

Groton native's image destined for WWI memorial



Traci Slatton, far right, poses with re-enactors Zach Libresco, middle, and Mark Puchinsky for a 3D photo that will be used to help create the new World War I memorial expected to be unveiled in Washington, D.C., within the next five years. (Submitted)

Published April 15, 2019 12:44PM | Updated April 16, 2019 9:06PM

By **Lee Howard** (/apps/pbcs.dll/personalia?ID=l.howard) Day staff writer

✉ l.howard@theday.com (mailto:l.howard@theday.com) [🐦 KingstonLeeHow](https://twitter.com/KingstonLeeHow)
(<http://www.twitter.com/KingstonLeeHow>)

How Groton native Traci L. Slatton came to be one of 38 people chosen to be immortalized in bronze for the new World War I memorial in Washington, D.C., is the story of connections and good fortune.

Slatton, a novelist and daughter of Waterford resident Jo Slatton, is well connected as the wife of Sabin Howard, the New York City sculptor chosen to create the bronze-relief part of the monument, "A Soldier's Journey," which will be unveiled a block and a half from the White House in what's known as Pershing Park sometime between 2023 and 2024.

It will be the first national World War I memorial erected in the nation's capital, perhaps reflecting Americans' reluctant entrance into "The War to End All Wars," a conflict that dragged the United States from a long history of isolation into an era of constant foreign entanglements.

But the story of how Slatton's husband came to be chosen for the project involved a bit of good luck, since his first team lost the opening round of the competition involving 360 entrants. Luckily, one of the top five proposals submitted by young architect-in-training Joseph Weishaar required a sculptor of Howard's ability, and Weishaar found him by doing a Google search of "living American sculptors," after a previous search turned up a list mostly of great sculptors from the past, she said.

The Weishaar team went on to win the competition for the \$25 million memorial in 2015 for a design it then called "The Weight of Sacrifice." In addition to Howard and Weishaar, the team consisted of Phoebe Lickwar and GWWO Architects in Baltimore, Md.

"This is high art," said Slatton, a former Fitch High School student who left a year early at age 16 to attend Yale University. "It will stand for thousands of years. It will change our cultural landscape like the Statue of Liberty."

The World War I Centennial Commission had hoped to erect by the 100-year anniversary of the conflict's end in 2018 a monument in recognition of the 116,000 Americans who died in the Great War. But bureaucracy and fundraising were slow.

"There were an unbelievable number of permits and approvals," Slatton said in a phone interview from Los Angeles.

In fact, there is one more hurdle to go through on Thursday, when the U.S. Commission on Fine Arts is asking to see a model of the relief.

Just to get the centennial commission to approve the sculpture's basic design took 12 tries, she added. The final design is 58 feet long and 10 feet tall.

The sculpture tells a story of a soldier leaving home to join comrades on the battlefield only to experience all the ravages of war, including a gas attack and shell shock, returning in triumph a nevertheless changed man.

A central figure is the man's daughter, who hands him his helmet at the beginning of the war and stares into it for the final scene looking ahead to World War II. Slatton said their daughter Madeleine Howard was the model for the girl at the beginning and end of the relief.

"That's close to my heart," she said in an email.

Slatton, who has been a frequent model for Howard's sculptures, said the character she portrays in the bronze relief is toward the end of the journey, a nurse in full dress uniform. It was important to her husband, she said, that women's role in the war would be portrayed with the same dignity as the comrades in arms who came back with an early form of PTSD known as shell shock.

"These soldiers were terribly traumatized," Slatton said. "We didn't want to glorify aggression; we wanted to talk about the brotherhood of arms and the commonality of suffering."

Slatton recently joined a group of re-enactors in England to begin trying to realize Howard's vision for the sculpture by dressing in World War I costumes and posing in a cutting-edge photogrammetry rig that used 160 cameras to create a three-dimensional effect. The process is being used to shorten the horizon of what otherwise might have been a 20-year project.

"This is the first time that living models were used with this kind of photogrammetry set up," according to a release about the project. "The photogrammetry images taken of the re-enactors will be 3D imposed onto the bronze that will make the final memorial."

Slatton jokes that the nurse she depicts is stockier than she is, and therefore she will be etched in eternity as heavier and thicker-waisted than her daily yoga workout would allow.

"I apologize for my vanity, but I am NOT that stocky!" she said in an email.

To fill out the 38-figure sculpture, Howard went through the laborious process of hiring actors who could pose for the 3D images. He posed them in groupings, Slatton said, because "the human community" is part of the design's theme.

"Sabin wasn't going to glorify war, even though we were victorious in WWI," she said. "He wanted to talk about how we are all connected through our families and friendships in our common humanity."

The only isolated figure in the relief, she added, is the one depicting shell shock.

"He's the only figure who stares straight out at viewers," she said. "He shows how soldiers suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. All the other figures are intertwined."

Slatton said the 3D images created by new photography techniques can be manipulated using a digital sculpting app called Zbrush, allowing the creation of the soft-foam forms that Howard will cover with clay to provide the framework for the 14-ton sculpture.

"Potentially, it could save years of work," she said, cutting a 20-year process down to about eight years.

But it also was a big change from the traditional way Howard, who has been a Lyme Academy of Fine Arts judge in the past, had painstakingly constructed sculptures using his own hands to create the steel armatures that formed the bones of the piece.

Finally, though, Howard relented, seeing 3D photography as another technique in the sculptor's toolbox, Slatton said.

"He had lost one cherished technique, but he'd gained a tool that could free his creativity in a way he'd never envisioned," she said in a February blog on **medium.com** (<https://medium.com/@tslatton/digital-technology-and-the-sculptors-art-innovation-and-imagination-a8716c3ee1fb>).

Slatton said she is "deeply honored" that Howard chose her image for the relief, though she also hopes to be known for her own artistry as a writer of a dozen books, including her well-received debut novel, "Immortal," and the nonfiction "The Art of Life" she wrote with her husband in 2012.

"All told, it's pretty cool," she said. "Perhaps (someday) one of my great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandchildren will stand in front of the relief and look at my face and feel our connection."

l.howard@theday.com (<mailto:l.howard@theday.com>)

