Washington's *Winged Victory*

by Marygrace Jennings

The State Capitol Campus in Olympia is rich with artwork and monuments that reflect the character and history of the people of Washington. Among the most beloved is *Winged Victory*, authorized by the State Legislature in 1919 "in honor of the soldiers, sailors and marines from this state who lost their lives in the service by disease or on the battlefield at home or abroad in the present war with the Teutonic powers."

The history of this well known memorial weaves a story of raw sentiment and artistic ambition, the triumph of a strong and worthy vision, and the enduring nature of our State Capitol Campus. *Winged Victory*, our World War I memorial, is a larger-than-life heroic bronze sculpture by Northwest artist Alonzo Victor Lewis (1886-1946) set atop an imposing, gray granite pedestal. It commands a prominent location on the capital grounds, at the circular terminus of two main diagonal drives into Campus.

The monument was conceived by the State Legislature before the war was officially over. A sum of $50,000 was appropriated for it in the same legislation that authorized the first installment for construction of a new state capitol. It must have been a satisfying moment for the 1919 State Legislature, as sadness and respect for the fallen tempered victory's fresh confidence. They chose to look to the future, and in the same bold stroke funded a new capitol building to house our

Building the *Winged Victory* monument on the State Capital Campus in the late 1930s. *Courtesy Family of Robert Barclift.*

A chemical and heat process applied by experts in 2008 helped to patinate the surface of the *Winged Victory* monument. *Courtesy Washington State Department of General Administration.*

democracy while ensuring that their generation's precious investment to protect it would not be forgotten.

Construction of the new capitol buildings stretched out over the next two decades and delayed the start of work on the memorial. In 1927, a hopeful Clark Savidge, Secretary of the State Capitol Committee, wrote about the memorial to W.P. Bonney, Secretary of the Washington State Historical Society, "If we get the grounds in shape in time to do it, the work can be taken up during the present biennium. It, of course, cannot be placed until the grounds are ready."

Delays by the artist in producing a scale model for final approval added to the lag, and Alonzo Lewis was not formally commissioned to fabricate the sculpture until 1931. Once work had finally begun, the stresses of the Great Depression and the personal travails of an ambitious and talented but troubled artist caused further setbacks. It was another seven years before *Winged Victory* was completed and placed, in 1938.

In spite of the setbacks, the funding was duly re-appropriated in each new fiscal cycle, and the State Capitol Committee persevered through design revisions, site concerns, contract defaults, and production problems.

Because Lewis' commission to sculpt the monument came just as the state was completing construction of the new capitol, the monument and its location were carefully considered within the composition of landscape and buildings of the new campus. It is distinctive in this regard, as the first and only work of public art to be so integrated into the original campus design.

Alonzo Victor Lewis was born in Utah in 1886, and lived and worked in Washington most of his life. He was a poet, painter and sculptor. In her 2007 *Conservation Treatment Study* for the sculpture, Seattle art conservator Patricia Leavengood wrote, *"Lewis worked in a conservative, realistic style on a heroic scale. His public sculptures, typically of recognized individuals, combined minute detail of expression, dress, and accoutrements with a grand, often over life-size presentation… In selecting Lewis for the War Memorial the Capital Committee clearly recognized both the sculptor's admiration for the ordinary soldier's heroism, and his ability to convey that on a monumental scale."*

In subject matter and composition *Winged Victory* represents an important divergence from Lewis' other works, and is perhaps the signal achievement of his career. In an ambitious departure from his typical style, Lewis designed a group of figures for this installation, rather than a solo form, and included an allegorical figure of Nike, Greek goddess of victory and charioteer to Zeus.

Winged Victory's twelve-foot tall Nike stands behind and above four uniformed images of a soldier, marine, sailor, and red-cross nurse. All of the figures are forward-moving and face in the same direction, looking to a distant horizon. Nike's magnificent wings stretch out behind her, as her right hand, grasping an olive branch, extends protectively over the group before her. She embodies strength, justice, and heavenly sanction for their human mission.

In selecting his subject, Lewis clearly drew inspiration not only from art history, but also from the context for his work: the classical architecture of the state capitol structures rising on this wooded hilltop overlooking Olympia. His use of Greek allegory is thoughtfully and successfully matched to the site, and evokes the nobility, tradition, and legitimacy of classical Greece and Rome for our capital city and our young state.

Unfortunately, *Winged Victory* did not age well. Black

and white photos don't reveal the story in full, but it appears that the sculpture's surfaces darkened and dulled with time and weather, and became streaked with dirt, corrosion, and staining. Various attempts to clean the metal surfaces only increased its vulnerability and worsened the overall condition. In 1989 the sculpture was coated with a brass-colored acrylic sealant, in an attempt to improve its appearance and protect it from further deterioration.

While the question of appearance is debatable—some considered the brassy look gaudy, others thought it an improvement—the acrylic did initially serve to slow the corrosion. Nearly twenty years later however, the acrylic had failed and corrosion was again in full swing, streaking in pale green swaths down the monument and the granite base.

A project to restore the monument was undertaken in 2007, beginning with testing, assessment, and development of a treatment strategy. Restorative treatment and repairs followed in 2008 to remove the acrylic coating, clean and repair the bronze, and recreate the rich, warm, brown surface tone intended by the artist. Removal of the acrylic coating revealed more extensive damage than anticipated, including numerous cracks and fissures that had allowed water to seep inside. Holes were discretely drilled into suspect low points along the sculpture to allow the water—in surprisingly copious amounts—to drain out.

Following the repairs and restoration, a clear protective coating was applied to the sculpture to preserve the finish with minimal future maintenance. *Winged Victory* was proudly re-dedicated on October 14, 2008.

Time adds value to things of true quality. Galvanized by a potent mix of grief and hope, the 1919 vision for a World War One Soldiers' Memorial was finally achieved after nearly twenty years of delay and difficulty. The monument's successful restoration in 2008 is a testament to the enduring nature of the work and the sentiment that inspired it. *Winged Victory* has become a constant and iconic emblem of our State's ambitions, our faith in the future, and our respect for those whose service helped to secure it.

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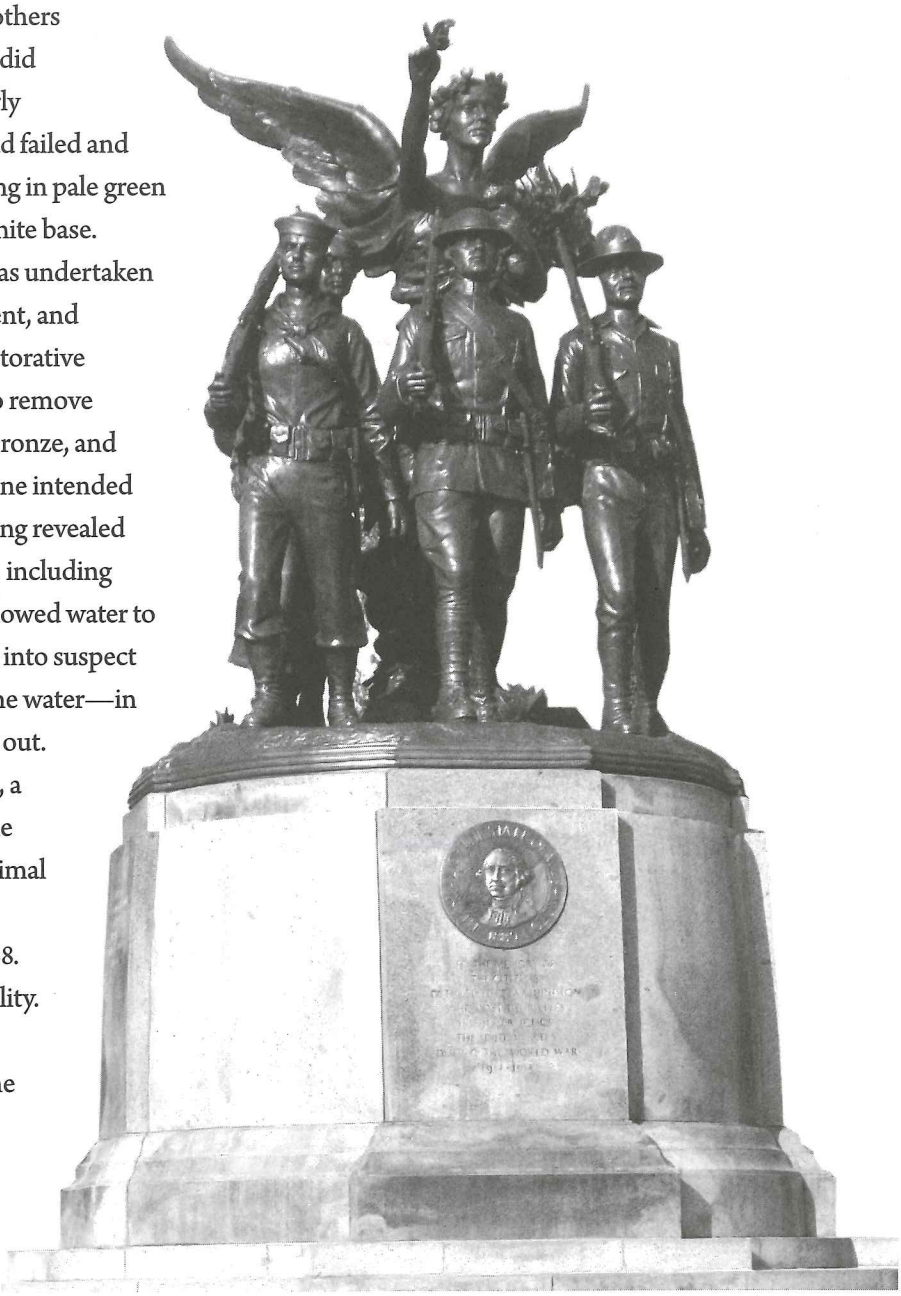

The *Winged Victory* monument after restoration in 2008. *Courtesy Washington State Department of General Administration.*