



The Stream of American History:  
1770-1870



The Courtyard  
Environment

The culminating event for visitors to the Corinth Civil War Interpretive Center is a walk through the commemorative courtyard at the rear of the facility. Here the visitor experience is shaped on several levels by the power of monumentation. The courtyard’s first impression conveys a feeling of tranquility and beauty, as the visitor encounters an art feature of fountain, pool, and flowing water.

Closer inspection reveals this water feature, through a distinctively minimalist approach, provides a detailed representation of first the birth and growth of the United States, and the accompanying rise of sectionalism; then the momentous events, and finally the continuing legacy of the American Civil War. Beyond its inviting, initial emotional appeal, and with a complexity at first glance easily overlooked, this watercourse records the flow of events central to understanding the American nation’s turbulent first century.

Liberty Pool



From an elevated, curved pool rises a small fountainhead, representing the wellspring of American democracy – “a new nation conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” In the center of the pool stands an imposing black stone.

Inscribed on its face are familiar, yet stirring, phrases from the Declaration of Independence - words the founding fathers used to present a compelling vision of freedom to the world, words which today still serve as the moral conscience of the nation. The phrases recall principles, enumerated in the complete document, upon which a new nation was founded, and to which North and South would each turn 84 years later to give legitimacy to their now separate causes of Freedom.

Left unsaid is the contradictory reality existing when Jefferson penned this inspiring theory of government. Because of restrictions in the freedoms of individuals, the principles set forth in the Declaration were only partially realized in the 1780s. For many, its democratic ideals were only a goal – a promise not yet fulfilled.

Below the Constitution quote, the straight rear wall of the Liberty Pool symbolizes the year 1790, when the last of the 13 original colonies (Rhode Island) ratified the Constitution. Here, water from the pool empties through 13 evenly spaced weirs to form a stream whose flow represents the ongoing history of the new nation. The states are depicted geographically from south to north (from left to right) as one faces the Ratification Wall.

On the reverse face of the Declaration Stone are the opening words of the Preamble of *The Constitution of the United States of America*, representing the legal mechanism or social contract defining the functioning of our government and its relationship to the governed. The Constitution serves as both the foundation for all subsequent government in the United States, and a model for representative government worldwide.



Compromise Markers in the Flow of History

Over a very slight gradient, the stream moves away from the 1790 wall. Each three and a half inches the current travels away from the Ratification Wall represents the passage of a year. As other states join the Union, the stream widens with new fountainheads appearing on either side: southern (slave-holding) states on the left as one faces the wall, northern states (free states) on the right.

At the year 1820, the stream flows over the lip of a thin granite marker, symbolizing the Missouri Compromise, an event which would only delay future sectional confrontation. Along the way, ripples of increasing sectionalism (Federalism, tariffs, slavery) occasionally mark the gentle waters.

After this drop, the slight gradient of the stream again carries forward the course of history. To mark the Compromise of 1850, the stream makes another slight drop, then resumes its steady flow.

Such events are symbolized by small granite conflict pyramids at the state location where the action centered. For example, at the year 1859, turbulence appears at Virginia’s spot in the stream marking John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry. One year later, with the presidential election of 1860, the turbulence increases and the now wide stream of American states cascades over a steep gradient.



The Battle Blocks: A Tragic War Divides a Nation

Here the water feature’s scale changes, as the depiction of the passage of time slows dramatically, the drop of the spillway’s swirling torrent representing a deeply divided nation pulled into a war it can no longer avoid. At the base of the fall, the single stream becomes two, now flowing separately while four years of war decide the issue of union. The watercourse now is fast moving, energetic, and irregular shaped.

Between the two streams, from an unseen subsurface pile of rubble symbolizing the Civil War’s 10,000 individual armed conflicts large and small, rise roughly 50 battle blocks representing its major battles and campaigns. The sizes of the stones are proportional to the casualties incurred at each battle; however, the chaotic nature of war has given the blocks an irregular, almost random placement.

Names of battles are inscribed on each stone, with campaign names given in capital letters. Battles commonly known by different names in the north and south have both inscribed, with each visible only from opposite sides of the stream. Generally, battles in the war’s eastern theater are on the east side of the pile of blocks, while those fought by western armies are placed on the building side of the fountain.

At this point, visiting families and friends may find themselves on opposite sides of the rapidly moving water, requiring them to make separate journeys along the chasm of war before they may be reunited. The symbolism of this imposed separation, the war’s well- known aspect of “brother against brother,” should be, in Lincoln’s words, self evident.

Inscribed dates along the two opposite paths mark the passage of four years of war. Battle stones first curve slightly to the side of the northern states to symbolize early Confederate success, but after the turning points of Antietam/ Sharpsburg, Gettysburg, and Vicksburg, have curved back to the south.



Amendment Bridge: A Difficult Reunion

At war’s end, the two streams join once again. However, the stream’s turbulence does not subside by the time the water flows under an ending wall marking the year 1870. Here three black horizontal stones, inscribed with excerpts from the three constitutional amendments passed

as a direct result of the conflict, form a bridge of reunification.

Pool of Reflection

Beyond the reunification bridge, at the lower end of the water feature, a quiet reflecting pool offers visitors the opportunity to contemplate the meaning of the Civil War, and its continuing impact on American history. Quotations below the water surface and on a nearby stone bench aid in this provocation.

In varying degrees, the staggering toll of the American Civil War – over 600,000 dead – was born by each of the nation’s three dozen states at the time of the war. (Fully twenty of

these states sent troops to take part in the 1862 Shiloh/ Corinth campaign.) Scattered around the edges of the reflecting pool, bronze leaves representing these 36 state trees symbolize the sacrifice of each state and the 200,000 soldiers who fought here during the War Between the States: Fallen leaves; fallen sons.

