

The Incredible Mount Rushmore

*The Creators, the History,
and a Modern Interpretation*

K.A. PICKETT

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the four hundred men, women, and children who worked for more than 14 years to sculpt the masterpiece that is Mount Rushmore

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1 RUSHMORE ROCK

“I want to create a monument so inspiring that people from all over America will be drawn to come and look and go home better citizens.”

— Gutzon Borglum

Mount Rushmore is perhaps the world's most recognizable symbol for democracy. Carved into the side of a mountain in South Dakota's Black Hills, four of the most celebrated United States presidents represent American achievements, endurance, and a nation's ability to overcome anything in order to achieve greatness.

State historian Doane Robinson originally wanted to feature the faces of various western heroes, but it was sculptor Gutzon Borglum's idea to carve George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln into a 5,725-foot-high mountain. Originally called Rushmore Rock, almost 3 million tourists visit Borglum's "Shrine of Democracy" every year — now known as the infamous Mount Rushmore.

In 1885, William Challis led New York lawyer Charles E. Rushmore on a hike through the wilderness of South Dakota as he surveyed the land for gold. It is recorded that when Rushmore asked Challis the name of one particular mountain Challis responded, "It's never had one...till now...we'll call the damn thing Rushmore." This mountain would later be chosen by Borglum as the site where he would carve a monument to American history and exceptionalism.

Commissioned by Robinson, Borglum had been assigned the task of sculpting wild west heroes into the side of a granite mountain. But given artistic autonomy and freedom, Borglum decided that he would commemorate the United States' first 150 years by featuring the busts of four great presidents all the way down to their waists. First choosing the nation's founding father and first president, George Washington was carved to embody the very creation of the United States and its independence from Britain.

2 THE CREATION OF RUSHMORE

"I realized that the average person in South Dakota, when he was approached in regard to financing Mount Rushmore Memorial, would think of it in terms of dollars and cents.... We tried to talk to the people of that state in just those terms."

— Gutzon Borglum

Originally just a state project intended for the viewing of South Dakota residents and its surrounding states, Mount Rushmore became a national work of art. It was first envisioned in the early 1920s by a state historian named Doane Robinson who wanted to increase tourism in South Dakota after he'd heard of plans to carve certain prominent leaders of the Confederacy into Georgia's Stone Mountain. Robinson then commissioned the talents of Gutzon Borglum, an American sculptor who was actually living in Europe at the time.

Borglum liked the idea, and agreed to carve the Black Hills of South Dakota as long as he could be paid in full. Robinson gave him a commission. When Robinson had raised a \$20,000 fee, he told the state of South Dakota that he'd like to see Borglum's proposed carving. The state then hired a committee to study the proposal. The committee, led by Robinson, visited the Black Hills in 1923 and 1924. They found the proposal to be "a masterpiece of art and a masterpiece of nature." They recommended that the state should accept the proposal. The state then passed a law in 1925 that authorized the carving of the monument. The carving began in 1927 and was completed in 1941.

During Borglum's career, he carved many other famous sculptures, including the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., and the Mount Lincoln Memorial in Lincoln, Nebraska. He also designed the Mount Rushmore National Memorial in South Dakota. Borglum's work has been recognized by the National Academy of Design and the National Sculpture Society. He was also a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Borglum's legacy is preserved in the Gutzon Borglum Papers, which are housed at the Mount Rushmore National Memorial.

Borglum died in 1941, but his work on Mount Rushmore continued until his death.

3 PATRIOTISM AND COMMERCIALISM

"It is distinctly out of place in the wilds of the Black Hills, where
God's statuary surpasses any possible conception of mere man."

— J.B. Townsley

While many residents of South Dakota and its Black Hills were excited at the prospect of a grand national monument being built in their home state, Mount Rushmore's creators anticipated that they would inevitably still have to face some critics. They began to strategize ahead of time, and the first way in which they went about this was to emphasize the carving's patriotic significance. Doughton knew that replacing the heroes of the Wild West with the portraits of several American presidents was an incredibly wise idea.

Both Robinson and Doughton understood that while relying on the Mount Rushmore project's patriotic theme would still not be enough to silence the skeptics and doubting that they will succeed. They felt that the project represented and would require more of work, but the response they had from the people involved in the project. They felt that the project was a very important one, and they felt that the project was a very important one, and they felt that the project was a very important one.

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4 CONSTRUCTION AND LOGISTICS

“His crew took thousands of measurements on the model and then went up to the mountain and translated it times 12 to recreate those measurements on the mountain.”

— Amy Bracewell

In 1927, four-hundred boys, women, and men arrived to the Black Hills where they would spend the next 14 years carving the portraits of four United States presidents into the face of a mountain. The project hired blacksmiths to make specialized drill bits and other tools. Tramway operators supervised the safe transporting of equipment from the mountain's base all the way up to laborers elevated hundreds of feet high.

Framed iron horse chains, professional carvers and drillers equipped with jackhammers were hired and housed by other workers controlling these routes and paths carefully by hand. Even the job was intricate and involved because if the workers were negligent or careless, it was possible, otherwise not doing so the corresponding horses that would be hauled up the mountain and other people, it is dangerous work that has brought upon the black granite along the top.

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5 CONTROVERSY AND DISSENT

"Two lovely legends of the Lakotas would be fine subjects for sculpturing the Black Hills as the earth mother, and the story of the genesis of the tribe. Instead the face of a white man is being outlined on the face of a stone cliff in the Black Hills. This beautiful region, of which the Lakota thought more than any other spot on earth, caused him the most pain and misery."

— Luther Standing Bear

Mount Rushmore has become known as the "Shrine of Democracy," but this interpretation of the monument is far from unanimous. Reflecting upon history, one should expect that sites of widespread social importance are simultaneously also sites of widespread controversy.

In the case of Mount Rushmore, where one group of people is inspired and moved by the sculpture, another is not only offended, but also feels threatened, too. As it sits on the very center of the Black Hills, Mount Rushmore is more so Native Americans than a mere reminder of white American dominance against their ancestors and oppressors. In their book *Native Americans and the Mount Rushmore Controversy*,

James and the author discuss the controversy surrounding the monument and the role of the Native American community in the development of the monument. They argue that the monument is a symbol of white American dominance and that it is a reminder of the oppression of Native Americans. They also discuss the role of the Native American community in the development of the monument and the role of the Native American community in the development of the monument.

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6 MONUMENTAL MEANING

“The natural marvels of the West compensated for America’s lack of old cities, [and] aristocratic traditions.” — Alfred Runte

Despite controversy and dissent, one cannot argue with the patriotic power of Mount Rushmore. The monument is exempt from polarized political ideologies, and instead, it not only celebrates them, but has historically been used by leaders to unite them. For example, the image of Mount Rushmore was employed to rally Americans against Communism during the Cold War. In 1953, Drew Pearson stood in front of the mountain as he encouraged the nation to resume their American patriotism and put their trust in the presidential administration.

A patriotic icon, within the face of Mount Rushmore there is essentially a political leader. It simply cannot be viewed as any simpler set of ideological principles. Nevertheless, the monument is the best record of a free religious community with a common purpose, its own values, traditions, and history. It is a symbol of the American people's faith in the future and their belief in the American dream.

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7 MODERN RUSHMORE

"I was appalled at the sight of the flag pole atop the Mt. Rushmore carving. It seems to me that this is going too far with the Bicentennial theme. To me, the sight of this flag pole is a desecration of the majestic work of the Mt. Rushmore carving."

— Anonymous Mount Rushmore tourist

Every year, almost three million people make their pilgrimage to South Dakota in order to see with their own eyes the colossal six-story busts of four much-loved American presidents. The year after the attacks of September 11, those tourist numbers rose by an astounding 15 percent. Since then, one of the site's greatest days for attendance was on October 31, 2016, the 75th anniversary of Mount Rushmore's completion. The day was especially popular because it was the 100th birthday of the National Park Service.

While one might assume that the state had passed long ago the controversies and debates regarding African Americans, for such an assumption could not be further from the truth. After all, the American South has remained a state, among all prominent regions, where its racism and inequality. However, that history is important for explaining the social conditions of contemporary and future racism that African Americans face.

K.A. PICKETT

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

Author of *The Receptacle*, *To Really Know the Narcissist*, *Girl Carnival*, *You Can Only Keep as Much as You Can Carry*, *My Brother's Keeper*, and *Another Memoir*, Kaylie Ann Pickett graduated from the University of Indianapolis with a BA in political science, and is pursuing her MFA in creative writing at the University of San Francisco. In her spare time, Pickett enjoys playing the piano, listening to blues music, and taking long naps with her cat, Bubba Ghee.