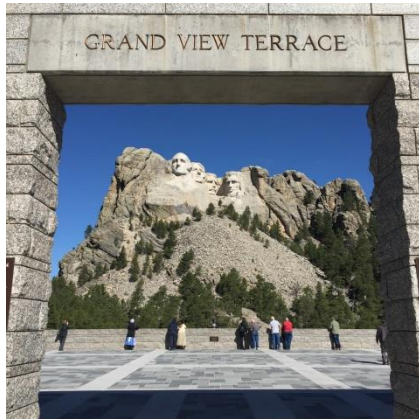


The “Father of Mt. Rushmore”

Doane Robinson

By Jerry Klinger



Mt. Rushmore’s Grand View Terrace



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Mt. Rushmore, South Dakota, where the visages of four presidents, Washington, Jefferson, T. Roosevelt, and Lincoln are massively carved into the mountain, means different things to different people. For some, it is awe at the enormity of the vision begun by the “*Father of Mt. Rushmore*”, Doane Robinson. For others, it is the recognition of the skill, the drive, the single minded belief in the project of, at times controversial, sculptor Gutzon Borglum. But for most Americans, it is a visible, tangible link of our great country that we all can reach out and touch together.

As president of the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation, the opportunity to add our name to the donor walls of Mt. Rushmore, as Americans, is a privilege. For Jewish Americans, Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt and Lincoln brought and preserved the special blessings of freedom for American Jews in ways many do not remember today. By their actions, they advanced freedom for all Americans.

The Jewish community of Newport, Rhode Island wrote a letter of congratulations to President Washington after his election. The President wrote back, *For happily the Government of the United States gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.* It was an extraordinary statement to a people who had not known welcome or a home in 2,000 years. The response to the Jewish community of Rhode Island became a foundation stone of freedom for all Americans.

President Thomas Jefferson wrote the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom in 1786. From it evolved the first Amendment to the Constitution of the United States - *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a*

redress of grievances. American Jews only dreamed of the freedoms of religion, speech, assembly and petition. Jews were denied these freedoms and rights everywhere else in the world. Jefferson wrote it in stone for all Americans.

President Lincoln put Washington and Jefferson's ideals into facts. During the Civil War, General Ulysses S. Grant issued General Order #11, in the Department of the Tennessee. All Jews were to be banished from areas his Union armies controlled. It was an anti-Semitic, arbitrary, broad order such as befell no other people in the history of the United States. Jewish Americans served loyally in Union Armies fighting for freedom and against slavery. Jews in communities across the country, loyal to the Union, reacted with horror at being singled out for such an unjust, arbitrary military order. The Jewish American community petitioned President Lincoln. Lincoln immediately reversed Grant's order. Lincoln protected Jews as Americans and by extension all Americans from arbitrary orders founded in bigotry.

President Theodore Roosevelt was the first President to appoint a Jew to a Cabinet Level position, (1906), Oscar Straus, Secretary of Commerce and Labor. Roosevelt put the United States on record opposing the horrific slaughter of Jews in Russia through state sponsored terrorism. The ideals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, written by Thomas Jefferson, were not just ideals for America alone but for all humanity. President Roosevelt began the process that would create the National Park system in 1916. The treasure of America's parks was not for one people, it was for all Americans.

Yet, Freedom is a process. It is not born, fully developed, equal and just for all. What Washington and Jefferson began with the Founding Fathers was and remains a challenge to implement.

The Pre-Revolutionary Royal Colonies were sovereign, subject to the Crown. Each controlled political rights within their borders. Each had special considerations for who had rights and who did not. All had test oaths of loyalty and by extension exclusion. Test oaths were to be challenged quickly and abolished in almost all the newly establish States after the Revolutionary victory.

Maryland in particular held tightly to its test oath requirements because it wanted to exclude from political life a certain group of its citizens, Jews.

Maryland's test required a newly elected individual to any position within the State to swear upon their faith as a "Christian" they will uphold the laws of the State of Maryland.

Obviously, Jews who took such an oath were lying. They were not Christians. Jews could be excluded from Maryland political life. Even being a lawyer, who was defined as an officer of the court, Jews definitionally were excluded. It was all by design.

In 1816, Thomas Kennedy, a recently immigrated Scottish Marylander, a Presbyterian, was elected to the Maryland legislature. He had no issue taking the Maryland Test oath for admission to the Legislature. He was a Christian. However, he did have a serious problem, a moral and ethical problem as an American.

Thomas Kennedy deeply believed in the principles of Jeffersonian Democracy. He believed the radical ideals of the newly created American political system. He believed in the Constitution and its promise

for all American and certainly all Marylander's. Kennedy had never known a Jew. He had a deep revulsion for the inherent contradiction of American ideals and the Maryland test oath's bigotry.

Kennedy said, *"There are few Jews in the United States. In Maryland there are very few. But if there was only one — to that one, we ought to do justice."*

Kennedy began a ten year struggle to change the Maryland Constitution to rid the blight of the test oath from Maryland's character. The struggle turned into a ten year battle, one of the most vicious, anti-Semitic, hate filled battles of the young American experiment. His fight to change the Maryland Constitution became known as the "Jew Bill".

With a one vote majority, in 1826, the Senate of Maryland approved the "Jew Bill" emancipating Jews in Maryland. The Constitution was changed; but not to the fullest Kennedy dreamed it should be. It was the best he could do at the time.

The Constitutional test oath was modified to permit Jews and even "Mohammadans", though there were none in Maryland, Free Thinkers and others to be emancipated – to get the right to hold political office.

The Maryland Constitution was amended. It still required an oath of a newly elected public representative. They had to affirm their faith in a future time of Judgement before God. The oath requirement remained because Maryland wanted to keep out a group of people they reviled even more than Jews, Quakers.

Quakers cannot swear. The Maryland Constitution was not modified removing the test oath, enabling Quakers to hold public office, until 1903.

In Maryland, in the Country as a whole, freedom was imperfect but it was capable of evolving, developing, and adjusting to something bigger and better over time. It took an idea, advanced by one person or perhaps many willing to reach for an ideal, a dream, to make things happen.

Doane Robinson was such an individual. He deeply loved his State of South Dakota. He dreamed of bringing people to the State. He dreamed of economic prosperity and he dreamed of the special meaning of the American experience.

Only how could he do it?

Who was he? Who was the man who began the process that became Mt. Rushmore?



Doane Robinson

Doane Robinson (1856-1946) was the South Dakota state historian from 1901 to 1926. Speaking to the Black and Yellow Trail Association in January 1924, Robinson proposed his idea to carve legendary figures of the American West into the Black Hills Needles formation. He believed the monument would be a special attraction to draw visitors to the scenic landscape and develop tourism to diversify the state economy. Robinson shared the idea with Senator Peter Norbeck who provided key political support. Enlisting artist Gutzon Borglum, they agreed on presidents as subjects of national significance and Mount Rushmore as the best site. Robinson worked with the state legislature for initial funding, coordinated with Norbeck for Borglum's initial visits, promoted the idea around the state, and was an early leader of the memorial association. Borglum's final design for the Mount Rushmore National Memorial was built from 1927 to 1941.

Nearly 3,000,000 visitors a year come to Mt. Rushmore. A large bust of Borglum fills the wall of the second of the three pergolas leading to the Grand View Terrace at Mt. Rushmore. Robinson has a small, obscure plaque in a corner of a retaining wall, about two feet from the bottom. No one sees it.

The man who dreamed the dream, who had the vision, who strived to make the future American National Memorial a reality, was pretty much written out of the picture. It was not right. It was an injustice that could not go unanswered.

May 11, a state historic interpretive roadside marker for Doane Robinson was dedicated in a ceremony attended by representatives of the State of South Dakota, the Mt. Rushmore Society, a large contingent of Doane Robinson's family, the public and the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation. A proclamation declaring May 11, Doane Robinson day, by Governor Dennis Daugaard was read.

Mr. Robinson and his vision for South Dakota and America are obscure no longer.

Why did I, my family and my society consider it a privilege, an honor, a duty, to support the Mt. Rushmore Society and sponsor the Doane Robinson historic interpretive marker?

Why, because the future is shaped by remembering the past...

"We hold these truths to be self-evident"

The Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation

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