Language Matters

September 2, 2018

By Liz Meador

Having just returned from Washington, DC, where I participated in "A Capital Conference," I need to share the experience with readers because this delicious "wallowing in words" has left indelible memories.

Some of you may know that Dr. Elliot Engel, lecturer on literary and historical topics who has often visited our community, also plans topics for long weekends in various cities, such as Savannah, GA; Scottsdale, AZ; and this time Washington, DC. His lectures included three from the past—Christopher Columbus (the "C" in DC), Mark Twain, and "The Tragic Genius of Edgar Allan Poe and His Tortured DC/Baltimore Connections."

New lectures included "The Potomac River: Its Amazing Flow Through American History," "Pierre Charles L'Enfant: The Tumultuous Life of the Man Who Invented Washington, DC," and "The History of Museums," with a focus on the Smithsonian Institution and the fascinating story behind its founding. After the lecture on the Potomac River, we 86 conferees delighted in a two-hour river cruise in a glassed-in boat, "The Odyssey," along the Potomac, complete with an elegant lunch and musical entertainment. An announcer pointed out historic landmarks during this voyage.

Dr. Engel's event organizers, Darian and Bob Poliachik, did an excellent job of planning the trip from Thursday, August 23-Sunday, August 26 (a travel day), sending us in advance ideas for meals not covered in the conference cost and places to see. They had lived in the area early in their marriage and were glad to discover that the Old Post Office, now Trump International Hotel, still had access to the Clock Tower for visitors to have a panoramic view of the city from the 315-foot tall observation deck. The National Park Service manages the tours of the Clock Tower which houses the Ditchley Bells, a 1976 gift from the Ditchley Foundation in Great Britain to mark the country's bicentennial celebration and its friendship with the United States. Volunteers from a local bell-ringing society practice every Thursday on the change ringing bells. The ringers use the word "bob" to mean a set of changes rung on the bells, the study of which is called *campanology*, combined from the Latin *campana*, meaning "bell," and the Greek *-logia*.

The Old Post Office, an imposing Romanesque Revival building, was built from 1892-1899 to house the U.S. Post Office Department Headquarters. The second tallest building in DC after the Washington Monument, it was slated to be demolished in 1920. Thanks to the efforts of Nancy Hanks, chairperson of the National Endowment of the Arts, Congress reversed its decision to demolish and ordered renovation and preservation.

Basically Romanesque in its massiveness, the building also boasts Byzantine capitals, French Gothic dormers and sculpture, and Classical Revival hallways. The building materials included granite from Vinalhaven, Maine, and an undergirding of iron and steel. In fact, this nine-story building was the first steel-frame building in Washington. Five-foot thick masonry walls provide exterior support while the steel girders support the interior floor beams. As we rode the elevator

to the clock tower, we caught glimpses of the hotel's lobby with its sumptuous furnishings in blue and gold. An immense skylight provides natural light for the interior.

Prior to our visit to the Clock Tower, we toured Ford's Theater, a new and moving experience for me. The Museum held documents, sculptures, and photographs with a timeline of the fateful days, April 14 and 15, 1865, when President Abraham Lincoln was shot and died. We looked into the box where he was sitting when John Wilkes Booth fired one bullet into Lincoln's head.

One impressive display was a tower of the more than 15,000 books written about Abraham Lincoln. We left the Theater and Museum with a sense of profound loss of this writer of The Gettysburg Address and the Emancipation Proclamation.

Washington, DC, contains nearly 80 museums, including those at universities, so a lecture on "The History (and Mystery) of Museums" was certainly appropriate. I especially wanted to tour the Library of Congress because of my teaching students about the classification system of the same name. As well as being a research library, the Library of Congress doubles as a museum, housing such valuable items as the Gutenberg Bible (in a special display case where various gases keep the pages from deterioration); 100 extremely rare children's books, including "The Children's Bible and "The Children's New Play-Thing," both published in Philadelphia in 1763; a newspaper from December 29, 1659; and the contents of Lincoln's pockets on the night he was assassinated, including glasses, a pocket knife, a handkerchief, and a five dollar Confederate bill.

James Madison was the first to propose in 1783 that a library be available to members of Congress, which acted in April 1800 to create such an entity. Thomas Jefferson, also a prime mover for a national library, needed money to pay debts, so he offered 6487 books from his personal library to be the nucleus of a library. Brought from Charlottesville, VA, to Washington in ten horse-drawn wagons in May 1815, the books were stored in Blodgett's Hotel, the library's temporary home. A current project the Library has undertaken is to replace the two-thirds of Jefferson's donation destroyed in a fire in 1851. The Library, using a catalog of Jefferson's books, is buying copies from other libraries or personal book owners to replicate every book Jefferson sold to the nation in exchange for \$23,950.

From my first glimpse from the train of the Washington Monument, I felt a swell of patriotism and awe that marked the three-day stay in our Nation's Capital. Upon my departure, when we approached Union Station, I saw the flags in front at half-mast to honor the passing of Senator John McCain. Despite all its flaws, our government continues to grow and learn. If our leaders will study the history before them, they may learn from past mistakes and move the nation forward in right ways—with honor, integrity, truth, and wisdom.

[to know more about travel with Dr. Elliot Engel, call Darian at 919-617-7659 or email darian@ProfessorEngel.com. The next adventure is planned for April 16-19, 2020]

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