

Memorial will add FDR in wheelchair

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Image Caption: A map of the FDR Memorial. Text reads: Display to be added. An addition to the FDR Memorial will show the 32nd president in a wheelchair. The new design adds a fifth open-air "room," to use architect Lawrence Halprin's term. The existing four rooms show scenes from the four terms of his presidency: his first inaugural, the Great Depression, World War II, and his funeral.

WASHINGTON – Vice President unveils plans today to add a life-size statue of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his wheelchair to the sprawling memorial that bears his name.

The announcement officially concludes a long-running controversy over this city's most popular tourist attraction. After a disability-rights group raises \$1.5 million to pay for it, construction will begin on a life-size sculpture to be placed in the center of a new display in the 7.5-acre FDR Memorial.

Showing that he led the nation through the Great Depression and World War II with a crippling disability "will make Roosevelt all the more heroic" to future generations, says National Organization on Disability Chairman Michael Deland, who fought for the new statue and whose group offered to raise money for the project.

Gore will announce that the Clinton administration has selected sculptor Robert Graham, who created some of the memorial's existing sculptures, to design the statue. He'll base it on a photograph of Roosevelt with his dog, Fala, and the daughter of the caretaker of his estate in Hyde Park, NY. It is one of only two known photographs of Roosevelt in the wheelchair he used after contracting polio in 1921.

The girl, Ruthie Bie, won't be part of the statue. Graham will work with stone carver John Benson and landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, who designed the sweeping memorial of granite, water, and bronze.

The addition will be "a tribute to a true American hero who led our nation through its darkest days and reminds us that disability is not a barrier to achievement," Gore says.

The controversy over depicting Roosevelt's disability erupted when construction began three years ago. Deland learned that plans for the \$48 million memorial did not include any obvious image of FDR's wheelchair or crutches.

The memorial does include a statue showing FDR in a regular chair with small wheels. He is wearing a cape and the wheels are not easily visible.

The initial decision not to show him in his wheelchair was "an unconscionable distortion of history," Deland says.

A nod to modern-day political correctness also wiped-out Eleanor Roosevelt's trademark fur stole and FDR's ever-present cigarette holder.

As for the wheelchair, members of the FDR Memorial Commission said FDR took great pains to hide his disability, so it was historically accurate not to show it.

Despite backing from most of Roosevelt's descendants, the activists could not persuade commissioners to change the plans. They threatened to stage a protest on the day the memorial was dedicated in May 1997.

That prompted President Clinton to announce his support for an addition. Congress passed legislation to make it so, and the demonstration was called off.

Christopher Roosevelt, one of FDR's grandsons, says his grandfather was "keenly attuned" to how to lead a nation gripped by depression and war and insisted "that the public see a strong leadership figure."

But he supports the addition. "The reality is that he spent every single day of his life in the White House utilizing a wheelchair, and when he did appear before groups of individuals that had faced adversity...He used his disability to inspire them," he says.

Another grandson, David Roosevelt, who served on the commission that developed the original plans, says, "I'm just not certain that a memorial like this should be used to make a social statement."

Photo caption: Roosevelt seated in his wheelchair. Next to him are dog Fala and caretaker's daughter, Ruthie Bie.