**Listing Madonna Rescued in Bethesda**

Sinkhole Had Statue Tilting to Its Left

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Saturday, December 11, 2004; Page B01

Bethesda's Madonna of the Trail strides forward, a baby in one arm and a boy tugging at her skirt, a bonnet on her head and boots on her feet. A stone monument to the women who took part in America's westward expansion, for 75 years she has been a pioneer presence along a stretch of Wisconsin Avenue near a Bethesda post office.

This week, she began to lean, a little forward and a little to her left, in ways that prompted comparisons to a tall building in Italy. It seemed as if the Madonna might topple over -- all 17 tons of her.

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So the statue's owners, the Maryland State Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, had her hauled from her sidewalk perch and into storage yesterday, acting in concert with a phalanx of county and state official and numerous representatives of utilities and public agencies.

Montgomery's Fire and Rescue Service set up an "incident command post" -- a black-and-red RV with flashing lights -- causing bystanders to wonder whether calamity had struck. Police stopped southbound traffic on Wisconsin Avenue for most of the afternoon and early evening to allow a crane to remove the Madonna.

"I can't get over the command center," said Albert Roy, an administrator of a Bethesda medical office, as he stood across the street. "It's like there's a weapon of mass destruction under the statue."

Officials said a sinkhole caused the statue to tilt, but they were not certain what caused the sinkhole. A water main break occurred Thursday in front of the Bethesda Hyatt hotel, about 100 feet from the statue.

"We're not certain that the only problem was a water main break," said Assistant Chief Denise Pouget of the Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Service. She would not elaborate about other potential causes.

Pouget said a basement wall of the post office had begun to buckle, but she added that no other buildings in the area were at risk. The Bethesda Metro station is below where the statue stood, but officials said they expected no mass transit disruptions.

The absence of a clear cause prompted observers to speculate about the symbolism of the listing statue.

Anita O'Reilly, a computer-skills instructor, was on her way to do some shopping when she encountered the downcast Madonna in the drizzle. "It's because of our soggy situation, the way the country's gone since Bush," she said.

Across Wisconsin Avenue, Roy and his boss, physician Greg Reaman, considered the statue and the horde of emergency vehicles attending to it. Reaman mulled the mourning-leftist analysis and added a twist: "That's what happens to everyone when you lean to the left: You sink," he said with a smile.

Faith Stuart Libelo, a retired high school physics teacher who chairs the Maryland DAR committee that oversees the statue, was as perplexed as everyone else about the statue's lean. Even so, she wasn't buying any excursions into supernatural causes. "You're talking to a physicist," she said.

That the statue is called a Madonna seemed an invitation to seek a divine meaning, but the statue is not a religious one. Madonna, in this case, "means mother," Libelo noted.

Bethesda's statue is one of 12 identical monuments erected throughout the country in the late 1920s to commemorate the women who pushed west along pioneer trails. Libelo said Harry S. Truman, then a judge, attended all 12 dedications, from Maryland to California.

Made of a cementlike material called Algonite, the statues were cast from a mold by artist August Leimbach.

In 1986, to accommodate the widening of Montgomery Lane, Bethesda's Madonna was moved from one end of the post office to another. In both cases, she looked east, Libelo said, so passersby would see her face, not her backside. The 11 others face west.

Yesterday, as dusk fell and emergency lights illuminated the street, the Madonna hung over Wisconsin, suspended by a crane. Workers set her down, gently, gently, on the back of a flatbed. For once, like her sisters across the country, she faced west.