

Americans in Westminster Abbey — what they did to be remembered

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When you step through the Gothic Great West Door of Westminster Abbey, you are following in the footsteps of countless millions who have converged on this venerable landmark since King Edward the Confessor first consecrated a church on this Thames-side site over nine centuries ago.

To browse through the Abbey's aisles, chapels, and cloisters is to leaf through the pages of British history, a history graphically told here in monuments, tombs, memorials, and archives.

But these chronicles also record many associations with American history — associations which the one million Americans who come here each year often know little about.

The most prominent reminders of the Anglo-American wartime alliances of this century are the mutual tributes just inside the Western entrance. A large marble plaque, placed above seven volumes listing the names of Britain's 1939-1945 civilian war dead, remembers Franklin Delano Roosevelt as "a faithful friend of freedom and of Britain."

A few yards away, just beyond the poppy-framed tomb of the British Unknown Warrior of World War I, hangs the blue-ribboned Congressional Medal of Honor, bestowed upon the Unknown Warrior by American General Pershing in October, 1921.

But the most conspicuous remembrance stone, noticed by all entering the Abbey, is the green marble tablet dedicated to Sir Winston Churchill, who actually is buried in Bladon, Oxfordshire. Churchill, a half-American through his Brooklyn, New York-born mother, Jenny Jerome, became an honorary American citizen by act of the U.S. Congress — the only Briton ever given that honor.

Reminders of a war which took place two hundred years earlier, a war in which England and the U.S. were the bitterest of foes, can also be found in many corners of the Abbey.

In the North Transept, for example, lies Charles James Fox, a liberal thinker and Whig statesman who zealously advocated the immediate and unconditional right of the American colonies to independence. Fox is also remembered for his successful fight in Parliament to abolish England's slave trade, an act which helped accelerate America's own abolition of slavery some decades later.

Fox's brilliant political rival, William Pitt, lies uncomfortably close to him. Pitt just as vehemently opposed independence for the colonies and, in an historic address in the House of Lords, warned against "the dismemberment of this noble and ancient monarchy."

Both Fox and Pitt have imposing Abbey

monuments erected in their memory, but Pitt's is so grandiose that it prompted George III to advise the sculptor to stick to his chisel and "not turn author."

Another statue of Pitt, this one in wax in the Abbey Museum, was made by Patience Wright, a talented American sculptor who lived in London during the Revolutionary War. Mrs. Wright served as an American spy: frequenting court circles, she gathered much valuable information, including military plans, which she passed on to Benjamin Franklin in Paris.

Another espionage drama of colonial times is recalled by the finely carved bas-relief in the Nave, near the tomb of Major John Andre. Andre, Adjutant-General of the British Army during the Revolution, was captured in civilian clothes after his secret meeting with Benedict Arnold at West Point. Designed by architect Robert Adam, the bas-relief depicts George Washington refusing Andre's petition "to die a soldier's death." A column of American colonial troops stands ready to witness his subsequent hanging as a spy.

In the Abbey's peaceful North Cloister a simple stone marker memorializes "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne, Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces, who surrendered at Saratoga in 1777. After his defeat, Burgoyne returned to private life in London, where he achieved better success as a playwright than he ever did as a soldier.

The best-known monument to an American in the Abbey is, of course, the marble bust of Longfellow, lodged between the resting places of Dryden and Chaucer in the Poets' Corner. When a black-cassocked Abbey attendant confided to me that Longfellow was his favorite poet, I asked him why. In reply, he quoted stanza after stanza of "Hiawatha," which he said he had memorized in his schooldays, (a considerable time ago). "It's the rhythms," he said. "So musical . . . so very American."

A stark commemorative tablet to T. S. Eliot in the Poets' Corner does not mention the author's origins. Born in St. Louis, Eliot became a British subject at the age of 40, but the universal quality of his literary genius was acknowledged when he was awarded the Nobel Literature Prize in 1948.

The Massachusetts poet, James Russell Lowell, who also served as one of the best-loved Ministers to Britain, has a stained-glass window and a stone portrait dedicated to him "by his English friends."

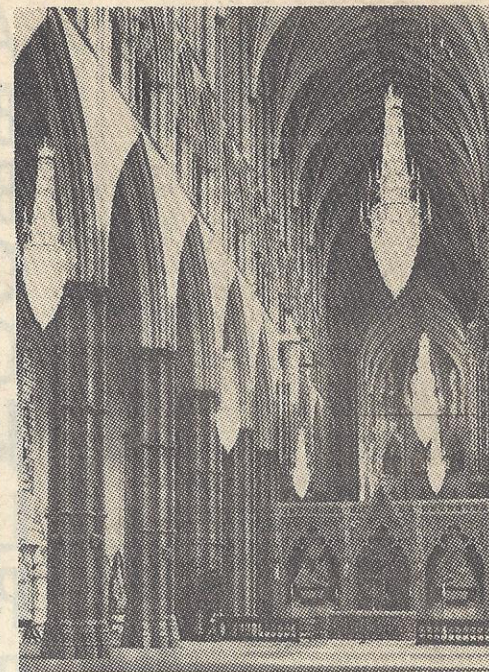
Another Bay State son, George Peabody, was the only American ever buried in Westminster Abbey. From humble origins, grocery clerk Peabody volunteered to fight the British in the War of 1812. Later, as a successful merchant and financier, he settled in England,

where he became renowned for his philanthropies.

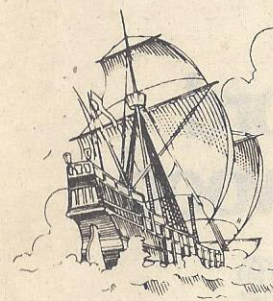
Peabody built low-cost housing for the poor which still stands near Westminster Abbey today. Generous and modest, he gave away \$9 million to philanthropic causes in his lifetime, but he firmly declined a baronetcy and other royal honors.

When he passed on in 1869, he was interred in the Abbey, but soon afterwards his remains were returned to his native Massachusetts aboard a British warship personally ordered by Queen Victoria. Peabody's original gravestone still lies embedded in the Nave floor.

At the easternmost end of Westminster Abbey there is a handsome stained-glass window through which, each morning, "dawn's early light" illuminates a small American flag. The window adorns the Royal Air Force Chapel dedicated to the fallen R.A.F. heroes who helped win the Battle of Britain in 1940. Among these 1,497 airmen was one American volunteer, Pilot-Officer Billy Fiske. In his honor, the Stars and Stripes are incorporated in the window design.

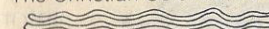


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