

CHAPTER IV
CONSTRUCTION 1923-1926

At a special meeting, April 27, 1923, the Board of Governors of the Liberty Memorial Association gave approval to H. Van Buren Magonigle's drawings and specifications for the shaft, two buildings, the north wall, and memorial court with steps descending to east and west.¹ The City Plan Commission gave their approval on May 10, 1923, when J. C. Nichols, representing the Liberty Memorial Association, appeared before them to present the final plans.² Earlier, tentative plans presented by George E. Kessler, their consultant, had received general approval by the Commission.

The Liberty Memorial consisted of four major elements.³ The chief element was the Shaft, the "memorial proper." Its dimensions, thirty-six feet in diameter at the base, twenty-eight feet at the top and 217 feet, six inches high, were actually those of a tower. This great cylinder was faceted, not "with shallow flutings" but "four buttresses and four round piers [to] soar aloft" to the Altar of Sacrifice which was encircled by four Guardian Spirits: Honor with a

¹"Minutes," 525-526.

²Ibid., 644.

³H. Van Buren Magonigle's Chapter, "Description of the Memorial," in The Liberty Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri, ed. J. E. McPherson, (Kansas City: Liberty Memorial Association, 1929), 25-37, was sent by Magonigle to Liberty Memorial Association President George S. Carkener with a letter dated 23 January 1928.

laurel wreath, helmeted Courage, Sacrifice with a winged star on her forehead and Patriotism with a civic crown. The monumental figures, who seemed to lift aloft the bowl of the censer on the tips of their wings, were the work of Robert Aitken. Magonigle likened the figures to the portal sculptures of the Cathedral of Chartres.⁴

The Shaft was designed to contain an elevator and staircase giving access to the lookout platform around the rim of the censer. The architect pointed out the "curved outline [of the shaft] known to the Greeks as 'entasis.'" The bronze work of the shaft entrance door on the north side and all other bronze work was from the architect's drawings and under his direction, modelled by Angelo Tagliabue for John Donnelly, Inc. and cast and finished by John Polachek. The flame effect at the top of the shaft was to be produced by the light from "four banks of powerful flood lights placed two and two on the memorial buildings" against steam, "so that the altar seems to float in the night sky."⁵

According to Mr. Magonigle, the element second in importance was "a great Frieze to be carved on the North Terrace Wall bounding the Memorial Court."⁶ The top of the North Terrace Wall, Magonigle pointed out, curved upward so that the center of the resulting arc was one foot higher than the ends giving it "spring and life despite its

⁴J. E. McPherson, ed., The Liberty Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri (Kansas City: Liberty Memorial Association, 1929), 25.

⁵Ibid., 27.

⁶Ibid., 25. Magonigle's words in his letter to Carkener, 23 January 1928, ". . . depicting the Progress of Civilization toward Peace," had been omitted.

enormous mass." Also, the paving of Memorial Court and coping stones of the buildings were designed with such a "spring." Another "architectural refinement" was that all walls including the buildings and pedestals for the sphinxes would incline backward one inch in eight feet.⁷

The third and fourth elements of the Liberty Memorial in the architect's description were "the small buildings" to the east and west of the Shaft, Memory Hall,⁸ and a Museum. On both sides of these buildings were flights of steps, monumental in scale twenty-four feet wide. It must be remembered that at the time of Mr. Magonigle's writing of this description, December 1927-January 1928, he apparently anticipated that the Frieze designed by his wife would be used. Perhaps it was for that reason that such emphasis was placed on the Frieze and that the two buildings seemed to have been minimized.

On the south, the entrance to the court was guarded by two colossal sphinx-like figures (32'x15'x15') typifying Memory (facing east toward Flanders Fields) and hooded Future (facing west where "the course of empire takes its way"). Both of these giants covered their faces with wings.⁹

⁷Ibid., 36.

⁸The east building was officially named Memory Hall, (instead of Legion Building), 24 February 1925. "Minutes," 845.

⁹Although those who modelled, cast, and finished the Memorial's bronze work were named, architect-artist Edgar F. Bircsak in Magonigle's office, who had been much involved in the creation of the sphinxes, remained anonymous. From Bircsak's sister, Thusnelda A. Bircsak, in the 1930s and confirmed, spring 1986.

Bircsak, originally a Kansas Citian, graduated in 1922 from the

The Memorial buildings, in plan, were each to be 46 x 93 feet. In Memory Hall on the east, the names of the Kansas Citians who had died in service were listed on four bronze tablets. In essence, it was a spacious meeting room for the Liberty Memorial Association itself and patriotic and veterans organizations, one story high with a partial basement for coat rooms and storage.¹⁰ The building on the west, the Museum, originally "conceived as primarily a flag shrine," was to have a basement to store relics and a sub-basement for the heating plant, a steam generating boiler for the flame at the top of the shaft and electrical equipment.¹¹

Although the official 1929 Liberty Memorial history stated that construction had begun July 5, 1923, midsummer progress had come to a standstill two months later when geologic problems brought work to a halt. A report on the site soil conditions from Hool and Johnson, September 12, 1923, called for changes in footings and structure. The report stated that the site was not a "hill of rock" as it had appeared but was composed of "honeycombed and grottoed rock and muddy clay," the result of ancient glaciers.¹² In spite of this, the report

University of Kansas School of Engineering with a degree in Architecture. It was he who drew the pictorial end paper maps for Magonigle's The Nature, Practice and History of Art (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1924).

¹⁰McPherson, ed., The Liberty Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri, 28-30.

¹¹Ibid., 31-34.

In addition, an access drive concealed the plantings and walls permitted direct, exterior service access to the lower level.

¹²"Minutes," 736.

said there was indeed a firm and dependable "Calico Ledge." However, utilization of the Calico Ledge would require that "additional moneys must be expended" and a new procedure had to be devised.¹³

A method referred to as the "new five foot cylinder plan" to provide stable footing plus allowing work into the winter was recommended by the New York engineers. The Liberty Memorial Association Board of Governors ordered discontinuation of all work until costs and a complete solution to these geological problems was known.¹⁴ A letter from Magonigle, November 1, 1923, spelled out recommendations. The shaft was:

to rest on the Calico Ledge, the foundation to have a diameter of 43 feet, which is that of the present excavation, protecting the shale between the Sandwich Ledge and the Calico Ledge by omitting the forms against the shale and letting the concrete fill all irregularities in the excavation.¹⁵

As for the Museum Building:

To carry this building on 5-foot cylinders thruout, to go to the Calico Ledge like those already in place.¹⁶

Recommended for the Legion Building (later designated Memory Hall) were similar instructions:

If necessary . . . to sink 5-foot cylinders to the Calico Ledge . . . the design of columns, bracing beams, etc., above ground to be adjusted as most economical according to the type of footing found necessary.¹⁷

An additional cost of \$17,705.00 was estimated. Differences in cost from original estimates plus the costly delays contributed to the uneasiness of some of the Board members. It is not hard to understand

¹³Ibid., 737.

¹⁴Ibid., 743.

¹⁵Ibid., 752-753.

¹⁶Ibid., 752.

¹⁷Ibid.

the frustration of Vice Chairman, J. C. Nichols, December 14, 1923, when he spoke of "overhead expenses increasing alarmingly."¹⁸

On January 18, 1924, actual construction began on the Liberty Memorial at 12:30 when "a stream of concrete was poured into the base of a well-like excavation fifty feet below the surface."¹⁹ The base for the shaft was to be six feet deep and forty-three feet in diameter. A newspaper headline read: "Reshaping Memorial Hill in Preparation for Liberty Memorial Legion and Museum Buildings." The accompanying article explained that this winter work was to be entirely preparatory for the structures which would be "slowly" taking shape.²⁰

By means of numerous newspaper photographs and articles Kansas Citians followed Liberty Memorial progress:

For months nothing tangible . . . [There were] months of soil tests, of excavating, of pouring the massive concrete block fifty feet below the earth's surface . . . [finally a] huge wall 488 feet long arises above the Station . . . reaching a stage where a layman's eye can measure its purpose.²¹

Headlines noted that "Toilers on the Great Pyramid Outshone by Kansas City Workers" and "Giant Steel Arms Place Slabs in Memorial Walls."²² The work was presented as the biggest, most exciting thing ever in their town. There was a sense of personal accomplishment

¹⁸Ibid., 782.

¹⁹Kansas City Star, 8 January 1924; Kansas City Times, 9 January 1924.

²⁰Kansas City Star, 9 December 1923.

²¹Kansas City Star, 20 April 1924.

²²Kansas City Journal-Post, 15 June 1924.

when,

. . . 160 men are at work . . . pouring 16,000 cubic yards of concrete, setting 115,000 cubic feet of stone and erecting 1,000,000 feet of wooden forms and scaffolds in a year and a half. . . . The tower that will dominate the center of the plaza has begun to shoot into the sky at the rate of five feet a day.²³

The work which was going so well in June 1924, came to a halt in July with the first of strikes resulting from inter-union disputes.²⁴ The initial strike was called by the Kansas City Building Trades Council in an effort to force the Westlake Construction Company of St. Louis, which had the contract, to employ members of their newly sanctioned carpenters' union.²⁵ At first, carpenters from the old union worked, but then, "the jurisdictional fight" brought all construction work to a standstill.²⁶ Westlake superintendent, Tom Mitchell, maintained that the new carpenters' union was a local one and not one recognized by the national organization. He said that carpenters on Westlake jobs elsewhere would walk out if he were to hire men from Kansas City's new union.²⁷

When R. A. Long sought help from Samuel Gompers,²⁸ the President of the American Federation of Labor replied that "unions are guaranteed complete self-government and authority."²⁹ At last, an announcement came in the Kansas City Star on August 9, 1924, that an

²³Ibid. ²⁴Kansas City Star, 2 July 1924.

²⁵Ibid. ²⁶Kansas City Times, 8 July 1924.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Samuel Gompers was the first president of the American Federation of Labor. R. A. Long to S. Gompers, 8 August 1924.

²⁹S. Gompers to R. A. Long, 26 August 1924.

agreement had been reached between the Westlake Construction Company and the carpenters who had been virtually idle since July 1. When strikes had halted work, hundreds called the Labor Temple to protest, as the Kansas City Star, 23 June 1924, put it, that "the site selected for a manifestation of patriotism" should be a labor dispute "battle-ground."

Newspaper articles reflected enthusiastic civic pride in the growing monument and saw it as really "putting Kansas City on the map!"

[It] will make [Kansas] City known all over the world . . . Heart of America will be famous for its perpetual beacon on a lofty column as ancient cities have been known in history for their beautiful monuments . . . a living memory to the thousands of travelers who pass through the Union Station.³⁰

The bigness of their Memorial fascinated the public—especially the enormous amount of stone which would be required. The newspapers reported that the 238 carloads waiting in the stone yard at Twenty-third and Pennway held four thousand tons of Indiana limestone!³¹ Moreover, it had been carefully selected and when in place, it would compose "A SYMPHONY OF STONE."

H. Van Buren Magonigle, the architect, went to the stone quarries at Bedford, Indiana . . . spent days choosing locations for the buff and the gray stones among the white ones. . . . The whole effect when he had it worked out on paper and in practice was a blend which relieved a 1-shade monotony, yet was not spotty or discolored. "I want a rugged effect which would nevertheless not give discord," [Magonigle] said.³²

³⁰Kansas City Journal-Post, 24 August 1924.

³¹Kansas City Star, 3 September 1924.

³²Ibid.

Kansas City architect W. C. Root exclaimed in print, "That's going to be a stunning Wall!"³³

The environment of the Liberty Memorial, especially that area known then as "Sign Hill" and later as "Signboard Hill" became a matter of great concern. In early July, Mr. Magonigle in an interview had admonished Kansas Citians not to neglect the surroundings of their "splendid monument." He envisioned, he said,

. . . the utilization of adjacent grounds for public buildings . . . Kansas City needs a civic center. . . . New city buildings must soon be provided. . . . The worst obstruction is on the east, where the bluff on that side of [Main Street] completely defeats our purpose.³⁴

The Kansas City Star followed up the next day commenting that leaving the surroundings "all uncouth" would discredit the Memorial and Kansas City to every visitor.³⁵ Kansas Citians were concerned that their monumental jewel should have a proper setting. The subject was much in the press during the summer of the strikes. The Kansas City Star, July 29, 1924, carried:

SIGN HILL MEETING CALLED, An Association to Remove Blots Near Memorial Planned . . . Renewed impetus will be given the movement to beautify the surroundings of the Liberty Memorial. . . . Heads of many civic clubs already have given their approval to the efforts of the [American] Legion to bring the hill into harmony with the Memorial.

In spite of much support for the need to "Remove Blots Near Memorial" some Kansas Citians felt otherwise and spoke "IN DEFENSE OF

³³Kansas City Star, 30 September 1924.

³⁴Kansas City Star, 2 July 1924. Signboard Hill was the rough and ragged remnant which resulted from cutting Main Street through the hill south of the Union Station site in 1912.

³⁵Kansas City Star, 3 July 1924.

UGLY HILL."³⁶ They resented "Just Another Bonus for the American Legion" and such "Municipal millinery!"³⁷

The reasons for leaving Signboard Hill status quo for more than four decades are not clear. It may have been that "selfish interests--billboards or filling station clients"³⁸ had indeed prevailed or perhaps civic inertia simply put aside Magonigle's "A noble work of art should have no distractions."³⁹ Whatever the reason, Signboard Hill remained "uncouth" until 1968 when a redevelopment project, led by Hallmark officials, created a completely new setting. A "hotel, office buildings, retail shops and residential structures" in addition to Hallmark's structures were to give the Liberty Memorial improved surroundings.⁴⁰

* * * * *

"25,000 BOW AT MEMORIAL STONE RITUAL"⁴¹

The ceremony of laying the cornerstone on Sunday afternoon, November 9, 1924, was local in character, unlike the site dedication

³⁶Kansas City Star, 7 September 1924.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Kansas City Times, 8 September 1924.

³⁹Kansas City Star, 2 July 1924.

⁴⁰George Ehrlich, Kansas City, Missouri: An Architectural History, 1826-1976 (Kansas City, Missouri: Historic Kansas City Foundation, 1979), 155-156.

⁴¹Kansas City Journal, 9 November 1921. Although called a "cornerstone," the block of stone was actually a great curved section of the shaft's base.

which had had an international tone.⁴² The Program lists the solemn events. Following an overture of circling planes, patriotic band music, and a Boy Scout Bugle Corps, Liberty Memorial Association President R. A. Long restated the purpose of the Memorial. After an address by Brig. Gen. Harry A. Smith, Commandant at Ft. Leavenworth, messages from President Coolidge and the five military leaders who had participated in the 1921 site dedication were read. Once again, there were white-robed young women with wreaths. As Sibyl, Mrs. Albert I. Beach, wife of the mayor, released eight white doves bearing messages of peace to the four points of the compass: Washington, New Orleans, San Francisco and Duluth. According to the Program, Mr. H. Van Buren Magonigle participated with ceremonial trowel, although "actual work of laying the cornerstone will begin after Taps."

A new problem developed, over the name for the Liberty Memorial building to the east. Since the beginning, the west building had been called the Museum and the east building had been called the Legion Building. In response to their letter, November 18, 1924, a committee composed of the National President of War Mothers, the Commander of the local Post of Disabled War Veterans and three representatives of the Veterans of Foreign Wars came before the Liberty Memorial Association Board, December 1. Their contention was that the name "Legion Building . . . represented only a part of those in whose honor the Memorial is being erected . . ." and was "not sufficiently comprehensive." Among the names suggested were "Veteran Building" and

⁴²McPherson, Liberty Memorial, 1929, 13.

"Memorial Hall."⁴³

On February 24, 1925, the name "Memory Hall" was chosen.⁴⁴ This solution, however, did not satisfy the American Legion. This dissatisfaction was expressed nearly two years later when "the American Legion in Kansas City [would] withhold acceptance of the invitation . . . to take an official part in Dedication ceremonies of the Liberty Memorial (November 11, 1926)."⁴⁵ In light of the leading role played by the American Legion at the 1921 site dedication, this development was a sad reversal.

Kansas City's American Legion definitely did not like the name Memory Hall for what they considered to be their building. This was only one of their grievances. At the September 29, 1926, meeting of the Board of Governors at which the Kansas City American Legion's refusal to participate in the coming dedication was made known, a Memorandum outlining these several points of dissatisfaction was also presented. In essence, the points were: the east building should be named American Legion Building, as promised--not Memory Hall; their preamble should be placed on the building; the words, "Guests of the Third Annual Convention of the American Legion" should be added on the cornerstone, under the Allied leaders' names; demands for a dedication tablet; plus several other demands for representation, recognition and use of the building.⁴⁶

Resolution (of a sort) came shortly after the 1926 Armistice

⁴³"Minutes," 845. ⁴⁴Ibid., 849.

⁴⁵Ibid., 1209. ⁴⁶Ibid., 1209-1210.

Day dedication. The response by the Committee to Confer with the American Legion was presented at the Board meeting, November 26. Basically, it was to agree to the demands as fully as possible. However, a name change could not be made at that time but would be considered as a future possibility. The American Legion preamble would be placed as requested. The words, "Guests of the American Legion" were to be added to the cornerstone—but not "Third Annual Convention." When it was suggested that a dedication tablet could be placed on the south side of the north wall, the Legion preferred a location at the "northerly end of the oval paths" suggested by Mr. Magonigle and agreed to wait and discuss the matter with the architect. Requests for representation and recognition were also to be met.⁴⁷ The dedication tablet was installed at the Pershing Road Wall of Dedication, but not until the mid-1930s, and the name, Memory Hall, remained unchanged.

Meanwhile, as construction progressed, local newspapers kept Kansas Citians fully informed. Growth of the Memorial was thoroughly recorded pictorially and often featured in Sunday rotogravure sections. Pictures of the many processes involved gave the public close looks—for example, installation of blue tiles around two porticos and twenty-four windows.⁴⁸ From time to time Kansas Citians were treated to newspaper pictures of the New York architect. Early in February 1925, headlines declared, "Memorial Hall to be Completed by End of

⁴⁷Ibid., 1228-1229.

⁴⁸Kansas City Journal-Post, 22 March 1925.

Week."⁴⁹ Watching installation of the "Shaft Angels" during the summer must have been exciting--"The Pieces Go Together Like a Puzzle at Memorial's Crest."⁵⁰ In September, pictures of the Sphinxes "in forty-nine parts each . . . largest in modern times . . . each 615 tons" were published.⁵¹

Construction of the Liberty Memorial was indeed progressing. The time had come to answer questions left dangling between architect and owners. The basic question was money--the two million dollars, actually, \$1,600,000 to be spent in erecting the Liberty Memorial. At the meeting of the Board of Governors, May 8, 1925, J. C. Nichols was prepared to "present to this body just what we contracted to do when we decided to build the Memorial."⁵² The architect was there and he, too, was armed with a presentation which was, he said, "absolutely essential to the success of the Memorial as a whole."⁵³ Magonigle's "essential element" was the four hundred-foot "mural relief on the north terrace wall" of some five hundred figures in their "March of Civilization." The architect bore the drawing by Edith Magonigle which "represented sixty-four feet . . . [and] showed seventy-five figures," one-eighth full size.⁵⁴

There was "general discussion as to the things that were necessary to complete the Memorial." Hughes Bryant was called upon to list

⁴⁹Kansas City Journal, 8 February 1925.

⁵⁰Kansas City Star, 30 June 1925.

⁵¹Kansas City Times, 15 September 1925.

⁵²"Minutes," 858. ⁵³*Ibid.* ⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 901.

those things that had not yet been contracted for:⁵⁵

Landscape work (a large part to be used in the planting of the tree boxes).	\$2,500.00
Carving on the panels at the ends of the buildings . .	3,300.00
Mural painting	20,000.00
Decorative maps for Memory Hall	6,500.00
	<u>\$32,300.00</u>

"Any additional walls, terraces and steps on the north of the present north wall . . . [must be] left for further consideration," Mr. Nichols said. Grading and landscaping to give a proper setting would be done by the city upon completion of the Memorial proper. Mr. Nichols urged that landscaping to the south should be done immediately "on account of the proposed art museum and other buildings to be located south of the Memorial."⁵⁶ He recommended "that the Association pay one-half of the cost" between \$25,000 and \$30,000. Nichols pointed out that it would be impossible to construct Magonigle's lower walls and terraces and called for a "re-study" for the purpose "of eliminating some of the retaining walls" as well as the elimination of the circular driveway on the north. The critical question was: "whether the steps and approaches or the frieze should be done first."⁵⁷

Was Kansas City's Liberty Memorial to have its steps and approaches or the sculptural frieze? This, indeed, was the critical question, and in allowing things to come to a "one or the other" choice, the architect had lost control. Even in retrospect, it is difficult to imagine how it might have been better handled. The Board of Governors had a moral commitment to the people of Kansas City to

⁵⁵Ibid., 858.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid.

produce an acceptably complete Memorial. To the Board, the steps and approaches were essential. The frieze must have seemed an accessory. To H. Van Buren Magonigle, his professional reputation was at stake. To him, the Liberty Memorial would be incomplete without the frieze. Perhaps, if Mr. Magonigle had maintained better relations with the Board, the Kansas Citians might have made a greater effort to work out a solution to complete the steps and approaches and also the frieze. However, neither side saw fit to yield.

To the architect, it was the frieze which should come first. "It is my duty as your architect to place at your service as my client all [my] knowledge and experience . . ."58 In an effort to convince Board members that the frieze was essential, Magonigle, on May 8, 1925, spoke of the public criticisms that the memorial looked like a fortress, even a penitentiary and not like the intended "Peace Memorial."59

. . . except [that] its horizontal lines spring upward to give it life, as the Greek buildings of the best period, . . . that every stone in shape, size, color and relation . . . [was] studied with most anxious care--except for these things, the wall is now merely a big retaining wall, . . . a face without expression and without soul.

This Mural Relief and the Shaft are the two things that give meaning to the Memorial, without the Frieze, half of the significance of the design is lost.⁶⁰

The New York architect was eloquent in describing the 400-foot "Progress of Civilization Toward Peace." From east and west figures representing the ages of myth and fable, ancient civilizations,

⁵⁸Ibid., 900.

⁵⁹Ibid., 898-899.

⁶⁰Ibid., 899-901.

Medieval, Renaissance, and modern times marched toward the center where a double-winged young woman, symbolizing the Spirit of America, cradled the children of the future. Stars caught in her wings suggested our country's flag.⁶¹

Mr. Magonigle described the technical processes by saying that the frieze was to be a "drawing in stone" in dark lines and lines of light, so managed that they would receive light or cast shadows just as shown in the drawings. There would be no distortion with changing light or point of view. The procedure would be: first research and selection, then drawings to be transferred to plaster slabs for use by the stone carver.⁶² With that, Mr. Magonigle invited members of the Board to examine the drawings for themselves. Mr. Long also invited his colleagues to study the drawings.

Apparently members of the Liberty Memorial Association Board were not moved by the oratory of the architect nor the drawings by his wife. Their primary concern was the grading, approaches, and to deal with the costs involved. On that subject, Mr. Magonigle said that both he and Mr. Kessler felt that the northerly side was "an extremely important approach."⁶³ Magonigle reviewed various plans for treatment of the area north of the memorial: one he had done in 1922 with an oval drive and an earlier one by Mr. Kessler with a lower, shorter approach.⁶⁴ It was then that Magonigle, himself, suggested that

⁶¹Ibid., 902.

⁶²Ibid., 904-905.

⁶³Ibid., 941.

⁶⁴Ibid. At the Board meeting, 8 May 1925, Magonigle said that the plan known as the "Kessler plan" had been done by Mr. Kessler only "to study out the question of an approach from Pershing Road and 29th Street."

the cost of almost all the walls, terraces and steps could be saved simply by not having an automobile approach!⁶⁵

Mr. Magonigle also gave the history of the Memorial's placement by saying that the late George Kessler had asked him if he had thought of stopping the Memorial there, without the lower terraces. That had been when the architect had "pushed the whole thing back" so that "whether you were ever able to build those lower terraces and walls or not, you would always have a sightly thing."⁶⁶ He assured the Board that their minds could be completely at rest as far as expense on the north side was concerned.⁶⁷ It is evident that members of the Board of Governors, in fact Kansas Citians in general, had great respect for the late George Kessler and his ideas and apparently the New York architect was well aware of his influence, too.

At the same meeting, following lengthy discussion of the treatment of the wall and north grounds of the Liberty Memorial, the Board's attention turned to the area south of the Memorial and plans to grade it. When Magonigle commented that plans to grade the area to the south were "news" to him, J. C. Nichols was dismayed. The Liberty Memorial Association Vice President no doubt was anticipating buildings to be erected by "private generosity" when he told Magonigle that it was his duty as architect, to be informed! Now, Mr. Nichols said, they would not be prepared "to commit anyone on adjoining property."⁶⁸ Mr. Magonigle had heatedly protested that he had been instructed to

⁶⁵Ibid., 941-943.

⁶⁶Ibid., 942.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid., 944.

design only the immediate surroundings and told not to consider the area to the north and only the 150 feet south of the Liberty Memorial. Obviously, J. C. Nichols felt that their architect had not kept his part of the bargain.⁶⁹

Mid-July 1925 brought public announcement of the adoption of a modified plan for the Liberty Memorial grounds with the north end of Main street hill "sliced off" and the oval in front restricted to pedestrians. Changes made "in the interest of economy" would eliminate "the additional stone walls and approaches shown in the first scheme of H. Van Buren Magonigle."⁷⁰ Also, in the interest of economy, the Board at a special meeting, October 1, 1925, voted to eliminate the tree boxes from the buttresses and Magonigle was instructed "to re-study the design of the steps and buttresses to see if the cost of construction could not be materially reduced."⁷¹

The important matter of the Mural Painting for Memory Hall came before the Board of Governors at the same special meeting, October 1, 1925. In his report, J. C. Nichols, chairman of that committee:

recommended that a competition be held for the purpose of securing an artist to execute the Mural Painting; that three or four eminent artists be invited to compete and that those invited be paid \$500.00 each to cover expenses; that each artist submit a small painting . . . that a jury be selected to determine . . . which . . . should be awarded the contract.⁷²

The Kansas City Post had carried the names of several possible

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Kansas City Star, 14 July 1925; Kansas City Journal, 15 July 1925.

⁷¹"Minutes," 1168.

⁷²Ibid.

artists: Jules Guerin of New York; Adolphe Blondheim, Kansas City Art Institute; and L. D. (Daniel) MacMorris, a former Kansas City artist who was then in New York.⁷³ However, the choice was made without a competition. At the October 1 meeting, after "extended discussion," Mr. Nichols had withdrawn his motion. Mr. Magonigle's nomination of Jules Guerin was then accepted by the Board.⁷⁴

By January 19, 1926, Jules Guerin's sketch for the mural was ready for inspection. In general, comments were favorable. There were some suggestions but the Board of Governors agreed to abide by Guerin's decisions on the matter.⁷⁵ When the Board viewed the finished mural on May 3, 1926, they indicated satisfaction, saying that the result was a decided improvement over the preliminary sketch.⁷⁶

Jules Guerin's painting (17'x36') on the east wall of Memory Hall, facing the entrance, is dominated by the seated figure of Victory holding the staves of two billowing American flags. At Victory's right, a kneeling American soldier places a wreath on a grave while a French peasant and child watch. On her left, also beside a grave, an American sailor comforts a grieving mother. Behind these central figures under overcast skies, gray ranks of the Allied forces pass before the walls of a shattered French cathedral. The upper edge of the mural follows the shallow arch of the ceiling. A border of laurel leaves, symbol of Victory, frames the work with "1914 - IN MEMORIAM -

⁷³Kansas City Post, 17 October 1925.

⁷⁴"Minutes," 1168.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 1193.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 1200.

1918" centered at the bottom.

Mechanism to create "the cloud by day and flame by night on the altar high erected in the skies" consisted of a bronze ring for steam and floodlights to illuminate the steam. The bronze ring from which would come a sixty-foot plume of steam was about nine feet in diameter and weighed 600 pounds. Two three-inch pipes were to shoot steam from the two boilers in the basement. Three rings of floodlights would illuminate the effect.⁷⁷ The mechanism was installed on September 18, 1925.⁷⁸ When the "pillar of fire" was tested later, wind and insufficient steam pressure "had spoiled the effect."⁷⁹ Tests of the cloud and flame effect continued over the next year with varying success. In June, 1926, following a test under direction of Mr. Magonigle, headlines read, "Test Wins Approval." However, in August tests were disappointing and the headline was "Shaft 'Fire' is Elusive."⁸⁰ Just days after the dedication, at the Sixth Annual Meeting of the Liberty Memorial Association, November 16, 1926, the Building Committee was instructed to continue the cloud and flame experiments and to make their recommendations to the Board of Governors.⁸¹

⁷⁷"Kansas City Liberty Memorial," Heating and Ventilating Magazine, February 1927. The entire issue was devoted to the Memorial. A diagram showing "Plan and Section of Shaft Showing Steam Ring and Steam Supply" appeared on page 63. A copy is in the Liberty Memorial Museum Library and Archives.

⁷⁸Kansas City Star, 18 September 1925.

⁷⁹Kansas City Times, 22 October 1925.

⁸⁰Kansas City Journal, 22 June 1926 and Kansas City Times, 7 August 1926.

⁸¹"Minutes," 1226.

Over the years, the Memorial's cloud and flame effects fell somewhat short of expectations. In the deluge of newspaper articles reporting the Memorial dedication on Armistice Day 1926, a brief item was headlined "Pillar of Cloud Lapses at Kansas City Shaft." No one had told the superintendent about the "forever" part!⁸² However, the daytime cloud effect was not satisfactory and was soon given up. The nighttime pillar of flame had better success although it, too, had problems. As with the Liberty Memorial itself, the flame on its altar was at times shaped by economics. In the 1930s, because of the cost of operation, the "eternal flame" only burned from twilight to 11:30 P.M. Veterans did not like that reduction at all. The Liberty Memorial Association's Secretary and devoted spokesman, J. E. McPherson, had assured the public that as soon as additional funds were available, the nocturnal flame's hours would be extended.⁸³

Spring of 1926 saw completion of many of the numerous elements of the Liberty Memorial. Almost daily articles reported progress in Kansas City newspapers. Journalists expressed enthusiastic admiration, approaching awe, of the Memorial and its New York designer. In April, Magonigle pronounced that ornamental work by Kansas City's Walters Plastering Company was "as fine as any" he had ever seen.⁸⁴ In fact, emphasis on Kansas City contractors, suppliers, and any local

⁸²New York Telegram, 13 November 1926.

⁸³Kansas City Star, 13 January 1934. It can be observed that the nocturnal flame effect is especially striking in winter when natural vaporization heightens the effect.

⁸⁴Kansas City Journal-Post, 20 April 1926.

participation was noted attentively by the press. That so much pertaining to the Memorial's design, materials, and personnel was coming from outside of their town was a sensitive point with the Liberty Memorial Association Board of Governors and Kansas Citizens in general. Early promotion had promised that "every dollar" would be spent at home.⁸⁵ As it turned out, with architect, sculptors, artists and engineers from New York, and a general contractor from St. Louis, only part of the \$2 million stayed in Kansas City. That was a serious disappointment in some quarters.

At yet another special meeting on the matter of the sculptural frieze, June 23, 1926, there was a decision "not to consider the frieze on the north wall at this time."⁸⁶ That put-down came in spite of speeches favoring Edith Magonigle's designs by R. A. Long's pastor and the director of the Kansas City Art Institute, who had been invited guests. Mr. Long, "who had changed his mind," upon seeing the finished work, made a strong statement in favor of the drawing "so splendidly done" by Mrs. Magonigle.⁸⁷

⁸⁵Lest the Ages Forget!, Allied Charities Campaign Leaflet, [1919].

⁸⁶"Minutes," 1204.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 1203-1205. The invited guests were eloquent on behalf of Mr. Long's wish for a Memorial frieze. R. A. Holland, Director of the Kansas City Art Institute, pointed out that Mrs. Magonigle's low relief would be "splendid and appropriate." The Rev. Dr. Raphael H. Miller compared her design to the Swiss Reformers' Monument and praised its "fidelity and feeling." It would be the "greatest monument in the world," he said. John Harding, also present by invitation, felt the story of civilization would be "a gripping thing." However, the men did have some reservations about whether the frieze would be "of sufficiently heroic dimensions."

Kansas Citians could observe progress being made as the area south of the Liberty Memorial was graded. In the press, Mr. Magonigle pointed out that the "sag" in each of the roadways added "an elusive element of grace" which was not accidental.⁸⁸ Later, he explained that the surface of the south mall had "a beautiful catenary curve" with the lowest point about a third of the distance from the south point of entrance to Memorial Court.⁸⁹ He said that as the trees bordering the south mall grew, they would "conceal the two Memorial buildings."⁹⁰ As the years have passed, this has indeed occurred. Today, as one approaches the Liberty Memorial from the south, the sight of the shaft guarded by massive sphinxes is framed by foliage or the gray tracery of bare branches—a moving sight—an example of when less is more!

It was in the spring preceding the 1926 dedication that the Kansas City Art Commission, composed of William D. Wight, architect; S. Herbert Hare, landscape architect; and R. A. Holland, Kansas City Art Institute Director, recommended major changes for Liberty Memorial hill, gateway, and art center to the Park Board.⁹¹ The Kansas City Journal-Post printed a large diagram of the area entitled, "Art Commission Proposes a Civic Art Center Treatment on a Scale of Grandeur." In this plan "The Art Center Memorial and Union Station [were] placed in architectural beauty and balance." On a grand mall south of the

⁸⁸Kansas City Journal-Post, 9 May 1926.

⁸⁹McPherson, Liberty Memorial, 1929, 36.

⁹⁰Ibid., 28. ⁹¹Kansas City Star, 9 May 1926.

Liberty Memorial, monumental buildings, apparently museums and a music hall, were arranged with precise symmetry.⁹² To accomplish this impressive scheme, razing the Bruce Dodson Building to the south and the large Sweeney Building on the west would have been necessary. None of the Art Center was ever built and these two buildings still stand, refurbished in somewhat different roles.⁹³

In July 1926, the matter of landscaping was turned over to the Liberty Memorial Association Committee on Grading and Landscaping. Because the Park Department needed funds to continue the work on the hill, the Liberty Memorial Association advanced the needed \$15,454.50 in accordance with a vote which had been taken at a meeting on February 5, 1926.⁹⁴

In mid-October 1926, a series of pictorial maps showing spheres of military action was installed in Memory Hall ready for the Armistice Day dedication. Installation of the twenty-five maps (about 5' x 6' each) was overseen by their creator, the painter D. Putnam Brinley of New York. The maps, described as "medieval in artistry, modern in accuracy," had just been on exhibition in the Grand Central

⁹²Kansas City Journal-Post, 9 May 1926.

⁹³At a special board meeting, 24 September 1928, elimination of the Sweeney Building was discussed. "Minutes," 1282. On 19 December 1928 the record of the meeting three months earlier was "expunged" because of its "confidentiality." Many years later, the white classical Dodson Building was incorporated into the St. Mary's Hospital complex and sheathed in red brick. The Sweeney Automotive School Building, later named the Business Men's Assurance (BMA) Building, and later still, named the Pershing Road Building, also underwent restoration.

⁹⁴"Minutes," 1207.

Art Galleries in New York where their colorful history-telling details were much admired.⁹⁵ They were set in the walnut wainscot which encircled the spacious room. In both Memory Hall and the Museum, all the marble used was Napoleon gray and the walls "French Caen stone ground in cement of a light golden tone." The woodwork is American walnut. Both walnut and marble were products of Missouri.⁹⁶

In the Museum with its display of flags and banners, relic and memorabilia cases, and collection of war posters, the great bronze doors are an outstanding feature. (See Fig. 27) They were designed by Magonigle to fold back against the entrance wall. The doors and large bronze tablet of Old Testament inscriptions, lintel-like above them, form the sole decoration of the east end of the room. The bronze alloyed with other metals is a warm black and silver. Each of the two massive bronze doors is framed and vertically divided into four sections by sculptured bands of Missouri's state flower, the hawthorn. The framing is pierced so that the silvery background silhouettes the hawthorn's flowers, leaves, and berries. A roundel sculptured in low relief is in each of the eight panels. On these are the sculptured symbols of worldwide amity, peace, justice, and the like which were by the English sculptor, F. Lynn-Jenkins.⁹⁷ Originally the ceiling of the Museum was of large panels of amber glass.⁹⁸

⁹⁵Kansas City Times, 13 October 1926. When two smaller maps added in 1929 and subdivisions of #3 and #4 are counted separately, the total of thirty-five is sometimes given.

⁹⁶McPherson, Liberty Memorial, 1929, 29.

⁹⁷Ibid., 32.

⁹⁸Ibid., 35.

The exteriors of the Museum and Memory Hall present mirror images of eloquent severity. The buildings, with open porticoes, face each other across the court with the Memorial shaft intervening. The mosaic tiles which line the porticoes are shaded from deep blue above to lighter tones at the bottom and are bordered with lines of black and gold tesserae. Two bronze lanterns, invisible from the court, light each portico. The effect is solemn and serene. Six deeply recessed windows are set into the smooth limestone sides on the north and south of each building. The twenty-four recesses are lined with mosaic tile of lighter shades of blue giving pleasing contrast, especially on the north side which is mostly in shadows.⁹⁹

The broad entrance steps of the Museum and Memory Hall are flanked with pairs of huge urns "of a cinerary type" (Magonigle's words). They are of a near-black aggregate (now faded) with carved bands of laurel and emblems of the Army, Navy, Red Cross, agriculture, transportation, etc. On the ends of Memory Hall and the Museum, carved panels of heraldic eagles display the Arms of the United States on the east and the Arms of the State of Missouri on the west.¹⁰⁰

In details such as the opulent color of tiles within pristinely severe window reveals and porticoes, the elegant design for bronze doors including the one on the shaft, even handsome screens to conceal radiators—the many small points of refinement which require close inspection for appreciation do credit to H. Van Buren Magonigle's skill as a designer. We can only rejoice that in reduction for the

⁹⁹Ibid., 28.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

sake of economy, these features, so "exquisite in craftsmanship"¹⁰¹ were spared.

J. C. Nichols reported, October 22, 1926, "that the grounds would be in excellent condition for the Dedication." Also, approval was given to employing Kansas City landscape architects, Hare and Hare, to prepare a plan for later "planting immediately around the Memorial." These plans, in turn, were to be viewed by Mr. Olmsted for examination and criticism and then submitted to the Board of Governors of the Liberty Memorial Association and the Board of Park Commissioners for final approval.¹⁰²

At the same meeting, after several details for the November 11th dedication were discussed, the very important matter of plans for the first unit of an Art Museum, using the Atkins fund, was presented. A location "on the west of the Mall, the central axis of the building being approximately 450 feet south of the Memorial" was accepted.¹⁰³

Less than a month later, November 16, 1926, J. C. Nichols, Chairman of the Committee on Location of Future Buildings, reported that funds from the estate of Mrs. William Rockhill Nelson "would not be used for construction of an Art Museum on Memorial Hill."¹⁰⁴ It is not difficult to imagine how disappointing this adverse development was to everyone.

¹⁰¹George Harold Edgell, American Architecture of Today (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), 278.

¹⁰²"Minutes," 1215.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, 1216.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 1226. The Sixth Annual Meeting of the Liberty Memorial Association Board of Trustees.

Mr. Nichols could report, however, that steps were underway for erecting a unit of an Art Museum using Mary Atkins funds. Plans for this unit were being designed by Kansas City architects Wight and Wight.¹⁰⁵ Walter S. Dickey, Chairman of the Committee on Music Hall, stated that efforts looking toward a Music Hall needed "the erection of a unit of the Art Museum before attempting to raise further funds" for still another building.¹⁰⁶

The original visionary plan for an Art Center with the Liberty Memorial as the "gateway" had been a splendid one.¹⁰⁷ As the actual story unfolded, the Liberty Memorial was to be both its opening and closing chapter. The bright dream of an Art Center for Kansas City in that location was never realized. Success of the larger plan depended, it seems, on a major art museum to house works of art purchased with funds from the William Rockhill Nelson estate. The decision to build that museum elsewhere brought an abrupt end to the Memorial hill idea and took the funds for the Mary Atkins Museum along with it!¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷"Minutes," 1183. On 17 November 1925, J. C. Nichols, Chairman on Location of Future Buildings, advised the Board that "not more than seven buildings should be located on the site . . . for proper air space . . . for Art Galleries, Music Halls, and historic buildings.

¹⁰⁸Ross E. Taggart and George L. McKenna, eds., Handbook: Nelson Gallery of Art, Atkins Museum (Kansas City: University Trustees, W. R. Nelson Trust, 1973), 7. By his will, William Rockhill Nelson established a Trust for the purpose of acquiring works of art. The twenty acres of grounds on which the Nelson home, Oak Hall, stood were given by the family and supplied a setting for the building which was built with family bequests plus funds left in 1911 by Mary Atkins to build an art museum.

Whether or not the story would have had another ending had the Liberty Memorial itself been completed in a single building program is impossible to know. Certainly, postponing completion until the 1930s could have only been detrimental to the total grand plan for an art center. Whatever the reasons, the Liberty Memorial was to remain the sole structure built on Memorial hill and stands there now in serene isolation.

* * * * *

Dedication of the Liberty Memorial

November 11, 1926

At the eleventh stroke of a tolling bell, at precisely eleven o'clock, November 11, 1926, the President of the United States, Calvin Coolidge, arose and addressed the vast crowd estimated at 150,000 present for the dedication of the Liberty Memorial. Eight years after the signing of the Armistice terminating the First World War, five years after the site dedication and two years following laying the cornerstone "a most impressive ceremony . . . filled with deep and reverent emotion, marked the dedication of our majestic Memorial to its high purpose."¹⁰⁹

The program had been planned with emphasis on the nation. Kansas City's Liberty Memorial, in fact, did stand at the nation's heart. President Coolidge, who as Vice President had attended the

¹⁰⁹McPherson, Liberty Memorial, 1929, 15.

1921 site dedication as an honored guest, said, "Today I return. . . in order that I may place the official sanction of the National Government upon one of the most elaborate and impressive memorials that adorn our country."¹¹⁰ In addition to the address by the President, there were addresses by Howard P. Savage, National Commander American Legion, and Dwight F. Davis, Secretary of War. Concluding solemn words and stirring music, Buglers of the 110th Engineers blew Taps. Then from the Liberty Memorial's "altar high erected in the skies" the "Pillar of Cloud [was] released for all time."¹¹¹

The press was eloquent in describing the lofty symbol of the Kansas City Spirit, the impressive ceremony, and the President's speech. Newspapers across the nation repeated the same news articles and the same photographs, all brimming with red, white, and blue enthusiasm. There was, however, something missing in descriptions of the War Memorial "which New York might well envy for its splendor of conception and impressive beauty."¹¹² In all of those news accounts there had been no mention of the architect of the Liberty Memorial. Henry H. Saylor, editor of Architecture, decried this omission:

But the man who created this monument, the man but for whose conception it might still be a mere pile of stones and bronze, cement and marble, was not thought worth mentioning. . . . His

¹¹⁰Kansas City Star, 11 November 1926.

¹¹¹"Program of the Dedication of the Liberty Memorial: Kansas City, Missouri," 11 November 1926.

Also adding to the excitement and glamour of the dedication was the presence of Queen Marie of Romania who "happened to reach Kansas City at the same time." Haskell and Fowler, City of the Future, 117.

¹¹²New York Herald Tribune, 13 November 1926.

name, . . . H. Van Buren Magonigle . . . to whose genius we owe [the Liberty Memorial].¹¹³

H. Van Buren Magonigle's name might have been missing in the press, but the New York architect had taken care of the permanent record. The enlarged signature, "H. Van Buren Magonigle, Architect," is carved into the stone on the north side of the Liberty Memorial shaft, on the left (east) side of the door about seven feet from the ground. On the right (west) side of the door is carved, "Robert Aitken, Sculptor"—both names engraved before the 1926 Armistice Day Dedication. So, as long as the stone of Kansas City's Liberty Memorial lasts, the identity of the men who conceived its form and shaped the four Guardian Spirits shall be known.¹¹⁴

The Liberty Memorial story, however, did not end in 1926.

¹¹³Henry H. Saylor, "The Editor Presents," Architecture 55 (January 1927): 31.

¹¹⁴Apparently the propriety of the signatures in stone had been a matter of discussion. According to J. E. McPherson to R. A. Long, 12 July 1926, it was "ethical and proper . . . [just] as an artist signs his pictures." The authority on this subject had been Kansas City architect, Henry F. Hoyt!

Unfortunately, cleaning for its rededication in 1961, significantly abraded the Liberty Memorial's stone surfaces including those bearing the artists' signatures and the carved names are somewhat difficult to see.