

## A Tour of the Washington Monument's Commemorative Stones

written by your teacher

Author's note: A long while back when I visited Washington, D.C., you could request a special tour of the Washington Monument every Saturday morning at 10:00 a.m. This special tour took you to the top of the Monument with a National Park Ranger, which everyone gets to do, but then you were allowed to slowly climb down to the ground floor using the stairs. What many people who just ride the elevator both up and down don't know is that the inside of the monument is decorated with almost 200 commemorative stones that were sent over the years from all over the country and world. I took this tour, and I am sad to hear it's no longer offered. My National Park Ranger who gave the tour looked nothing like an **American Beaver**, but I thought it would be fun to turn him into one for tis guided tour script. Imagine you have been taken to the top of the monument and had time to look out at Washington, D.C., then a small group of you are permitted into the stairwell for this special tour.



*a. Buchanan the Beaver*



*First Stone - Worn plaque reads "Top of Statue on Capitol"*

Hello, humans. I hope you enjoyed your time in the top of the Washington Monument today, and I hope your view from the 500' observation deck of this 555-foot monument were memorable and—perhaps—worthy of a selfie. I'm Buchanan, I'm an American Beaver, and I'll be your guide for the remainder of your special tour today. Today's tour is special because, well, it's being guided by a beaver, and also most people aren't allowed to walk down the stairs inside the monument, and they miss seeing all the commemorative stones that are attached along the staircase anymore. Most of the stones you will see were sent from various states, large organizations, and smaller civic organizations between 1849 and 1855. Only by walking down the stairs can you see them all today. Our first stop here is at a stairwell about 170 feet below the observation deck. The stone displayed here commemorates the exact height of the statue on top of the

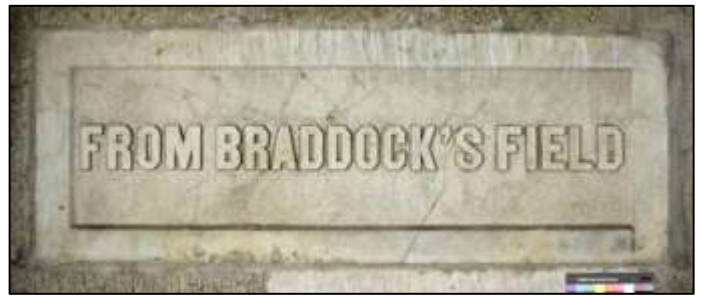
second-tallest marble building here at the National Mall: The U.S. Capitol. Did you know that no building in Washington, D.C., can be taller than the monument you are standing in? I am often asked if I wish beavers could build a dam as large as the Washington Monument, and interestingly enough, the largest beaver dam, which is Alberta, Canada, is four times the size of the Washington Monument, and can be seen from space, which the Washington Monument cannot boast. Let's head down several flights of stairs to the 250-foot stair landing.



pass. Let's head down one more stairwell to the 240-foot landing.

Here at the 250-foot stairwell, we mark the halfway point between the ground and the observation deck of this marble monument. While the stone we started with seemed well-worn, most of the commemorative stones showcase elaborate carving skills, like this 4' x 6' plaque presented in 1854 by the Philadelphia Fire Department. Take a look at the many stones here at this level, and see if you can find one that you think shows the most skill by the carver. Remember, most of these stones are over 150 years old and are slowly eroding in time. Unlike a beaver's teeth, which are constantly growing bigger, these commemorative stones are only going to get smaller and smaller as the years

While many stones embedded here in the monument's stairwell are from organizations and states paying their respect to the Father of our Country—George Washington—a number of them represent the important places and events found in President Washington's personal history. This less-than-elaborate stone is one such memorial stone. Braddock's Field was the site of one of the first battles in the French-Indian War, a battle that advanced the name of a young military leader named George Washington, and this limestone slab was actually taken from that field and carved into the stone you see here. This battle, which took place near the shores of the Monongahela River near what is modern-day Pittsburgh, was the second largest Indian victory in American history; the Indian battle that killed Custer is the tenth largest victory, so this battle was significant in its size as well as in the fact that it promoted George Washington's name into the public eye. Primary source documents show this particular stone was carved in 1850 by James Buchanan—not the James Buchanan who was president and for whom I was named—but a different James Buchanan. I wonder how many James Buchanans there are in the world today. I wonder how many George Washington's there are. Let's head down two more stairwell landings to the 220-foot mark as we think about that.



All fifty states feature commemorative stones inside this monument. The state of Nevada dedicated this stone seventeen years after being admitted to the union and seven years before the monument opened, so these stones were created and sent to be included in the monument on a strange timeline. The last state stone to be dedicated was Alaska, which was placed in 1982, and it is one of the very last stones to become part of the monument. Nevada's stone is an interesting one because it was vandalized. Originally, the words in Nevada and the numbers in the 1881 were filled with pure silver from "The Silver State," which is Nevada's nickname. By 1888, the silver had slowly been stolen—letter by letter—until all but one remained, according to an 1887 article in *The New England magazine*. That one remaining letter was removed for safe-keeping. Today, this state-dedicated plaque is simply the color of the granite it was originally carved into. Speaking of color, did you know that a beaver's teeth are orange but not because of bad dental hygiene? Beaver's tooth enamel contains iron, which keeps it tougher than human teeth, but discolors it to the color of orange. If there was iron in these commemorative stones, perhaps they would last as long as my teeth. Think about that as we head down three landings to the 190-foot stairwell.



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Here you will find one of the most elaborate stones found located inside the Washington Monument. Not only did states and local organizations send stones, so too did foreign countries. This beautiful and elaborate sculpture came from the Sultan of Turkey in 1854. The Sultan announced he would be sending the stone in 1852, and obviously the next two years were spent designing this highly elaborate piece. You'll notice the text is written in Turkish. Does anyone know Turkish and can translate? No? Luckily, I have a distant relative—a Eurasian Beaver, the only other species of Beaver on the planet—who was able to translate the inscription when I sent it to him. It reads, "So as to strengthen the bonds between the two countries?" Do you know of any other times in American history when something elaborate and artistic was sent as a gesture of good will between two countries? Think on that as we head down fifty feet to our last stop on this tour today.



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This final stop is to remind you of the importance of being accurate, especially if you're writing something carved in stone. Here you see a commemorative plaque carved in granite that actually comes from Otter's Summit, which is still a popular hiking destination in Virginia. Otter's Summit is some 230 miles from the spot in the same state where George Washington was born as Virginia's "noblest son." The inaccuracy here is in the phrase "loftiest peak," which is not accurate; in fact, Otter's Summit is not even in the top 50 of Virginia's highest peaks. Mount Rogers, which is some 168 miles southwest of Otter's Summit, is significantly higher. Perhaps in 1853, the citizens of Virginia had not surveyed all of the mountains in the

state, or perhaps the word "loftiest" is not meant as literal height but instead as "imposingly powerful," which is also part of that word's definition. It's not uncommon for there to be inaccuracies in history or science; many people, for example, firmly believe that beavers eat fish, but we don't. American beavers are 100% herbivores, and we are completely satisfied with our simple diets of bark, branches, and grass. Bringing that fact up has reminded me how close to lunch it is, so I will ask you to help me end today's tour by heading down to the base of the monument, enjoying that additional commemorative stones you may pass. Thank you for joining me today to get an "inside look" at the Washington Monument, the highest structure that will ever grace our nation's capital.

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#### Works Cited:

(Students, can you help me translate these websites I used for research into correct MLA format? Thanks!)

- **The Washington Monument: A Technical History and Catalog of the Commemorative Stones** found online at: [http://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online\\_books/wamo/stones.pdf](http://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/wamo/stones.pdf)
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- **Sharp Top/Otter's Summit:** <http://virginiatrailguide.com/2010/10/23/sharp-top-and-buzzards-roost/>
- **Amazing Facts about the Beaver:** [http://www.onekind.org/education/animals\\_a\\_z/beaver/](http://www.onekind.org/education/animals_a_z/beaver/)
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