

The Forgotten Memorial

How 9/11 changed Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

On September 24, 2001, Donna Glessner was boxing up donations at the fire station in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Two weeks before, United Flight 93 had crashed into a reclaimed strip mine about three miles away, killing its 40 passengers and crew members. The station in this town of 245 had become a supply depot, offering the hundreds of outsiders sweatshirts, bug spray, toothbrushes, and so much homemade food the town had to bring in a refrigerated trailer just to store it. With the FBI closing its field investigation, though, Shanksville seemed ready to return to normal. As Glessner packed up the last container of food, she noticed a car with out-of-state plates. Out popped a woman clutching a camera and asking for a picture of the Shanksville Fire Truck. “I remember being really struck by that,” Glessner recalls. “Wow, a tourist in Shanksville!”

Shanksville has never been an easy place to find. Christian Shank founded it as a mill town in 1798, and Shanksville missed its chance for bigger things when the plans for a train station fell through around the turn of the century. To get to Shanksville today means driving through the Allegheny Mountains on U.S. 30, a twisting, two-lane road, then turning on to Lambertsville Road, which is closer to a lane and a half. Lambertsville also goes past the Flight 93 crash site, and, in the last ten years, more than 1.6 million people have visited it—a number that will only increase once the permanent Flight 93 National Memorial opens on September 10. In Shanksville, it seems, tourists (and journalists) have become a residential hazard. Glessner now keeps a roster of trusted and willing contacts, for when the media calls. “It’s almost like a shopping list,” she says. “Give me a first responder, a person from the school, and a state trooper.”

Yet Shanksville and Flight 93 rarely receive as much attention as the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. One way to see this is in their memorials. Washington’s opened in 2008, the same year New York’s hit its fundraising goal of \$350 million. But Shanksville’s remains \$10 million short of its \$30-million goal—and that’s only one reason building the Flight 93 memorial turned out to be just as difficult as building ones in New York or Washington. True, the people in Shanksville didn’t have to wrestle with the Port Authority; they didn’t have to balance the demands of building in the Pentagon’s shadow. But they did face conspiratorial bloggers, hypocritical politicians, at least one avaricious land owner, and multiple layers of well-meaning bureaucracy. More than that, though, they faced the challenge of doing it all in a town that still isn’t comfortable with the role forced on it by history. No one in Shanksville would compare their losses to those suffered by the people on Flight 93. Still, the crash has changed everything here—and not always for the better. Glessner, who herself became a key figure in the long slog to build the memorial, admits as much: “I don’t think any of us thought we’d still be involved at this level ten years later.”

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Shanksville is a borough on a hill, with three parallel streets (the fire station occupies the highest one), three churches, and a one-building K-12 school. Families stay here for generations—Glessner can trace her genealogy back to Christian Shank—and they value their leisurely and secluded way of life. Outside town, cars share the road with Amish buggies, ATVs, and combines. People work in mining or farming or construction, or they drive to bigger cities like Somerset (pop. 6,277) and Bedford (pop. 2,841). Most need to supplement their income, and many farm houses and mobile homes have hand-painted signs advertising firewood, antiques, and pick-your-own blueberries.

All of this to say that the region is poor, rural, and very, very independent. This last quality drove Shanksville's initial response to Flight 93. In the weeks after the tragedy, and on the side of the bowl-shaped meadow where the plane had crashed, the local government paved a small parking lot and erected a 40-foot chain-link fence where people could leave messages and mementos. Glessner watched the growing activity at this temporary memorial, until, one Sunday at church, she suggested starting a group of volunteer guides. That first winter, the Flight 93 Ambassadors would sit in their cars to keep warm while waiting for visitors. In December, Shanksville and Somerset County also hosted a meeting at the school to discuss building a permanent memorial.

Not everyone in town welcomed the attention. Rick King, who owns Ida's Country Store, the only place to eat in Shanksville, remembers the constant interruptions from tourists needing directions and reporters needing local color. "You couldn't mow your grass for the first year," he says. For the first time, parents worried about their kids riding bikes in the street. Neighboring businesses had to put out "No Public Restroom" signs since they ran on septic systems—and since so many tourists were asking to use the bathroom, though they rarely bought anything.

But these changes were nothing compared to what happened when the government stepped in. In September of 2002, George W. Bush signed the Flight 93 National Memorial Act, a bill sponsored by Pennsylvania's John Murtha that authorized the National Park Service to develop a permanent memorial. Needless to say, the NPS proceeded much differently than had the locals. For example, it created a Resource Assessment Committee, which spent more than a year commissioning studies by engineers and economists, compiling a "Cultural Landscapes Inventory," and developing 3-D computer models of the crash site's topography.

The Committee decided that the Flight 93 memorial should include 2,200 acres, which meant a budget of between \$30 and \$58 million. Both numbers astonished many locals. While the Ambassadors were serving more and more visitors—including tour buses that rolled through Shanksville on their way to Gettysburg or Washington or New York (Glessner counted 180 buses in 2003 alone)—others in Shanksville wondered why the rest of the country wasn't ready to move on.

These frustrations became especially clear when Somerset County decided to do a corridor study on the traffic patterns and commercial development along U.S. 30. In yet another report, the NPS had projected that a permanent Flight 93 memorial would more than double its annual attendance, from 130,000 to a peak of 400,000. The corridor study warned that, since municipalities like Shanksville had no zoning, billboards and chain restaurants could soon pockmark their countryside. But the municipalities ignored the study's call for gentle regulations,

and their residents used it to voice their irritation at the memorial itself. “I like things the way they were, before this dumb idea,” read one anonymous comment card. “Why do we have to make changes when we didn’t ask for change?” read another.

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On a Wednesday afternoon in September of 2005, the NPS held a press conference to announce the memorial’s next step. Officials hoped the announcement (Paul Murdoch’s “Crescent of Embrace” would be the memorial’s design) and the location (Washington) would generate more interest and more donations for the Flight 93 memorial. Instead, they generated something else: by the weekend, a swarm of bloggers were protesting that crescents represented an important symbol in Islam—and that Murdoch’s memorial appeared to point to Mecca.

Murdoch, an architect based in Los Angeles, had beaten out more than 1,000 designs to win the NPS’s two-stage, two-jury competition with “Crescent of Embrace.” His titular feature called for a crescent of red maple trees to curve along the bowl of the Pennsylvania field, framing the crash site. This, it seemed, was too much. Prominent conservatives piled on with outrage and some ominous connections. Pamella Geller, who would later drive the “Ground Zero Mosque” debate, wondered, “Why not a ginormous swastika?” Michelle Malkin noted that Teresa Heinz’s “far left” foundation had helped fund the competition. Tom Tancredo wrote a letter to the NPS itself..

Still, most critics seemed satisfied when, in November, Murdoch unveiled a new design that replaced the crescent with a circle and obscured it with additional trees. But not Alec Rawls. Rawls, a former Ph.D. student at Stanford and the son of the late liberal philosopher John Rawls, believed Murdoch had intentionally smuggled these and many more Islamic details into his design. Rawls set about writing a book to prove this, though it was never published. (The first sentence of his *Crescent of Betrayal*: “This book exposes the planned Flight 93 Memorial to be a terrorist memorial mosque, centered around a half mile wide Mecca-oriented crescent.”) Rawls blamed the “mosque” on coverups by both the media and the government. “No one will tell the truth,” he says. “They just lie and lie and lie.”

It’s no surprise that Rawls kept finding crypto-Islamic clues in Murdoch’s redesigns. What is surprising is how seriously the NPS took his claims. It circulated Rawls’s research at meetings and asked several professors to review it. (They universally rejected his arguments.) The NPS even invited Rawls to Shanksville to talk with Murdoch and several members from the competition’s juries. Rawls was not impressed—“a dog and pony show” is how he describes the meeting—and soon returned to his campaign, studying the NPS’s Flight 93 newsletters; buying full-page, tiny-type ads in Somerset County newspapers; and even tracking down the addresses and phone numbers for several family members of the Flight 93 passengers and crew and contacting them at home.

The Islam-memorial accusations set the NPS back several months. A bigger obstacle, though, came from Charles Taylor, the Republican chairman of the House’s Interior Appropriations subcommittee. The State of Pennsylvania and the federal government had allocated nearly \$32 million for the Flight 93 memorial, in addition to the private donations. For two straight years, the NPS had requested \$10 million in federal money to purchase the memorial’s land—and, for

two straight years, Taylor had denied the request. So, in 2006, some Flight 93 family members headed to Washington to lobby Taylor in person. Taylor claimed he was taking a principled stand against the project's excessive price tag. It might have made sense—after all, another one of Shanksville's big-city neighbors is Johnstown, Pennsylvania, where John Murtha famously poured \$150 million in subsidies into a largely empty airport—except for Taylor's own record. The North Carolina Congressman, to pick only one example, had previously secured \$3.8 million to build a lavish park next to the headquarters of one of his financial companies. After pressure from numerous Republicans, including Bush's chief of staff, Taylor relented, adding the request to his 2007 budget.

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Now that the NPS had its money, it turned to buying the memorial's land: about 1,300 acres, spread out over 13 different tracts. (The NPS secured easements on the remaining 900 acres.) Tim Lambert, a reporter at a public radio station in Harrisburg, owned 164 of those acres, including some crucial land near the Hemlock tree line where Flight 93 had crashed. During the Great Depression, Lambert's grandfather—the Lambert in Lambertsville Road—had used those Hemlocks to build and sell small recreational cabins. Now Lambert wanted to sell the land to the memorial and donate the acres nearest the crash site.

But even giving the land away would prove complicated. While Rep. Taylor was holding the NPS's money in limbo, Lambert discussed his donation with the Conservation Fund, the Flight 93 family members, and officials from Somerset County. "You had to figure out who you were talking to," Lambert says.

Then there were long stretches when, for the smaller land owners, there was no talking at all. The NPS focused on the two most important parcels of land, which were owned by PBS Coal and Svonavec, Inc. PBS had strip-mined its 900-plus acres from 1969 through 1996—Lambert says his family's coal leases with the company put him through college—and then, per state and federal regulations, had restored it to its earlier state. But such restorations rarely went smoothly, and, while negotiating the PBS sale, the NPS discovered low levels of iron and manganese in the field's sediment ponds. PBS agreed to sell its land for a little more than \$2 million, then to deposit the money in a trust fund to cover the water's treatment.

Still, that took time. Buying the land of Svonavec, Inc., a locally-owned quarrying company, took longer still. After the Flight 93 crash, the Svonavec family had graciously allowed the construction of the temporary memorial on its 273 acres, acres which also included the crash site. As the land negotiations stretched on, though, the Svonavecs became less cooperative. At various points, the Flight 93 families and the NPS commissioned three separate appraisals of the Svonavec land and made offers ranging from \$250,000 to \$750,000. According to one of the family members, Michael Svonavec claimed the land was "worth \$50 million, but you can have it for \$10 million"—with \$10 million being the highly publicized figure intended to purchase all the memorial's land.

Svonavec denied saying this. Still, his family seemed intent on squeezing every dollar out of land that for years had sat mostly empty, except for when locals would hunt or ride snowmobiles. The

Svonavecs hired the same appraiser who'd evaluated the homes of O. J. Simpson and Jon Benet Ramsey. In 2007, they installed a donation box at the temporary memorial that promised "Your donations go directly to securing and preserving this site"—then pocketed the money to pay for a private security team. When the NPS found the box, its rangers covered it with plastic bags and duct tape. The next year, Svonavec countered by refusing to renew the temporary memorial's agreement, which forced the NPS to move the memorial a few hundred yards to the newly-acquired PBS land.

In December of 2008, the Flight 93 families appealed directly to Bush, asking him to invoke eminent domain and seize the Svonavec land. During the president's final week in office, Svonavec and the NPS agreed to proceed with eminent domain in order to settle the land's price in court. But as 2009 continued—and as the tenth anniversary of 9/11 approached—the government decided to threaten the other landowners with eminent domain, as well. Tim Lambert first heard about this while driving to work at the radio station, when another reporter called him and asked for comment. "I was just stunned that this was the point that had been reached," Lambert says. "We had never sat down with anyone and said, 'This is a fair price' or 'This is what is going to be done with your land.'"

Most outsiders missed this point. "People thought we were greedy farmers," Lambert says. But a few locals remained sympathetic to the Svonavecs—and just about everyone understood what Lambert and the other landowners were going through. In fact, when the government began making noises about eminent domain, two Somerset County officials resigned from their volunteer duties with the memorial. At the last minute, Pennsylvania's then-Senator Arlen Specter pushed for another round of face-to-face meetings. Lambert had run out of time to donate those acres along the tree line, but he did knock the price down on the sale. "Once we sat down and talked, it wasn't very long," he says.

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On November 7, 2009, the NPS finally broke ground on the Flight 93 National Memorial. Crews poured concrete through the winter, then started working simultaneously on the memorial's features and on the new road that would connect them directly to U.S. 30. Still, the NPS managed to finish everything on time and under-budget. By the time I visited, for three days in late July, the memorial was more or less complete.

Meanwhile, in Shanksville, tourists were still asking for directions—GPS didn't really work there—then moving on. The Bedford and Somerset Chambers' of Commerce were sparring over the Flight 93 signs on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, but the memorial still hadn't done much for Shanksville itself. Of the four obviously commercial buildings in town, two sat empty. Some locals remained irritated by the memorial; a few who lived within a couple miles still hadn't been to see it. "There are places I don't like to wear my Ambassadors shirt," Donna Glessner told me.

Alec Rawls, as I found out in a rambling, hour-long interview, continues his holy war on the memorial—and has been joined by Tom Burnett, Sr., whose son was one of Flight 93's most prominent victims. Rawls plans to run more local newspaper ads on the day of the memorial's dedication. Burnett refuses to attend the ceremony and has even asked that his son's name be

removed from the memorial, though the NPS has declined. Because of slow fundraising, several parts of the Flight 93 memorial won't be ready for the dedication—including the ring of red maples that first provoked Rawls and others. "It's not like Washington or New York," says King Laughlin of the National Park Foundation. "There's simply not a tradition of philanthropy here."

Still, the Flight 93 National Memorial has received donations from nearly 75,000 individuals, many of whom have given multiple times. And the crowds continue to come to this rural site. During my visit, nearly 3,000 people toured the temporary memorial—big families, Boy Scout troops, motorcycle clubs, and more. It remains a raw and personal experience, a place where people feel compelled to tell their own 9/11 stories. (One woman turned to me and started explaining how that day had forced her to go into labor almost three months early.) "Part of our role is to listen to people's stories," says Sue Strohm, another local Ambassador. When someone does ask Strohm a question, it's always "Where did the plane crash?" or "How close can I get?"

Well, once the permanent memorial opens, you'll turn right off U.S. 30, which now has turning lanes, drive through acres of wetlands full of lolling ducks, and park next to trees so new they're still in their green plastic water bags. Then you'll walk out a long and somber slate path to the memorial's plaza. There, a wall made up of 40 white granite panels, each engraved with the name of a Flight 93 passenger or crew member, will trace the plane's flight path. At that point, you'll be 200 yards from where the plane crashed. To your right, a recessed gate will lead to a second, private path where family members can walk through the Sacred Ground. For them, the Flight 93 National Memorial will always be part monument, part cemetery. For the rest of us, though, it will be something that helps us as 9/11 shifts from being a personal experience to a historical one. Indeed, standing there, surrounded by Pennsylvania hills still muddy from construction, you'll feel this memorial's power coming not only from what happened, but from where it happened—in a place history, to that point, had mostly passed by.