

US GRANT MEMORIAL

National Mall • Washington, D.C.

One of the most magnificent and least appreciated examples of realistic wartime sculpture is that of Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885) in front of the U.S. Capitol. A Mexican War hero, excellent horseman, and abject failure in private business, Grant became the hero of his generation due to his duty in the Civil War: captor of Fort Donelson, scapegoat of Shiloh, conqueror of Vicksburg, rescuer of Chattanooga, general of all the armies, and finally the victor against Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Less notable was his term as President of the United States (1869-1877), which was marred by scandals. Suffering from throat cancer due to cigar smoking, Grant wrote his memoirs, much praised by historians, to save his family from financial ruin (Grant's tomb is located in New York City). • Grant's equestrian statue is one of the largest in the world at 40 feet tall, showing him hunched in the saddle observing his army in action, his horse Cincinnati appearing much more attentive than the rider. Bas relief castings on the pedestal depict the infantry in marching action. However, the genius of the huge artwork (which sits on a plaza 252 by 71 feet in area) are the two intricate and dramatic castings on the flanks—the cavalry group to the north and the artillery group to the south.





The artillery group sculpture depicts six men and five horses in dramatic action, hauling a caisson and field artillery piece through the mud and debris of battle. The commander is flung backward in a halting motion, signaling with his guidon to pivot to the right; several of the horses are being pulled back and are struggling to find purchase, while another continues to charge steadfastly forward, his bridle broken. The men on the caisson are struggling to stay aboard; another is desperately trying to rein in the horses.

The cavalry group (next page) is even more dramatic (noted critic James Goode said the sculpture possesses “more dramatic interest and suspense than any sculpture in the city, and, indeed, in the nation). As the officer raises his sword in exultation, one of the six other riders and his mount have fallen and are about to be trampled. Only one of his cohorts is trying to react, as the others charge onward. The sculpture is a swirl of motion.



The Grant Memorial was dedicated on April 27, 1922 on the centennial of Grant's birth by Vice President Calvin Coolidge and General John Pershing following a grand military parade down Pennsylvania Avenue. Grant's granddaughter and great-granddaughter unveiled the equestrian statue. (President Harding was in Ohio dedicating Grant's birthplace home.) Notably missing at the site between the U.S. Capitol and the National Mall was the sculptor, Henry Merwin Shrady, who had died two weeks previously of overwork and exhaustion at the age of 50. Shrady had worked tirelessly for two decades to create Grant's memorial, one of the finest pieces of sculpture in the world. At the time in 1901 that Congress appropriated \$250,000 to create the memorial, Shrady was a little-known artist, and the award of the commission caused an uproar among the more established competitors. Born into a wealthy and prominent family, Shrady was graduated from Columbia University and served as president of the Continental Match Co. until a bout of typhoid fever forced his retirement. During

recuperation, he sketched the animals at the Bronx Zoo and taught himself to sculpt. He created the bronze equestrian statue of Washington for the Williamsburg Bridge Plaza. His design for Grant's memorial was chosen from 22 others by a jury that included Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Daniel Chester French. A retrial was demanded and conducted, with Shrady again winning the commission, the largest at the time. Shrady began an arduous process of educating himself about his subject. He studied military uniforms loaned to him by order of the secretary of war, and observed artillery and cavalry drills conducted expressly for him at West Point. He joined the New York National Guard and served for four years to gain experience. Shrady selected

a horse from 300 specimens employed by the New York Police to study its anatomy. He dissected several equine cadavers and observed many military parades. He consulted with his father, Dr. George Shrady, who had attended Grant in his last days. He conferred with Grant's eldest son. He studied the life mask of Grant at the Smithsonian Institution. He used his friends to serve as models for the faces of the cavalrymen. Three West Point cadets, class of 1908, served as models for the artillerymen. Work progressed slowly, as Shrady was somewhat of a perfectionist. The lead horse in the cavalry group, for example, was sculpted nine times before he was satisfied. There was controversy over the siting of the memorial, originally set for the White House Ellipse. President Theodore Roosevelt objected, because the sculpture would block the view of the Potomac River. The mall site was chosen but only after a lawsuit was settled regarding the removal of several large trees. The plaster sculpture of the artillery group was loaded onto a truck to haul to the foundry when the truck caught fire. The plaster original made it to the foundry and was cast into bronze, only to have the foundry burn down. Shrady was beside himself; a wealthy benefactor shipped Shrady and his family off for three weeks on his private yacht to calm down. The foundry's owner, Ricardo Bertelli, begged the fire chief to leave the ruins of his foundry untouched. As it happened, a huge metal beam had protected the bronze casting from harm as the foundry building fell to the ground, and after 21 days of cooling down the bronze sculpture emerged unharmed from the ruins, ready to be located at the site.

Unfortunately, the years of hard work and worry took its toll on the sculptor. He died two weeks before the formal dedication of his masterpiece. There's a bit of dark irony here, however. Using mirrors, Shrady had fashioned the face of the cavalryman who is about to be trampled to death after his own.

