in the same position as those who have been killed and whose remains lie under the feet of the witnesses. These heroes paid a high price; they gave their life.⁹ The commemoration or monument constructed for them only represent their silenced “voices”.

Memorials, whether the headstone of a grave, preservation of a battlesite, or the construction of a building all marks themselves in our consciousness. The knowledge of its existence and the meaning behind its existence are all that is required for its presence. History and memorials affect us both actively and passively.

In developing monuments and memorials, you come to the point of making a transformation from learning to creating. One has to remember what audience they are going to try to reach with this memorial. What point of view will it assume? Are these monuments and memorials passageways to history or

are they expressions of social, political and psychological crucial moments in time? Maybe it is possible to cater to all these needs.

The two most common memorials are Spontaneous and Traditional. Spontaneous memorials are a first reaction to the unanticipated and violent loss of life. They can be the limited, personal expression of the family and friends who placed flowers, candles, stuffed animals, and notes on a tree by the roadside where a fatal accident occurred. In the case of September 11th, spontaneous memorials grew in thousands of places at the same time. It seems that the unfortunate event of September 11th united most of the free world. Spontaneous memorials are not commissioned, planned by a committee, or directed by a government. They just seem to evolve spontaneously in response to the public's needs.

Spontaneous memorials were a definite major part of the public response to the 9/11 attack. What are spontaneous memorials? Who creates them? What symbols do they use? What psychological or religious needs do they seem to answer? How do they fit into the history of rituals and practices relating to grief and mourning?

A Spontaneous memorial may create "A Community of Bereavement " or transform public areas into "Sacred Spaces". This may be a response to changed attitudes toward death and cemeteries. Later in this paper we will discuss "Angels Circle", a spontaneous memorial that originated from the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

Traditional monuments move through a much more formal process of creation in the search for something everlasting. They involve the raising of funds, the forming of committees, and the selecting of designs with regard to architecture. Traditional monuments might refer to an artistic appeal to a particular time period. There are monuments that relate to war. These traditional monuments not only represent an artistic appeal but they could possibly have a deeper meaning with regard to what they were made of and how they were made. Traditional monuments involve the role of the individual in society and their defining element is the underlying beliefs that these monuments represent.

Simply, these traditional monuments suggest that the individual's character, honesty, as well as ones unselfish contribution to society can make a difference and are worthy of this memorial. Traditional monuments also involve progress. These particular monuments celebrate inventors and inventions that help make society and the world a better place to be. These traditional monuments do not limit on meaning. They carry a message that we hope will carry on with future audiences.¹⁰

My father has received many Traditional Memorials from the New York City Department of Correction for being a hero. I will briefly try to explain why this man was honored in so many ways.

On September 9, 1975 my life was forever changed. An escaping prisoner shot correction Officer, George Motchan, my dad, in the line of duty. On September 15, 1975 he died, because of the injury. He was the first officer killed in the line of duty in over two and one half decades. When he was alive, he

touched many people's lives. He is forever remembered in the hearts of his loved ones and co-workers every day. Because of the Department of Corrections honoring him with Traditional Memorials, George Motchan's name continues to live on with honor.

Just to tell you a little about this "hero" of mine, my dad: He may have looked like your average man, but inside you would find a man with extraordinary qualities. He had a charismatic personality. He was a good friend to whoever he met. If you were lucky enough to meet and speak to him, you would remember him forever. He left a lasting impression with people. His treatment of people was always fair. Maybe it was his sincere smile, his stature or his thoughtfulness. Maybe it could have been his wit. Whatever the case may have been, people truly loved this wonderful man and were drawn to him.

When the Verrazano Bridge was first built, my family was one of the many Brooklynites to move to Staten Island. My dad was so excited about the move. He felt he was providing his family a home in a country surrounding. He was so proud to be a "Staten Islander".

On September 9, 1975, my dad went into work and worked the 12x8 shift. The night had been quiet. He was about just about to leave work and go home, when one of the officers working the 8x4 day shift needed to take off. My dad, being himself, volunteered to work that shift for him. My father was working with his steady partner, Correction Officer Joseph Connors. Their assignment was to escort the inmate, Joseph James to Kings County Hospital to care for his teeth. During their visit to the hospital, Inmate James asked to be taken to the

bathroom. Unfortunately, what both officers did not know was that James's girlfriend had planted a gun in the bathroom toilet tank. When the inmate asked to go to the bathroom, my dad escorted him in. My father had no weapon, however, Officer Connors did. It was standard procedure for one officer to be armed and the other with the prisoner to be unarmed. James came out of the bathroom stall with the gun pointed at my dad. He told my dad to call his partner into the bathroom. My dad did call his partner into the bathroom. As Officer Connors was opening the door, my dad quickly pushed it shut and yelled "Joe, he has a gun". My father was able to get off a warning; seconds before the bullets severed his spine, causing him to fall to the floor lifeless. Thinking my father was dead; James then fired a shot through the wall striking an innocent female patient. He pulled open the door and shot Officer Connors. James then tried to shoot Connors in the face. God must have been watching because the gun misfired. James then ran out of the hospital to a car his girlfriend was waiting in. Six days after his escape, James was recaptured. It was the very same day my dad died.

The Motchan Family now lacks a husband, a father, grandfather, and friend. All they have are the memories of a man who wanted to help everyone. We believe that his soul is somewhere helping someone right now.

On July 12, 1978, nearly three years after dad died, my family, friends, and fellow officers gathered on Rikers Island to see the unveiling of the street named after him, "Motchan Drive". The Department Honor Guard stood at attention under a warm midday sun and the firing detail saluted with three

volleys. A trumpeter played Taps while the gathering of over two hundred people paid silent tribute to “my hero” Commissioner Ciuros, said, “Nothing that we do or say will fill the emptiness that his family, friends and fellow officers feel. “But there is solace in the memory of his courage and goodness and in the knowledge that the example of his actions make us more thoughtful, diligent, and proud to be New York City Correction Officers” Peter Tufo, the Chairman of the New York City Board of Corrections also said, “George Motchan unselfishly demonstrated the Correction Officer’s dedication to preserving public safety and order in New York City. In dedicating this drive on Rikers Island to George Motchan, we are recognizing not only his heroic efforts but also recognizing through his example the heroic efforts of the City.” This memorial was the first of its kind and we felt so honored to be a part of it. Our family finds this situation difficult to explain; one day we were a typical nuclear family, and the next, we were “famous” due to the selfless efforts of our father/husband.

Eleven years later, on June 12, 1989, we were welcomed back to Rikers Island for the unveiling of a bronze plaque mounted near the entrance of building C-73. The beautiful plaque reads, in part “This facility is dedicated to the memory of Correction Officer George Motchan who valiantly gave his life in the line of duty”. There were hundreds of people at this special event. I remember it like it was yesterday. Bagpipes played as I headed to my seat in the front row. I felt so proud to be the daughter of this fine man as such admirable words were spoken of my father. I was truly honored when I noticed the letters “GDMC” in large blue letters on the huge building. All the Correction Officers who worked in

that building also wore “GMDC” on their collars. GDMC stands for “George Motchan Detention Center”. I remember saying to myself, “Wow, that’s my father’s building!” His name was everywhere. “George Motchan Detention Center” was even written in big bold orange and blue letters at the entrance to the building. Then tears came to my eyes when I saw his picture and name posted on the wall; this time his name was written in Big Gold letters. There are no words to explain the feelings I felt. My family and I were truly honored with this great tribute.

In mid-May 1998, a ceremony was held in Washington D.C. marking the inscription of additional names on the National Law Officers Memorial wall. At that time, my dad’s name was added to this Memorial Wall. Designed by Davis Buckley, the Traditional Memorial sits on three acres of Federal Park land called Judiciary Square at E Street between 4th and 5th Streets NW. The site has served for some 200 years as the seat of the nation’s judicial branch of government. Plush carpets of grass, nearly 60,000 plants and 128 trees decorate the grounds. In April, some 15,000 orange and yellow daffodils make the site one of Washington D.C.’s most spectacular attractions. Bordering the beautifully landscaped park are tree-lined “pathways of remembrance” where the names of the fallen officers are engraved. We are so proud to have my dad’s name included on The National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Wall. This wall was dedicated back in 1991 by then President George Bush. The wall honors all of America’s federal, state and local law enforcers. On the blue-gray

marble walls are the names of more than 14,000 officers killed in the line of duty, dating back to the first known death in 1794. ¹¹

On July 6, 2001, the Correction Department once again honored my dad with another Traditional Memorial. Within the "GMDC" building, a renovated auditorium was dedicated in my dad's name. They called this the "George Motchan Ceremonial Hall". Along with the dedication of the hall, we all saw a Promotion Ceremony take place. It was beautiful to see. My mother had the honor of cutting the ribbon, which signified the opening of the new auditorium. In the auditorium there was a plaque which read, "Correction Officer, George Motchan 1930-1975, A True Hero. A Noble and Humble Man, An Outstanding Officer, Who Laid Down His Life In the Line of Duty". In the program, there was a short story about what happened to my dad. It also said how highly respected my dad was. It also said how everyone who had the personal and professional pleasure to work alongside of him misses him.

On October 4, 2002, once again the Department of Corrections asked my family to join them in another Traditional Memorial. This time it was in the Meier's Corner section of Staten Island. Outside our family's church (St. Rita's), at the intersection of Bradley Avenue and Westwood Ave, a new street sign reads, "C.O. George Motchan Corner".

Ed Connors, who is a Correction Officer and a fellow St. Rita's parishioner, is the one who is most responsible for getting this traditional memorial established. (He has no relations to my father's partner Officer Joseph Connors) At the time C.O. Ed Connors initiated the idea of this street corner

naming, he was a stranger to our family. He recognized my family's picture from an article, which was written, about a prior memorial in my father's honor. Being a Staten Islander himself, he thought it would be wonderful for our family to have a memorial right here on Staten Island where we would always be able to see it. In addition to hard work to make the street naming occur, Officer Connors also arranged to have the St. Rita's school children present at the dedication so that they too would always memorialize my father. It was so nice to see these innocent young children learn about the history of the man of whom this street corner was named. Once a stranger, Officer Connors is now a family friend and we are very grateful for his determination to make this happen. His intentions of having this memorial placed on Staten Island, near our family church, was done so for my family's sake; he wanted us to have a place close to home where we could most appreciate it. I don't believe he is aware of the true importance it holds in my heart. It is true that my family is able to appreciate this memorial everyday, but to me, it's real significance lies in the fact that my father was so happy to be a Staten Islander. Although he only lived on this great island for 8 years, he will forever be a part of it, thanks to Ed.

At the street naming ceremony, bagpipers played and over one hundred Correction Officers were also in attendance. So many times, I wanted to express to the Department of Correction our thanks. At all the other memorials, I wanted to get up and thank the Department of Correction for all their memorials but couldn't. This time, I did it. I expressed how thankful we were that they continue to honor my father even after 27 years. Wow. We are so grateful for all

the wonderful dedications; however, this one will definitely have the greatest impact on my family. I went on to explain how this memorial is practically in our own backyard, right beside our family's church. We'll see it every single day. Now all of our friends and family will also have the opportunity to experience those tremendous feelings that we have encountered on a daily basis.

To some, it is just a street sign on a pole. Hundreds of cars pass it every day not knowing who C.O. George Motchan was. To us, this little sign is a huge reminder and memorial honoring my father. After receiving so many wonderful memorials from the Department of Correction because of my dad's heroism, this one is the most heartfelt.

Because of my dad's heroism, the department of Correction honored him by creating so many wonderful tributes and memorials in his honor and memory. There is not a day that goes by that I am not filled with pride. These Traditional Memorials enable me to remember, pray as well as mourn in my own way and I am truly appreciative of that.

On Staten Island, we also have examples of have another type of memorial. It is a Spontaneous Memorial created in the honor and memory of all the fallen heroes who perished on that unforgettable day September 11th, 2001. This memorial is known as "Angels Circle". It is located in Grasmere at one of the busiest intersections between the corner of Fingerboard Road and Hylan Blvd. This small parcel of land was nothing more than a dusty traffic island.

Prior to September 11th, plans were underway to turn the piece of land into a Greenstreets site. The Parks Departments' Greenstreets program replaces

concrete asphalt medians and triangles with decorative trees, shrubs and flowers. The program has beautified about one hundred fifty sites throughout this borough, and about forty locations are added each year.

The birth of this memorial took place several nights following the attack at 3:00am one sleepless night for Wendy Pellegrino. When she could no longer sleep she went into her garage to make a sign. This simple sign read, "God Bless our Heroes". This was a tribute to the firefighters who would not be returning home. This was the unofficial birth of Angels Circle. She simply walked a few steps to the intersection and placed the sign along with several American flags and candles. When finally the report came out that Rescue 5 lost eleven men, more American flags were added totaling eleven. Wendy Pellegrino wrote a letter to the Staten Island Advance telling them there was this piece of property that she wanted to turn into a memorial. She eventually contacted the Parks Department and signed papers for stewardship of the property.; therefore, she could maintain it. Along with Wendy Pellegrino there are other people who have become so involved in this project. The first picture to be placed on this property was that of Michael Cammaratta, the youngest firefighter to have died. Wendy went to Rescue 5 to get a listing of all the men. She passed a flier around the community for all of the children to paint pumpkins, and put the names of the person they lost or knew, and place it in the circle. They did just that.

In a short time people began arriving at this roadside site placing candles, flags, and other special remembrances of their loved ones. Spontaneously, this

became a homemade memorial, an outpouring of love to all the innocent people lost on that tragic day. This was to be a simple monument, however, this definitely turned into more than that. It turned into a cemetery where it is thought to be a sacred ground. A Vatican Priest has blessed and declared it sacred ground.

As time went on numerous people became aware of the importance of the serene area that has become a testimonial site. Every night some four hundred candles were lit. This light shined through no matter what prevailing weather conditions existed; this included rain sleet and snow. There were numerous volunteers who took part in this ritual each and every night. This tedious task of love could take up to two hours of work to light the candles and they were only to be found blown out on windy nights. There had to be a better solution to all of this.

A local school, St. Joseph Hill Academy was asked to do a fundraiser for lanterns. Some sixty-five lanterns were donated in the name of Carl Bini, a lost firefighter. "Angels Circle" was decorated for the first Thanksgiving in hope to make it a more comfortable, and bearable place for visiting your loved ones. Christmas was not too far behind. A tree was placed where people could come and hang angels. Why these Angels? Wendy, the creator of this spontaneous memorial, felt that that when all people died, they became angels. Therefore that is why this place is known as Angels Circle; it is a circle of love.

Two beautiful 2¹/₂ foot tall Guardian Angels were donated by a local business. They grace the entrance to this shrine. Pictures of the deceased

family members were placed, eventually only to be ruined by the weather. The photographs had to be “lasered” onto metal to be weatherproof. More pictures are continuously being sent along with the addition of new candles being added. Charms, statues, and other reminders rest underneath photos of the departed.

Most of the money from the site has come from local donations. Families pay \$100 a year for candles and \$40 for the laser engraving. The children of St. John Villa, a nearby school donated \$200 dollars that was used to purchase three stone benches. The family members and friends who come to visit use these benches. There isn't a time in the day or night when there isn't someone visiting Angels Circle.

People have come from all over to visit Angels Circle. Buses have come from Boston, Michigan, and Connecticut. This memorial has been heard of in places as far as Japan. Angels Circle is a gathering place. It is a place where many stories have been exchanged and a place where everyone can share in their feelings of loss. Here is where one common thread can be shared by all that mourn.

With the changes of the seasons and the merriment of holidays there is the constant changing of decorations. From Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Valentine's Day, Easter and the Fourth of July one can feel that their beloved departed can too be part of each celebration.¹²

I have to thank God that I myself or my family wasn't personally involved in that tragic day. However, all of America was effected in some way. The reason for my special interest in this Angels Circle is that much of the donations

of flowers, shrubs and trees came from where my husband had worked for the past ten years. It was my husband who was approached by Wendy Pellegrino for some sort of donation. He was the one who suggested the Guardian Angel to be donated to the cause. Who knew what this all would have started? Over the past two years I have met many of the family members who came to this local business.

For all of the time, dedication, and hard work Wendy Pellegrino has given to the Angels Circle, she has recently received a very special award. She was honored with the Women of Achievement Award 2003. Knowing the person that Mrs. Pellegrino is, she was very touched by this honoring of her.

Staten Island is made up of many close knit communities; it is a borough comprised of people from all nationalities, and various economic and religious backgrounds who have bonded together to express their thanks and love to the many fallen heroes. Losing a family member or someone that is close is a heart-wrenching situation that no one intentionally chooses to go through. These tributes or memorials, whether they are Traditional or Spontaneous, create a common area of testament. It is here that anyone, whether family members or visitors from other countries, can come to mourn, remember, honor, or view on common ground. Memorials pay tribute to our heroes and all that are honored; they become shrines showing that our heroes never died in vain.

Endnotes

- ¹ The New Oxford Dictionary of English, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p.1155
- ² Brian S. Osbourne, "Landscapes, Memory, Monuments, and Commemoration: Putting Identity in Its Place", Queen's University, November 12, 2001, p. 9.
- ³ Sanford Levinson, Written In Stone: Public Monuments in Changing Societies (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 251.
- ⁴ Brian S. Osbourne, "Landscapes, Memory, Monuments, and Commemoration: Putting Identity in Its Place", Queen's University, November 12, 2001, p. 11-12.
- ⁵ Sanford Levinson, Written In Stone: Public Monuments in Changing Societies (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 249.
- ⁶ Brian S. Osbourne, "Landscapes, Memory, Monuments, and Commemoration: Putting Identity in Its Place", Queen's University, November 12, 2001, p. 15.
- ⁷ Brian S. Osbourne, "Landscapes, Memory, Monuments, and Commemoration: Putting Identity in Its Place", Queen's University, November 12, 2001, p. 16.
- ⁸ Brian S. Osbourne, "Landscapes, Memory, Monuments, and Commemoration: Putting Identity in Its Place", Queen's University, November 12, 2001, p. 19.
- ⁹ Gerald Sider and Gavin Smith, Between History and Histories: The Making of Silences and Commemorations (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 176.
- ¹⁰ "Facing History and Ourselves", website,
<http://www.facinghistory.org/facing/fhao2.nsf/all/memorials+map?Opendocument>
- ¹¹ "The Continuing Story of Correction Officer George Motchan", website,
<http://www.correctionhistory.org/html/chronicl/motchan/motchantoc.html>
- ¹² Staten Island Advance – various articles, no dates available.

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