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History lights up Baltimore's Charles St.

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Statues don't get much better than the one atop the Washington Monument. You haven't noticed? There's the father of our country, resigning his commission, wearing his uniform -- and wrapped in a gently flowing toga.

If you've missed it, that's because a true appreciation of *the* Washington Monument requires traveling to Baltimore, which has the Washington Monument, the very first undertaken in this country to honor our first president. It was completed in 1829. The one in the District, also the work of architect Robert Mills, wasn't begun until 1848 and took forever to finish -- until the end of 1884.

[Baltimore's Washington Monument](#) stands, quite rightly, in the middle of enchanting Mount Vernon Place. To me, the square is one of the most beautiful spots in the city, and a fitting adornment to Charles Street, which [last month was proclaimed](#) a National Scenic Byway by the U.S. Department of Transportation.

City street as scenic byway? Let Webster's call a byway a side road; federal regulations include cultural or historical significance in their definition. So Las Vegas Boulevard swanned onto the most recent byways list, too. Know why Vegas wanted the title? So it could get help putting up more neon signs, and restoring and bringing back old-timey ones.

Charles Street hardly needs neon. The street is illuminated by the flattering light of history, with the level of intensity depending on the traveler's desire. Quick drive-by on your way to somewhere else? Motor along all 12 miles in 40 minutes, and you'll still feel as if you've seen a sight or two. Crave a night away? Stay in the new Hotel Monaco, in the 1906 B&O Railroad building right on Charles Street, and add visits to the [Walters Art Museum](#), the Baltimore [Museum of Art](#) and two historic house museums, [Homewood](#) and [Evergreen](#). An [Everyman Theatre](#) performance is a must, as is dinner at the Helmand, an Afghan restaurant run by a brother of Afghan President Hamid Karzai. (Try the pumpkin in yogurt sauce.)

I limited myself to a day, with time aplenty to stop for lunch -- the roasted vegetable salad at Donna's cafe is renowned -- beginning my walking-driving tour in South Baltimore at Wells Street. Start from the south because part of Charles is one way, northbound, and when you encounter George Washington, he'll be facing in your direction.

First thing: the brick, castle-like Pabst Brewing Co. on your left at Charles and Wells. Ah, beer was indeed king here once. In the mid-1800s, the city had about 30 breweries, and many an old-timer remembers being regularly sent to one of the plentiful neighborhood taverns to fetch a pail of beer for his parents. If it's not too early, stop to raise a glass. On a football Sunday, keep your window open along these blocks filled with quintessential Baltimore rowhouses and you'll hear the roars of the Ravens-watchers, directing you to the nearest bar.

I visited on a Saturday to sample the boutiques in full; some are closed on Sundays. A few blocks after crossing Fort Avenue (it leads to Fort McHenry), I parked, drawn into Amy's Boutique at 1133 S. Charles, where I encountered a fabulous collection of jackets. The An Ren line transfixed me, even though the items were out of my normal price range. A girl can dream, can't she?

I dawdled and window-shopped, looking at jewelry, antiques, new furniture and bric-a-brac, and at the northeast corner of Charles and Montgomery, I took my first photo: the distant monument, framed by a portico in front of me.

Back in the car, I briefly left the 19th-century city, looking to my right at Conway Street for a glimpse of 1980s Baltimore -- Harborplace and the Aquarium -- then entering 1960s Baltimore at Redwood Street, the urban-renewed Charles Center on my left.

Traffic stopped me at the Greek-temple-like-but-built-in-1907 Savings Bank of Baltimore, now World Relief, on the east

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side of Charles, at Baltimore Street. Overnighters, here's where you check into the Hotel Monaco across the street.

For me, onward, leaving the last vestiges of the 1960s behind at Saratoga Street, stopping for a look-see at the [Woman's Industrial Exchange](#), which was set up in 1880 to help impoverished but respectable women earn money by selling their needlework. Great place for baby gifts, with lots of handmade clothes and toys -- the sock monkey is a specialty.

And now, finally, I have arrived. Here's Mount Vernon Square, an ode to wealthy 19th-century Baltimore, its gardens dotted with heroic horsemen and imposing sculptures, the monument rising in the center, the retiring general high atop a Doric column, wearing a toga reminiscent of his hero, Cincinnatus, the Roman leader who gave up command of the army and dictatorship to return to his farm.

Inside, I get a warm greeting from Anthony Carter, who jovially informs me that he has been blessed to work at the monument for two years. First, I get a free map of the neighborhood and buy a package of lovely notecards, 10 for \$5, illustrating the annual holiday lighting of the monument -- a spectacular event set off with fireworks and scheduled for the first Thursday of December.

Climb up, Anthony urges me, it's a wonderful view. I pay \$1 and ascend, all 228 steps, and examine the city from a perch just below the statue. To the west, Baltimore spreads out to an undulating ridge. To the south, I can see the famed Domino Sugars sign. To the east, the dark, foreboding stone walls of the 19th-century penitentiary. And to the north?

To the north, miles of Charles Street still beckon: the aggressively modern Man/Woman sculpture imposed on the beaux-arts train station (better not to look!), Johns Hopkins University, a Mies van der Rohe building, affluent 1920s Baltimore and finally the suburbs. But for now, in the late afternoon light, it is enough to stand silently -- and enjoy.

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