

American Monuments and American Exceptionalism

Themes: Man made symbols of American history, ingenuity, and greatness

Think about what makes your city or town special. Are there fun parks to play in or stadiums to visit to cheer on your favorite team? Are there sprawling fields that grow crops and allow animals to graze? Are there tall, glistening buildings that seem to touch the sky? Are there many different stores for people to shop, restaurants to dine in, or interesting museums to explore?

We are fortunate to have so much beauty and magnificence in the United States. We have learned in previous lessons about the natural beauty God created in America and our responsibility to care for it. Today, we are going to learn about how our fellow Americans put their God-given talents, gifts, and ingenuity to work to create wonders and marvels that stand as a representation of American exceptionalism. Our lesson begins in South Dakota.

MOUNT RUSHMORE

Mount Rushmore is one of the most famous symbols in our nation that celebrates America's greatest leaders and our most important values. Located in the Black Hills of South Dakota, Mount Rushmore is 5,725 feet tall. Each President's face is 60 feet tall, the same as ten fully-grown men standing on each other's shoulders. That's big!¹

The idea for the monument came about in the 1920s when Doane Robinson, the South Dakota State Historian, set out to create a tourist attraction that would bring people to his state. But this project would prove to be no easy feat.

Getting political support, securing funding, and gaining permission to carve the monument were some of the challenges that had to be overcome to make the idea become a reality. Further, the onset of the Great Depression introduced yet another obstacle to making progress on Mount Rushmore. (The Great Depression began in 1929. For more than a decade, the American economy was not working properly, also known as a recession or economic downturn. Millions of people lost their jobs, and those who had jobs were paid less money. Americans struggled to meet basic needs like finding food, shelter, and clothing.)

Carving began in 1927, but the work was also a challenge. Four hundred workers were involved in the project; they were lowered over the face of the mountain, hanging hundreds of ...



...feet in the air in bosun chairs (similar to the harnesses used by window washers and rock climbers). It was a dangerous process, involving jackhammers, hand chisels, and lots of dynamite.² Not any kind of work you would want to do if you're scared of heights! Even though the work was dangerous, a job was a blessing during the Depression, and not a single worker died during construction.³

Mount Rushmore has the faces of four U.S. presidents: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln. Each was chosen because they represent some of the most important parts of American history, as well as our Nation's most important values.

George Washington, before serving as America's first president, was commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. His bravery, leadership, and moral resolve during the Revolutionary War led the colonists to victory over the British, which won our American independence. As our nation's first president, Washington set the example for how the commander-in-chief of the United States should act and transfer power to the next president. This was an important test for our young country to ensure that a government founded by and for the people would endure. Washington was chosen to be represented on Mount Rushmore because he represented the birth of America and moral leadership.

The second figure is Thomas Jefferson, also one of America's Founding Fathers. He was the primary author of the Declaration of Independence and later became the third president of the United States. In an event now known as the Louisiana Purchase, President Jefferson bought the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803 and doubled the size of the U.S. Jefferson was selected to be featured because he represents the expansion of America.

The third figure is Theodore Roosevelt, also known as Teddy. Teddy Roosevelt was the 26th President of the United States, serving at the beginning of the 20th Century, a time of great economic growth and change. Roosevelt played a major role in the negotiations to build the Panama Canal, stood up for the rights of working-class American citizens, and ensured our natural environment could be used and enjoyed by future generations through his establishment of the U.S. Forest Service as well as numerous national parks, bird sanctuaries, and wildlife refuges. The image of Roosevelt atop Mount Rushmore represents America's development into a new century and beyond.

The last figure is Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln was our 16th President, serving during the Civil War, when states in the North fought against states in the South to end slavery and keep the United States together. Abraham Lincoln thought slavery was wrong and fought to abolish it. But he also fought to preserve the United States, to ensure the North and South remained united as one country, living peacefully, with liberty and justice for all. He famously said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand."⁴ Because of Lincoln's leadership, the Union won the Civil War and kept the country together. Lincoln is honored on Mount Rushmore because he ensured the survival of the United States through its greatest trial, saving its future.

Finally, after 14 years, Mount Rushmore was completed in 1941.⁵ Today, more than two million ... people visit Mount Rushmore each year!⁶ Mount Rushmore is a celebration of America and a monument embodying the integrity and strength of our greatest leaders. It is a reminder of the great legacy we must live up to as Americans. The great stone statues are predicted to last 500,000 years or more: inspired by Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt, and Lincoln's examples, perhaps America's exceptionalism will survive into that future.⁷

THE ST. LOUIS ARCH

[Editor's note: Name changed from the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial to the Gateway Arch National Park.]

Recall from one of our earlier lessons Jefferson's historic Louisiana Purchase, as well as the famed expedition of Louis, Clark, and Sacagawea through the American West and to the Pacific Ocean. The westward expansion of the 19th century enabled America to expand, grow, and flourish beyond the original 13 states. The West opened up a whole horizon of possibility and opportunity, as well as adventure and discovery.

In 1935, an area of land along the riverfront in St. Louis, Missouri, was chosen to create a national monument that would represent this era of westward expansion. (Recall that Lewis and Clark's expedition initially set out from Camp Dubois, near St. Louis, in 1804. Also, St. Louis, in addition to South Dakota that we previously talked about, was a part of the Louisiana Purchase.) In addition to Thomas Jefferson's dream for a nation that spanned from the Atlantic to the Pacific, the goal was to memorialize "the men who made possible the western territorial expansion of the United States," including "the great explorers, Lewis and Clark, and the hardy hunters, trappers, frontiersmen, and pioneers," as one local civic group wrote.⁸

Various obstacles, including America's involvement in World War II, significantly delayed the project. One important question that was still unanswered was: what should the monument look like? After a nationwide design competition, the arch design by Finnish-born architect Eero Saarinen was chosen in 1948. [Editor's note: Saarinen also designed the Washington Dulles International Airport.] Saarinen wanted to capture both the enduring legacy of Jefferson and the pioneers, as well as pay tribute to the modern age. He said, "The major concern ... was to create a monument which would have lasting significance and would be a landmark of our time... Neither an obelisk nor a rectangular box nor a dome seemed right on this site or for this purpose. But here, at the edge of the Mississippi River, a great arch did seem right."⁹

Construction began in 1963 and was finished two years later, in 1965. The stainless-steel-faced arch stands 630 feet tall, and the outer faces of its legs are 630 feet apart on the ground. The legs are made in the shape of equilateral triangles, or triangles with equal sides. At ground level, the sides are 54 feet long; the sides get smaller and smaller, so at the top, they are 17 feet long.

Visitors can also travel to the top of the arch on a tram that moves at 340 feet per minute. According to the National Park Service, the Arch “takes the shape of an inverted catenary curve; a shape such as would be formed by a heavy chain hanging freely between two supports.” It is also “one of three firsts in the history of engineering in this country, all in the City of St. Louis.”¹⁰

[Editor’s Note: Via National Parks Service: “Historic Eads Bridge, the first tubular steel arch structure of its kind, completed in 1874, forms the northern boundary of the Memorial. At the southern boundary stands the steel plate girder bridge designed by Sverdrup and Parcel - the first U.S. bridge of this size to employ orthotropic design. The Gateway Arch, in neighborly spirit, borrows the arch concept from Captain Eads and makes use of the new concept of stress analysis and structural design from Sverdrup and Parcel.”]

Today, the Gateway Arch stands as a representation of what Americans can achieve through courage, curiosity, and creativity. From Thomas Jefferson, the Corps of Discovery, and the pioneers, to Eero Saarinen, and the teams of architects and engineers that built the Arch, let us always remember the marvels that we can achieve as Americans.

THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE

Many called it “the bridge that couldn’t be built” – but today we know it as the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, California. The Golden Gate Bridge spans 1.7 miles across the Golden Gate Strait, connecting San Francisco to Marin County.¹¹

With advancements in civil engineering in the early 20th century and a massive population in the Bay Area, the time was ripe to attempt to construct what had long been thought of as impossible. Political and economic challenges (particularly during the Great Depression) aside, imagine trying to build a bridge over one mile of water. Imagine trying to figure out how to make the structure withstand strong tides, winds, salt air and water, and earthquakes erupting from the nearby San Andreas Fault.

Such an enormous task required a team of engineers, architects, geologists, contractors, and construction workers led by Chief Engineer Joseph B. Strauss.¹²

Construction began in 1933, in the midst of the Great Depression. Those who were brave enough seized the opportunity to work on this treacherous project with hazardous conditions.

Divers had to plunge into the cold ocean with dynamite and hoses to move loose material away and set up the forms and funnels used for concrete. They would descend up to 110 feet, but keep in mind this was before portable air tanks had been invented – they relied on a long hose to breathe!¹³

Steel was shipped for the two towers from Pennsylvania through the Panama Canal (thanks, Teddy Roosevelt!) to the San Francisco Bay. Tall towers are important structures in a long-span suspension...

... bridge (this is a type of bridge where the road is attached to cables and hangs in the air), and the Golden Gate is taller than a 60-story building. At the time, the 746-foot-tall towers were the tallest bridge towers in the world.¹⁴ The bridge also held the record for the world's longest suspension span until the completion of New York City's Verrazano Narrows Bridge in 1964.¹⁵

Much of the bridge was built by local laborers who not only needed the pay, but also knew what a historic engineering project the Golden Gate Bridge was. They knew it would become one of the greatest accomplishments in modern engineering. Between the natural elements, heavy materials, and high-altitude work, the jobs working on the bridge were dangerous and scary. Safety nets were installed during construction to catch workers who fell, and workers wore safety equipment such as helmets, headlamps, and wind goggles.¹⁶

In May 1937, the bridge officially opened. Chief Engineer Joseph Strauss said that the bridge was made to last "forever."¹⁷ To date, more than 2 billion cars have driven across the Golden Gate Bridge!¹⁸

When the bridge was finished, Strauss authored a poem that reads:

At last the mighty task is done;
Resplendent in the western sun
The Bridge looms mountain high;
Its titan piers grip ocean floor,
Its great steel arms link shore with shore,
Its towers pierce the sky. ...

An Honored cause and nobly fought
And that which they so bravely wrought, ...

High overhead its lights shall gleam,
Far, far below life's restless stream,
Unceasingly shall flow;
For this was spun its lithe fine form,
To fear not war, nor time, nor storm,
For Fate had meant it so.¹⁹

From the Golden Gate Bridge, to the St. Louis Arch, to Mount Rushmore, each of these monuments are incredible accomplishments that represent where we have been as a nation and where we are going. What makes America extraordinary are the people who dare to do the impossible, explore the unknown, and seize opportunity. This has been true since America was founded, and these monuments remind us that with the help of each one of us, America will remain exceptional.

Footnotes

1. <https://www.nps.gov/moru/learn/kidsyouth/how-big-are-the-heads.htm>
2. <https://www.nps.gov/moru/learn/historyculture/carving-history.htm>
3. <https://www.nps.gov/moru/learn/historyculture/the-workers.htm#:~:text=Over%20the%20fourteen%20year%20period,fatalities%20during%20the%20carving%20work>
4. <https://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/housedivided.htm#:~:text=%22A%20house%20divided%20against%20itself,thing%2C%20or%20all%20the%20other>
5. <https://www.nps.gov/moru/learn/historyculture/memorial-history.htm>
6. <https://www.nps.gov/moru/planyourvisit/index.htm#:~:text=Just%20over%20two%20million%20people%20visit%20Mount%20Rushmore%20each%20year>
7. <https://www.travelsouthdakota.com/trip-ideas/story/75-surprising-facts-about-mount-rushmore>
8. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/2018/06/26/50-years-later-the-st-louis-arch-emerges-with-a-new-name-and-a-skeptical-view-of-western-expansion/>
9. <https://www.nps.gov/jeff/planyourvisit/architect.htm>
10. <https://www.nps.gov/jeff/planyourvisit/materials-and-techniques.htm>
11. <https://www.goldengate.org/bridge/history-research/statistics-data/design-construction-stats/>
12. <https://www.goldengate.org/exhibits/bridging-the-gate-the-beginning/>
13. <https://www.goldengate.org/exhibits/working-under-water/>
14. <https://www.goldengate.org/exhibits/worlds-tallest-bridge-towers/>
15. <https://www.goldengate.org/bridge/history-research/statistics-data/faqs/>
16. <https://www.goldengate.org/exhibits/all-in-a-days-work/>
17. <https://www.goldengate.org/bridge/history-research/bridge-construction/joseph-strauss/>
18. <https://www.goldengate.org/bridge/history-research/statistics-data/faqs/>
19. <https://www.goldengate.org/bridge/history-research/bridge-construction/joseph-strauss/#poems>

Additional Resources

- <https://www.nps.gov/moru/learn/kidsyouth/how-big-are-the-heads.htm>
- <https://www.nps.gov/moru/learn/historyculture/carving-history.htm>
- <https://www.nps.gov/moru/learn/historyculture/the-workers.htm#:~:text=Over%20the%20fourteen%20year%20period,fatalities%20during%20the%20carving%20work.>
- <https://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/housedivided.htm#:~:text=%22A%20house%20divided%20against%20itself,thing%2C%20or%20all%20the%20other.>
- <https://www.nps.gov/moru/learn/historyculture/memorial-history.htm>
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- <https://www.nps.gov/jeff/planyourvisit/architect.htm>
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