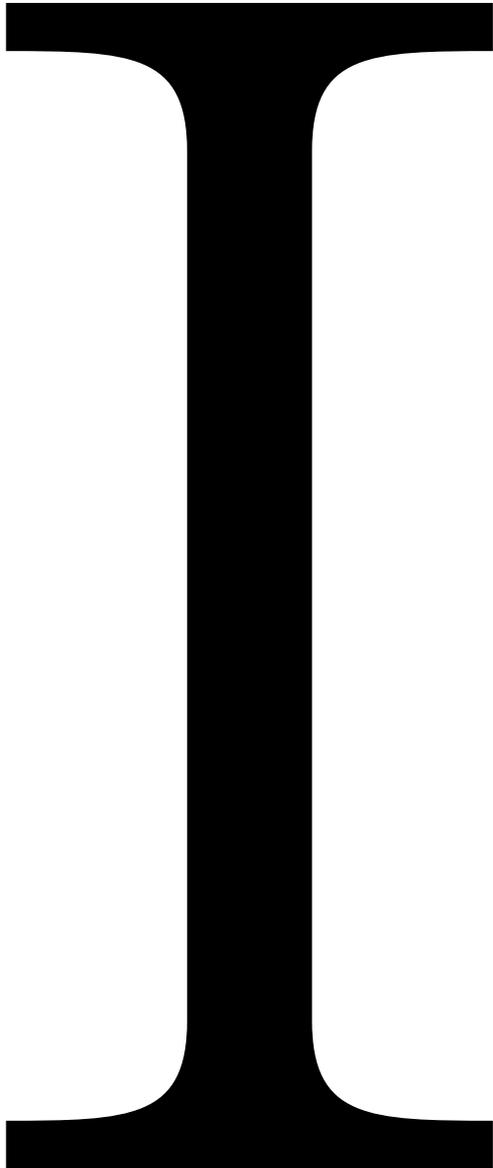


One American family in
Maine is determined to build
the world's tallest flagpole
in hopes of uniting the
country. It's not as crazy as
it sounds. By *Oliver Roeder*.
Photography by *Jeff Rich*

The plot to save America from itself





t's a gorgeous bright day and it's noon and we all stare up at the sky, squinting through heavy curtains of sunshine. We stand on a hilltop clearing, surrounded by endless trees. We wander around, charting our own slow paths through the knee-high thicket. It's silent save our rustling and the birds.

It's hard to imagine what it will look like up here.

This is one of the most remote points in the most rural state in the union. Maine is a place of rocky coasts, lobsters, wild blueberries and wilderness. This is the wilderness, vast and lush and beautiful. This is where a new behemoth will pierce the sky with concrete and steel. According to the Worcesters, my hiking companions and the owners of this forest, it might be what saves America from itself.

At 1,461ft, the Flagpole of Freedom will be the tallest flagpole in the world by a factor of two. It will rise 7ft taller than the Empire State Building. Including the 315ft hill on which it will sit, it will tower 1,776ft above sea level, an homage to the year the US declared its independence and the same height as One World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan. The attached flag will be the largest ever flown, covering nearly two acres, the size of a professional football pitch. At this scale, each of its 50 stars will be twice the size of the average adult.

Three elevators, the fastest made by the Otis Elevator Company, will run through the interior of the flagpole, stopping along the way at a gift shop, a

theatre and a lower observation platform at 330ft. The golden ball at the top will be five storeys tall and host multiple observation decks, a shining Death Star of freedom. (That's no moon...) Robot window washers will crawl along its exterior, keeping it sparkling. Specially designed mechanisms will allow the enormous flag to be lowered to half mast in times of national mourning. The flag itself is the subject of ongoing and novel engineering to ensure it flutters properly, given its great mass.

Because of its height and far-eastern location, the flagpole - "pole" doesn't do it justice - will be the first thing sunlight touches in the United States each morning. The Worcester brothers, Rob and Mike, tell me 60 people - architects, engineers, marketers - have been working on the project for the past 14 months. Rob hands me a rod of granite, a core sample from deep within the hilltop site. It's heavy. This is the ancient ballast of the planet into which his family's vision will be drilled. This first phase is meant to be completed by the country's 250th birthday, its semiquincentennial, on July 4 2026. They say it'll cost \$1bn.

These elements are just the centrepiece of a planned complex, across 2,500 acres of wild and remote land, set to unfold over the next decade and a half. Smithsonian-scale Halls of History will be devoted to individual conflicts, from the revolutionary war to the war on terror. One building will be subterranean, built into a local gravel pit, to recreate the look and feel of the trenches in the first world war. Live performers will re-enact historical events in a Village of Old Glory. An elevated gondola system will ferry visitors through the forest and around the park. An augmented-reality town crier will read the Declaration of Independence from a balcony. "We don't want this [to be] all about the blood and gore of war and stuff like that," Rob says.

The park will also memorialise tens of millions of individual veterans in unprecedentedly exhaustive and concentrated form, their names stamped and backlit on nine miles of walls. "We don't want it to look like a Dunkin' Donuts signboard," says Rob. "But we want to have it so it's tasteful and lit." They will, presumably, stamp my grandfathers' names here and perhaps the names of your relatives.

"What if this was the only place that honoured every one of our over 24 million fellow Americans who have served this country and fought for our freedom?" asks a promotional video that Rob and Mike play for me.

What if?

The Worcester family business, under the auspices of the Worcester Wreath Co, is Christmas wreaths. Morrill Worcester, the 72-year-old patriarch, is in hospital out of state, so I meet with his sons in the family office on the edge of Columbia Falls, population 476. It's a large rustic room and all the chandeliers are made of antlers. The heads of animals adorn the walls and taxidermied specimens stand in glass cases. Tall windows afford a stereoscopic view of the Worcester domain. We sit at an enormous wooden table, joined by a business associate named Bill Kitchen. The Worcesters have spent their lives here; Kitchen quit the New York grind to live alone here in a lighthouse.

Rob, 44, is sturdy and clean-shaven. He wears jeans and a dress shirt and is businesslike. Mike, 42, is shorter, heavier-set and speaks with a thicker Maine accent, all dropped g's and r's. He is bearded, goofy and charming, and wears a cap





From left: Morrill Worcester with his two sons, Rob and Mike, at the future site of the flagpole

with an American flag on it. And there is something mystical and sharp about Kitchen, lean with grey hair, something cosmic and calculating. He's worked with the family for years on "strategy" and "entertainment-driven projects".

Morrill, pronounced "moral", got his start in business during college, selling fruit and vegetables on the roadside. Someone asked him if he could procure seasonal wreaths too, which he began selling in 1971. The family now produces millions of them each year from balsam firs covering a large swath of this state. They also have lines in construction and land holding. "We do all kinds of other things just to make ends meet," Rob says. "We've done pretty well." By all accounts, they are the wealthiest family in the area.

The other Worcester family business is America and its military dead. They are professional patriots.

If the Worcesters are known outside this corner of Maine, it is as the founders of Wreaths Across America, a tax-exempt charity that lays unsolicited wreaths at military veterans' graves, accepting donations from the public with the promise of remembrance and honour in return. One day each winter, Wreaths Across America and its vast legions of volunteers dispatch to thousands of cemeteries to lay wreaths. This December they say they'll distribute more than two million of them.

The charity is the source of much of the family's income. For 26 years, the Worcester Wreath Co sold its wreaths to LL Bean, the iconic New England outfitter, seller of boots and sweaters. While they were doing business together, LL Bean accounted for the majority of the Worcesters' wreath sales, according to court documents. But LL Bean had "unease about Worcester's environmental and human resources record", and a contract dispute in 2008 and ensuing legal battle torched the relationship.

A few years later, the charity accounted for as much as 80 per cent of the family business's sales, according to the Wall Street Journal. It's an arrangement the Portland Press Herald described as "unusual though not illegal". Wreaths Across America collected \$22 million in total revenue last fiscal year, according to tax documents, most of it from donations. Nearly \$15mn of that was paid to Worcester Wreath Co.

The family's appreciation empire has an origin story, repeated like a mantra. When Morrill was 12, it goes, he was a paperboy and won a paperboy contest. The reward was a trip to Washington, DC, where he was especially taken by Arlington National Cemetery, the military burial ground. The feeling lingered and in 1992, when he had some extra wreaths, he laid them on Arlington graves. He kept going back. In 2005, a photo of the wreaths in the snow there went viral, and the nonprofit was founded in 2007. Morrill became a sort of patriotic folk hero, with a goal of placing a wreath on every single veteran's grave, tens of millions in all. "Over-all we're just a grateful family," Mike says. "There's no huge direct connection to the military."

The first large flag I see when I arrive in Maine flutters off the back of a pick-up truck. It's red, white and blue and says "Fuck Biden". I drive past antique shops, junkyards, yard sales and mortuaries; lovely meandering rivers, glimmering lakes and rolling hills; megachurches, Maine Military Supply and Big Bang Boom Fireworks.



The marker for where the flagpole will stand and a rendering of the flagpole itself

'Nobody's ever argued that this isn't lofty. That this isn't aspirational. That this isn't, like, a dream'

Bill Kitchen

Maine is the north-easternmost state in the contiguous US. It shares more border with Canada or the ocean than it does with the rest of America. Its coastal towns lie beneath the flight paths of many intercontinental jetliners, far below the Great Circles connecting the metropolises of the world. It's so quiet here that you can hear them from the ground, 40,000ft in the air.

I am staying at the home of my future father-in-law, Bob, in Winter Harbor. He's retired here to a life of antique cars and cable news. We may be geographically remote, but Bob is politically attuned, deeply interested in and dismayed by the erosion of our democracy.

Geologically, we're on Grindstone Neck on the Schoodic Peninsula, tucked on a gnarled east coast, facing west. Out my bedroom window I see sunsets and sea and islands: Turtle Island, Spectacle Island, Heron Island, Flat Island. I see deer and wild berries and lobstermen on their boats. I see cormorants and ospreys and hummingbirds and mink, playing among the rocks. They stare back at me.

Bob's house is 35 miles from the Flagpole of Freedom site, and there's some debate about whether we'd be able to see it from here. Yes, we decide, if we hiked Cadillac Mountain, just across the narrows. No problem. This fact is later confirmed when I see a "visual impact study" commissioned by the Worcesters, showing the flag sticking out of the horizon. To build the world's tallest flagpole, they commissioned a study to reassure people that it won't be too visible.

At first the Worcesters balk at the phrase "patriotic Disneyland". The term is too pat, too light. But on the wall of their office I notice a photograph of Walt Disney and Mickey Mouse. The Worcesters are clearly admirers. Disney parks are built around fictional cartoon characters, Rob explains. "They have the artificial, which is awesome, I mean, we go all the time."

But the Worcesters' claimed purpose is something loftier. "We're about uniting. We're about honouring. We're about teaching future generations, specifically about service and sacrifice and stuff." There's a pause, then Kitchen says, "Boy howdy, did they know how to move people through and service them. Those things are enviable. But I also think there is a strong similarity in storytelling. And that's what both of these are going to be about."

The Worcesters emphasise education in their patriotism. Wreaths Across America's slogan is "Remember, Honor, Teach" and the group offers school lesson plans about American symbols, history and military conflicts. The flag park will also feature a heavy pedagogical element, which the Worcesters say will be "authentic history" - just the facts, the first-hand accounts, everyone's story included. "The Native Americans and their experience, the settling of the 13 colonies and slavery, everything that went on prior to the revolution," Rob says. "We're not taking sides in history." Then each "family unit can decide how they want to react".

The Flagpole of Freedom is also a for-profit enterprise. For \$660, you can become a "park founder", which comes with free lifetime admission. Ten per cent off for veterans. They decline to tell me how many founders they have so far and haven't settled on what the entrance fee will be yet. A link also recently appeared on its website advertising a "corporate patriot program": \$50,000 buys your company or organisation 216 sq in of advertising, "displayed in our Patriots Roll Call index and projected in our River of Patriots". I can picture it: *America and Her Glorious Dead! Brought to you by Big Bang Boom Fireworks*. The Worcesters plan to launch a companion nonprofit; the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian, they say, won't buddy up otherwise.

I find myself overwhelmed. By the scale of the proposed flagpole and the park and the construction required in the middle of nowhere. By the transformation of this place from permanent wilderness into malleable *site*. By the lack of population nearby to visit the park, let alone staff it. By the cost and logistics and supposed purity of vision to justify it all.

Eventually, I simply ask: "Is any of this even real?"

"Nobody's ever argued that this isn't lofty," Kitchen says. "That this isn't aspirational. That this isn't, like, a dream."



Flagpole View Cabins: each cabin has a large window that faces the future site of the flagpole

Bob and I take a short drive to Grindstone Point, overlooking the ocean. Locals and tourists, known as people "from away", wander the rocks and admire the crashing surf and seagoing vessels. I ask some locals about the Worcesters. Most here know about the gargantuan flagpole and regard it with scepticism. "Ostentatious patriotism is like ostentatious religion," says David Fertig, a civil rights attorney who lives nearby. "It's suspect."

The writer EB White lived just over the hill we're facing. In a 1955 essay, he describes a Maine where "woods and fields encroach everywhere", where his fire chief was also his barber, where in a small town "the white spire of its church against the pale-red sky stirs me in a way that Chartres could never do". When driving into Maine, he writes, "I do have the sensation of having received a gift from a true love."

White also describes a visit to a village where he sees trucks loaded with balsam fir wreaths. "They were lined up in formation, headed out, ready for the starter's gun. The loads were already built high in the air."

The Worcesters own 50,000 acres of Maine. Fifteen thousand acres of that is wreath farm, balsam fir forest or "tip land", so called because every three years selected trees' branches are harvested, or tipped, and made into wreaths. The family's holdings stretch much, much farther than the eye can see. It's strange but familiar, like walking on a distant planet in a dream. During the harvest, workers carry three sizes of trimmer to gather the wreath-stuff. There are some 400 trees per acre here, and the Worcesters say they will produce three million wreaths this year.

Rob is currently developing a new machine that would spin around each tree with a sickle blade,

trimming its tips. And the balsam firs are now fertilised by drones that hover across the vast forest.

The Queen of England dies while we're in the tip land. Mike hears the news first. "She had an amazing life," he says. Later, Bob's British wife, Gillian, explains to me the monarchical ideal: a figure that looms tall, above the political fray, neutral, unifying.

The Worcesters' tip land is dotted with military memorials of the family's commission - to Medal of Honor recipients, to women veterans, to a doomed army flight to Vietnam. The tip land is also the final resting place of Peter, a caisson horse that pulled the caskets of fallen soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery. ("Believe it or not, it was the most emotional funeral I've ever been to in my life," says Mike. "And it was for a horse.") There is an amphitheatre that hosts country music concerts. Adjacent is Acadia National Cemetery, one of only two national cemeteries in Maine. It's built on land donated by the Worcesters in 2017 and features a plaque bearing the Gettysburg Address made, I'm told, of melted cannonballs from the civil war.

Military families can request dog tags of their deceased loved ones be hung from one of the firs, free of charge. Kitchen invites me to do so for my grandfathers; I ignore this. Rob says he's been moved by the tags' sound, metal jingling in quiet forest moments. Later, in a promotional video, I hear him say the exact same thing.

We visit a chapel the Worcesters built in the tip land (antler chandeliers again). It's an unlikely bit of architecture out here, with a handsome white steeple. Outside, Mike snaps off a small bit of balsam and urges me to smell. It smells like Christmas.

Along a mile stretch of road, the pledge of allegiance is spelled out on a series of signs.

"I pledge allegiance..."

"...to the flag..."

"...of the United States of America..."



Mike, Rob and Morrill Worcester at the family office discussing the renderings of the site

The next morning, Bob drives us to a small foundry called US Bells. Bellmaking is an ancient craft, involving clay and olivine and molten bronze heated to 2,200F. Here they work with marine bronze, they tell us, the kind used in cleats and oarlocks. There's something captivating about molten metal: the pure glow, the transformation of permanence into motion. Two practised workers, dressed like rugged astronauts, pour it into a series of casts and pull out brand new objects. After the casting, the small group we're with shuffles over to the storefront where they ring the lovely small bells on display.

Amid that din, I ask about the flagpole. "They just don't understand scale," Dick Fisher, the master bellmaker, tells me. "Why didn't somebody stare this guy right in the face and say, 'You're crazy'? I mean, forgive me, it's like Trump. Nobody will stand up."

Fisher, who moved here in 1975, says I'll regret having got him started. Like many people I talk to, he compares the flagpole to a proposed enormous

industrial salmon farm in the bay nearby, a project decried by local bumper stickers and yard signs. Another project perceived to be out of scale, suspect and threatening. (Bob is deeply attached to the local osprey population and counts on them to sabotage the salmon farm, should it ever be built.) "It'll put a big eyesore that will turn it into suburbia, if they do what they're talking about," Fisher says. The flagpole team expects millions of visitors a year. "If they really bring enough people to make it pay, that's gonna ruin the whole coast of Maine."

Local response to the Flagpole of Freedom is at turns sceptical, angry, pragmatic and awestruck, as are opinions about the wreath enterprise and even the wreaths themselves. "We know wreaths around here," a local New England government official in a nearby town tells me. "They're, like, one layer. They're cheap."

The flagpole is covered regularly by the local press, generating impassioned correspondence from readers. "This project endeavours to honour-

ably recognise our nation's heroes and at the same time spark economic development, which will create a prosperous future for residents in Washington County," reads a letter to the editor of The Ellsworth American newspaper.

"Wouldn't the billions of dollars being raised for this for-profit project be better spent in providing physical and mental healthcare, housing, food and clothing to the thousands of veterans who need it?" reads another. "Of course it would."

I drive into the centre of Columbia Falls, the Worcester's hometown. It appears abandoned until I see movement in Ruggles House, a prim federal-style building from 1820, which is now a museum. A tidily dressed guide named Roberta Hammond walks me through the building and its history: a local baron, a fortune made in lumber, an untimely death, disrepair, restoration, preservation. Hammond runs a tight ship. You can take photos in the Louvre and the Met, but not here.

I mention the new flagpole in town, the work of modern barons, and she rolls her eyes.

“My family has been here since before the revolutionary war,” Hammond tells me. She talks about the sanctity of the land and the beauty of Peaked Mountain Pond. “My father built a camp there in 1958, and the people that have it now are just devastated over this whole thing. I can’t blame them because it’s never going to be the same. They will never see another sunset. They will never see the stars again.” Years ago, she says, everybody thought it was going to be just a flagpole. “Well, then it turned into a small city. And it was a sneaky way that they did this.”

Earlier this year, in an emergency session, Maine legislators passed a law that would allow Columbia Falls to annex the Flagpole of Freedom land, so long as Columbia Falls voters approve. (They have yet to vote.) This would create a world apart and place oversight powers with the tiny town rather than the state. As reported in the *Maine Monitor*, the “law is unusual in several respects, including that it strips protections designed to ensure a municipality’s ordinances are at least as stringent” as those the state’s land-use commission has in place.

After the tour, Hammond suggests I cross the street to the headquarters and museum of Wreaths Across America. The Worcester’s wreath charity shares its building with the municipal offices of Columbia Falls. In this sense, a city official from nearby tells me, “they literally own the town”.

I walk around the back of the nondescript former school. I enter and tell the woman at the desk that I’m writing a story about the Worcester’s big flagpole. “It’s completely separate,” Beth Butler, Wreaths Across America’s special projects coordinator, tells me. “Did they tell you that we’re completely separate?”

Never mind that early materials for the flagpole bear the Wreaths Across America logo, or that the first thing I see in the hallway is a shrine to Morrill Worcester. Its centerpiece is a large painting of the man wearing a Worcester Wreath Co cap and caressing a wreath. In the background are graves with wreaths, soldiers, Boy Scouts and a casket pulled by horses. Surrounding the painting are a small doll in Morrill’s likeness, various awards and keys to cities, a photo from his paperboy trip and a photo with George W Bush.

Butler shows me around. She tells me the painting was done by the same artist who did the Paul Bunyan statue down in Bangor. She repeats the paperboy origin story. She recalls with pride the time the snow photo went viral. Then she says something else: “We want everyone to know, everything is above board, everything is transparent.”

I hadn’t suggested that anything was below board. In fact, I hadn’t said much at all. She pre-empts another would-be critique: “It’s not a Christmas wreath. We call it a remembrance wreath.” I hadn’t mentioned Christmas either, though every wreath in the online company store says “Christmas” in the description. Perhaps it was a UPI article last year that reported “religious liberty advocates” were protesting the wreath-laying events and calling the unsolicited laying of wreaths “desecration of the grave”. Butler further says that the organisation understands that the “Jewish faith really doesn’t believe in decorating graves” and therefore doesn’t lay wreaths on graves with a Star of David.

In the next room is a life-size diorama of American soldiers in Vietnam, mannequins at war.



Columbia Falls, Maine: the small town has a population of 476

Other rooms are packed with countless military artefacts and memorabilia, the effect overwhelming, uncured and undigested. Butler shows me a promotional video consisting largely of big trucks packed with wreaths arriving at Arlington. She says she is moved every time she watches it.

Butler suggests I also go see the Gold Star House next door. This is Wreaths Across America’s new bed-and-breakfast for families of fallen service members. Each room is themed to the era of a military conflict: the Civil War Room, the Vietnam War Room, the Global War on Terror Room and so on. There are copies of *World War II for Dummies* and *American Revolution for Dummies* on the shelves.

Back at the house, Bob wants to show me a documentary about the Schoodic Peninsula, the place where we are. We pour glasses of port. The DVD player hasn’t been used in a while, so we have to clean corrosion gunk off the remote control’s batteries to re-establish the connection. The movie is 20 years old, but I’m pleased to recognise the rugged astronauts at the foundry. Bob and Gillian recognise everyone.

“He’s not doing too well, is he?”

“Yeah, I think he died.”

The film is mostly about the region’s spirit of self-reliance and -preservation and the motley band that has made its way here over the decades, making a living off the land and the sea. No one asks anyone what they do here in Maine, I’m told, because people do so many things. There is talk of “harmonic waves” on the sea and of how life is very short.

Bob also watches a lot of news at high volume. He records certain segments and we rewatch them. The former president is branded an insurrection-

ist. Aides are subpoenaed. Allies surrender to state authorities. Fears of a hardline majority grow. Political attacks are sharpened. Record campaign money is raised and spent. Subpoenas are issued about the money.

One evening over dinner Bob tells me about a new survey: 43 per cent of Americans believe another civil war is likely. I wonder if that’ll warrant a new building in Patriotic Disneyland. Bob’s housekeeper, Susan, used to make wreaths for the Worcester’s. “They’re great people,” she tells me. “They sometimes get a hard time but they’re very nice, they treated us well.” And the flag? “I can’t wait to see it. I can’t even imagine a flagpole that tall.”

The current tallest flagpole in the US stands at a measly 400ft. It’s in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, outside the headquarters of an insurance company located alongside an interstate highway. This is a pittance, globally speaking. Some of the tallest flagpoles in the world are in North Korea, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan. At a glance, the list suggests an inverse relationship between the height of a country’s flagpoles and the health of its democracy. This does not trouble the Worcester’s. “This flag, the United States flag, is recognised all over the world for all the good that it stands for, and all of the sacrifice that it stood for,” Rob says. “I feel it should be on a pedestal above others.”

“It has nothing to do with Saudi Arabia or anyone else,” Mike says.

To build their flagpole, the Worcester’s have employed the services of a number of professional firms including Trident Support, a California- and Dubai-based company that has built record-tall poles with record-big flags in Jordan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and the United Arab Emirates. The Maine flag will be twice as large as any they’ve ever



Evergreen trees in this park bear dog tags of fallen military veterans

made, and subject to unprecedented weather and wind. Trident estimates the flag alone will weigh half a ton, and they're consulting expert sailmakers and considering exotic materials such as Kevlar and Dyneema ("the world's strongest fiber™"). Flags this big must be treated with caution. If they get loose they can knock down trees and even entangle people, lifting them into the air.

Some fundraising duties have been farmed out to Triple Impact Connections, a company that employs nearly exclusively active-military spouses to field calls. "We're actually not getting a lot of calls at all," Bob Olds, the company's president, tells me. He expects the patriotic largesse of corporate America will need to make up the shortfall.

Robert Frank, a principal at the architecture firm WBRC, the park's master planners, tells me the Flagpole of Freedom Park is as unique as Disney World, built as it was in the Florida swamp. He points to the "thousands of hours" that have been devoted to the flag park's tiniest details, like the design and placement of its gondola towers. He recognises that people are worried about the pole's size, but it's built in proportion, he says, so that from a distance "it just looks like a flag". Nobody wants to say much about how much any of this has cost.

"People think Maine is the ends of the earth," Frank says. "And in some ways it is." But Mainers built the steamship that took Peary to the North Pole, he says, and they also built the carbon-fibre superyacht that set a transatlantic speed record.

Earlier American monuments were born of similar ambition, and they faced similar objections. In the winter of 1800, Nathaniel Macon, congressman from North Carolina, angrily took the floor of the House of Representatives. Up for debate was a proposed monument to George Washington, the first president. "For what purpose was this great

mass to be raised?" Macon said. "Can stones show gratitude?" He continued by describing the monuments and mausolea of Egypt and asked, "But where will they find the virtues or the talents of the men they were meant to commemorate?"

Nevertheless, the Washington Monument project marched on for decades. The monument's boosters touted it with promises it would be the tallest structure in the world, which at 555ft it briefly was. An 1859 poster advertising the project compared its height favourably to St Paul's in London, St Peter's in Rome and the Great Pyramid in Egypt. The Worcestersters' materials compare their flagpole's height favourably to the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty and the Washington Monument itself.

The Washington Monument, like the Flagpole of Freedom, exists out of context. Washington isn't buried there, nothing of note happened there. Yet there it stands, gleaming obelisk, unmoored from history, a point on a map. "The monument manufactures its own aura," writes Kirk Savage, an art historian at the University of Pittsburgh who specialises in American monuments. The fact of having built, whether in marble or steel, is a victory for the builder. "The people that developed that ended up with the last laugh," Mike says.

We cruise empty roads under bright sunshine in Rob's large white pick-up, the Passamaquoddy blueberry fields on one side and a vast green wilderness on the other. (Mike's large white pick-up's licence plate reads WREATH.) We unlock a gate and enter Worcester-owned forest. A few minutes' drive and the gravel road ends in a clearing. A heavy-duty utility vehicle is parked here. We

climb out of one work vehicle into the other and slowly drive up a steep, rocky hill through a tunnel of green. We crawl back into the light of a hilltop glade, ringed by tall trees and mottled clouds. It's like standing inside a wild crown. I'm told to watch for bears.

There's nothing man-made here yet, save a series of wooden stakes which mark the future perimeter of the flagpole, nearly 300ft in circumference, and an "X" on the ground in the centre. This is the flag site. A structure will rise more than a quarter mile into the sky here. This, if the Worcestersters have their way, will be the new locus of the American idea.

"Imagine," Mike says, looking up. "You won't even be able to see the top of it from real close."

Two weeks earlier, the *Maine Monitor* reported that the Worcestersters had built "several dozen cabins, a restaurant, roads and parking areas without obtaining necessary permits". We drive on those roads. We eat at that restaurant, the Liberty Kitchen, claiming our table quickly before a motorcycle gang of veterans arrives. And we tour one of the Flagpole View Cabins. It is a spartan accommodation. On a wall is a framed rendering of the flagpole towering over a pond.

My last day in Maine, I meet with Peter Drinkwater, proprietor of Winter Harbor's general store and prominent local realtor, in his shop on Main Street. It is packed with necessities for the locals and souvenirs for those from away. "In the big picture, it would be kind of cool to have something like that, you know, a draw to the area. But I just don't know where he gets the people to run the place." On the other hand, he adds, "You build it and they'll come."

As I browse the merchandise, the physics begin to sink in. "A flag that big, though, will never fly," he says. "They'll get it up there, but it'll never fly." I buy a cap with a lobster on it and wear it until I get home.

Later that morning Larry Smith - the unrivalled star of the Schoodic documentary and expert teller of its juiciest stories - comes over to Bob's for a chat. He's lived here more than 60 years, including time managing a lighthouse. We sit on couches with a panoramic view of sea and mountain behind us. The giant flag will be out there one day.

I tell him about my visit to Ruggles House, and he tells me he's the president of its foundation. I tell him about Hammond, and he tells me about a late docent and house historian. Smith and Morrill Worcester have attended the same church. Smith's wife has played piano in the tip land chapel. I wonder aloud about the scale of the flagpole, the unrelenting patriotism. "It's on his mind all the time," Smith says. "He's got a drive that's unbelievable."

Two weeks after my trip to his forest, I speak with Morrill Worcester, the patriarch. He's out of hospital and feeling better. Morrill is funny and disarming and doesn't want to talk politics, though I keep asking. "I mean, the first thing you know you'll think I'm a - who knows what?" he says. "We don't need to get into that." His only public politics are that America is the greatest country in the world. He has donated money to Mitt Romney and Paul LePage, the state's Republican former governor; his wife, Karen, executive director of Wreaths Across America, has given to Donald Trump and the Republican National Committee.

Morrill has been working on the flagpole for 13 years now, originally envisioned as a modest structure amid the balsam. It became so tall, he explains, because it is important that it is the first thing sunlight touches in the US each morning and the last flag that deployed troops see when they leave. "I'm gonna be proud of it, I won't lie to you," Morrill says. "It's not the number one thing in my life. Frankly, I think my family's the number one thing in my life. No, well, actually, above that is the good Lord himself." (At a press conference, he jokingly compared the park to the novel coronavirus, "but better". "There's no vaccine for that, the disease of patriotism.")

It's important that people are proud of their country, he tells me. "You've heard the news lately that only about two-thirds of the country is proud of America, they really love America. The other third, I don't know what they're thinking, but they're really not about America."

I hadn't heard that news, not specifically, but I don't buy the dichotomy. Certainly it's possible to love America and sometimes be ashamed by it. In any case, I wonder what this market research means for Flagpole of Freedom Park. "This park is going to be a place where a patriot, somebody that loves America, can come and be around like-minded people that feel the same way," Morrill says. "It's not going to be for everybody. We know that."

I thought that had been the whole point. "This project has the power to unite America. This is going to be America's park," Morrill said in an announcement video.

Is there an apolitical American patriotism, I wonder. "I don't know, I really don't," Morrill

"This park is going to be a place where a patriot, somebody that loves America, can come and be around people that feel the same way. It's not going to be for everybody"

Morrill Worcester

says. Because the project is part monument, part museum, part theme park; Disney comes up again. "It's not like Walt Disney at all. That was built very successfully on the backs of two mice. This will be built, not on the backs, but on the remembrance of 24 million American heroes."

"He did have a gondola system, though," I say.

"Well, he's smart."

Finally I ask, as that letter to the editor had, if this money could be better spent, perhaps on shelter for unhoused veterans. "You know, it's great to have housing," Morrill says. "But this is so much better than building a house for somebody because it actually represents the entire country."

I discuss the large flagpole and the large park in the pristine Maine wilderness with Savage, the monuments scholar. For the Worcesters, the project is clearly a monument; they use the term repeatedly in their promotional materials and our conversations. But Savage isn't sure it even fits strictly within the standard definition. "This is really not a public monument project, because it has nothing to do with that tradition of public support," he says. He compares it to other recent displays of ostentatious patriotism. "It's like Trump and his military parade. Why do we need the tallest flagpole in the world?"

Savage says no monument is what it claims. "The statement that's being made is always about a present-day agenda of some kind. No one erects a monument for the future, even though they say they do." Bronze corrodes, granite deteriorates, democracies fall. Monuments and those who build them return to the earth. The whole idea of a monument is permanence, and permanence is a fiction.

Savage tells me a story. The World War II Memorial had just opened in Washington, DC. A veteran of the Allied D-Day invasion of Normandy recalled returning to France 50 years later, as an old man. The old man saw French children playing on the beach, the sun shining down on a long lovely coast. The site of horror and death was now a place of peace. There was no more fitting memorial.

I tell Morrill this story. He's been there too. He's laid a wreath there. "That is the most beautiful beach you ever saw," he says. "It is a pristine place, just beautiful." **FT**

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