

PEACE CROSS
4500 Annapolis Road (intersection of Rt 450 and Rt 1)
Bladensburg
Prince George's County
Maryland

HABS MD-1415
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PHOTOGRAPHS

COLOR TRANSPARENCIES

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

PEACE CROSS

HABS No. MD-1415

- Location:** 4500 Annapolis Road (intersection of Rt. 450 and Alternate Rt. 1)
Bladensburg, Prince George's County, Maryland
- Coordinates for the Peace Cross are 38.939400 N, -76.940897 W, and they were obtained through Google Earth in December 2013 with, it is assumed, NAD 1983. There is no restriction on the release of the locational data to the public.
- Present Owner:** Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission
(M-NCPPC)
- Present Use:** World War I Memorial
- Significance:** The Peace Cross is a forty-foot tall exposed aggregate concrete cross constructed as a memorial to the Prince George's County, Maryland residents who lost their lives in World War I. Peace Cross also served as the starting point of the new National Defense Highway between Bladensburg and Annapolis. Construction was initiated in 1919 by the Prince George's County Memorial Committee on land near the historic port of Bladensburg. In 1922 the Snyder-Farm No. 3 Post of the American Legion took over the project, raising the necessary funds and dedicating the memorial on July 12, 1925.
- Peace Cross was designed and constructed by local concrete innovator John Joseph Earley. Starting in 1916, Earley developed a method of creating colorful pre-cast concrete panels employing a variety of exposed aggregates. This project is an early example of his work in this visually striking construction material. It sits on a grassy, crescent-shaped traffic island with a flagpole and some low scale plantings. Due to long-standing conflicts about control of the traffic island, the Circuit Court ruled in 1956 that the State of Maryland was the owner. In 1960, the State transferred ownership to the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. M-NCPPC still administers and maintains the Peace Cross and its site. Today the memorial includes a small exposed aggregate concrete World War II "Honor Roll," other small veterans' memorials for later conflicts, and additional plantings on a small plot across the road to the east.
- Historian:** Lisa P. Davidson, Ph.D., HABS Staff Historian

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Groundbreaking - September 28, 1919
Dedication - July 12, 1925
2. Original owner: Prince George's County Memorial Committee (1919-1922)
3. Subsequent owners: Snyder-Farmer Post No. 3, American Legion (1922-1956)
State of Maryland (1956-60)
Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission
(1960-present)
4. Builder/Designer: John Joseph Earley
5. Contractor: Edgar H. Mosher, concrete foundation
Earley Studios, rest of structure
6. Original plans and construction: Architectural drawings for the Peace Cross have not been located, but it appears to retain its original form and details.
7. Alterations and additions: The plantings and other low scale features of the Peace Cross's traffic island site have been changed and replaced over the years. The site also includes a flagpole located just west of the Cross and across Annapolis Road to the east an exposed aggregate concrete "Honor Roll" scroll memorializing World War II, as well as plantings and more conventional granite markers for later conflicts.

B. Historical Context:

The Peace Cross is a forty-foot tall exposed aggregate concrete cross constructed as a memorial to the Prince George's County, Maryland residents who lost their lives in World War I. Like many communities throughout the United States, Prince George's County sought to commemorate the loss of its citizens in the Great War. It also served as the starting point of the new National Defense Highway between Bladensburg and Annapolis. Construction was initiated in 1919 by the Prince George's County Memorial Committee on land near the historic port of Bladensburg. The Cross was placed at the west end of the new highway (now Annapolis Road/Route 450). Ultimately its dedication plaque would be placed on the west side of the monumental cross, further emphasizing its function as a gateway to the modern road.

Peace Cross was designed and constructed by local concrete innovator John Joseph Earley. Starting in 1916 Earley developed a method of creating colorful pre-cast concrete panels employing a variety of exposed aggregates. This project is an early example of his work in this visually striking construction material. Other prominent Earley projects include Meridian Hill Park in Washington, DC (1914-36), the replica of the Athenian Parthenon in Centennial Park,

Nashville, Tennessee (1925), Baha'i Temple in Wilmette, Illinois (1932), and the Marché House in nearby Hyattsville (1932).¹

Groundbreaking for the memorial cross and the National Defense Highway was conducted in a joint ceremony on September 28, 1919.² The name "Peace Cross" would come later and the early newspaper accounts refer to the memorial in various way - "sacrifice cross," "Calvary cross." John J. Riggles, president of the county good roads league and head of the Memorial Committee presided over the ceremony. The keynote speaker was Josephus Daniels, Secretary of the Navy during the war. Mrs. William Farmer, mother of George Farmer - the first county resident killed in France, did the ceremonial first shovel for the cross. The highway groundbreaking honor went to Mrs. Martin Redman, mother of William Redman, who died while serving with the naval reserve flying corps. Mrs. Redman later served as treasurer of the Memorial Committee.

Contractor Edgar Mosher of Washington, DC prepared the foundations for the memorial cross, completing \$190.75 worth of work by late November 1920. Mosher was paid a total of \$675.80, but the effort was faltering. The Memorial Committee did not have the funds to continue and construction was halted. Then in February 1922 the Snyder-Farm Post No. 3 of the American Legion took over the project, with the stipulation that if the post ceased to exist ownership of the memorial and its property would revert to the Town of Bladensburg.³ Based in Hyattsville, members of Post No. 3 were Great War veterans of the Maryland Fourth Regiment. Like the Memorial Committee, the Snyder-Farm Post solicited donation pledges and conducted community fundraisers such as a ball at the armory in Hyattsville and an excursion to Chesapeake Beach.⁴

A newspaper article from February 1924 noted that the Legion Post had about \$900 on hand but needed an additional \$1,000 to let the contracts, with a total goal of \$5,000.⁵ They eventually succeeded in raising the necessary funds and dedicating the memorial on July 12, 1925.⁶ Representative Stephen W. Gambrill of the Fifth Maryland Congressional district gave a keynote address at the dedication. He declared: "You men of Prince George's County fought for the sacred right of all to live in peace and security and by the token of this cross, symbolic of Calvary, let us keep fresh the memory of our boys who died for a righteous cause."⁷ From the first years following its dedication, the Peace Cross has served as a site for American Legion Memorial Day ceremonies and other veterans' events.⁸

¹ Breiseth et. al., 8:2.

² "Begin Work on Memorial: Ground Broken for Prince George's Monument and Highway," *Washington Post*, 29 September 1919.

³ partial typescript "History of Peace Cross," Historic Preservation section files. The original and complete document had not been located at the time of this report.

⁴ See "Hyattsville to Help Get Fund for Vet Cross," *Washington Times*, 5 October 1922, 7; "Funds Sought for Cross," *Washington Herald*, 28 November 1922, 3; "Outing for Benefit of Memorial Cross," *Washington Post*, 29 July 1924, 7.

⁵ "Suburban: Hyattsville," *Washington Post*, 18 February 1924, 3.

⁶ partial typescript "History of Peace Cross," Historic Preservation section files.

⁷ "Legion Dedicates Bladensburg War Memorial Cross," *Washington Post*, 13 July 1925, 14.

⁸ "Bruce Lauds Heroes at Bladensburg Rites," *Washington Post*, 31 May 1928, 5.

The cross form was popular for war memorials as well as grave monuments in this period. While clearly imbued with Christian significance, the cross was also used as a broader cultural symbol of sacrifice. World War I-era English military cemeteries each had, as a standard feature, a "Cross of Honor." This example of a monumental stone cross had attenuated arms and a bronze Crusaders sword attached at the center. Overseas American military cemeteries for World War I departed from the typical slab headstone used in national cemeteries for standard Latin cross or Star of David form headstones.⁹ At the Peace Cross, the American Legion symbol is prominent as are the bronze letters presenting military virtues - valor, courage, endurance, and devotion. Also at street level, the Peace Cross includes a bronze plaque listing the names of 49 local men who died while in military service overseas. The desire to democratize war memorials, and individually recognize the fallen, was an increasing trend in the early twentieth century.

Due to long-standing conflicts about ownership of the traffic island, the Circuit Court ruled in 1956 that the State of Maryland was the owner.¹⁰ In 1960, the State transferred ownership to the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. In 1965 the Bladensburg Rotary Club provided floodlights for the Cross. M-NCPPC administers and maintains the Peace Cross and its site. Today the memorial includes a small World War II "Honor Roll," and additional plantings on a small plot to the east. In 2012, the American Humanist Association notified M-NCPPC that they intended to sue unless the Peace Cross was removed, citing the separation of church and state. M-NCPPC lawyers offered a rebuttal and currently this issue appears to be dormant.¹¹

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Peace Cross combines a traditional memorial form of a Celtic cross with an Art Deco surface provided by the use of polychrome exposed aggregate concrete.
2. Condition of fabric: Fair. There is some cracking and spalling of the concrete that needs to be address to prevent further deterioration.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: Peace Cross is approximately forty-feet high, with the cross arms extending five feet to either side.

⁹ For a discussion of this debate, see the author's Historic American Landscapes Survey documentation of Flanders Field American Cemetery and Memorial, Waregem, West Flanders, Belgium, HALS No. BE-1, Prints and Photographs Collection, Library of Congress.

¹⁰ "Suit Asks Division of Bladensburg's Peace Cross Plot," *Washington Post*, 14 August 1937, 3.

¹¹ See Miranda S. Spivack, "Memorial Peace Cross: Veterans memorial or religious symbol," *Washington Post*, 13 September 2012, accessed online.

2. Foundations: Peace Cross stands on 15 foot square base approximately six feet high. The base matches the Cross above with a primarily tan aggregate surface outlined in a thin band of pink granite aggregate. Concrete foundations continue below grade.
3. Form: The thick cross form includes semi-circular brackets at the top and bottom of each arm, creating a Celtic cross appearance. The form of the memorial is monumental, clear, and bold. Additional research is needed to determine the construction techniques used here, which involved pre-cast concrete panels.
4. Ornamentation: The construction method of exposed aggregate concrete provides the primary ornamentation for the memorial. The primary color base and cross is a buff tan with flint aggregate. The cross is decorated with a thin line of pink granite aggregate outlining the edges of the two main elevations (west and east). The side elevations (north and south) have a thick bank of pink granite aggregate that continues across the semi-circular brackets. The center of the cross has an inlaid seal of the American Legion executed in green, blue, and red aggregate on both the west and east elevations. The seal includes the letters "U.S." superimposed on a five-pointed star inscribed in a circular laurel wreath. An early black and white photograph shows that originally the circle was more prominent, with a light colored field behind the star (Figure 1). Weathering and perhaps later restoration work has made the contrast between the star, circular wreath and background more muted.

Bronze serif letters are attached to the bottom of the cross on all four sides. The letters spell VALOR (west), ENDURANCE (south), COURAGE (east), and DEVOTION (north). A bronze plaque set into a shallow recess on the west side of the base (below "VALOR") holds the inscription:

"1917 THIS MEMORIAL CROSS 1918"
"DEDICATED TO THE HEROES"
"OF PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY, MARYLAND WHO LOST THEIR LIVES IN"
"THE GREAT WAR FOR THE LIBERTY OF THE WORLD"

The names of the 49 local soldiers who died during the conflict are listed in seven vertical columns. The plaque concludes with a quote from President Woodrow Wilson across the bottom, "The right is more precious than peace. We shall fight for the things we have always carried nearest our hearts. To such a task we dedicate our lives." The plaque is affixed to the cross at the corners with bolts decorated by five-point stars.

C. Site:

1. Setting: The Peace Cross sits on a grassy crescent-shaped traffic island formed by the crossing of Annapolis Road (Route 450), Bladensburg Road, and Alternate Route 1. The site is flat and modest in size.
2. Plantings: Various low scale plantings have been located around the base of the Peace Cross. When the HABS photographs were taken in March 2013, mature rose bushes

formed a solid hedge encircling the base. These plantings have since been replaced with small perennials.

3. Associated memorials: A World War II "Honor Roll" faces the Peace Cross on the east. Constructed from concrete, the Honor Roll takes the form of an unfurled scroll resting on a base. The scroll portion features a fine tan-colored exposed aggregate. A gold star in a circular blue field appears near the top, executed in colored aggregate. Just below large serif letters done in blue aggregate read "HONOR ROLL." A circular bronze American Legion seal and modest rectangular bronze plaque sit at the middle within a large square of slightly lighter fine aggregate. The plaque reads "IN MEMORY OF THE MEN AND WOMEN OF PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY WHO MADE THE SUPREME SACRIFICE THAT FREEDOM MIGHT LIVE." Below this area "Prince George's County World War II" appears in small sans serif letters executed in blue aggregate. A ribbon motif with a five-point star done in blue and gold aggregate is located in the lower right hand corner. While the use of colored aggregate compliments Earley's work on the Peace Cross, the craftsmanship is much cruder on this smaller monument. A small black granite Korean/Vietnam War Memorial was added in 1983, also across the road from the Peace Cross.

PART III. SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

"Peace Cross" file, Historic Preservation Section, Prince George's County, M-NCPPC, Upper Marlboro, MD.

Baltz, Shirley et. al., "Peace Cross," (PG: 69-005-16) Maryland Historical Trust Maryland Historic Sites Inventory Form (1985).

Breiseth, Elizabeth and Paul Weishar, "Peace Cross," (PG: 69-005-16) Maryland Historical Trust Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties Form, (2007).

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of Peace Cross was undertaken in 2013 by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Heritage Documentation Programs division of the National Park Service (Richard O'Connor, Chief). The historical report was written by HABS Historian Lisa P. Davidson. The large-format photography was done by HABS Contract Photographer Renee Bieretz.

PART V. ILLUSTRATION



Figure 1: Veterans' Ceremony at Peace Cross, c. 1920s
Source: "Peace Cross" file, Historic Preservation Section, Prince George's County, M-NCPPC.