

The Madonna's '15 Minutes of Fame'

Usually unnoticed, Bethesda statue has a rich history

By Janine Peterson

When the Madonna of the Trail statue in Bethesda began to list in mid-December, the statue got something that has eluded it during its 75 years looking out on Wisconsin Avenue: attention. With television cameras whirring—and rush-hour traffic paralyzed—the 17-ton statue was lifted to safety December 10 by a crane to keep it from toppling over.

Usually unnoticed among the high-rises and hubbub of downtown Bethesda, the Madonna statue has a rich history nevertheless. The statue is one of 12 dotted across the country, marking the “National Road” that stretches from Bethesda to Sacramento. The Madonna holds a baby in one arm, a rifle in the other and a small boy clinging to her skirts—depicting the arduous journey faced by women settlers as they made their way west, often with children in tow. (To make it easier for passersby to see, the Bethesda Madonna faces east; the other 11 Madonnas face west.)

In the early 1900s, the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) began to rally support to recognize and remember the trails and the mothers who tended their children along the journey. In 1912, the president of DAR founded the National Old Trails Association to mark the trails and expand them into roads.



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Col. William F. Cody, known as Buffalo Bill, donated an original coach to the effort. And in 1921, Congress passed a bill honoring the National Road. DAR would place Madonna of the Trail statues in all 12 states through which the

road passed. Each statue was made of a composite called Algonite stone. Including the base, the statues are 18 feet tall.

Missouri Judge Harry S Truman became president of the association in 1926 and selected the 12 sites. The goal of the association was to create or improve roads from Baltimore to Los Angeles, with branches to other cities like New York and San Francisco. The roads followed many of the original pioneer trails, including the Santa Fe Trail. Deciding which Maryland city should receive the statue was difficult, Truman wrote to his wife, Bess.

Cumberland had as good a claim to the statue as any Maryland town: Cumberland was the starting point for the original National Road. (Today much of the National Road has become Route 40.)

In 1929 Truman chose Bethesda, which was connected to the main road by a spur. Five thousand people gathered in April 1929 to hear Truman dedicate the statue.

Although the decision to locate the statue in Bethesda was made over 70 years ago, rivalries remain. In 2001, Cumberland officials suggested that the statue be moved to their city. John C. Alexander, then president of the Bethesda Chamber of Commerce, replied, “You all are welcome to come look at it, but you’re not leaving with our Madonna.”