## CHAPTER III

## CONSTRUCTION PRELIMINARIES 1921-1923

On June 29, 1921, the New York architect, H. Van Buren Magonigle, was unanimously selected to create Kansas City's monument to heroes of the Great War. On November 3, 1921, Mr. Magonigle discussed his plan for the Liberty Memorial with the Association's Board of Governors at a special meeting and Mr. Long was authorized to pay for the model. At a meeting, December 15, 1921, Mr. Long brought to the fore "certain matters in the relationship of Mr. Magonigle and Mr. Kessler to the Liberty Memorial Association in order that there might be a clear understanding at this time and no misunderstanding in the future."

First, the Liberty Memorial Association was to be in no way bound to Mr. Magonigle beyond the "architectural development of the Memorial proper." When Vice President J. C. Nichols asked if the architect would claim compensation for ideas pertaining to further development of the whole general scheme and would there "be any strings?", Mr. Magonigle said there was "no . . . legal obligation . . . to employ him . . . beyond the Memorial proper" and there would be "no strings." Mr. Nichols further underscored the matter of the Liberty Memorial Association's liability and responsibility:

The Association never had the right to enter contractual relations with anyone for any suggestions or plans in the treatment of the

<sup>1&</sup>quot;Minutes," 290. 2Ibid., 304.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 305.

40 acres in the art center . . . that Mr. Magonigle would not expect any compensation . . . unless definite specific agreement was entered into at some future date to that end.  $^4$ 

Mr. Magonigle was in accord with this as well as a number of similar caveats. Mr. Long voiced his personal wish "to use his influence as occasion arose . . . to urge the employment of Mr. Magonigle" for building the art center.  $^5$ 

At the meeting of the Board of Governors the next day, following Mr. Magonigle's explanation of his sketches, a resolution was unanimously adopted by the Board of Governors approving the "general conception embodied in the sketches submitted by Mr. Magonigle in competition."

In the Ball Room of the Hotel Muehlebach the following evening, the Board of Trustees (the old Committee of One Hundred) plus the Committee of One Hundred and Fifty met to consider and take action on H. Van Buren Magonigle's general conception. Although the Board of Governors had complete authority to make the decision, Mr. Long had wished the larger group to be included. Mr. Magonigle, ever an artist with words, "explained that the design was intended to represent an altar high raised in the sky, with its flame of inspiration ever burning" . . . the shaft "was formed by a group of buttresses, so that its character would be readable at a distance." Further, he said, "the architecture while new in combination, is composed of the very elements of architecture . . . the simplicity of the Greeks, the austerity of the Egyptians and the sympathy of Gothic architecture."

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>Ibid., 306.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 307.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>Ibid., 309.

Mr. Thomas R. Kimball, in turn, gave glowing affirmation to the jury's unanimous decision and referred to like endorsements by several architectural authorities of Magonigle's "sublime design." George Kessler not only approved the specific monument design based on fundamental principles but spoke in favor of Mr. Magonigle's general conception for any later building. With unanimous acceptance by the Board of Trustees and the Committee of One Hundred and Fifty for the Resolution approving "the general conception embodied in the sketches submitted by Mr. Magonigle in the competition . . . any changes . . . [to be] approved by the Board of Governors," the meeting was adjourned. 10

Shortly after these meetings, J. C. Nichols privately expressed concerns which presaged impending difficulties. In a letter to R. A. Long, December 29, 1921, which he requested not to be transmitted to their architect, Mr. Nichols wrote that, "in Mr. Magonigle we have a man whom we will have to watch pretty closely . . . and hold a very close rein upon . . ." It is obvious that the Vice President had been troubled by Magonigle's cavalier manner in speaking of "the mere insignificance of a quarter of a million dollars," as well as his ideas about increasing the Memorial's size without considering the costs which would also increase drastically. Mr. Nichols further stressed that Magonigle must be made to give up his notion that Kansas Citians could and should raise another million dollars to build their Memorial! Earlier in the same confidential letter, J. C. Nichols had observed that architects "are naturally thinking along artistic lines

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup>Ibid., 309-310.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup>Ibid., 310.

rather than practical lines," but that Mr. Long and he were responsible to the public in "keeping this cost within the amount they so liberally gave."

By April 5, 1922, several proposals awaited acceptance by the Board of Governors. George Kessler presented traffic pattern plans, a recommendation for the axis of the Memorial and Art Center and for its elevation. Working independently, Mr. Magonigle had arrived at very similar recommendations. The new drawings which the architect had brought from New York promised an even grander Memorial than his competition renderings. The diameter of the tower had been increased five feet and its height was increased forty-six feet! (Fig. 19)

The "amended plans" were enthusiastically approved by the Board and pronounced an "immense improvement over the original sketches."11

At a special meeting of the Board of Governors, June 7, 1922, Mr. Hughes Bryant was named as advisor at a salary of \$500 a month, his employment not to exceed three years. Bryant's duties were to be "to assist the architect, if so desired, in obtaining competitive bids . . . letting contracts . . . to keep a record . . . auditing and approving of extras and credits," etc. 12 The Kansas City Post described Hughes Bryant as a "Widely known Kansas City financial"

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 314. Later in a letter to Hughes Bryant, 20 February 1923, Magonigle responded to Bryant's letter, 9 February 1923, saying that work done on Scheme A, including "trying to use a larger shaft," had not been a waste of time or money — that "every moment and every cent spent on A, B, & C have contributed to the more rapid completion of 'D prime'."

<sup>12&</sup>quot;Minutes." 320.

agent, who has been named . . . to be building supervisor of the construction of the \$2,000,000 memorial to Kansas City's soldier dead."<sup>13</sup> At the same meeting, approval was given the revised plans dated April 13, 1922, as well as "so much of the plans shown as Scheme 'A' . . . agreed upon April 5, 1922 . . . within the following boundary lines . . . approximately one hundred and fifty feet south of the south line of the Memorial Buildings."<sup>14</sup>

By November 14, 1922, H. Van Buren Magonigle had returned to Kansas City and brought a report dated October 17, 1922 (As Revised November 8, 1922) to the Board of Governors of the Liberty Memorial Association. 15 His Scheme A with enlarged dimensions presented April 5 would have been too costly, he said, and had been discarded. He had therefore designed Scheme B, based on dimensions of the original competition plans. Outlines of the Liberty Memorial were superimposed on photographs of the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial as well as the New York Public Library. 16 The architect proposed moving "the Shaft to the South and West... push the Memorial back into the hill." Also, he described several refinements of design and construction. 17

Magonigle presented charts showing "BASIC ESTIMATES" with four scales of materials and costs.  $^{18}$  The plan based on the least costly materials  $\underline{far}$  exceeded available funds. Even now it is not difficult

<sup>13</sup>Kansas City Post, 8 June 1922.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup>Ibid., 335-342. <sup>18</sup>Ibid., 343,346.

to imagine the shock of Board members hearing those enormous projected construction costs for the first time. Following Magonigle's startling report, Chairman R. A. Long bluntly presented "three possible courses:

- (1) Reduce the size of the Memorial; (2) Change the design; [or]
- (3) Raise more money . . . the last alternative would be . . . out of the question."19

With these choices members of the Board of Governors had to wrestle with the serious problems of quantity, quality, ideals, and expediency. Would Alternate "D" which called for reinforced concrete, Kettle Creek Sandstone facing, reduction and elimination of certain features and still costing \$2,500,000 be acceptable? Could the original design constructed "of the best stone" but reduced in size, fall within the acceptable \$1,600,000?20 Should one or both buildings be eliminated? "The Chair appointed Mr. Magonigle, Mr. Kessler, and Mr. Bryant . . . to confer at once . . . [to bring] the estimated cost down . . . in line with the fund available." In adjourning the session, Mr. Long requested newspaper men and all others present "not to give out any information concerning these subjects."21

Three days later, the Board of Governors met at a special meeting, November 17, 1922, to consider "possible savings in the design or construction of the Memorial to bring the estimated cost

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 323.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 323-324. Magonigle's letter to Bryant, 20 February 1923, states that the total cost has been increased to \$1,600,000 in a "post-competition decision."

<sup>21&</sup>quot;Minutes," 324.

within the limit of the funds available."<sup>22</sup> From that time, most of the proceedings were recorded <u>verbatim</u> in the minutes. In the voluminous records of the Liberty Memorial Association much of the idealism and dedication of R. A. Long was evident. To avoid a negative approach at the session with their architect, Mr. Long endeavored to prepare the group by speaking of "some disappointments" met and warned against "an atmosphere in our minds that might be hurtful to us and hurtful to the cause."<sup>23</sup>

Mr. Magonigle read his report which suggested various money saving measures including: moving "the axis of the shaft east and north within a radius of twenty-five feet," using wooden window frames instead of bronze with plain plate glass (instead of wire plate glass), a gravel roof rather than copper, cement stair treads rather than terrazzo, elimination of all marble in restrooms, plaster porticoes instead of mosaics, and the possibility of reducing the size. The New York architect declared that the New York engineers Hool & Johnson had figured it just as low as possible "by every hook and crook" they could think of.<sup>24</sup>

It is obvious from the minutes that tempers flared when confronted with the prospect of using unworthy materials to build "the most beautiful single monument in the world... an Acropolis." 25 W. C. Scarritt declared to his fellow Board members, that with gravel roofs, "You would be ashamed of yourselves," and that he would "hate

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 365.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 366-367.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 377-386.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.. 389.

the architect!" Mr. Magonigle was "not doing what [he] was paid to do!"26 Magonigle's response was that he was "the agent of the Board" —either "reduce it or find the money"—but warned that reduction would be a mistake.27 Again, the beauty of the "naked Washington Monument" was recalled. "The shaft [of the Liberty Memorial]," John T. Harding declared, "is the living thing, . . . the heart and soul of the entire proposition."28

Earlier Mr. Long had crystallized their position,

Gentlemen, . . . it looks like it would be impossible for us to carry out the scheme as set forth in the competition plan . . . the thing to do is for Mr. Magonigle to go home and go at it in earnest.  $^{29}$ 

Mr. Nichols, the realist, cautioned that the Liberty Memorial Association had been charged with a responsibility — to keep costs within the amount of money which had been raised. Nevertheless he assured fellow board members, "I believe it is possible to obtain a monument of striking proportions and of great beauty to stand through the ages and still keep within the sum named . . . It was a competition to select an architect [not the design]," the Vice President reminded the group. 30

Another member of the board, C. C. Peters, said that "the right thing would be for Mr. Magonigle to go home and do it right; not any makeshifts." By that time everyone was questioning "such an enormous retaining wall." Mr. Peter's motion "for further consideration"

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 390-391. 27 Ibid., 392. 28 Ibid., 393.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup>Ibid., 387. <sup>30</sup>Ibid., 394-395.

carried.<sup>31</sup> The amount of \$1,600,000 was to be the absolute maximum even though Mr. Magonigle protested its inadequacy.<sup>32</sup>

Less than a month later, at the meeting, December 11, 1922, H. Van Buren Magonigle had a new plan illustrated with photographs and diagrams. He declared, "Gentlemen, I have done exactly what you told me to do."33 In Magonigle's new plan, heroic dimensions had shrunk as if squeezed in a titan's vise. Of the Memorial's original north—thrusting T-shape, only the east-west crossbar remained. (Fig. 20) Only dimensions of the shaft had escaped reduction. George Kessler, however, seeing the plan for the first time, felt it would give as full satisfaction as the original scheme, for to him, the shaft was the Memorial itself. Mr. Kirkwood declared "the dignity and solemnity of the new design . . . makes the other one garish" and Mr. Harding noted "its frankness and simplicity . . . a grandeur."34

The group was assured by Magonigle that the new design would not interfere with the setting of the other buildings in the Art Center to be built later. The Chairman asked the New York architect to explain then, why he had brought the first design with its treatment of the hill, costing "about a million dollars more," when it was not essential to the future Art Center buildings. Magonigle replied

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 395-401.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 402. Mr. Long reminded the architect that \$1,600,000 was \$100,000 more than originally stated in the Program.

<sup>33&</sup>lt;sub>Ibid.</sub>, 419.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 438-439.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 439-440.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 449.

that this new plan was only for the Memorial itself. "What I have done in this design is to eliminate all extraneous features, all retaining walls, approaches and steps, because you cannot pay for [them]," he said.  $^{37}$ 

Mr. Long pointed out an extremely critical problem. The new plans had completely eliminated any means of approach to the Memorial from the north! 38 J. C. Nichols was concerned not only about the lack of an approach on the north, but also with the possibility of rising costs. 39 After the Vice President again cautioned that costs absolutely must not exceed \$1,600,000, H. Van Buren Magonigle's truncated plans for Kansas City's Liberty Memorial were approved by the Board of Governors. December 11. 1922.40

In looking back on the Liberty Memorial story, one can imagine that although the Board of Governors had given approval to Mr. Magonigle's reduced plan, the need to scale it down and the process of doing so had been painful and disappointing. Surely the Kansas City owners had assumed that their two million dollars would be an ample amount to build the Memorial of their dreams. That early crisis over money must have been disillusioning for the Kansas Citians. Perhaps it was this experience at the very beginning which initiated strains in relations between the owners and their architect.

The death of George Kessler, landscape artist, was noted in the minutes of the next meeting, March 19, 1923.41 When a Resolution

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 452-453.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup>Ibid., 474.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 491.

"touching upon the death of George E. Kessler" was read on September 19th, it was unanimously adopted by the Board of Directors.

. . . we can but feel that this Association has lost a useful advisor, and our state and nation one of its most useful citi-zens . . . Mr. Kessler quickly felt the high purpose of the undertaking . . . [He] was endowed with the highest order of common sense . . . [which] always merited and obtained for him both public and private confidence.

... In the art of park and boulevard construction and beautification he stood almost alone. As the impetus Pericles ... gave to art ... so the high ideals and beautiful works ... of George E. Kessler, shall stand as beacons ... 42

One can only wonder if such a man, "endowed with the highest order of common sense," had he lived, might have helped to chart a smoother course for the Liberty Memorial toward completion.

The minutes of the Board of Governors of the Liberty Memorial Association, March 19, 1923, recorded a disturbing development. Mr. Magonigle had violated instructions to give Kansas City contractors an equal chance. He had given out a full set of plans and specifications to an eastern contractor. Hughes Bryant's response to the architect's violation of the Board's instructions was to demand that the Board of Governors must "run" the job or else he wished to be relieved from his obligation. How architect would member agreed that it was they who should "run" the job. They were the ones who had to live in Kansas City—their New York architect would not!

At a special meeting, April 27, 1923, the Board of Governors of the Liberty Memorial Association accepted and approved plans and

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 734-735.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 491.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 515.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

specifications as presented by H. Van Buren Magonigle for the purpose of advertising for bids. 46 The Board then approved the release of plans and specifications to contractors on Monday, May 7th, to be returned on or before June 4, 1923, addressed to H. Van Buren Magonigle, Architect, in care of Hughes Bryant, R. A. Long Building. 47 A resolution "that all of the general and local sub-contractors of Kansas City, Missouri, be given every opportunity and encouragement to bid upon the construction of the Liberty Memorial," was adopted and a copy sent to the Builders Association of Kansas City, Missouri. 48

J. C. Nichols, representing the Liberty Memorial Association, presented final plans for the Liberty Memorial at a meeting of the City Plan Commission, May 10, 1923. The plans were unanimously approved as submitted. 49 The following month at a meeting of the Building Committee, June 11, 1923, ten bids for construction of the Liberty Memorial were considered. With a bid of \$1,150,000 based on Indiana limestone, the Westlake Construction Company, St. Louis, Missouri, was the lowest bidder and was awarded the contract. 50 With official approval by the City Plan Commission and the Westlake Con-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup>Ibid., 525.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. A 1919 promotional leaflet, <u>Lest the Ages Forget!</u>, had promised "Every dollar of the two million will be spent in Kansas City, for Kansas City materials and Kansas City labor." That is not the way it turned out. A copy of this leaflet is in the Liberty Memorial Museum Library and Archives.

 $<sup>49\</sup>mbox{"Minutes,"}$  644, an excerpt of minutes of City Plan Commission meeting.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 617.

struction Company as the builder, all would have seemed to be ready for beginning construction. There was, however, a problem remaining—the architect's choice of his collaborators.

At an "adjourned meeting of the Board of Governors," June 12, 1923, before Mr. Magonigle had arrived, Mr. Long announced that: The architect planned to nominate his wife as a sculptor! 51 The Kansas Citians were dismayed. It was suggested that Thomas Kimball be called in from Omaha to induce "Mr. Magonigle not to present the name of Mrs. Magonigle." 52 Mr. Nichols reported that Magonigle "blew up" on the subject. It was evident that the New York architect was going "to make a very strong fight to have his wife appointed." 53

On the following day, June 13, 1923, the Board of Governors met with Thomas R. Kimball, present by special invitation, to consider Magonigle's intention of naming his wife as sculptor for the north wall. Some thought the architect's choosing his wife to be in "bad taste" and "indelicate." However, others wished "to avoid friction" and perhaps "Mrs. Magonigle's qualifications were so outstanding that the Board could not afford to decline to accept her. 55 Mr. Kimball, siding with Mr. Magonigle, noted that "he had not seen the openmindedness for which Mr. Long had pleaded" and requested "giving Mr. Magonigle... undivided co-operation and support in carrying out his

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 679. 52 Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 693. 54Ibid., 718.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 719. For more information on Edith Magonigle, see National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, 1951 ed., s. v. "Magonigle, Edith Marian Day (Mrs. Harold Van Buren Magonigle)."

ideas."56 He said further:

The particular character of the bas-relief intended for this Memorial has not been executed for more than two thousand years . . . It is a new thought . . . Mrs. Magonigle is an exquisite draftsman, a painter of great merit and great originality and wonderful enthusiasm. I would be in favor of supporting any nominee Mr. Magonigle might name, for his entire reputation depends upon this Memorial. 57

Mr. Kimball cited the New York Custom House where "each sculptor strove to make the building a background for his own particular work, and as a result, the building is a monstrous failure." Mr. Kimball said further:

This wall is one of the outstanding features ... Drawing is one of the essential elements of this decoration—it is a carved drawing—a drawing to be established by the chisel.<sup>59</sup>

At the meeting the next day, June 14, 1923, the President's opening words to the Board of Governors indicate the importance he attached to the "sacred subject" which awaited their decision. Before calling on Mr. Magonigle, Mr. Long said, "I am going to express in this statement an open prayer to our God that He may lead us and help us reach the right decision."60

Mr. Magonigle, in turn, prefaced his statement by reading from the competition Program concerning the authority given to the architect to choose his collaborators "in Sculpture, Painting, and Landscape." Today, he said would merely be confirmation of "his prior nominations." He was, he said, quite capable of carrying out the

<sup>56&</sup>quot;Minutes," 719. 57Ibid., 720. 58Ibid., 720-721.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup>Ibid., 721. <sup>60</sup>Ibid., 722. <sup>61</sup>Ibid., 722–723.

<sup>62&</sup>lt;sub>Ibid.</sub>, 723.

landscaping plans which had already been approved by the late George Kessler and would do so "without extra charge."63

Architecture in the United States, the New Yorker pointed out, lacked "harmony between sculptural color and architectural color" because of failure "of the architect and sculptor to work toward the same end."64 He reviewed the difficulty he himself had experienced on the McKinley monument in Canton, Ohio, with an independently selected sculptor. The architect also spoke of lack of harmony between architecture and sculpture in the New York Custom House as well as the New York Public Library. Here, Mr. Magonigle was determined to himself control "the character of the sculptural work."65 With that preamble, he nominated Robert I. Aitken, past president of the National Sculpture Society and author of many distinguished works, as the sculptor of the four Guardian Spirits. He then nominated Mrs. Edith Magonigle, past president of the National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors of America for mural relief. For the two sphinxes, he nominated himself because he could "get better results in that way."66

The New York architect then enthusiastically described the proposed mural relief to the members of the Board of Governors:

As to the great wall, it can either be a mere wall, or one of the greatest lessons to humanity that the country has known, and can give a real setting to the shaft. The relief is designed to

<sup>63</sup>Ibid. In describing his qualifications, Magonigle said, "that he had studied landscaping under Mr. Volke who was a partner of Olmsted and who was landscape architect for the Park Department of New York." Undoubtedly Magonigle had referred to Mr. [Calvert] Vaux which had been misunderstood as "Mr. Volke."

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

depict the progress of civilization, started from the East and from the West to meet here in America . . . I believe she will contribute a spirit of devotion that will be unapproachable . . .67

The enormity of this scheme must be considered. Nothing like it has ever been attempted. The bas-relief is 400 feet long and 13 feet high . . . While the cost is given as \$80,000 it will cost from \$40,000 to \$50,000 to produce models to be put into the hands of the carvers . . . it will require one full year of study, one year to make full size cartoons ready to produce in plaster and two years to produce models. <sup>68</sup>

Magonigle's emphasis on the expense and time requirements of the mural relief probably did not improve the case of his wife with Board members, some of whom had been completely hostile since the New Yorker's introduction of her name as a collaborator.

The minutes of the troubled meetings on June 11 and 12 were not approved until September 19, 1923. It was agreed to postpone the approval of the minutes of June 13 and 14.69 It was December 14, 1923, when the minutes of June 13 and 14 were finally approved. This approval was arrived at only after lengthy additions, referred to as "amendments," expressing opposition to the nomination of Edith Magonigle were included. The minutes indicated that no action had been taken on H. Van Buren Magonigle's nomination of his wife. That the problem was more of personalities than aesthetics or even costs is now obvious and probably was at the time. One can only wish that the New York architect might have been less autocratic and that those who supported him, as several did, could have been more persuasive. As

<sup>67&</sup>lt;sub>Ibid.</sub>, 724. 68<sub>Ibid.</sub> 69<sub>Ibid.</sub>, 734.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 776-779. The minutes show that Mr. Beardsley requested, "that he be recorded as not voting on any of the motions covering these amendments."

Thomas Kimball had said in the beginning, the "jury . . . had already reached a decision!"71

Edith Magonigle worked on drawings for the 400-foot "March of Civilization" for some nine years. As completed, they are impressive and beautifully done. They were, however, never realized in stone. 72 (Fig. 21) Nearly ten years passed before the Great North Wall was completed with an abbreviated sculptured frieze by another artist, a frieze which perhaps falls short of Mr. Kimball's plea that "sculpture must be a part and harmonize with architecture." 73

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 719.

<sup>72</sup>Edith Magonigle's copyrighted drawings for the 400-foot "March of Civilization" are in the Archives of the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, New York. My examination disclosed the earliest date to be 1926, the latest, 5 August 1931. In Magonigle's letter to Carkener, 29 August 1931, he referred to the drawings as the product of "nine years of laborious research..."

The some 500 figures as masterfully delineated by Mrs. Magonigle for the Liberty Memorial wall and figures by Goodhue's collaborator, Lee Lawrie, for the Nebraska State Capitol "Development of the Law" frieze seem to me to have a common denominator in a crisp Art Deco style.

<sup>73</sup>Kimball's words, 13 June 1923, "Minutes," 721.