

## *“Boy in Blue”*

### Memorial Project

The American Civil War began on April 12, 1861, with the firing on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. In four years of bloody fighting, 629,000 American lives were lost on both sides; the Union of states was preserved and slavery was abolished. Out of a total population of approximately 31,000,000 in 1860, almost a quarter of it had perished by war's end in 1865,—leaving countless widows, orphans, sisters and sweethearts behind to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives, and begin life anew. After the fiery passions of the war itself had cooled, there emerged an earnest desire, coupled by a concerted effort by individuals throughout the nation to memorialize their Civil War dead by convincing their communities to build war memorials to the fallen heroes. In this way, the wartime sacrifices of the dead would never be forgotten, the living could commune with the dead, and lessons of the past could be passed on to a new generation.

Mankato's *Boy in Blue* was just such a memorial. In 1885, twenty years after the guns fell silent at Appomattox, ladies auxiliary members of Alexander Wilkin Post, Grand Army of the Republic, persuaded the City of Mankato to purchase the triangular block of land, owned by W.H. Shepard, at the intersection of Broad, Grove and Lincoln Streets in Mankato, for the express purpose of erecting a Civil War veterans' memorial. In 1892, the memorial was built on the site; the following year, it was dedicated on Memorial Day, May 30, 1893.

The *Boy in Blue*, representing a Union infantry soldier stood 7'-8' atop a cast iron basin, which in turn stood 6' above a octagonal pool. The basin or fountain portion of the monument, as well as the cornices at each corner of the pool beneath it were decorated with images of rams heads, symbolizing war, and goats heads, symbolizing determination. It is worth noting that even though the park was named in honor of President Abraham Lincoln, his likeness was not chosen to grace the apex of the monument. Rather, it depicted an ordinary soldier—the common man who had given his “last, full measure of devotion,” to preserving the American Union and its ideal of “all men are created equal.” This is proof that the original intention of the statue/fountain's promoters was for it to be a war memorial. Lincoln himself would not have objected; for him, the common soldier embodied the highest ideals for which the war had been fought—preservation of the Union and freedom for all. In the midst of the Civil War, Lincoln himself had journeyed to Gettysburg to memorialize the dead and remind the living of their obligation: “...that from these honored dead, we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last, full measure of devotion...”

Sadly, the *Boy in Blue* did not remain on active duty guarding his park very long. In 1894, vandals broke off the musket he was holding. This happened again in 1911, when the musket was completely broken, and the soldier's fingers were pried off the statue—making it vulnerable to damage from corrosion caused by moisture. A windstorm toppled the figure and it was not repaired. Exposure to the elements and neglect continued to take their toll. By 1922, citizens were asking for the fountain's removal. In 1927, that was done. A granite monument was installed in 1935, to replace the statue/fountain.

Mankato's once-proud Civil War veterans' memorial had passed into history—that is, until very recently. A dedicated group of local researchers were able to discover the name of the original company (Mott) that had constructed the cast-iron basin or “bottom bowl” portion of the fountain, as well as its modern successor (Robinson). Further investigation revealed that statues similar to the “*Boy in Blue*,” had been erected in other American cities, including Forest City, Iowa, and Cape Girardeau, Missouri. An experienced artist, Alan Gibson was contacted, and asked to submit a bid to re-create the “*Boy in Blue*.” On July 5, 2011, the Mankato Area Community Band hosted a concert of patriotic music in Lincoln Park, with the intention of attracting visitors to the site of the original statue/fountain. Over 300 people attended the event, and witnessed the historic announcement that efforts were now underway to form a coalition of community organizations and individuals committed to raising the necessary funds to return the *Boy in Blue* to his post. Since then, the following organizations have stepped forward to support and promote this important cause: Anthony Wayne Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, Blue Earth County Historical Society, City of Mankato Department of Public Works (Parks, Streets, Utilities), Lincoln Park Neighborhood Association, Mankato Area Community Band, Mankato Area Foundation, and Minnesota Heritage Publishing.

This project is an ongoing, grassroots community effort. Any interested individual or organization that wishes to contribute toward the successful re-creation of the “*Boy in Blue*,” is encouraged to contact [www.mnheritage.com](http://www.mnheritage.com) for project updates and specific information on how to make a financial contribution. It will cost approximately \$100,000 to rebuild the memorial. But as Lincoln believed, “trust the people,” and great things will happen.

--Bryce O. Stenzel, M.A., Historian and Project Director

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