

Sylvan Theatre on the Washington Monument Grounds

Background

Source: "DRAFT Cultural Landscape Report: Washington Monument Grounds," John Milner Associates for the NPS, Dec. 2003 (Rev. March 2008)

(pg 2-20)

Establishment of the Sylvan Theatre

One major addition to the Washington Monument Grounds that would serve as a focus for many future public gatherings was the Sylvan Theatre. In 1916, Alice Pike Barney, an arts patron, approached Col. W.W. Harts, Superintendent of the OPB&G, with the idea of building an outdoor theatre for productions of Shakespeare and other classical plays. This theatre was originally envisioned as a grassy knoll with a screen of trees, and its plan was based on that of an interior theatre, with a main stage, wings, entrance passage and floodlights, spotlights, and flood lights. On June 1, 1917, the Sylvan Theatre was dedicated before a crowd of 15,000 with an opening performance of an allegorical play (*figure 2-37*)....

The Sylvan Theatre served as the location for many concerts, ceremonies, and speeches on the monument grounds in the early 20th century (*figure 2-43*).

(pg. 2-25)

In 1944, a permanent stage was built at the Sylvan Theatre. This stage was four feet tall, rectangular in plan and supported by iron girders (*figure 2-70*). In 1976, the Sylvan Theatre underwent a major renovation, with the construction of the existing proscenium arch and enclosed dressing rooms.

(pg. 2-27-summarized)

In advance of the national bicentennial celebrations, a temporary structure (The Kodak Theatre) and a permanent new comfort station were constructed on the southeast corner of the Washington Monument grounds near the Sylvan Theatre in 1976. The comfort station is still extant.

Historical Significance

The Sylvan Theatre is not listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Functionally, the Sylvan Theatre continues its purpose as a dais for public gatherings and events on the Washington Monument grounds. The significance of the Sylvan Theatre, which is recognized in the National Register listing for the Washington Monument and Grounds, is in its continued use as an events/public gathering space. The building itself is not historic.

From the National Register listing for the Washington Monument and Grounds (1980):

"In 1917 the Sylvan Theatre came into existence. The original theatre was not a building but merely an earthen platform bordered by shrubbery. By 1944 an actual stage structure had been built on the site and by 1961 the stage resembled its present appearance. Various auxiliary buildings, such as dressing rooms, a storage room, an electrical room, a control booth and restrooms were erected after 1966. A major renovation of the theatre complex took place in 1976. The extant facility cannot be considered historic."