Monuments help individuals and communities remember the past and preserve important historical events, heroes, personal or collective triumphs, even moments of conflict. Marking the landscape in highly visible ways, monuments are located in front of civic buildings, in town squares, in plazas and parks, in cemeteries and memorial gardens, and in specially designated areas set aside for remembrance and tribute. People visit such spaces for private reflection and or public commemoration. Monuments can offer redemption, recognition, pride, and belonging.

But the past sometimes meets the present uneasily, reflecting varied interpretations of whose history matters. Thus public monuments can also arouse intense anger, feelings of exclusion, as well as dissonance among communities, local governments, and special interest groups. People throw paint on monuments, scribble graffiti across their surfaces, physically destroy them, attempt to reroute mainstream narratives, hold protest rallies to call attention to omissions and distortions of the past and present.

Many monuments force public conversations about what is important to communities and to the nation. They galvanize public opinion in unpredictable ways. They are not static: each individual, neighborhood, and new generation encounters and interprets the meaning in ways that are as fluid as time and space. Although people may become desensitized to the significance of monuments in their daily lives, those who build them or fight for them often start from a storehouse of deep emotion and want to celebrate or correct some aspect of history — glorifying or reinventing the past, or revealing a part of it that has remained unacknowledged.

The commission and creation of the African American Civil War Memorial (1998) in Washington, DC (fig. 1) offer insights into both monument building and shared remembrance and commemoration in relation to public space. As an active “site of memory,” this memorial sought to rectify the nation’s failure to recognize African American participation in the American Civil War and to encourage visitors to extract new meaning from the past. It now stands in the nation’s capital as a significant commemoration of the Civil War, acknowledging the active participation of African American men in restoring the nation. It also relates to other Civil War monuments in Washington, DC — including three equestrian statues arrayed along Vermont Avenue and Thomas Ball’s Freedmen’s Memorial to Abraham Lincoln (The Emancipation Group) (1876) on Capitol Hill. And while the African American Civil War Memorial took some inspiration from Augustus Saint-Gaudens’ Memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment (1897), one of the preeminent monuments of the Civil War (see p. xx, fig. xx; pl. xx), it also gave the artist who created it a chance to rethink the content and interpretation put forward a century before. The resulting memorial places African American men at the forefront of the story of American freedom, recognizes their contributions to the young nation, and highlights their presence, commitment, and strength. It gives material witness to the real names and units of the United States Colored Troops and represents their bravery and loyalty despite the trauma of slavery, racism, and the denigration of black manhood during the nineteenth century.

Significantly, the architects and design committee chose to place the African American Civil War Memo-
rials outside the monumental core of the National Mall (fig. 2). Located at the convergence of Vermont Avenue with 10th and U Streets NW, the new memorial occupies an extended, triangular urban space which is landscaped on the east side and adjacent to the historic Prince Hall Masonic Temple on the west. The plaza is composed of rose and gray granite, laid out in an array of squares and rectangles that are bisected by angled lines that form a regular pattern of large isosceles triangles. At the center of the plaza and resting on a two-foot-high granite base, the nine-foot-tall bronze Spirit of Freedom depicts three African American infantrymen and one sailor. On the reverse of the semicircular sculpture, a multigenerational family gathers around a soldier who stands ready to depart for war. Etched on the surface of the granite base are the words, “Civil War to Civil Rights and Beyond.” A series of four curved and progressively higher granite walls form a mirroring semicircular niche immediately behind the sculpture. On this composite “Wall of Honor,” 157 burnished stainless steel plaques are engraved with the names of more than two hundred thousand African American soldiers and sailors as well as their white officers. Carved near the top of the outermost wall are the words of Frederick Douglass, the nineteenth-century abolitionist: “Who would be free themselves must strike the blow. Better even die free than to live slaves.”

ENVISIONING THE MEMORIAL

On July 2, 1991, the Council of the District of Columbia passed a resolution that endorsed the creation of an African American Civil War Memorial. A month later Representative Eleanor Holmes Norton presented a resolution in the House of Representatives to authorize the government of the District of Columbia “to establish a memorial on Federal land in the District of Columbia or its environs to honor African-Americans who served with Union forces during the Civil War.” No federal funds were allocated for the project, and the public law stated clearly that the government of the District of Columbia was “solely responsible for payment, from official funds or charitable donations.”

Under the leadership of Frank Smith Jr., then a Ward 1 city councilman, the African American Civil War Memorial Freedom Foundation was formed in 1992 to raise the necessary monies to realize the memorial. In partnership with the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, the National Planning Commission, the National Park Service, and the National Archives and Records Administration, the foundation eventually raised $2.6 million from public and private sources to landscape the site, construct the Wall of Honor, and commission Spirit of Freedom.

Washington architects Paul S. Devrouax and Edward D. Dunson Jr. designed the site for the African American Civil War Memorial, transforming the unwieldy triangular site in front of the U Street/Cardozo Metrorail station into a broad and attractive plaza for commemorative activities and community gatherings. They set the two-toned plaza back from the street and Metrorail station and placed the semicircular niche at the narrowest point of the triangle to allow easy access and direct engagement with the Wall of Honor and Spirit of Freedom. And they specified crepe myrtle trees and plantings at the corner of U Street and along Vermont Avenue to provide greenery at a busy city intersection.

With its long side parallel to Vermont Avenue, the memorial lines up with three significant Civil War bronze equestrian monuments in the city. Mayor General John A. Logan (1901) at Logan Circle; Major General George Henry Thomas (1876) at Thomas Circle; and a Ward 1 city councilman, the African American Civil War Memorial Freedom Foundation was formed in 1992 to raise the necessary monies to realize the memorial. In partnership with the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, the National Planning Commission, the National Park Service, and the National Archives and Records Administration, the foundation eventually raised $2.6 million from public and private sources to landscape the site, construct the Wall of Honor, and commission Spirit of Freedom.

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Circle, and Major General James Breckinridge McPherson (1876) at McPherson Square (see fig. 2). All three generals face south atop massive bronze horses, seeming on a perpetual march of conquest. Vermont immediately in front of the White House. At the center of that square is an equestrian statue of General Andrew Jackson (1885) on an inscription on the base that reads, “Our Federal Union It Must Be Preserved.” This quotation, taken from Jackson’s toast at a Democrat Party dinner honoring Thomas Jefferson’s birthday on April 13, 1830, related to the South and the nation.

By 1936, new public art commissions such as the National Park Service’s commission for the World War I memorial in Washington, D.C., were addressing a variety of themes and issues, including African American history and African American artists. The African American Civil War Memorial foundation and architects considered locations on the National Mall but decided to propose a site significant to the African American community: the historic U Street district and the Shaw neighborhood, one of the city’s oldest. Beginning in the 1860s, the neighborhood shifted from a mostly rural area to a thriving urban core. Several Union army camps and hospitals were located there, including Camp Barker, Wise Well Barracks and Hospital, and Campbell Hospital, which attracted formerly enslaved men and women (contrabands) who sought shelter and safety within the city’s boundaries. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the area became a thriving center for African American intellectual, cultural, and civic life. The neighborhood’s name, adopted in the 1860s, derived from the local junior high school named for Robert Gould Shaw, the leader of the all-black 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. In October 1992 the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities issued a call for proposals, directed specifically to African American artists, for a commemorative figurative statue for the African American Civil War Memorial. By December 1992 the commission along with the foundation and the architects had narrowed their selection down to four sculptors: Eddie Dixon, Ed Hamilton, Jerome Meadows, and James Earl Reid. The architects were primarily concerned with finding “an artist who would work as part of the design team to ensure that the sculptural element will be integrated into the overall design.” On May 26, 1993, Dixon, Hamilton, Meadows, and Reid gave formal presentations of their work, showing examples of their previous public monuments and discussing their proposed memorials for the U Street site. Unable to decide between Dixon and Hamilton, the commission invited both artists to return to Washington, D.C., in July 1993. To enhance the presentation of his sculpture, Hamilton placed his maquette within a scale model of the memorial plaza. His plaster maquette featured four Union soldiers and two sailors standing at parade rest, with the figures emerging from a semicircular wall, its concave side shielding members of a family. On the strength of his model, Hamilton won the contract for the project in a unanimous vote. The commission wrote Hamilton in August 1993, stating “the design team felt that your proposal combined their interests and concerns in a manner and style that would be appropriate for the memorial. They commented that your work displayed a profound unity in placing representatives from the armed forces on the outer side of the semicircle, essentially protecting a family on the inner circle. The selection committee agreed that this conveys the sense that ‘they were fighting for the protection of their families from the slave trade, unjust treatment, and equal protection under the law.’” The commission specifically commented on the style of Hamilton’s design as well, saying “your proposed work goes beyond many of the other memorials and monuments in Washington through the use of the has relief semicircle. They agreed that it was an original and unique approach. Its relationship to the walls of the memorial where the names will be placed is also very important.”

Sixteen months later the commission awarded Hamilton an “Arts in Public Spaces” grant to realize a “permanent art in public spaces installation” for the African American Civil War Memorial.

In commissioning Hamilton to create the central figurative statue for the memorial plaza, the selection committee had found a sculptor well versed in the art of public monuments. Hamilton was responsible for several important public artworks, including the Booker T. Washington Memorial (1984) at Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia; the Joe Louis Booker T. Washington Memorial (1984) at Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia; the Joe Louis Memorial (1985) for Cobo Hall and Arena in Detroit, Michigan; and the Amistad Memorial (1992) in New Haven, Connecticut. Born in 1947, Hamilton grew up in Louisville, Kentucky. He is a graduate of the Art Center School (later known as the New School of Art and eventually absorbed by the University of Louisville). Hamilton writes that he was interested in creating three-dimensional objects from a young age and discovered sculpture upon entering the Art Center School. “I walked into the sculpture studio and caught sculpting fever. I saw modeling tools and smiled the day. I felt an inner glow that spread throughout my body. Somehow I knew sculpting would allow me to use all my creative energies and I was hooked. Sculpture to me was physical. It had dimension. An artist can’t fake form in three-dimen-
After his apprenticeship with Bright ended in 1977, Bright hired Hamilton as a full-time assistant to work with him on several local commissions, including the River Horse (1975) and the Louisville Clock (1976). Hamilton’s work with Bright expanded his sculptural skills and knowledge of the dynamics of public art. After his apprenticeship with Bright ended in 1977, Hamilton established his own studio, sculpting lenticular pieces for Catholic churches in the Louisville area and working on a series entitled “Junkology,” in which he used scavenged pieces of steel, tin, truck feathers, chicken and fish bones, and other materials to create abstract sculptures. When Hamilton received the commission for the Booker T. Washington Monument in 1981, he returned to creating large-scale sculpture and began a career as a full-time builder of monuments.

Hamilton commenced work on Spirit of Freedom in the fall of 1995, modifying his design to include three soldiers who grip the barrels of their rifled muskets and one sailor who holds a ship’s wheel (fig. 4). He began the process by fashioning a cardboard frame to establish the scale of the memorial and making paper forms of each of the figures to determine their overall relation to one another. Over several months, he replaced the cardboard frame with a metal frame made from water pipes onto which he applied water-based clay, pushing and moving the wet material to create swirls and undulations suggestive of movement. He then modeled the life-size bodies of the soldiers and illustrations of uniforms, weapons, and a range of personal items. He obtained a copy of William A. Gladstone’s Men of Color (1993) and his daughter gave him a subscription to Civil War Times. He also read Frederick Douglass’ Philadelphia speech (from 1861), which maintained that the Union uniform held the potential for transformation and for building self-confidence. In reference to the Emancipation Proclamation and the new right of African American men to fight in the Union army, Douglas

soundtrack from Glory, the epic Civil War movie that immortalized the bravery of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry at the Battle of Fort Wagner, both its original score by James Horner and the voices of the Boys Choir of Harlem inspired his work.17

In finalizing his design, Hamilton was aware of two earlier memorials dedicated solely to deceased African American troops the West Point Monument (1909 – 1920) in West Point Cemetery in Norfolk, Virginia, and the Colored Soldiers Monument (1924) in Green Hill Cemetery in Frankfort, Kentucky. The West Point Monument (fig. 6 and pl. x) is a large granite shaft supporting a bronze statue of Sergeant William Harvey Carney, a native of Norfolk, member of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, and the first African American to be awarded the Medal of Honor (see pl. xx). The statue is surrounded by the graves of one hundred African American men who served in the American Civil War and the Spanish-American War. The Colored Soldiers Monument (fig. 7) is a gray limestone tapered plinth inscribed with the names of 142 African American men from central Kentucky who served in the Civil War. Early efforts at remembering the United States Colored Troops, these two monuments have fallen into obscurity in their respective locations.

Instead of the memorial form of the obelisk, Hamilton’s multi-figure statue focuses intensely on the details of the uniform and rifled musket. To ensure historical accuracy, the artist purchased William C. Davis’ The Fighting Men of the Civil War (1989), a large book filled with photographs of Union and Confederate soldiers and illustrations of uniforms, weapons, and a range of personal items. He obtained a copy of William A. Gladstone’s Men of Color (1993), and his daughter gave him a subscription to Civil War Times. He also read Frederick Douglass’ Philadelphia speech (from 1861), which maintained that the Union uniform held the potential for transformation and for building self-confidence. In reference to the Emancipation Proclamation and the new right of African American men to fight in the Union army, Douglas

The Spirit of Freedom, 1995–1998, bronze, 9 feet high

Fig. 4 Hamilton, Spirit of Freedom, 1995–1998, bronze, 9 feet high

Fig. 5 Detail of bearded soldier from The Spirit of Freedom by Ed Hamilton
stated: “Never since the world began was a better chance offered to a long endure and oppressed people. The opportunity is given to us to be men. With one courageous resolution we may blot out the hand-writing of ages against us. Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letter. U.S. let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, there is no power on earth that can deny that he has earned his right to citizenship.” 19

Wearing the United States Army uniform was an important moment for African American soldiers, and Hamilton wanted to capture the dignity of the uniformed men in his Spirit of Freedom. According to historian Joseph T. Glatthaar, “The uniform was a tacit recognition of their importance to the country and to the war effort, as well as a chance to demonstrate to the white race that they could stand on their own and contribute significantly to the United States in its time of need.” 20 Wearing the Union blue symbolized this fight for self-emancipation and signaled the personal investment of African Americans to end slavery in the United States.

African American soldiers’ government-issued rifles were also associated with this real change in status. One popular song from the period, sung by the 8th United States Colored Infantry, emphasized the connection between arming African American men and manhood:

They look like men, they look like men,
They look like men of war,
All arm’d and dressed in uniform,
They look like men of war. 21

Once African American men joined the Union army, the uniform and rifle became essential markers of their manhood and citizenry. Hamilton took careful note of this pride and belonging through his attention to the uniforms and rifles in Spirit of Freedom. He clothed his soldiers in the blue wool uniform of the Union army, rendering with precision the fatigue blouse, a light wool coat with four brass buttons, and the wool trousers with inset stripes. Each man wears a forage cap—a hat with a round flat top and leather visor—and blackened leather boots with thick leather soles and heels (see fig. 8). Hamilton included other important details: the leather sling with the leather cartridge box, the eagle button attached to the center of the sling (see fig. 9), the U.S. brass buckle on the wide leather belt, the leather cap box attached to the right side of the belt, and the scabbard for the bayonet, which hung on the belt at a soldier’s left hip. The soldiers also wear tin canteens draped to their left side.

On the back of each soldier, Hamilton modeled the Union issued knapsack that held personal belongings and a rolled blanket tied in place at the top. He made a mold of a reproduction .58 caliber 1861 Springfield rifled musket borrowed from a re-enactor in the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, as he wanted to render the firearms “true” to those the army would have issued to the United States Colored Troops. Each soldier strides forward and carries this Springfield rifled musket pointing outward, hammer cocked at the ready. The sailor is rendered with equal veracity. He wears the federal navy “flat hat” made of dark blue wool and the blue wool frock and trousers. With his hands on a ship’s wheel, he stands with his legs wide apart as if balancing himself against the water’s movement. At his feet rest three rows of small cannon balls. 22

In the concave arc of the reverse of the statue, Hamilton shaped in low relief six members of a multigenerational family, interconnected through touch and glance (fig. 10). To the left, a young wife holds a newborn in her arms, her head held high and eyes closed in reflection or perhaps in fear at the potential loss of her spouse. Hamilton used the features of his wife, Bernadette, and the hands of his daughter as models for this figure. The woman’s soldier husband, fully dressed in his Union uniform and resting the butt of his rifle on the ground, stands beside her and extends his right arm behind her to hold her steady. Two young children hold hands: a girl grasps tightly her burlap doll, and a boy reaches across to his grandmother.
The grandparents mirror the position of the young husband and wife, with the grandfather holding his son’s left wrist and the grandmother staring stocically forward. Just out of the fields, the latter wears a cotton bag draped on her left shoulder and a necklace of cowry shells indicating her connection to Africa. 13

The family group is integral to Spirit of Freedom— the wife, children, and grandparents are the reason the soldier is heading to the battlefield. Hamilton had realized his vision and that the figure with closed eyes unified his concept for the sculpture: not as an angel of death, but as an angel of protection leading the soldiers into battle. 25

RESPONDING TO THE PAST

The full significance of Hamilton’s sculpture comes into focus when compared to Thomas Ball’s Freedmen’s Memorial to Abraham Lincoln (1875) and Saint-Gaudens’ Shaw Memorial (1897). The African American Civil War Memorial is in dialogue with these nineteenth-century memorials, with both their representations and their content. The most noted and notorious sculpture to commemorate emancipation, Ball’s memorial is installed in Lincoln Park and aligned with East Capitol Street, which leads directly to the Capitol Building. Free African Americans raised the monies to pay for the monument, first conceived by committee in 1866 and completed a decade later, but they had no say in its conceptualization. The work was the most visible attempt in public sculpture to capture the ideals of the Emancipation Proclamation. Yet it faded miserably and served as the antithetical model of emancipation.

Ball subordinated a partly dressed African American male to the fully clothed Abraham Lincoln (fig. 12). Although based on a portrait of a former slave named Archer Alexander, the image is one of obsequiousness, with the liberated black male crouching at Lincoln’s feet and encumbered by broken manacles still attached to his wrists. Lincoln stands tall and erect, his right hand holding the Emancipation Proclamation, his left bestowing freedom on the former slave. Ball depicted Lincoln as the noble and commanding head of the nation, while he showed the African American male as a non-citizen, uncouthed and childlike, stripped of his dignity and potency. The monument was ultimately not about emancipation but about domination and the continued paternalistic power of the white nation. 26 Ball’s statue visually anchored the park until the National Council of Negro Women commissioned a statue of Mary McLeod Bethune for the east end of the park in the mid-1970s, changing the focus from Ball’s statue to the modern rendering of the well-known African American educator.

If Hamilton’s Spirit of Freedom stands in stark contrast to Ball’s Freedmen’s Memorial, its relationship to Saint-Gaudens’ work is more complicated, reflecting both his admiration for and his criticism of the earlier memorial. Hamilton appreciated the powerful emotional charge and material beauty of the Shaw Memorial and the way Saint-Gaudens captured the psychological drama of men marching to their deaths in time of war. Saint-Gaudens conveyed this drama through his modeling of the physiognomies of the infantrymen (although the faces were idealized likenesses of anonymous models in his New York studio) and faithful rendering of the soldiers’ Union uniform. Hamilton, too, created idealized portraits of African American men for his Spirit of Freedom and depicted them in accurately detailed Union uniforms and weapons. He seemed to make a visual connection between the bearded older man who marches in front of Shaw’s horse and his own bearded man. In both the Shaw Memorial and Hamilton’s Spirit of Freedom, the somber expression and greater maturity of this figure add gravitas to the portrayal of the African American soldier. 27

Yet Hamilton also believed that Saint-Gaudens’ sculpture emphasized the disparity between the white officer, Shaw, sitting high atop his horse and the African American soldiers striding below him. From the beginning, Hamilton envisioned a memorial that focused exclusively on African American
At the end of the Civil War, the role of African American soldiers and sailors in the war faded from public memory. Weeks after the surrender of Robert E. Lee and the Confederate army at Appomattox, Virginia, the Grand Review of the Armies took place in Washington, DC, celebrating the Union victory. On May 21 and May 24, 1865, approximately 150,000 men of the Army of Tennessee, the Army of Georgia, and the Army of the Potomac marched up Pennsylvania Avenue to great fanfare and passed a reviewing stand in front of the White House with President Andrew Johnson and his cabinet in attendance. Just as the Civil War era, former African American soldiers faced discrimination and violence, fighting for pensions and recognition of their service. In its final form, Spirit of Freedom stands nine feet at its highest point and curves six feet along its horizontal axis. Integrating the traditional soldier monument with an evocation of family and the embodiment of an abiding spirit, Hamilton’s memorial to the United States Colored Troops is about the strength of character of African American men who volunteered to do battle for the Union, and it presents the coherence of the African American family even in times of duress. It is also about motion and coming change. Influenced deeply by the French sculptor Auguste Rodin’s fluid handling of his materials, giving expressive rendering of the psychological state of his subjects, Hamilton poured the clay with his hands to suggest wind, movement, and the ethereal propelling of life. His soldiers are protected by the righteous presence of his angel and thus able to fight for freedom to end of centuries of enslavement.

REMEMBERING AND COMMEMORATING THE PAST

As a site of memory, the African American Civil War Memorial encourages people to take part in public acts of commemoration in the plaza. Historian Jay Winter writes in his work on World War I monuments, “Commemoration at sites of memory is an act arising out of a conviction, shared by a broad community, that the moment recalled is both significant and informed by a moral message.” Under the auspices of the National Park Service, the African American Civil War Memorial encourages people to take part in public acts of commemoration in the plaza. These acts of commemoration are often related to the meaning of the war. A national amnesia set in, emphasizing the Civil War as a battle of brothers that forged greater national unity. Organizers actively excluded African American veterans from the reunion of Gettysburg approached, profound differences crystallized between how blacks and whites remembered the war. In a move intended to amalgamate an official account of the Civil War, both southern and northern whites celebrated reconciliation and white solidarity. But they ignored slavery and emancipation as critical to the meaning of the war. A national amnesia set in, with people willfully forgetting the service of African American soldiers. This move to a reconceptualization memory of the Civil War was exemplified in the celebration at Gettysburg from July 1 to 4, 1913. Funded and supported by the federal government, Union and Confederate veterans participated in ceremonies that emphasized the Civil War as a battle of brothers that forged greater national unity. Organizers actively excluded African American veterans from the reunion and refused to acknowledge their importance to the outcome of the Civil War, ultimately erasing the whitewashing of this history. The fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg was a segregated event, with African Americans on the periphery, employed as laborers and camp workers. Not until seventy-six years later with the film Glory (1989) did a popular art form give mass audiences a glimpse of the role African American soldiers in the Civil War. It was both this film—despite its historical inaccuracy and romantic storytelling—and the profound erasure from historical memory of the service of black soldiers in the war that awakened people to the need for the African American Civil War Memorial. At the dedication of Spirit of Freedom in 1998, Frank Smith Jr., the founding director of the African American Civil War Museum, stated, “I consider it a grave oversight in American history that very little is known about the heroic contribution of these brave soldiers in ending slavery and keeping this country united under one flag.” The historical suppression of the role of African Americans in the Civil War is tied to racism, the battle for equal rights, and attitudes of white supremacy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And the social organization of forgetting and exclusion was the impetus for the new memorial. African Americans did not forget the United States Colored Troops, but the rest of the nation paid little attention to their military service. Only with Benjamin Quarles’ Tie Negro in the Civil War (1955) and Dudley Taylor Cornish’s The Sable Army: Black Troops in the Union Army, 1861 – 1865 (1956) did historians begin to acknowledge the significance of African Americans to the Civil War. Yet many years and scholarly books later, the general public still does not have good understanding of the war or of African Americans’ participation in it. Historical annals also extend to what we see in public spaces. If monuments signal the importance of historical events and individuals, then the absence of certain populations in monumental forms implies that they are unworthy of public representation. Many monuments in American cities and towns are focused solely on white male military and political leaders, “illustrious men” and their great deeds. Others are dedicated to perceived high points in U.S. history—marble and bronze statues that stress the ideals of heroism, freedom, and democracy. Writing about the monumental core of the National Mall, historian Kirk Savage argues “Public monuments are an inherently conservative art form. They obey the logic of the last word, the logic of closure . . . . Traditionally, this means that monuments strip the hero or event of historical complexities and condense the subject’s significance to a few patriotic lessons for all time.” Washington’s monuments, in this conception, “do not seem to immerse visitors in the ‘essential’ America, the ‘soul of the nation.’” With the African American Civil War Memorial, a long ignored chapter of American history is reinserted into the landscape of the nation’s capital. Visitors and residents of the city are asked to expand their understanding of the past and broaden their perceptions of national identity.
just the United States Colored Troops during the Civil War. They are acts of profound acknowledgment and deep emotion in the public sphere.

The African American Civil War Memorial recognizes African Americans who have served their country despite the ongoing battle for emancipation, freedom, and civil rights, and it celebrates their bravery and loyalty within the context of the family and the nation. Importantly, the memorial exists in tandem with the African American Civil War Museum housed across Vermont Avenue in the historic Grimek Building. Through permanent exhibits and educational activities, it collects documents and photographs that inform the nation.

The memorial is acts of profound acknowledgment and deep emotion in the public sphere. It preserves artifacts, archival documents, photographs, and music that remind visitors of the integral role African American soldiers and sailors have played in the Civil War and beyond. The African American Civil War Memorial and Museum bring together the past and present in powerful ways. Visitors can search for the names of their ancestors on the Wall of Honor and find further information in the National Park Service's Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System database and in the National Archives' Bureau of Colored Troops Records, which collect documents and photographs that provide a physical reminder of African American presence in history.

With a careful balance between heroic ideal and everyday concerns, the African American Civil War Memorial reinvigorates the meaning of the Civil War within the memorial landscape of Washington, D.C.


30 Glatthaar 1990, 231 – 264; Steven Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 165 – 215; and Kate Masur, An Example of All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle over Equality in Washington, d.c. (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010).


34 Kirk Savage, Monument Wars: Washington, d.c., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape (Berkeley, 2009), 10.

35 Winter 2010, 313. See also Edward Casey, Remembering: A Phenomenological Study, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN, 2000), 216 – 257.