

# **Sheridan Veterans Memorial**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sheridan Neighborhood Organization wished to include a memorial in a park being planned along the Mississippi River that would serve as a tribute to Minnesotans who served their country in war as well as include a component that sought to put the concept of peace into a concrete, tangible form. The writing of the veterans memorial component of the project was straightforward, consisting of the dates of the conflict, the number perished, a brief description of the conflict, and a quote of someone involved in it. The peace marker component of the project was more difficult, specifically because it was unclear as to how this topic should be addressed.

## WAR MARKERS

The primary criterion surrounding the war markers were that they were to begin at Minnesota's statehood, include the number perished, and to focus on the contributions of Minnesota, preferably Minneapolis veterans, with special effort taken not to "glorify" the conflicts themselves. I suggested the plaques should include a brief description of the conflict being discussed, then include a quote from someone involved in the conflict. The use of a quote would not only be informational, but would serve to humanize war, in the hope that a quote from an "average person" would create a stronger, more personal, and longer lasting impact on the reader of the marker than a simple description of the conflict. By putting the quote at the end of the marker's text, the last thing a park visitor would read would be the impact war had on a person, which would hopefully be what the visitor would take with them. The focus on the effect of warfare on a human being was emphasized in an attempt to highlight the role of veterans in the conflict, not other aspects of warfare such as battles or weapons used.

Sheridan neighborhood requested approximately ten plaques be used to cover wars since Minnesota became a state on May 11, 1858. I chose to use what the Department of Defense refers to as "Principal Wars." Additionally, the neighborhood desired to memorialize the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Although the American military has been involved in actions other than those covered by the memorial, the Department of Defense Principal Wars are the largest military operations. After discussion with neighborhood members, it was decided that while other conflicts were still important, too many markers would be required to discuss every American military action and that those with the greatest impact on the nation and the world would be covered. Also, the series of engagements sometimes collectively referred to as the "Indian Wars" were left out as their inclusion was decided to be too controversial and difficult to discuss. The following are the final conflicts submitted to the neighborhood and brief reasons for selection:

- **American Civil War (1861-1865)** - First war fought with Minnesota as a state, and Minnesotans made significant contributions to the war effort. It was one of the bloodiest wars in U.S. history and perhaps one of the best remembered.

- **Spanish-American War** (1898) - Considered to be the first U.S. war of imperialism, it displayed the modern role of the American military as a global force.
- **World War I** (1914-1918 – U.S. involvement from 1917-1918) - First major war to see the full effects of industrialization on the military and warfare.
- **World War II** (1939-1945 - US involvement from 1941-1945) – Perhaps the most well remembered conflict in American history, it had a major impact on all facets of American life and significantly altered the global political climate.
- **Korean War** (1950-1953) – Set the tone for Cold War (the fighting of proxy wars between the United States and the Soviet Union).
- **Vietnam War** (1964-1973) NOTE: Exact dates of American involvement are hard to establish since U.S. forces, including military advisors, were involved at different levels for many years. I feel 1964 is a good year to consider the beginning of major American presence as that starts major American combat operations with large numbers of U.S. forces. 1973 ends U.S. troop involvement. It should be noted that the Department of Defense has used the years outlined above on its list of American “Principal Wars” – The Vietnam War was perhaps the most influential war regarding how the American public views large scale military operations, with these impacts still resonating today.
- **Persian Gulf War** (1991) - First "high technology" war, displaying how advanced technology would change warfare. Also showed the fighting of regional wars instead of global conflicts. Likely a preview of future conflicts, at least those in the first part of the 21st Century, similar to how World War I showed what war influenced by the industrial revolution would look like.
- **Operation Enduring Freedom - Afghanistan** (2001-Present) – First American response to September 11, 2001 terrorists attacks. Its inclusion was specifically requested by the neighborhood.
- **Operation Iraqi Freedom** (2003-Present) – The source of much current news coverage. Its inclusion was specifically requested by the neighborhood.

The two wars currently being fought also serve as a time capsule as they show the feelings of Sheridan neighborhood in 2007 toward events that were unfolding before them. In addition to the nine markers proposed above, there are also plans to include one blank plaque, which shall have a message commenting on the hope that there will never be a future war to fill the space on that plaque. The combination of the nine conflicts above with the one blank marker result in the use of a total of ten markers to comprise the war memorial portion of the project.

## PEACE MARKERS

The creation of peace markers was significantly more problematic than that of war/veterans markers. Wars are concrete events, with easy to describe facts such as dates of conflict, casualties, and financial costs, making description of those events, for the purposes of a memorial, fairly simple. The difficulty faced by the neighborhood was that peace is rarely remembered in such a fashion. The neighborhood desired a way to show peace as a something that could be seen and achieved, rather than as an abstract, or "ethereal," (a word often used in discussions surrounding the peace markers) concept. There was a sense that peace markers should serve as a counterbalance to the war markers, and there was a desire to show times in history when humanity chose peace over war. This could be used to highlight the impacts of human decision making; the peace markers from times when humans made positive choices, the war markers when humans made negative choices. However, choosing such events was difficult as ethical and practical questions could be raised with a variety of decisions resulting in peace rather than war. Some questions were:

- **Concept of "Just War"** - Is the net result of war always bad and the net result of peace always good? Surely war is a terrible aspect of humanity and is miserable for all involved. However, can war accomplish something? For example, the American Civil War ended slavery in the United States and World War II ended murderous regimes, replacing those governments with much more free and far less violent alternatives. Would it have been better to not fight those wars, which were indeed horrific, and live in a world that allowed slavery or genocide? Certainly such a choice would be fraught with moral problems. The ethical question became whether the any ends, for example the ends of a freer or more just world, can justify the means of warfare – essentially whether war can be justified. Some argued war was never an acceptable solution or answer to social problems, others felt it was sometimes necessary. This impacted the project by questioning the assumption that peace should always be presented as the "right" choice or option and war as the "wrong" choice or option.
- **How do we define peace?** - There was extensive debate within the neighborhood over what exactly "peace" encompasses. Unlike war, which is clearly defined, peace is a more nebulous concept. Is peace simply the absence of war? Some suggested peace was to be defined as a move towards "social justice" and was sufficiently broad as to include things as diverse as access to medical care, availability of mass transit, and "reproductive freedom." Should the definition of peace encompass so many things, pragmatic problems would arise when writing the markers; namely the need to narrow down and ultimately select a few items that would be featured on memorial markers. Additionally, there would need to be a policy regarding how these topics would be presented. Topics like spending on medical care and mass transit are controversial; "reproductive freedom," especially if it were to touch on the topic of abortion, is even more divisive. Is this memorial the proper venue to air these societal issues? One could avoid

debate over these topics by having the markers take a side, for example by celebrating advocacy for increased mass transit spending. However, this may be inappropriate for a memorial, especially one devoted to the service of veterans, some of whom perished during war. Additionally, the war markers were written with the intent to be neutral on issues surrounding a war; specifically, the markers do not comment on whether a war should or should not have been fought, but focus on the impacts these wars had on those who served. There is no reason why this pattern should be broken for the peace markers.

- **Is peace sought for self interest to be lauded?** – At various points in history, war has been avoided not necessarily for moral or altruistic reasons, but as a matter of self interest. One can see this dilemma when removing superhuman entities like nations from the question and focusing on the actions of a person. For example, if a businessman opposed a war because it would very likely damage his business and cause him financial ruin, and proceeded to speak out against conflict, should he be praised? After all, the businessman was only acting in self interest. If the same person were to benefit financially from a war and were to argue for it, again acting in self interest, he would not be the subject of glowing tribute but of disgust and condemnation. Nations can also act in this manner; supporting peace when it benefits their group, opposing it when it does not. There is often evidence that leaders, sometimes considered peacemakers, act for reasons other than a pure desire to have peace for the sake of peace. Should such peacemakers be praised?

As of August 2007, there was not a consensus in Sheridan Neighborhood regarding how to best move forward with the completion of the peace marker component of the memorial.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION**

Additional research and discussion about the memorial would almost certainly be positive, unless these significantly delayed the completion of the memorial. More time needs to be invested in the creation of the peace markers assuming Sheridan Neighborhood Organization still wishes to include these in a final memorial design. The debate over how best to proceed with the peace markers can take place in many forms. A decision regarding what the markers should encompass and how to discuss these items is essential, however the decision can be made in a variety of ways. If the decision were to be made in a small group, such as through a private discussion of neighborhood leaders, a consensus could perhaps quickly be reached, although there would be a risk that this decision would not be reflective of the public opinion of the neighborhood at large, leading to dissatisfaction with the final product and perhaps a lack of support for the memorial. If a series of open, well publicized, community wide meetings were held to discuss the memorial, the entire neighborhood would have a voice in the process, likely producing more community satisfaction with the end-product than a decision made by a small group. Neighbors could perhaps even vote on ideas presented. However, community-wide discussion would likely take a great deal of time, risking delay in the

completion of the project. It is also possible that a large group would never reach a consensus, meaning a small group of community leaders would be forced to ultimately decide what was to be included and left out of the memorial, effectively mitigating the benefits of widespread neighborhood agreement on the project.

The following sources may be helpful for further research:

Department of Defense Statistical Information Analysis Division (SIAD)  
List of “principal wars” and casualties for those wars  
<http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/CASUALTY/WCPRINCIPAL.pdf>

For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America by Allan R. Millett & Peter Maslowski (Printed by The Free Press, New York, NY) is a superb, detailed discussion of American military history. It is an excellent text for those seeking a basic knowledge of the wars America has participated in.

War Stories: Accounts of Minnesotans Who Defended their Nation by Al Zdon (Published by Moonlit Eagle Productions, Mounds View, MN, 2002) includes the accounts of Minnesotans who served in war from the Civil War to the 1991 Persian Gulf War. NOTE: There is a copy of this text in the Weyerhaeuser Reference/Reading Room at Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul. As of July 2007, it was stored in a gray folder, which may make it difficult to see on the shelf. The book’s call number is F.607.Z3 2002