

# TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION



## EPITAPH TO THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER CARVED ATOP THE MEMORIAL

*Here lies a soldier of the Revolution whose identity is known but to God.  
His was an idealism that recognized a Supreme Being,  
that planted religious liberty on our shores, that overthrew despotism,  
that established a people's government, that wrote a Constitution setting metes and bounds  
of delegated authority, that fixed a standard of value upon men above gold  
and lifted high the torch of civil liberty along the pathway of mankind.  
In ourselves his soul exists as part of ours, his memory's mansion.*

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier of the American Revolution, located in the churchyard burial ground, honors an unidentified soldier whose remains were unearthed just to the north of its current tomb and reburied at its current site in 1826. It honors not only the single unknown individual, but all the Patriots who helped secure Independence for the United States of America, especially those who now rest in unmarked graves. It reminds us as well of the gratitude that we owe to all who have served to enable the United States to remain a free and independent nation.

## Creation of the Memorial

In 1826, during construction of the original portion of a sanctuary for St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church (now Basilica of St. Mary), the body of an unidentified man, clothed in a Revolutionary War uniform, was unearthed. The body was then reinterred within the current bounds of the churchyard burial ground. The memory that the remains of an unidentified soldier had been reburied at this site was carried into the twentieth century by Mary Gregory Powell (1847-1928), a member of the congregation and historian of the Mount Vernon chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution. Her father, William Gregory (1789-1875), had come to Alexandria from Scotland in 1807 and had served the congregation many years as an elder and member of the church committee. Mary Gregory had placed flowers on the unmarked grave of the unidentified soldier as a child.

Several events that took place during the 1920s influenced the creation of the memorial. One was the memorialization of soldiers who had died in World War I and remained unidentified. On the anniversary of the signing of the treaty that ended World War I, Armistice Day 1920, memorials to Unknowns were dedicated in Great Britain in 1920 and in France in 1919. The United States dedicated its memorial to an Unknown of that war at Arlington National Cemetery on November 11, 1921. The sarcophagus-style monument that now sits atop the burial vault of the Tomb of the Unknowns was added in 1932.

The 1920s also witnessed a surge of interest in honoring and preserving our nation's colonial heritage. Among Alexandria's earliest Colonial-revival preservation efforts was the restoration of the Meeting House, which began in 1925.

As that project drew to its completion, Mary G. Powell contacted John B. Gordon, chair of the restoration committee, about honoring the unknown soldier in the churchyard burial ground in some manner. The decision was made to formally mark the gravesite. Leadership in that task was provided by Alexandria's American Legion Post No. 24.

### **Dedication of the Memorial**

On February 22, 1928, a temporary marker was placed at the gravesite in conjunction with Alexandria's annual celebration of George Washington's birthday. Dedication services held that day followed traditions dating from the colonial period – participants initially gathered at Gadsby's Tavern and then joined in a processional walk through the city's streets to the Meeting House, where a service was conducted. Mary G. Powell, in her eighties and ailing, dedicated a temporary wooden marker. A permanent marble tabletop memorial was dedicated the following year.

The permanent memorial was created through the leadership of the National Society of the Children of the American Revolution and Mrs. Josiah A. Van Orsdel, the society's president. It was dedicated on Lexington-Concord Day, April 19, 1929, with services in the Meeting House and at the site of the memorial. The service in the Meeting House was led by Mrs. Van Orsdel and included two addresses – "Story of the Discovery of the Grave," by John B. Gordon, chair of the committee that had led the recent restoration of the Meeting House, and "157,000 American Unknown War Dead Here and Abroad," by James W. Good, U.S. Secretary of War. William Tyler Page, Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives and author of "The American's Creed," read the "Epitaph of the Unknown Soldier," which he had prepared for the tabletop memorial (text above). Music was provided by the U.S. Army Band, which also joined with the church's historic 1849 Erben organ to lead the singing of the *Star Spangled Banner*. Following the service, the assemblage moved to the gravesite, accompanied by the solemn tolling of the church bell, where numerous wreaths were placed at the foot of the memorial by patriotic and military organizations. The -minute program was broadcast live by Washington's local radio station, WRC, to a national audience.

We remain ever grateful to those who first secured our Independence and to those who continue to maintain it.

### **The Memorial Today**

The Unknown Soldier continues to be honored regularly by visitors and with services conducted by the Children of the American Revolution, Daughters of the American Revolution, Sons of the American Revolution, Society of the Cincinnati, First Virginia Regiment of the Continental Line, Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, Legion of Honor of Shriners International, National Sojourners of Freemasonry, and other groups. Visitation to the churchyard burial ground and Unknown Memorial is unrestricted. Visitors are welcome to tour the Meeting House, Monday-Thursday 9-4, Friday 9-12, and Sunday 9:30-12 – contact the church office in neighboring Elliot House.

### **Churchyard Burial Ground**

The churchyard burial ground is the final resting place of some 300 persons dating from the colonial and early national periods. Few of the graves in the churchyard remain marked. The burial ground contains the remains of the congregation's first minister, the Rev. William Thom (1750-1773). The congregation's third minister, the Rev. James Muir, D.D. (1757-1820), is buried in the Meeting House. Others buried in the churchyard include John Carlyle (1720-1780), founding trustee and first overseer of Alexandria; Dr. Robert Creighton (1734-1801), physician with General Braddock's forces in the French and Indian War; Dr. James Craik (1730-1814), surgeon general in the Continental Army and confidant and physician of George Washington; William Hunter (1731-1792), mayor of Alexandria and founder of the St. Andrew's Society; Lewis Nicola (1717-1807), Colonel in the Corps of Invalids of the Continental Army; numerous veterans of the French and Indian War; twenty-seven Patriots of the Revolutionary War; and many founding members of Alexandria-Washington Masonic Lodge No. 22 that George Washington served as founding master.

After 1809, members of the congregation were buried in the Presbyterian Cemetery located one mile west of here. Sixteen Patriots of the Revolutionary War are buried there.