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Crowding the capitol

I once watched a Marine Corps tank patrolling Constitution Avenue in Washington, D.C. The streets were uncharacteristically empty but for a handful of excited tourists and more than the usual amount police officers. It was Sunday, Jan. 20, 2013, the night before President Obama's second inauguration.



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Reporter

I went to college in the District, and like every other student I wanted to be a part of this major cultural, communal moment. The earliest indication I had of just how insane Inauguration Day might be was a letter from the university president saying students are not allowed to rent out our dorm rooms to out-of-

towners. Like any odd rule, this means that someone did it once, and that it must have gone badly.

Anyway, I woke up before dawn, rode the subway as close as it would take me (not close at all) and spent the day with innumerable strangers.

I was nowhere near the Capitol, nearly a mile from the president. From the distance, I made out his podium but watched most of his address (and Beyonce's national anthem performance) on a massive monitor. The sea of people packed shoulder-to-shoulder extended probably an additional mile behind me.

They came from *everywhere*. One girl, a Texan, approached me and said she was trying to find someone from every state, and already had 46 checked off. Yes, I was her first New Hampshireite.

I don't think we have the time for me to write about the kooky characters and wacky costumes and countless street vendors selling things that may not be fit to print. I'll just say I didn't get anything, but still laugh when I remember the pitch lines.

Washington is used to visitors, families taking in the cherry blossoms or school groups filing into museums, but this was something else. The police and military presence was unlike anything I'd ever seen. I walked the six miles because the metro stations were backed-up with people waiting en masse. I figured I'd keep walking until I found an uncrowded station, and wound up walking all the way home. All that and historically second inaugurals are less attended than firsts.

And nobody had organized what might be the city's biggest protest in decades for the same weekend, a protest that forces us to acknowledge this week of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday that his fight for civil rights is not finished.

My inauguration experience was filled with bizarre characters and the too-rare experience of being part of something, with thousands of compatriots, that will be talked about in history classrooms.

I won't be there this week, but the Lathams will be represented. My sister, Allison, is a midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy and will march with the new president in the inaugural parade.

She is one of 91 in the Academy's 13th Company, last semester's chosen color company. Our grandfather, a 1957 Navy graduate, marched at President Eisenhower's inauguration 60 years before.

My parents are going, too, to see her, with a reserved spot much closer than I was, courtesy of the office of Sen. Jeanne Shaheen. They even get chairs – can you believe that?

I wonder what kinds of characters they might meet.