

Nelson F. Rimensnyder, Historian

The Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia
Testimony before the House Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee
on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Regarding a National World War I Memorial aka
The Frank Buckles Act (HR 938)

January 24, 2012

Chairman Bishop, Committee Members, Ladies and Gentlemen: I am Nelson Rimensnyder the Historian of the Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia. Dedicated since 1865 to preserving and promoting the District's history and civic accomplishments, the AOI is currently celebrating its 147th year of continuous service to the residents and civic leaders of our great city.

On March 21, 2011 AOI member Joseph N. Grano wrote to the Board of Directors of the National World War I Memorial Foundation proposing an alternative to H.R. 938 and Senate Bill 253 which would establish a commission to ensure a suitable observance of the centennial of World War I and to designate memorials to the service of men and women of the United States in World War I. These proposals include altering the name of our District of Columbia War Memorial to insert the words "and National" (District of Columbia and National World War I Memorial). The Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia joins with our member Mr. Grano in urging you to consider an alternative to the pending legislation. The portion of the legislation which re-names the District's memorial is wrong on several fronts, the most noteworthy being that it ignores the rights of the District's residents and the fact that it was from District residents that so much of the funds for the memorial were raised. Secondly, the Peristyle Doric Temple located in Ash Grove on the National Mall in West Potomac Park is the District's War Memorial, **not** the World War I Memorial as when it was dedicated in 1931 the 1914-1918 conflict in Europe was referred to as The Great War or simply The World War and no numerical suffix was ascribed to the monument.

As Mr. Grano so eloquently points out, there is in fact already a national World War I memorial bearing the name of General John Pershing. The memorial, occupying an entire city block, is elegantly situated opposite the White House Visitors' Center, within a half block of the White House and Ellipse, closely situated to the Washington Monument's axis of the National Mall and holds a distinguished position at the western-most point of the main stretch of Pennsylvania Avenue within view of the Capitol.

With a few, relatively simple architectural additions and additional interpretive signage, Pershing Park would make a fitting and appropriate venue for a ‘new’ National World War I Memorial obviating the need to tamper with the District of Columbia’s existing War Memorial in Ash Grove on Ohio Drive. In honor of Frank Buckles, a doughboy statue could be crafted in his image and placed at the North West entrance to the park – clearly visible from the 15th Street approach, the White House Visitors’ Center and to the hundreds of thousands of visitors waiting to enter the White House grounds. The existing long, unadorned wall on the Pennsylvania Avenue side of the park could be boldly inscribed with, “National World War I Memorial” clearly visible from the White House Visitors’ Center, the John A. Wilson Building and the 14th Street approach.

While we believe the efforts of Representative Ted Poe and the co-sponsors of H.R. 938 and Senator Rockefeller and his co-sponsors of Senate Bill 253, together with the initiatives of the National World War I Memorial Foundation are praiseworthy to help reconcile the misperceptions and confusion facing the National World War Memorial in Kansas City and *our* District of Columbia World War I Memorial, we believe strongly that simply renaming or re-designating our existing monument not only demeans the history of this existing memorial but, in fact, does not go far enough to realize the dream of a true National World War I Memorial in the Nation’s Capital. The proponents of the World War II Memorial on the National Mall between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument, after much controversy, realized their dream of a truly wonderful tribute to the men and women who gave their service and lives during the Second World War; however, if you visit the Pershing Park site you will see that this existing memorial already contains many of the features one would want in a national memorial: a water feature (beautiful fountain and pool), an impressive statue of General Pershing, historical and interpretive information engraved on the stone walls, etc. The only features it is missing are the engraving that would distinguish it as the “National World War I Memorial,” a statue of a doughboy in honor of the military personnel who served – like Frank W. Buckles – and recognition of the other military services’ contributions in World War I.

We believe these relative simple improvements to the existing memorial would make it worthy of being designated as the National World War I Memorial and by avoiding changes to either the National War I Memorial in Kansas City or the District of Columbia World War I Memorial would render controversial changes to these existing memorials moot.

[Attached is a series of recent photographs which may help you visualize how this impressive park could be transformed into a National Memorial dedicated to the First World War.]

The National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission is on record opposing renaming the District’s War Memorial (August 2, 2011) and while considering Pershing Park as a worthy World War I Memorial was not within the scope of either Congressman Poe’s or Senator Rockefeller’s legislation, we believe together with the endorsement of the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission our proposal deserves your consideration and support for removing references to the District of Columbia War Memorial and, in turn, endorsing our proposal to designate Pershing Park as the National World War I Memorial.

Thank you for the opportunity for me to testify before you today.

Sincerely,

Nelson F. Rimensnyder, Historian

The Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia