

AN ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF  
THE LIBERTY MEMORIAL IN KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI  
1918--1935

A THESIS IN  
Art History

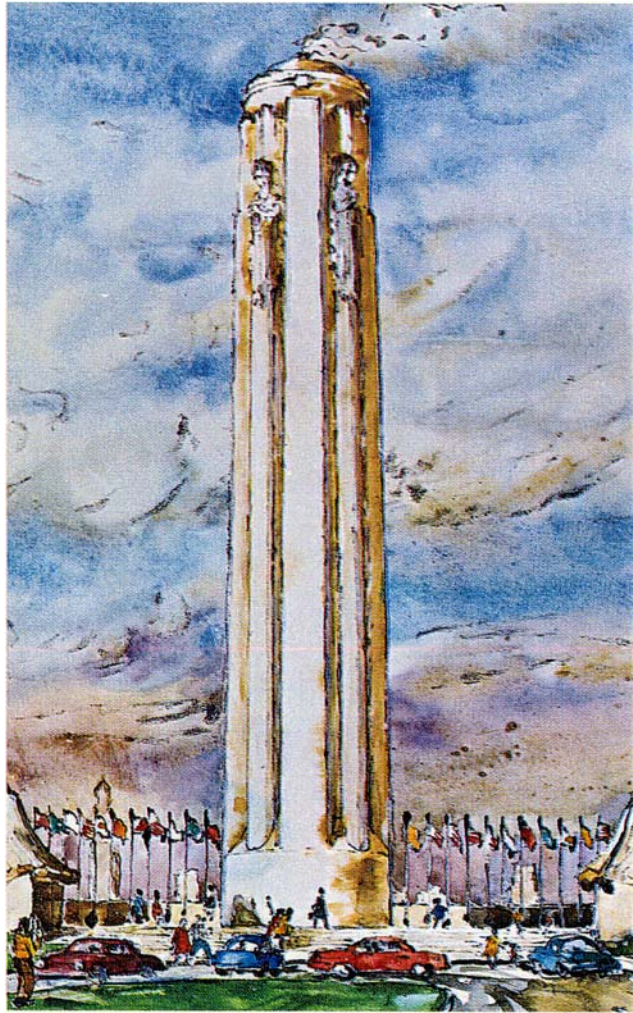
Presented to the Faculty of the University  
of Missouri-Kansas City in partial fulfillment of  
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MASTER OF ARTS

by  
SARAJANE SANDUSKY ABER

B.A., University of Kansas, 1944

Kansas City, Missouri  
1988



Postcard of LIBERTY MEMORIAL based on Watercolor by Paulina Everitt, 1968.

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Sarajane Sandusky Aber, Master of Arts  
University of Missouri-Kansas City, 1988

ABSTRACT

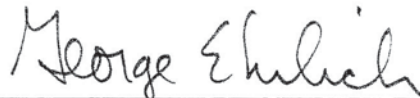
The Liberty Memorial can now be seen as the symbol of the exuberant "Kansas City Spirit" which followed World War I because dedicated Liberty Memorial Association leaders kept meticulous records and journalists described every detail of its development and construction. The Memorial took shape in an emotion-charged atmosphere. Late in 1918, grateful citizens called for a noble monument for war heroes. A consummate campaign led by R. A. Long and J. C. Nichols quickly raised \$2 million for the country's most ambitious war monument. The idea for the nonutilitarian memorial upon the "Athenian Hill" facing Jarvis Hunt's Union Station expanded into a grand plan for an Art Center. A competition of eleven architects was held to obtain the best possible design, causing problems with local architects. When H. Van Buren Magonigle of New York won, some local architects took umbrage.

Magonigle and his lofty "Flame of Inspiration" captivated the City's imagination. When the five famous Allied leaders and the American Legion came for the 1921 Site Dedication, excitement and civic pride were unbounded. There was, however, an obstacle. The

elaborate design could not be built within the allotted funds. Severe reduction was necessary. Geological problems and strikes caused costly delays. Worse still, Magonigle insisted on his wife, Edith Magonigle, as frieze sculptor!

It took all of R. A. Long and J. C. Nichols' skill to bring the Liberty Memorial to near-completion for its 1926 dedication. When President Coolidge stood before the crowd of 150,000, the Memorial lacked its sculptural frieze and landscaped setting. The idea of creating an Art Center had faded. Unable to finance the Memorial's completion and unwilling for Magonigle to continue as architect, the Board marked time. Six years later, Kansas City architects Wight & Wight, plus landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., using city and federal funds, finished the job.

This abstract of some 300 words is approved as to form and content.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "George Ehrlich". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Dr. George Ehrlich

The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies, have examined a thesis entitled "An Architectural History of the Liberty Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri," presented by Sarajane Sandusky Aber, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

George Ehrlich  
George Ehrlich, Ph.D.  
Department of Art & Art History

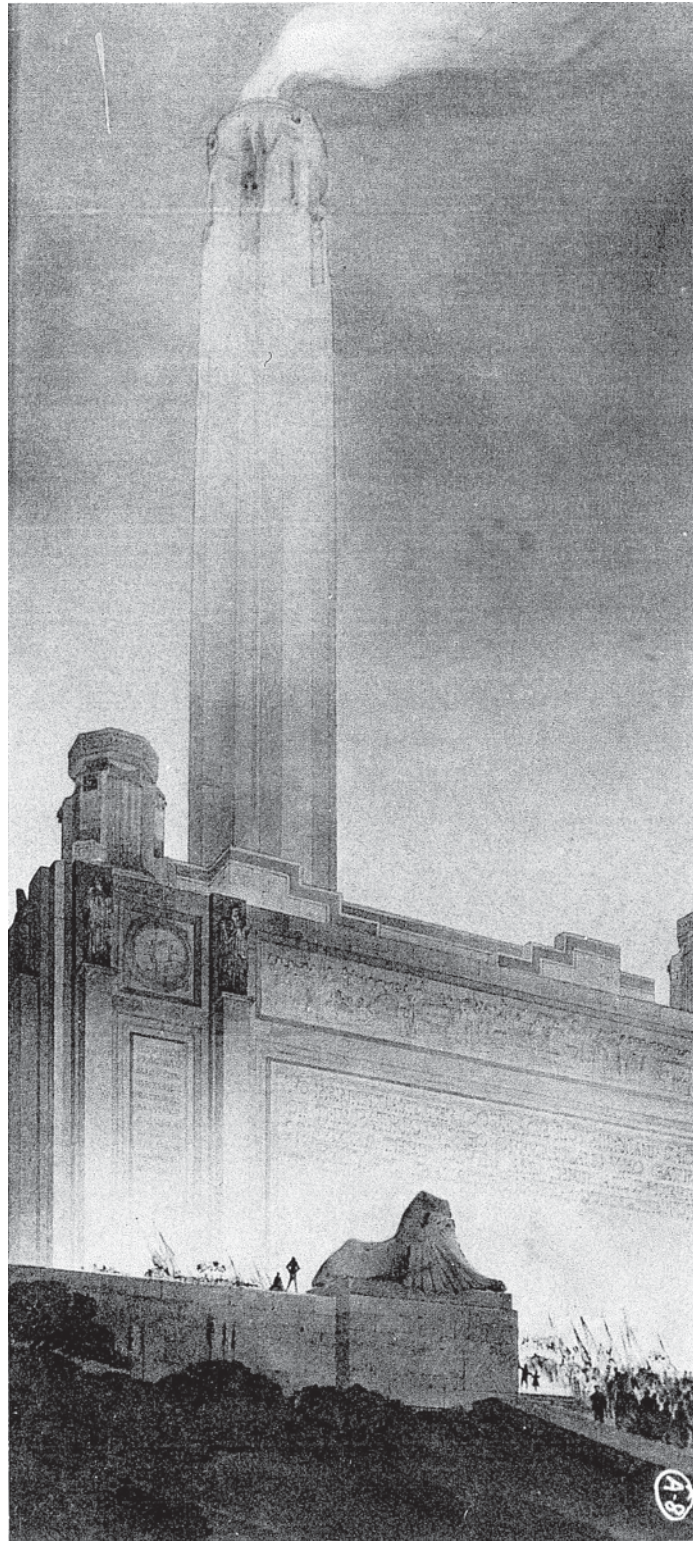
11 April 1988  
Date

Geraldine E. Fowle  
Geraldine E. Fowle, Ph.D.  
Department of Art & Art History

11 April 1988  
Date

Nancy G. Troyer  
Nancy G. Troyer, Ph.D.  
Department of Art & Art History

11 April 1988  
Date



Magonigle, Liberty Memorial, Perspective, 1921. Competition Drawing (First Place).

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After six years of inactivity, it was Kansas City architects Wight & Wight, employed by the Liberty Memorial Association, and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., retained by Kansas City's Parks Department, who finished the job. The Memorial itself stood completed at its fourth and final dedication on Armistice Day 1935, but the bright Art Center concept was never to be realized.

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The drama and colorful cast of characters which surrounded the Kansas City symbol from its beginning to its delayed completion have receded into distant memory. Now the Memorial stands silently eloquent -- a masterpiece of American architecture -- the creation of Harold Van Buren Magonigle.

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In recent years new purpose and vitality have come to the Memorial's Museum and Memory Hall. The exterior setting has changed markedly but the Liberty Memorial remains the same, constant in its vigil --

THE AGES SHALL NEVER FORGET!

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## PREFACE

The Liberty Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri, is important architecturally and historically. As an architectural monument and as a segment of post World War I American history, the Liberty Memorial and the story of how it came to be says a lot about the aspirations and realities which shaped it. It has been my privilege to tell that story. Even though this is basically intended to be a scholarly thesis, I hope it will convey something of the excitement and drama of the story, which to me exemplifies the "Kansas City Spirit."

As to a more personal history -- some years ago I returned to school and undertook a course of graduate study in Art History at UMKC. When the time came at last to choose a subject for a thesis, my advisor, Professor George Ehrlich, proposed an architectural history of the Liberty Memorial. I am grateful to Dr. Ehrlich for entrusting to me the research for a subject so important in both the history of architecture and Kansas City. I thank him for that charge and for his insightful guidance in my labors to fulfill it. I must admit that in the beginning I had only an inkling of the intriguing story which lay behind the serene monument on the hill across from our majestic Union Station.

As a native Kansas Citian, I grew up with the Liberty Memorial. In fact, for a long time I thought every town had one -- just as I assumed everyone had a grapevine on their backyard fence! I do in

fact have a number of personal connections with this unique World War I monument. James L. Sandusky, my father-to-be, was one of the 60,000 who marched in the 1921 American Legion parade at the time of the Liberty Memorial site dedication. The maiden name of my mother-to-be, Clara E. Winslow, is listed with the 83,000 contributors to the Liberty Memorial fund. The Liberty Memorial and I first met when it was very young and I was even younger. I have a clear memory of myself as a toddler sitting on General Pershing's knee when the Missouri-born general came to visit it!

I remember its completion and the beautification of Memorial Hill in the mid-1930s, as well as visiting its Museum and Memory Hall with my parents. I remember its Rededication in 1961 when former Presidents Truman and Eisenhower came to Kansas City. It was a place I visited with Cub Scouts in tow and returned to on Veterans' Day as the mother of an R.O.T.C. cadet. Considering all of these recollections, it is surprising how little I knew about the Liberty Memorial. I would imagine that such a lack of knowledge on the subject would be rather common with many of today's Kansas Citians.

The Liberty Memorial story is complicated and many-faceted. Personal ideals and egos seemed to loom as large as architectural principles in shaping its course. Civic leaders of the early decades of this century played leading roles in the drama. None of the main characters are alive today though their names are still well remembered. There are, however, Kansas Citians who have vivid recollections of the beginnings of this important city symbol. Although the Liberty Memorial was probably better publicized than any

other building project in Kansas City, then or since, much about it was not publicly revealed at the time. The story might have developed somewhat differently if today's journalistic dedication to complete public information had prevailed. The truth is that the winner of the architectural competition, H. Van Buren Magonigle, architect of the Liberty Memorial, and the Governors of the Liberty Memorial Association had a difficult time maintaining a harmonious partnership. Differences of temperment, the limitations of \$2 million, and the Board's obdurate rejection of Magonigle's wife as his artistic collaborator brought about a traumatic parting between the New York architect and Kansas Citians before the Liberty Memorial had been completed.

Also, as it turned out, the full role and function of the Liberty Memorial -- "to set the keynote" for a group of art center buildings -- was never fulfilled. The story of what did not occur is almost as intriguing as the tale of events which did take place. With thoughtful reading of all the voluminous materials and some slight reading between the lines, one cannot escape the conclusion that both the architect and Kansas Citians were disappointed in the outcome of their bright expectations.

Much of my research was done in the Liberty Memorial Museum Library and Archives. There, bound verbatim Minutes of the Liberty Memorial Association, meticulously preserved volumes of Press Clippings, and voluminous correspondence are all stored with what I would imagine to be unusual care. I am grateful for this record and to early Liberty Memorial Association Governors, especially J. E.

McPherson, the Association's Secretary from 1918 until his death in 1938. During the course of my research, I was myself elected a Trustee of the Liberty Memorial Association. I am proud to be a part of that ongoing organization established in 1918 as the Committee of One Hundred. I thank today's Liberty Memorial Museum Curator since 1976, Mark Beveridge, and successive Archivists Elizabeth Pessak, Susan Wilkerson, and Carol Dage for their helpful support.

It was my happy privilege to solve at least one Liberty Memorial mystery -- the whereabouts of the winning renderings for the 1921 architectural competition. No one in Kansas City knew where H. Van Buren Magonigle's designs were, or if they still existed. They do indeed survive. Those beautiful renderings are in the Archives of the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library at Columbia University, New York. They are gorgeous -- no wonder Magonigle won first place! Also stored there are roll after roll of drawings for the Memorial's sculptured frieze by the architect's wife -- the product of nine years of labor which were never used. Avery Library Archivist is Janet Parks. I appreciate her help as well as that of the staff there.

My Liberty Memorial research brought happy surprises which were nearer home. In visiting with longtime friend, architect Elizabeth Evans Rivard, I found that she and her University of Kansas schoolmates Robert Bloomgarten and Edgar Bircsak<sup>1</sup> (who was later in Magonigle's office) had themselves viewed the competition entries displayed in the gymnasium at Northeast High School! I appreciate

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<sup>1</sup>Brother of Thusnelda A. Bircsak, my piano teacher in the 1930s.

Mrs. Rivard's and Mr. Bloomgarten's recollections. I also appreciate helpful comments on competition entries by another friend, Kansas City architect, Robert S. Everitt. Originally, only a single set of forty photographs of the competition drawings existed, and this set was held in the collection of the Missouri Valley Room, Kansas City, Missouri Public Library. I am glad to have assisted in providing a set of these rare photographs for the Liberty Memorial Museum Library and Archives.

I appreciate the assistance of staff members of the Missouri Valley Room; the Linda Hall Library; Archives of the Jackson County Historical Society; and especially the University of Missouri-Kansas City General Library. I thank my Library Advisor Beverly Kerr as well as Marilyn Carbonell, Assistant Director for Collection Development, for early help. I thank Architectural Historian Elizabeth G. Grossman, authority on architect Paul Philippe Cret (who placed second in the Liberty Memorial competition), for her insightful comments. Also, I should make mention of my appreciation to Professor Burton Dunbar whose advice started me on the road to a graduate degree.

Most of all, I thank my husband R. Kenneth Aber for his unflinching patience and encouragement. Without his continuing support I could not have fulfilled this task.

The Liberty Memorial story is not a simple one nor is it brief. Some facts though fascinating were not germane and so were dropped, along with an extraneous bon mot or two. It has been a special privilege to become so very well acquainted with the distinguished masterpiece that is the Liberty Memorial. I feel as if I have become

acquainted with those who played the drama's roles and have come to understand the times and conditions which set the stage and in fact shaped the Memorial itself. It is my hope that this study will help to bring this unique architectural monument the recognition it deserves.