Soldiers Monument in Seaside Park
Bridgeport, Connecticut

CAITLIN SJAARDA
Central Connecticut State University

Postcards and a photo of the Seaside Park in Bridgeport.
On August 17, 1876 the dark skies opened up over Bridgeport, Connecticut and it rained hard all day. It did not, however, stop the dedication ceremony for the new Civil War Soldiers Monument in Seaside Park. The Grand Procession included six companies of the New York National Guard, the Second Company Governor’s Horse Guard, and the sculptor, Melzar Hunt Mosman. They made a slow, well-received march down the patriotically bedecked streets of Bridgeport. Since the weather did not welcome an outdoor dedication the festivities were held in the Opera House at 3:30 in the afternoon.

The principal speaker was Reverend Dr. Alexander R. Thompson, the former pastor of the Second Congregational Church in Bridgeport. He presided over that congregation from 1859 until April of 1863, and then moved to New York City. In his address he praised the men of Bridgeport for doing God’s work. “The land was saved under God by these men.” Thompson must have felt a special camaraderie with the Nutmeg State because on October 22, 1889 he also gave the keynote speech for the dedication of the 17th and 27th Connecticut Volunteers Monuments at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. In a speech flooded with references to the Crimean War and the past tyranny of Great Britain, Reverend Thompson mirrored the same sentiments he expressed in Bridgeport thirteen years earlier by announcing to the Gettysburg veterans, “It will stand to tell that by such men as you, under God’s providence, such a goal was won.” During his Bridgeport address, Thompson also made note of the emancipation of the slaves and refers to the south plaque on the Soldiers Monument, which displays a small portion of Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg address.

The governor of Connecticut, General Joseph R. Hawley, also spoke at the dedication, even though he was unaware of being on the program until he arrived at the ceremony. Hawley actually spoke ten years earlier at Seaside Park when the foundation was laid for the monument. Unfortunately, the many years the separated the actual creation of the monument were common for many such projects across Connecticut. The ceremony in 1866 for the foundation laying drew over 15,000 spectators and over 2,200 soldiers and veterans. The Ladies Soldier Monument Society, formed after the war from the Ladies Soldier Aid Societies, laid the foundation amidst the dirge of cannons and cheers from excited onlookers. Governor Hawley then gave a riveting speech brimming with nationalism. One comment in particular drew rounds of applause: “Lessons of patriotism learned at the mother’s knee or in old brown school-houses went with them. It was emphatically a people’s war.” Hawley relied on similar themes of patriotism and the spirit of the Union to rouse his crowd ten years later.

In 1876 the Soldier’s Monument stood erect and complete. On August 17th it became a fifty-four foot shining beacon of pride for the city of Bridgeport, even amidst the sheets of rain that drenched onlookers that day. The monument is a massive granite structure that evokes the Renaissance Revival and Baroque styles. It has been described as “heavy and complex,” with elaborate carvings and a flourish of bronze ornamentation. The intricate structure depicts the figure of a soldier and a sailor, despite being only referred to as the Soldiers Monument at the time of its
There was also a white marble female representation of Liberty that used to be housed in the central arch of the monument, but due to vandalism and deterioration it was removed in the late 1960s. A restoration effort began in 2006 and a Vermont sculptor recreated the statue using white gypsum. In September of 2010, the statue was placed under the arch, restoring the monument to sculptor Melzar Hunt Mosman’s original design.

In addition to all of the statues and ornamentation, the monument also has several bronze plaques adorning each side. The portion of the Gettysburg Address is accompanied by the names of all the Bridgeport men who died in the Civil War and the capacity in which they served. There were men from seventeen different infantries, including the 29th and 30th infantry of African American troops. Also represented are the 1st Connecticut Calvary, 1st and 2nd Heavy Artillery, 1st Heavy Battery, as well as eight men from the Navy and ten miscellaneous soldiers. The south plaque sums up the purpose of the monument: “Dedicated to the Memory of the Heroic Men of Bridgeport, Who Fell in the Late War for the Preservation of the Union. July, 1876.”

Accordingly, the site where the monument stands is also a link to the past. Seaside Park is the location where the 17th Connecticut Volunteers encamped in 1862. It is now on the National Register of Historic Places and is home to one of the most elaborate and expensive monuments (estimates of cost start at $30,000 and jump to $80,000) in the state of Connecticut. The creative sculptor, Melzar Hunt Mosman hailed from Massachusetts, but his work can be seen throughout Connecticut, with Civil War Monuments in places like New Haven and Middletown. In cities throughout the state citizens came together in good weather and torrential downpours to unveil their gift to the veterans of the Civil War. Overall, these monuments are a symbol of pride to the entire state of Connecticut and a representation of the efforts and sacrifices Connecticut made to protect the Union.

Research materials and image courtesy of the Connecticut Historical Society www.chs.org

This essay is part of the wider Connecticut Civil War 150th Anniversary Commemoration www.ccsu.edu/civilwar

NOTES


2 Samuel Orcutt, A History of the Old Town of Stratford and the City of Bridgeport, Connecticut (New Haven, CT: Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor, 1886), 448.


