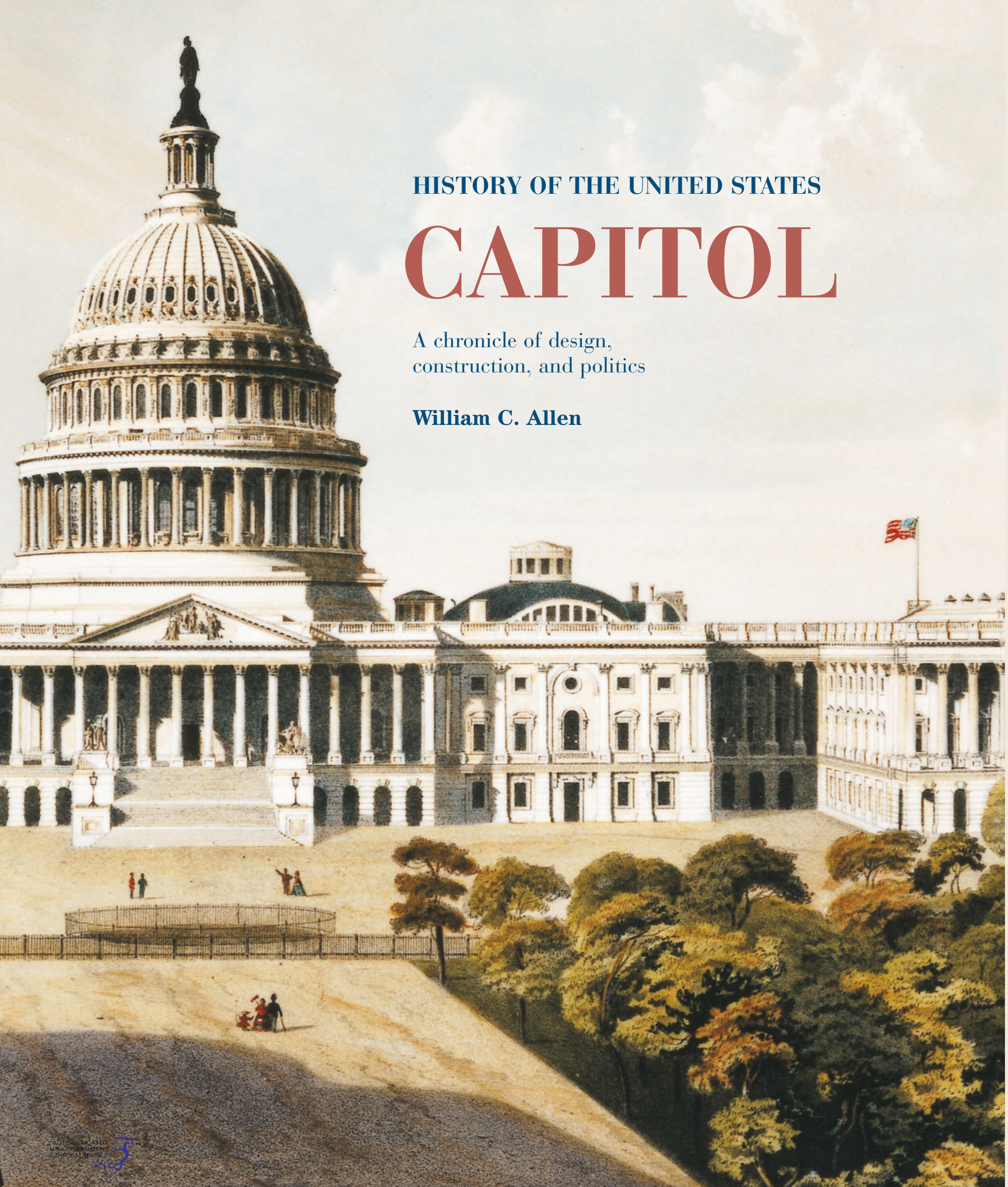

HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

CAPITOL

A chronicle of design, construction, and politics

William C. Allen

The United States Capitol is one of the most familiar sights in the world. The image of this stately building and its unforgettable dome is carried around the globe in countless television programs, newspapers, magazines, advertisements, books, and souvenirs. Each year millions of people come to see the Capitol in person and to observe American democracy in its day-to-day operation. The doors to the Capitol are open to all who wish to enter—no fee charged, no introduction necessary.

In contrast to the familiarity of the building itself, the Capitol's history may appear murky. Begun as an ideal in the minds of President George Washington and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, the Capitol has evolved for over two centuries along a seemingly meandering path littered with design changes, funding shortages, labor problems, fires, and an invading army bent on destroying the building. In fact, however, its destiny has been directed—and redirected—by successive generations of political leaders, architects, engineers, artists, and craftsmen who have contributed their share to the development of this remarkable structure.

Like the diverse country it serves, the Capitol can mean different things to different people. To some it is the object of political ambition; to others it is a museum of art and history; and to others it is a symbol of self-government and liberty. Most basically, however, the Capitol is home to the American Congress, the first of our three branches of government. It houses the chambers in which the House of Representatives and the Senate meet to debate the laws that govern the nation and affect the world's condition. There are hundreds of other

rooms, some noble and grand, others humble yet indispensable to the operations of Congress. Each has a unique history that illustrates a chapter in the Capitol's ongoing evolution. The appearance of *History of the United States Capitol: A Chronicle of Design, Construction, and Politics* will be welcomed by those wishing a full account of the architecture and history of this well-known landmark.

William C. Allen has been the architectural historian in the office of the Architect of the Capitol since 1982. In addition to writing about the history of the Capitol, Allen supports preservation and restoration projects undertaken by the Architect's office. Formerly, he was with the Department of Archives and History in Jackson, Mississippi, where he served as the state's chief architectural historian. Allen holds an undergraduate degree from the University of Delaware and a graduate degree from the University of Virginia, where he studied under the late Frederick Doveton Nichols.

Main cover illustration:
United States Capitol, Washington, D. C.
Lithograph by Charles Hart, 1866

Back cover illustration:
Principal Front of the Capitol, Washington
Engraving after William H. Bartlett, ca. 1837