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### Author

Bressi, Todd W

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## THE CITY ON A HILL

Washington, D.C.—They stand here enigmatically, in a meadow, on a hill, in the far outer reaches of this monumental capital city. Twenty-two Corinthian columns, abandoned from the the U.S. Capitol when it was enlarged some 30 years ago, have been resurrected and re-arranged on a grassy knoll in the National Arboretum.

The National Capitol Columns, as they are called, are not quite a ruin, but neither are they a celebration. Arranged almost as they were when they stood at the Capitol, they suggest a portico or a colonnaded chamber, and are reminiscent of some place else, some time else—perhaps the Capitol itself in an era when government, and architecture, was much more accessible to ordinary people.

The columns surround a terrace of marble blocks that were removed from the Capitol steps during the same expansion, and whose chipped and worn edges betray their age. Bursts of thyme are planted in the gaps between these blocks, giving the assemblage an unkempt look. The names of those who contributed to this \$2 million project are carved in the marble, subtly reminding us of the financial limitations of our national government.

Because of their improbable location, one cannot separate the presence of the columns from the reason they are here. They were shorn from the Capitol facade because they could not support a new, enlarged pediment that was installed, and were left to languish. They were rescued through the persis-



**The National Capitol Columns.**  
Photo by Todd W. Bressi.

tence of the late Ethel Garrett, who arranged for the Arboretum to accept them and raised money to pay for their installation. Russell Page, the English landscape gardener, chose the site and made a preliminary sketch; Pat Faux and Russ Hanna of EDAW's Alexandria office completed the project.

The columns are orphans of the expansion not only of the Capitol, but also of the city and the nation. They belong in Washington's monumental core as a testament to the restless expansion of the U.S. and the furtive rebuilding of its cities. Instead, they have been relegated to the Arboretum—not because we have no other place to erect them, but because we have not found a more comfortable way of integrating our past into our present.

So the columns stand improbably on this grassy knoll, transposing the moral and civic vision they embody to an unlikely venue, just as this nation carried that vision to the most remote corners of the continent. But they also stand resolute, offering a counterpoint to and commentary on the relentless transformation that thrust them here. In that sense, they stand as a city in exile, a silent city on a hill.

—Todd W. Bressi