

# **Reading the Plaques: A Look into How Different Public Spaces Act as Arenas for Sharing History**

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## **Introduction**

As a society we often agree that one of the best ways of moving forward in the right direction is to look to the past to see what has worked and what has not. While history classes in the United States do a good job having students learn about the past and reflect upon historical events and figures, there are sometimes better ways to immerse people in history in their everyday surroundings. Our nation has in a way crafted our public spaces to remind those that use them that they are surrounded by history.

When walking through a public park or a university campus, one might notice monuments, memorials, or simple tributes to historical events and figures. These tributes each tell a story in their own way. A fountain may commemorate an important event in a city's history. A university building may be named for an alumnus who won a Nobel Prize. A park or school could be named for an important historical figure, or simply for the person who donated the most. Whether drastically important or interesting, elaborate sculpture or small plaque, our public spaces in the United States of America act as arenas for telling stories, and this paper will take a closer look into the many methods of memorialization present in our public spaces.

## Schools

One type of public space that we may not often consider containing things such as monuments and memorials is our schools. We mostly think of schools as simply institutions of learning that mainly focus on the present and only discuss the past in history classes. It's hard to consider that a classroom may have a history when plays host to the same class year after year, taught by the same teacher. However, our schools serve as and contain monuments, memorials, and tributes to history at all levels of education.

To start out, let us look at one of the most visible ways that schools act as monuments to the past: names. How often have you driven past an elementary or high school named after George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, or another founding father. In fact, according to an article published by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, there are hundreds of K-12 schools named after presidents, with Abraham Lincoln leading the way with 607 different schools named after him in some capacity (Petrilli). However, presidents are arguably the least interesting people that are memorialized by schools. Most presidents are memorialized in other ways, such as presidential libraries, as well as every American history book. Some more interesting examples of how schools' names have memorialized people include: John Hersey High School (Arlington Heights, IL), Ida B. Wells High School (San Francisco, CA), and Edward R. Murrow High School (New York, NY), who were a writer and journalist who wrote a widely praised account of the aftermath of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima; an investigative journalist and founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); and a broadcast journalist known for his live radio broadcasts from Europe during

World War II respectively. These are figures that range from being mentioned briefly in history class to not being widely known about at all, except for those that live near the schools and therefore have at least heard the name of these unique Americans.

Another feature of the average American high school that one might not even consider a memorial at a glance is the presence of pictures, awards, murals, trophies, and more that tell the history of students from said high school. While memorials are often thought as structures or names, they are defined as “serving to preserve remembrance” (“Memorial Definition & Meaning.”). These homages to past achievements of school alumni do just that. Even though a trophy for winning a state competition might just be considered as something to show that a school’s team won, as it sits in a trophy case in a hallway while students walk past it serves as a monument in its own right to the students that earned it.

One final more sobering example of memorials at K-12 schools are those dedicated to students who never got the chance to graduate. An older example of this is exemplified in the memorial garden located on the campus off Prospect High School in Mount Prospect, IL. This garden contains a plaque that memorializes three students who were killed in a car crash in the early 1990s caused by driving under the influence of alcohol (Marszalek). Bricks have also been added in the garden’s walkways that contain the names of other alumni that have passed away. In the past decade, as school shooting have become a common occurrence, newer memorials have been erected to remember the victims of these horrid events. Examples include the Columbine Memorial Garden, which is intended to be a place of “peace, comfort, and reflection” remembering those who were killed in the tragic shooting (“A Place of Peace, Comfort and Reflection.”), and the Sandy Hook Memorial, which opened in 2022 and contains

the engraved names of the first graders and educators that were murdered surrounding a shallow pool of water (“A Sandy Hook Memorial Opens”).

Monuments and Memorials are even more prevalent at the University level. Some of the methods of memorialization are similar to K-12 schools (i.e., Washington University in St. Louis being named after George Washington). Many Universities also name buildings to memorialize famous alumni or faculty, an example being Boyer Hall at the University of California Los Angeles being named for Professor Paul D. Boyer who won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1997 (Siegel and Park). Likewise, many colleges have named buildings to memorialize worldwide events, with there being 15 World War I memorials located at or as football stadiums throughout the United States (Maisel). While these stadiums may be primarily used for sporting events, their names and memorials preserve the memory of those who fought in World War I. Many colleges campuses also have class gifts that partially serve as monuments to the class that donated them. Two prime examples of this are found at the University of Illinois, in the statue “Alma Mater” and the Altgeld Chimes. The Alma Mater was donated by the classes of 1923-1929 and was sculpted by Alumnus Lorado Taft (“Alma Mater.”). It is one of the most popular photo spots on campus, and every picture taken with her is effectively helping preserve the memory of these classes and the sculptor. Towering behind the Alma Mater is the Altgeld Hall Bell Tower, which contains the Altgeld Chimes, donated by the classes of 1914-1921 (Rank). Every time the chimes are played, they preserve the memory of these classes of alumni.

One difference that seems to appear at the university level is the appearance of buildings, schools, quads, and other things being named after donors. For example, Purdue University is named after John Purdue, who donated \$150,000 towards creating the school

("Purdue History"). Additionally, many colleges within universities have been named after donors, such as the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan, named after businessman Stephen M. Ross, who donated 100 million dollars towards the school in 2004 ("Stephen M. Ross"). Some buildings and schools have even been named after companies who purchase naming rights. This is exemplified by Huntington Bank Stadium at the University of Minnesota, or the State Farm Center at the University of Illinois ("Huntington Bank Stadium") ("State Farm Center"). While it is difficult to consider these memorials like the other named facilities at schools, it is hard to deny that these people and businesses have cemented their names in the minds of college students across the United States, in effect making these examples monuments to the donors. Interestingly, these naming deals with corporations also seem to memorialize the current American ideals of capitalism and advertisement.

## Parks

While our public parks and green space are often viewed as a much more traditional landscape for monuments and memorials, they still merit a closer look into the many ways they can help memorialize historic figures, events, and places. Parks are just as ubiquitous with the landscape of our cities and towns as schools. However, while most members of society only frequent schools throughout the first twenty years of their lives, parks are places that are much more accessible to those of all ages and walks of life. They certainly lend a much larger and more diverse audience to whatever memorials and monuments they contain, which is why they are a common place to find a memorial. This section will look at our parks as a more traditional arena for monuments, as well as some of the less orthodox cases and the privatization of naming and erection of monuments.

A great example of a large urban park that plays host to many monuments and memorials is Grant Park in Chicago. Similarly to schools, parks can play host memorials just from their names. Grant Park specifically was renamed from Lake Park in 1901 to honor President Ulysses S. Grant, who was from Illinois and helped push reconstruction in the South after the Civil War (“Grant (Ulysses) Park”). Grant Park also plays host to many traditional monuments, including the “Abraham Lincoln, Head of State” Memorial, the Sir Georg Solti Bust, and the John Alexander Logan Monument. The first being a monument to one of the most famous presidents to live in Illinois, Abe Lincoln (“Abraham Lincoln, Head of State”); the second honoring the world-renowned orchestra conductor who brought new life to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (“Sir Georg Solti Bust”); and the final honoring a war hero from the Mexican-American War and

Civil War (“John Alexander Logan Monument”). These are all very traditional statues of each man, fitting in to the formal landscapes of Grant Park.

Grant Park also showcases several monuments and memorials that have been donated by private citizens for various reasons. The arguably most well-known is the Clarence F. Buckingham Memorial Fountain as it takes up a very large and prominent section of the park. The fountain was donated by Buckingham’s sister, Kate Buckingham, in his honor (“Clarence F. Buckingham Memorial Fountain”). A lesser known privately funded example is the Joseph Rosenberg Fountain, donated by Joseph Rosenberg to “provide the thirsty with a drink”. Rosenberg vowed as a boy to create a fountain for all to drink at if he were ever wealthy as when he was a boy, he “could never convince local merchants to spare him some water” (“Joseph Rosenberg Fountain”).

While both fountains were private donations to the park, they are both public features that anyone at the park can enjoy. However, it does seem to cheapen some of the other named features of the park by having the most prominent feature (Buckingham Fountain) named after a seemingly random wealthy citizen rather than a more prominent figure. It seems somewhat insincere to put these memorials at the same level as the others without having them commemorate something that is important by the consensus of the public. However, one cannot argue that the fountain has been effective at memorializing Clarence Buckingham, as it is ubiquitous with Grant Park.

The most extreme end of memorialization through naming in Grant Park is exemplified by the many plazas located in Millennium Park (a smaller adjacent park that is considered a part of the larger Grant Park system). With Millennium Park being developed very recently over

former rail yards right next to Grant Park, many more modern tactics were employed in its creation, including a public-private partnership to fund the park (“Project Profile: Millennium Park”). This is exemplified with many public spaces within the park being named for major corporations that bought the naming rights. These include the Chase Promenades, the Boeing Galleries, the McCormick Tribune Plaza and Ice Rink, the Wrigley Square, the BP Bridge, and finally the AT&T Plaza which hosts the famous Cloud Gate Sculpture (more commonly known as “The Bean”) (“Millennium Park Map”). The use of these public spaces for advertising is disturbing when viewing from a monument and memorial perspective. While the issue is complicated due to the funding for these spaces coming from the companies, these spaces greatly undermine the other monuments and memorials in the park as they memorialize the wealth of faceless corporations rather than impactful citizens and events that are important to the area. These “monuments” fail to tell a story, but nonetheless could still be considered as a type of monument since they memorialize these companies.

There are some more unique examples of memorials and monuments located in Grant Park as well. Within Grant Park itself, as well as the Museum Campus just to its South, are many museums and institutes that each act as monuments to their contents, period of construction, and namesakes. The majority of Chicago’s museums that reside in these two areas are named for major donors that helped open them. The Field Museum is named for Marshall Field (“About the Field Museum”), the Shedd Aquarium is named for John G. Shedd (“Vision and History”), and the Adler Planetarium is named for Max Adler (“Adler Planetarium History”). These men were all very wealthy citizens who wished to help found their respective institutes. While this naming scheme does seem similar to the private donations of memorials such as the



Buckingham Fountain, it could be argued that these names are less problematic as the contents of each respective institution are more important than the names.

As alluded to in the previous paragraph, the contents of these institutions serve as greater and more impactful monuments. The Art Institute serves as a monument to all the artists that it features in its galleries. All the people that visit actively keep the memory of the artists and their works alive, thereby memorializing them. Similarly, the Field Museum serves as a monument to natural history. It's famous T-Rex skeleton, Sue, could be considered a monument to the dinosaurs and the infamous extinction event that wiped them out. The Adler Planetarium memorializes humanity's exploration of space. It even has a moon rock on display that looks suspiciously like a monument in its presentation and accompanying plaque ("Collecting Rocks From Space"). One final example is found at the Museum of Science and Industry, which is not located in Grant Park, but prominently sits over Jackson Park to the south. The Museum of Science and Industry uniquely serves not only as a monument to American industry and progress, but the building itself can be viewed as a monument to the era it was built. The museum currently occupies the former Palace of Fine Arts from the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. While the rest of the buildings burned down in the Great Chicago Fire, the Museum of Science and Industry is the only building that remains to this day, and therefore can be seen as a monument and memorial to the "White City" of the 1893 World's Exposition.

Parks do in fact seem to act as a vast arena in which many methods of memorialization can be employed. After viewing the examples shown in the Grant Park complex in Chicago, it's clear that these methods can be viewed as successful. The monuments, memorials, named areas, and museums located within and around its grounds effectively memorialize many

people and events by associating their names with the places and attractions those in the park visit. However, larger parks also seem to show an increasing amount of corporate and private naming for features that may serve to undercut the validity of monuments and memorials within them.

## Conclusion

As a public arena for monuments and memorials, schools seem to do a surprisingly good job. At all levels, they play host to unassuming memorials to past alumni and faculty that help teach students and visitors history at a local and more mundane scale that isn't typically associated with the traditional conceptualization of a memorial. With that being said, many schools also have memorials and monuments in a more traditional sense, commemorating famous people and events that might not even have a direct connection to the school. As the function and format of schools continues to evolve, it should be expected that these traditions of memorialization will continue, and new methods of memorialization will arise.

Parks are a much more established and accepted arena for monuments and memorials than schools, and in many ways that makes sense. They're more accessible to people of all ages and are open for much longer hours. The development of parks as a space for memorials seems to have followed a more conservative route in accordance with their more established niche for hosting monuments. However, the rising prevalence of private and corporate funded park amenities and features that act as monuments and memorials is slightly worrying. This increase in monument and memorial type features that are presented as public features but are influenced by private individuals may serve to undermine the significance of other monuments.

Altogether, the public parks and schools in the United States both serve as arenas for monuments and memorials in their own ways. As individuals experience these places, they actively and passively absorb the history that is shared by formal and informal monuments found all around. By placing monuments throughout our public landscapes, we provide the

option for citizens to learn a range of history. From great historical events to lesser-known figures, if one takes the time to read the plaques that are so often neglected, they can learn a little bit more about their world while being a part of our public spaces.

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