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SECRETS OF THE LOST SYMBOL

CROSSERS BY PHILIP CAPUTO WHY I LOVE SPRINGSTEE

Guide to Independent Schools

{BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE}

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COVER ART: DAVE CUTLER

BELOW: BRONZE GEORGE WASHINGTON, GEORGE WASHINGTON MASONIC MEMORIAL, VA.
OPPOSITE: HOLOGRAPH GEORGE WASHINGTON NATIONAL MEMORIAL, VA.

Secrets of the Lost Symbol

*A Magical,
Mystical Tour of
Washington, D.C.*

> *By Dan Burstein
with photography
by Julie O'Connor*

I get to the top of the 555 foot high Washington Monument about once every twenty years. The first time was in the 1960s. I was a teenager doing a summer program in Washington, D.C. The second time I was in my thirties writing an article for the *Condé Nast Traveler* about a group of Japanese as they toured America. Now I am in my fifties, and on a brilliant windswept early fall day, I am here again, gazing out at the White House, the Capitol Building, the Jefferson Memorial, the Potomac River, and all the other sights you see so spectacularly from the top of the world's tallest and most unusual Egyptian obelisk. I am here with my wife Julie and we are following in the footsteps of Robert Langdon and Katherine



Solomon, the fictional hero and heroine of Dan Brown's new blockbuster novel, *The Lost Symbol*. We are researching *Secrets of The Lost Symbol*, the new book that I am doing with my writing partner and fellow Westonite, Arne de Keijzer.

Our mission is to understand *The Lost Symbol* on all its many levels and in all its dimensions—history, architecture, philosophy, religion, spirituality, science, art, ancient civilizations, codes and ciphers, secret societies, and much more. We have done this twice before with Dan Brown's books. Our *Secrets of the Code* became the world's best-selling guidebook to *The Da Vinci Code*. It ended up on the New York Times bestseller list and appeared in more than 30 countries.



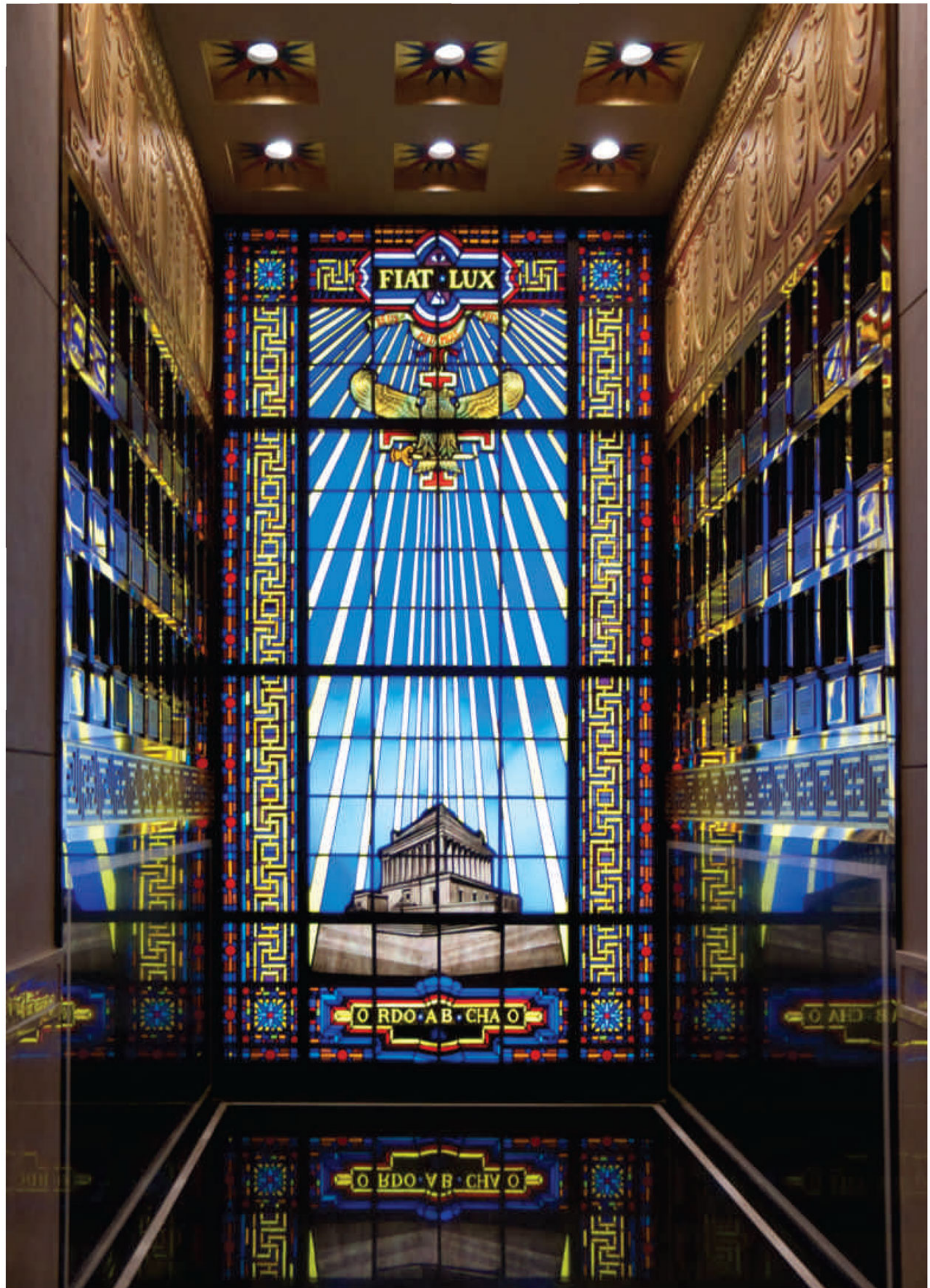
We had a similar experience with our *Secrets of Angels & Demons*. For those projects, Julie and I, accompanied by our son David, went to Paris and Rome to learn more about the locations that figured so prominently in the plots of those books. Now, with *Secrets of the Lost Symbol*, we are following Robert Langdon on his first American adventure. As a result, we are seeing our nation's capital as we have never seen it before.

The Washington Monument is obviously an obelisk, yet on my previous visits I had not understood why that architectural format was chosen to honor George Washington. But now that I am so deeply immersed in *Lost Symbol* research, I have come to understand the importance of Egypt, Greece, and Rome to the Freemasons, and the importance, in turn, of Freemasonry to George Washington and many of the founding fathers of American democracy. (Washington, as well as Benjamin Franklin, Paul Revere, John Hancock, and many other heroes of the American Revolution were Masons, as were at least nine signers of the Declaration of Independence and more than a dozen American presidents).

The Freemasons arose as an important secret society in early 17th century Europe, at a time when political life was dominated by kings and

clergy. The Masons focused on democratic ideals. Their belief in science, brotherhood, equality, tolerance, and an open society, was still considered dangerous and heretical at that time—thus the need for secrecy. They referred to the golden ages of ancient civilizations as metaphors for their thirst for knowledge. They made a particular metaphoric connection to Egyptian stonemasons and pyramid builders, whose knowledge of engineering and geometry was obviously quite advanced.

The Freemasons believe in the power of symbolic language, which is incorporated into the rituals they conduct, the art works they create, and the buildings they build. The Washington Monument is a glorification of George Washington, and yet it is so austere and spare as not to overglorify a single mortal man. It represents humankind's reach to the heavens, but also celebrates the here and now on the ground. It hearkens back to ancient Egypt's belief in the sun god, and the Egyptian use of the obelisk as a physical embodiment of a sun ray. Most of the financing for the Washington Monument came from 19th century Masonic groups. Their contributions are memorialized on special stones built into the monument. The "lost symbol" of the book's title turns out to



be the Bible, which, along with some 200 other time capsule documents from the 19th century, was buried inside the Monument's cornerstone, set into the ground in a Masonic ceremony in 1848.

Dan Brown tells much of this history as his characters, Robert Langdon and Peter Solomon, ascend the Washington Monument. He

that our capital city should be built on those classical dimensions, filled with pyramids, pantheons, and parthenons.

As we walk around the park area at the base of the Monument, the street level of American democracy is coming vibrantly to life. Americans and tourists of dozens of nationalities are talking, taking pictures, sharing

moments. Lovers are kissing. College students are reading. People are sending emails and chatting on their iPhones—and taking pictures of themselves and their friends in front of this iconic monument to democracy and the first American president. There's a Chinese family feeding a baby. There's a Middle Eastern family with women covered in traditional garb. There's a group of young professional Indians talking about a company they're planning to start. Even with all our national and global challenges, standing right there at the Washington Monument on this beautiful fall day, we feel in tune with the optimism and the daring spirit of American democracy.

Have you ever stared up into the upper reaches of the dome in the Capitol Rotunda? The huge fresco painted there, the *Apotheosis of Washington*, is routinely ignored by visitors because you have to crane your neck really high to take it all in. Painted by Constantino Brumidi, (known as the “Michelangelo of Washington”) *Apotheosis* is an amazing art work that figures promi-



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also takes special note of the ring of flags around the Washington Monument and a darkened circular pattern in the sidewalk on the ground, suggesting that the circle surrounding the point (the Monument) comprises a “circumpunct,” one of the most important of ancient symbols. Looking rather like retailer Target’s corporate logo, the circumpunct was the symbol of the Egyptian sun god, Ra, but also a symbol in some Christian traditions for the eye of God and of the center of the divine order of the universe. It is also the alchemist’s symbol for gold.

I am walking around the base of the Washington Monument noticing this “circumpunct” for the first time and thinking these weighty thoughts about symbols that cross over between cultures and have meanings that range from the most spiritual to the most material. And Julie and I are talking about the incredibly visionary group of founders of the American democracy. From the very first days of our republic, they believed that what they were doing had a significance that recalled the accomplishments of ancient Egypt, Athens and Rome, and

nently in both the beginning and the last moments of *The Lost Symbol*. Mal’akh, the evil villain, has planted Peter Solomon’s severed hand in the Rotunda to open the book, and the hand is pointing up 180 feet to the top of the dome. We will later learn Mal’akh is seeking “personal apotheosis”—he is literally trying to become an immortal soul.

The Lost Symbol tells us that Brumidi’s fresco portrays Washington ascending to heaven and becoming an American god. But whether you believe that on a literal or only a metaphoric level, the fresco is amazing. Using Greek mythological forms, and stylistic elements from the Renaissance painter Raphael, Brumidi has surrounded Washington with goddesses representing everything from war to science to justice to invention. Finished around the end of the Civil War, Brumidi’s work was so visionary that it even included a scene representing the laying of the first Trans-Atlantic telegraph cable and another depicting an early electrical generator.

We exit from the Capitol through one of the recently built under-

Secrets of the Lost Symbol



ground connections to the Library of Congress. Julie and I feel for a moment like Robert Langdon and Katherine Solomon on the run. After a long hike through the passageway, we arrive at an information desk. We immediately inquire about the scene in *The Lost Symbol* where Robert and Katherine escape by putting themselves on a conveyor belt used for moving books through the library. The friendly docent tells us she has never seen that conveyor belt and she too is wondering about it.

Later we will interview a spokesperson for the Library of Congress who will tell us, that while a conveyor system actually does exist and is currently being upgraded, their ride would be much more of a challenge than Dan Brown suggests. “Since it is designed for boxes carrying books and has a significant number of horizontal and vertical switching points, it would not be possible for a person to fit on it and ride from the stacks in the Jefferson Building to the Adams Building.”

OK, so that’s why they call it fiction. But meanwhile, we are in this awe-inspiring palace dedicated to books and knowledge. For me, as an author, this is one of the most magnificent interiors I have ever expe-

rienced. The central space has rightly been called “the most beautiful room in the world.” We are immediately captivated by the grand scale, the spectacular architecture, the statues and murals devoted to major writers and philosophers, the paintings devoted to the history of writing and book-making, the quotations about the importance of books, libraries, and the printed word, and the sense that the legacy of Thomas Jefferson is everywhere in this building.

After the Capitol and the Library of Congress, the next important stop on *The Lost Symbol* tour of Washington is the Smithsonian. The fictional Katherine Solomon runs her noetics research projects at the real-life Smithsonian Support Center in nearby Maryland, and the fictional Peter Solomon is supposed to be the Secretary of the overall Smithsonian Institution. As I stand on the National Mall in front of the “Castle,” (the first of what has today become numerous Smithsonian buildings) I am reminded of some of the history of James Smithson, the original endower of the Smithsonian. Some of this his-

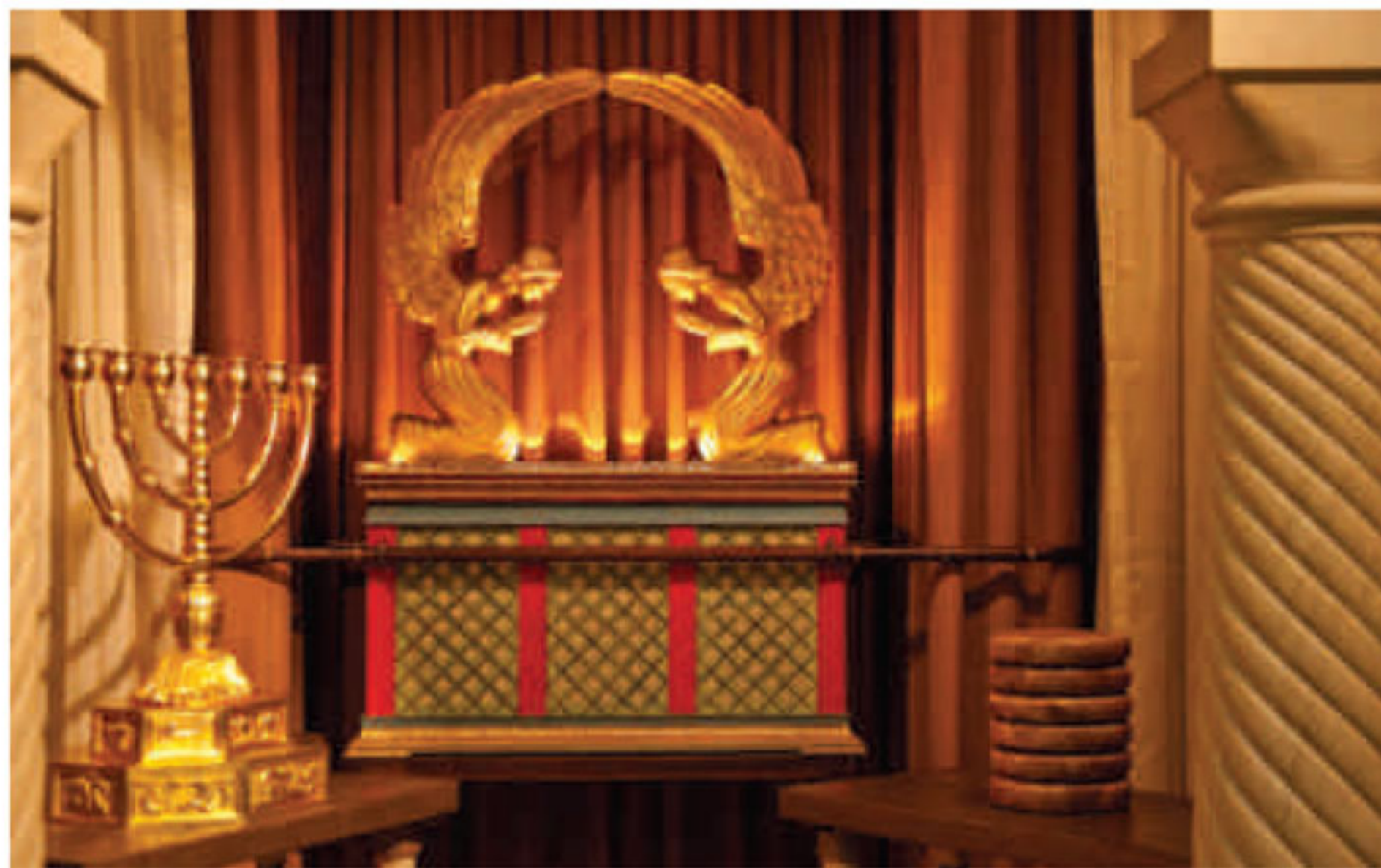
tory is told in *The Lost Symbol*, but not what I think of as the best parts of the story. Smithson is known in history as a pioneer in chemistry, although he may have had a background as an alchemist (and he also may have been a Freemason). He knew many of the great scientific and political minds of the European Enlightenment. And he made a fortune during his lifetime. In his will, he specified that, on the death of his nephew, the money should go to the United States, a country to which he had never been, in order to endow in Washington, an institution devoted to science and the diffusion of knowledge.

Eventually, a London court had to decide if England was really prepared to see all Smithson's money go to America. After a long set of hearings, the court finally ordered eleven crates of Smithson's gold loaded onto a ship and sent to America. His chemistry papers came too, although they burned up in a fire before they were ever inventoried or archived. I thought Dan Brown would have been fascinated by the details of the Smithson story, but he went in other directions with his interest in the Smithsonian.

We are on 16th Street in the company of two giant sphinxes and staring at an imposing Washington building that is actually modeled on one of the wonders of the ancient world—the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus. This is the so-called House of the

Street with two sphinxes that I have driven past my whole life, but had never actually gone into...Now I hear they are bracing for tourists.”

Despite the fact that the Freemasons make much of their secret rituals, handshakes, and passwords, there are daily public tours of their fascinating 1915 vintage building. The House of the Temple was designed by John Russell Pope, a Freemason and a major figure in Washington



Temple, the headquarters of Scottish Rite Masonry in America.

New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd wrote the Sunday Book Review commentary about *The Lost Symbol*. She didn't like the book all that much. But she gives Dan Brown credit for the interesting details he brings to light: “What Dan Brown does so well is he makes you look at things that you see every day and haven't thought about, like why do we have a pyramid with an all-seeing eye on the dollar bill? Like, who put that there? There's this Scottish Rite Masonic temple on Sixteenth

architecture. (A coded message on the cover of *The Lost Symbol* refers to “Pope's Pantheon.”) Pope also designed the Jefferson Memorial (in the shape of a Roman pantheon) and the National Gallery of Art (which was originally endowed by the philanthropist and Freemason Andrew Mellon, who may well be the prototype for the Peter Solomon character.)

The House of the Temple is worth a visit for many reasons, but I would recommend it as one of the few places in DC where you can see the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Koran together in one place on one altar table, reflecting Masonry's openness to people of diverse faiths and beliefs. The remains of Albert Pike, the legendary unifier and codifier of American Freemasonry, are in a place of honor in the House of the Temple, as mentioned in *The Lost Symbol*. Pike is also the only confederate general to rate a statue in Washington. It is in

Judiciary Square. Most tourists never see it, and Washingtonians who pass it every day have no idea who Pike was. But in the late 19th century, Albert Pike was a major force in American intellectual life and largely responsible for integrating a wide variety of myths and legends from ancient civilizations into the ritual practices of the Masons.

George Washington has a second monument: the George Washington National Masonic Memorial in Alexandria, Virginia.

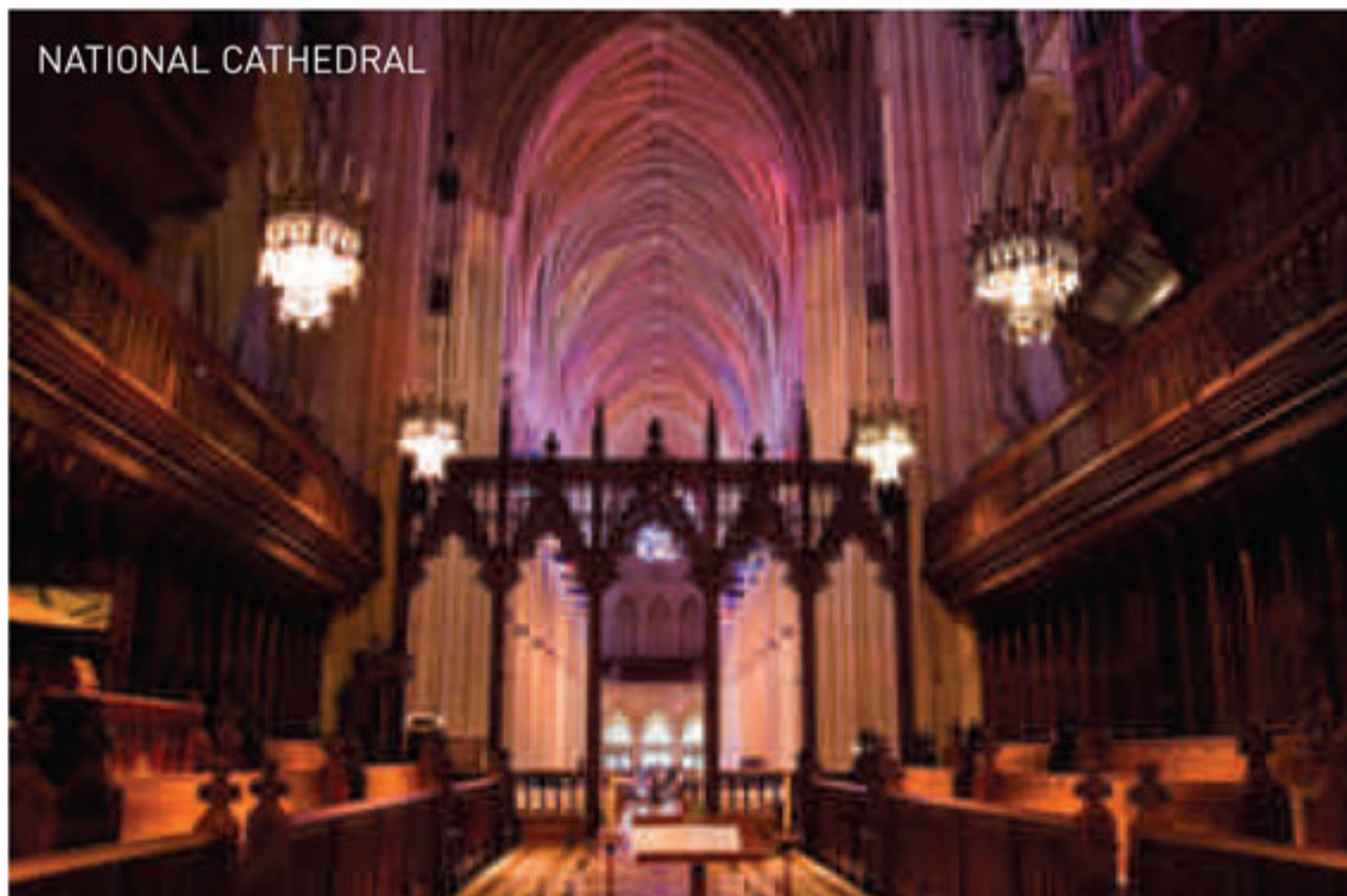
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Built in the 1920s and 1930s it is based on another wonder of the ancient world—the lighthouse at Alexandria in Egypt. This is a museum devoted to the side of Washington we know the least about—his role as a Mason and the importance of his Masonic beliefs. Original and reproduction memorabilia are here, including the trowel Washington used for laying the cornerstone for the U.S. Capitol building in 1793 in a full Masonic ceremony. Dan Brown came here several years ago to do research for *The Lost Symbol* and worked the George Washington Masonic Memorial into his story.

er, in fact, than many well-known European cathedrals. (One of Dan Brown's points in *The Lost Symbol* is to emphasize how Washington is just as intriguing, mysterious, and mystical as Rome, Paris, London, Seville, or any of the European cities used as backdrops for his prior books).

The National Cathedral, which is formally an Episcopal institution but very ecumenical in its outreach to people of many Christian denominations and other faiths, becomes an important location in *The Lost Symbol*. One of the minor riddles Robert Langdon has to solve is to find a location that has stones from Mt. Sinai, one from “heaven itself,” and

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To the staff's relief, he did not use their 333-foot tall tower as a location for a murder. But somewhat to the staff's dismay, their building was used only as a red herring in the plot, and Langdon never actually goes here. A highlight of the tour here is a reproduction room styled after the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, or at least the way the Masonic mind imagines this most sacred of Old Testament locations.

We ended up at the National Cathedral, going on the tour and taking tea at the top of its tower. The National Cathedral was envisioned by George Washington's hand-picked first architect/designer of the city, Pierre L'Enfant. However, work was not started until a century later. After 83 years of construction, it emerged as not only the longest construction project in DC history, but the sixth largest cathedral in the world—larg-

er, in fact, than many well-known European cathedrals. (One of Dan Brown's points in *The Lost Symbol* is to emphasize how Washington is just as intriguing, mysterious, and mystical as Rome, Paris, London, Seville, or any of the European cities used as backdrops for his prior books).

When our tour guide learned we were from Connecticut, she made special efforts to point out that the Cathedral houses the remains of former Easton resident Helen Keller, in addition to president Woodrow Wilson and other American notables.

Exiting from the tour, we found ourselves in the National Cathedral bookshop with a tremendous selection of books reflecting many faiths, many styles of spiritual practice, many kinds of philosophical inquiry into the deepest questions of life. And there, in the center of it all, was a large display of Dan Brown's *The Lost Symbol*. ❁

Dan Burstein has lived in Weston for nearly two decades and is co-author with Arne de Keijzer (also a Weston resident), of SECRETS OF THE LOST SYMBOL: The Unauthorized Guide to the Mysteries Found in the Da Vinci Code Sequel (William Morrow/HarperCollins). Their series of Secrets titles now includes six books, two documentary DVDs, and two special collector's issues of US News, accounting for more than four million copies in print in more than 30 languages. Their Secrets of the Code and Secrets of Angels & Demons were both New York Times bestsellers. To learn more, visit: www.SecretsOfTheLostSymbol.com.

Julie O'Connor, whose photographs of Washington, D.C. are featured in this article, is the author and photographer of DOORS OF WESTON: 300 Years of Passageways in a Connecticut Town, published in partnership with the Weston Historical Society.