

Victory Drive, a Memorial for World War I

[A brief history of Victory Drive and the World War I Monument given in November 2015 at the World War I Monument at the corner of Waters Avenue and Victory Drive by Luciana Spracher, Director of the City of Savannah, Research Library & Municipal Archives, for the Veterans Council of Chatham County.]


Good afternoon. I want to thank the Veterans Council of Chatham County for inviting me to speak today and give you a brief background on the history of Victory Drive and the World War I Monument in front of us.

The area of Victory Drive in our immediate vicinity was originally developed as Estill Avenue to our west, and Dale Avenue to our east. During the development of the Chatham Crescent neighborhood, Estill Avenue and nearby Atlantic Avenue were landscaped with a series of palmetto trees under the suggestion of Harvey Granger, president of the Chatham Land and Hotel Company, who desired a parkway running through his development. As early as 1910, the City's Park and Tree Commission reported in their annual report that they had planted 460 palmettoes along these streets.

In October 1919, City Engineer William O'D. Rockwell proposed a military memorial boulevard called "Victory Avenue" to stretch from here at Waters Avenue to Thunderbolt, in honor of those who died in the world war. His design was inspired by the existing landscape of palm trees along Estill and Atlantic Avenues.

On April 5, 1922, the City Council renamed both Estill Avenue, between Bull Street and Waters Avenue, and Dale Avenue, between Waters Avenue and the City Limits to the east, Victory Drive.

Also in 1922, the "Million Dollar Road" stretching from Thunderbolt all the way to Tybee Island was officially named Victory Drive by the Chatham County Commission, extending the military memorial boulevard from Savannah to the ocean. The Million Dollar Road opened on June 21, 1923.




With the inclusion of the stretch west to Ogeechee Road, the Victory Drive memorial is a total of 19.82 miles long.

The completion of the road to Tybee in 1923 is fitting, since that was the year the nation's last returning troops from World War I, known as "America's Last Thousand," came home arriving through the port of Savannah on February 7, 1923. About 1,200 men of the 8th Infantry arrived on the transport *St. Mihiel* from the Rhine in Germany and were greeted by an estimated 75,000 people lining the riverfront and streets of Savannah. The local newspaper reported:

The river front seemed alive with people. Like hives of swarming bees they hung in clusters from every available vantage point and the little balconies of the business offices along the bay seemed in danger of falling under their unaccustomed loads. As the transport neared the City Hall the Washington guns, presented to the Chatham Artillery by George Washington, lifted up their aged voices in salutation. With the third shot a mammoth smoke ring rose into the air, floating like a halo for a few seconds in space before it dissolved. Whistles and bells echoed from boat to boat and cheers reverberated from shore to shore.

On April 26, 1929, the Victory Drive Memorial was crowned with this Georgia Granite monument. The stone was provided by Chatham County Post 36 American Legion and the Savannah Women's Federation presented the Honor Roll tablet recording the names of 128 Chatham Countians who lost their lives in World War I.

The monument was originally located in the median of the Victory Drive and Waters Avenue intersection. During a 1995 cultural property assessment, the monument was determined to be in good physical condition, but at risk of traffic accidents. In 1998, Alderman George Zettler also raised the issue that it was very hard to visit the monument or hold memorial ceremonies at it. In September 1999, the City relocated monument,



weighing over 14,000 pounds, and installed new landscaping around it. A rededication ceremony was held on November 1st 1999.

And here we are: 96 years after Victory Drive was first proposed; 92 years after “America’s Last Thousand” returned home; and 86 years after this monument was erected to remember those who didn’t. The Victory Drive Memorial and this World War I Monument continue to provide a lasting legacy to honor our fallen heroes and our returning veterans.

Thank you.