
PREFACE

*O*n February 22, 1827, members of the House of Representatives spent the afternoon debating the merits of legislation aimed at the gradual improvement of the navy. Two days later, the subject of discussion was licensing ships engaged in mackerel fishing. On both occasions the galleries were full of sightseers who had come to the Capitol to have a look around and see Congress in action. Visitors watched from galleries located behind the chamber's magnificent Corinthian colonnade. Tall shafts of variegated stone and Italian marble capitals gave an impression of grandeur and monumentality that was exceedingly rare in American architecture of the period. Gold fringe dangled from crimson drapery that was festooned between the columns. Sunlight filtered through a large round aperture in the wooden ceiling, which was painted and gilded to imitate a coffered dome. On the carpeted floor below, 212 representatives sat in armchairs covered with horsehair upholstery, their hats stowed on small shelves held between the chair legs. Some congressmen followed the proceedings, but others read newspapers or wrote letters home. Bad acoustics made it difficult to pay attention in any event. Small clusters of congressmen congregated behind the rail to smoke cigars and discuss politics or the evening's entertainment. Presiding over the spirited scene was the Speaker of the House, who was seated on a raised dais with a sil-

ver inkwell and candelabra on the desk before him. At his right was the ceremonial mace, symbol of the authority of the House. Overhead, swags of fringed drapery hung from a mahogany sounding board.

Between the naval and mackerel debates, the House took up the topic of funding the public buildings in the capital city of Washington. Legislation before the House included an appropriation for the continuation of the Capitol's construction. A congressman from Kentucky named Charles Wickliffe rose from his seat to ask why the Capitol was still under construction after thirty-four years of work. He knew old men in his home district who had spent their youths working on the building and who were now utterly astonished to learn that the Capitol was still not finished. He did not understand how the United States, with all its wealth and resources, could not complete a building in the span of more than three decades. He would not support the appropriation because he could foresee that there would be no end to these funding requests.

In 1870, forty-three years after Wickliffe's remarks, the House was meeting in a new chamber designed for improved hearing and speaking. Gone were the echoes that plagued the old hall, but the new chamber was so cavernous that hearing was still difficult for those seated far from the orator. The new hall was covered by a flat iron

ceiling with a stained-glass skylight framed by gold-leafed moldings, stars, and pendants. Galleries surrounded the chamber on four sides without columns or draperies to block views or muffle voices. In this new chamber, during a debate about relocating a pair of bronze doors, Fernando Wood of New York City rose from his leather-tufted chair to complain that every year something was done to change the Capitol purely for the sake of change. He regretted to say that this desire for change—particularly in reference to the Capitol—was an unstable and unflattering aspect of the American character.

In 1903 Joseph Cannon of Illinois sponsored legislation to “complete” the Capitol with an addition to its east front. To document the need for a larger Capitol, Cannon cited the growth of the nation, the increasing number of congressmen and senators, and the expanding number of committees that reflected the overall growth of public business. The time was right, Cannon claimed, to complete the Capitol with a new east front. Seventy-five years later, other legislators claimed they wanted to finish the building with a new west front extension. Despite outward appearances, it had become clear that the Capitol’s completion was in the eye of the beholder.

Like so many aspects of American life, the Capitol is often viewed as a work in progress—an architectural evolution reflecting the country’s own political, economic, and social development. It was not the vision of a single person nor the product of a single age; rather, it was—and continues to be—the accumulation of thousands of ideas worked by thousands of people over a two-hundred-year period. Honorable and gifted political leaders, architects, and builders appear at critical moments in the Capitol’s history, but the story is also tangled and enlivened by dozens of unscrupulous and obstreperous characters who complicate matters along the way.

How the Capitol has evolved makes for an unusually intricate tale, but it is one worth telling. Most early histories were written by architects who saw the building’s story mainly through biographies of its designers. Robert Mills published accounts of the design and construction of the Capitol in guide books that he sold to visitors to the federal city in the 1840s and 1850s. In 1877

The American Architect and Building News carried an essay entitled “Architecture and Architects at the Capitol of the United States From its Foundation Until 1875” written by Adolf Cluss, a Washington architect. The most prolific writer on the subject at the end of the nineteenth century was Glenn Brown, an architect who served as secretary of the American Institute of Architects from 1899 to 1913. He began writing about the capital city and its major buildings in 1894 when *Architectural Review* published his article “The Selection of Sites for Federal Buildings.” Two years later he wrote a monograph on William Thornton, one of the Capitol’s more enigmatic figures. Brown’s series of articles for the *American Architect and Building News* appearing in 1896 and 1897 covered the early history of the Capitol and formed the basis for the first half of his most famous work, the two-volume *History of the United States Capitol* (1900, 1902). Throughout much of the twentieth century, Brown was the top authority on the Capitol’s history.

Three years before Brown’s first volume appeared, Washington lawyer and novelist George C. Hazelton published *The National Capitol: Its Architecture and History*. It was a popular history and guide to the building, which was reprinted in 1902 and 1914. Many of the myths surrounding the Capitol’s construction were cheerfully retold by Hazelton, who divulged in the preface that the most delightful “truths” in history lie in “romance and tradition.” In 1940 art historian Ihna T. Frary published *They Built the Capitol*, a breezy work based largely on Brown. In 1963 the United States Capitol Historical Society began publishing *We, the People*, a handsome and reliable guidebook currently in its fourteenth edition and available in several foreign languages. Twenty-seven years later, Congress issued a short overview of the building’s construction in *The United States Capitol: A Brief Architectural History* prepared by the Architect of the Capitol. Many of the visual delights of the Capitol’s architecture were captured by Fred Maroon, a gifted photographer who published a collection of spectacular pictures in his book *The United States Capitol* (1993). Works of recent scholarship include Pamela Scott’s *Temple of Liberty* (1995), an important catalogue accompanying a bicenten-

nial exhibit held at the Library of Congress covering the Capitol's early history. Annual symposia on the Capitol's art and architecture sponsored by the United States Capitol Historical Society encourage fresh inquiries by some of America's most respected scholars. *A Republic for the Ages: The United States Capitol and the Political Culture of the Early Republic* was published in 1999 as a compilation of papers from the 1993 bicentennial conference. Papers presented at the Society's 1994 and 1995 symposia were published in *The United States Capitol: Designing and Decorating a National Icon*. The Society promises to continue holding conferences that will no doubt stimulate further inquiries into various aspects of the Capitol's history.

In preparation for the 1993 bicentennial of the Capitol's first cornerstone, steps were taken by the Architect of the Capitol to compile a comprehensive chronicle of its design and construction history. The bicentennial seemed a good time to provide a fresh look at these intriguing subjects. There was a need for an in-depth examination of the Capitol's development set within a broader political and social context. Some of the ground to be covered was not new, yet much needed a fresh reexamination, while long-ignored or recent aspects of the Capitol's history needed to be folded into the story. Illustrations from familiar sources would be augmented from the lesser-known photographic records held by the Architect of the Capitol. Preparation of the bicentennial history of the Capitol was supported by the Capitol Preservation Commission, a bicameral congressional entity that funds projects related to the Capitol's history and preservation.

The text of the present volume draws heavily on primary source material, such as the edited and published papers of William Thornton and B. Henry Latrobe. Unpublished primary sources, particularly papers and manuscripts only recently made available, were valuable resources as well; important examples were the papers of Thomas U. Walter, acquired by the Athenaeum of Philadelphia in 1983, and the journals of Montgomery C. Meigs, long available at the Library of Congress but only recently transcribed from their original Pitman shorthand. The records of the Architect of the Capitol and the debates of Congress were two

valuable resources that were generally underutilized in previous histories. Not found in the bibliography are the personal observations made by the author over an eighteen-year period. A daily examination of the Capitol's intricate structure and architecture offered unique opportunities to learn lessons about the building that no document or book could provide. Bringing these documents, observations, and illustrations together in a comprehensive history was one way the Architect of the Capitol sought to make a permanent contribution to the understanding of one of America's most intriguing buildings.

With gratitude, the author would like to thank his professional colleagues who helped in this effort. First and foremost, Ann Kenny's assistance was indispensable. She performed innumerable scholarly and dreary tasks with equal aplomb, doing research, collecting illustrations, and keeping track of paper work. Her compilation of the most extensive chronology of the Capitol's history brought mounds of diverse research materials into sharp focus. John Hackett and Sarah Turner, archivists in the office of the Architect of the Capitol, helped sort through 150 years' worth of material generated by an agency that rarely discarded anything. Pamela Violante McConnell, the agency's registrar, gambled her eyesight and sanity transcribing correspondence of Montgomery Meigs and Frederick Law Olmsted. Benjamin Myers, James Corbus, Michelle Gatlin, and R. Edward Ashby of the Architect's records center were always helpful with the historic drawings and records under their care. The Architect's photo lab, headed by Wayne Firth, holds a priceless and growing collection of images dating from 1855. Michael Dunn, Steve Payne, and Chuck Badal contributed their considerable talents to the photographic illustrations, as did their predecessors, Harry Burnett and Mark Blair. Special drawings were prepared in the Architecture Division by staff architects Edward Fogle and Juliana Luke and by an especially able intern, Eric Keune.

Three repositories outside the office of the Architect of the Capitol hold key drawings significant to the history of the Capitol. At the Library of Congress, C. Ford Peatross, curator of architecture, design, and engineering collections, generously shared his time and knowledge regarding

the extensive holdings in the Prints and Photographs Division. Bruce Laverty, archivist of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia's architectural collections, and Elizabeth Gordon, registrar at the Maryland Historical Society, provided similar access to their collections.

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