AUTHENTICATED
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INFORMATION
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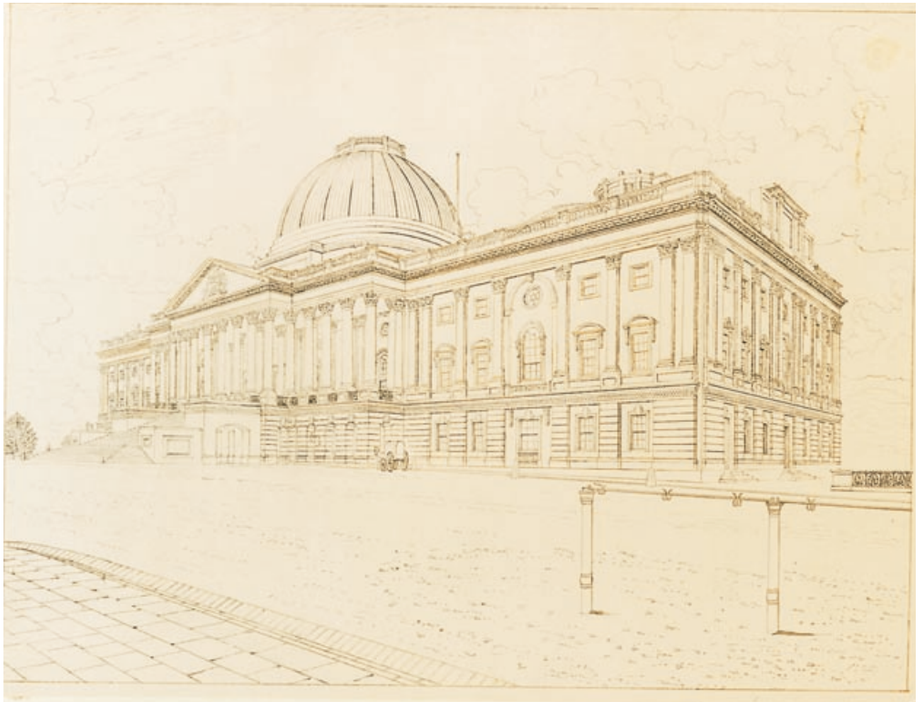
AN UNSETTLED TIME, 1830–1850

Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, the Capitol's architectural evolution was virtually dormant. Small things were done to keep the building up-to-date, but most people considered it finished. Charles Bulfinch's departure left the Capitol under the care of the commissioner of public buildings; except for Bulfinch and James Hoban, all the architects in its past were dead: Benjamin Henry Latrobe died in 1820, Stephen Hallet in 1823, George Hadfield in 1826, and William Thornton in 1828. If the services of an architect were needed, the commissioner hired local men on a case-by-case basis. The most frequently consulted architect was Robert Mills, a native of South Carolina who studied architecture under Latrobe and Thomas Jefferson. While Mills was often called upon for architectural advice during the 1830s and 1840s, the jobs were generally small and his suggestions, while numerous, were not often implemented. A master carpenter named Pringle Slight, who came to the Capitol in 1825, served as the general superintendent and took care of the building's everyday needs. Until enlargements were begun in 1851, the Capitol was maintained essentially as Bulfinch left it.

***The Capitol* (Detail)**
by Christopher P. Cranch, 1841

The Capitol's exterior belied its convoluted construction history: although oddities abounded inside due to the alterations that had occurred over the years, the outside appeared remarkably unified. The building was surrounded by well-tended grounds that only improved with age. Visitors from around the country and abroad came to see Congress in action and explore the Capitol's vast (by American standards) interior. Few left without forming an opinion about the artistic merits of the building and its contents. For those unable to make the trip, enterprising engravers and lithographers sold views of the Capitol. Household items such as sheet music, candle sticks, and dinner plates carried the image of the Capitol into the everyday lives of countless Americans. Despite the wide variety of artistic skill evident in these images, the building always appeared noble and serene, giving no hint of the political battles waged inside. Sectional turmoil during the period, pitting north against south, slave state against free, was an ominous sign of things to come. Fights over tariff issues divided protectionists in the north from southerners, who generally backed free trade. The Bank of the United States, nullification, state's rights, and other issues were hotly argued in Congress and throughout the nation, filling the Capitol, political meetings, and newspapers with inflammatory rhetoric. Legislative debates were rarely depicted, however, and views of the Capitol's peaceful exterior were both popular and profitable.



The Capitol, Looking Southwest
attributed to George Strickland, ca. 1830

The artist of this perspective view avoided showing the Capitol's roof line, with its low domes, chimneys, and lanterns. Instead, the drawing focused on the rich wall treatment, portico, and dome.

HONORING WASHINGTON'S MEMORY

On the day after Christmas in 1829, Robert Brown gave the commissioner an estimate for building a tomb for George Washington under the lower rotunda and paving the passages leading to it.[1] Brown, who had succeeded to the head of the stone department upon George Blagden's death, figured that $1,300 would be needed to prepare the tomb with plastered brick, stone paving, steps, and an iron gate secured by a strong lock. A little over two years remained until the centennial of Washington's birth, and, according to a congressional resolution passed thirty years earlier, it was hoped that his remains would be interred at the Capitol.

Soon after Washington's death on December 14, 1799, the House of Representatives had appointed John Marshall of Virginia chairman of a committee to report on a suitable way to honor his memory. The committee recommended that Congress ask the Washington family's permission to remove his body to a tomb in the Capitol once the building was finished. A monument would be erected over the tomb to commemorate the events of his military and political life.[2] Martha Washington agreed to the request, asking only that her remains in due course lie next to her husband's. Marshall received a letter from Dr. Thornton asking permission to include Washington's widow in the Capitol mausoleum scheme:

> The body of her beloved friend and companion is now requested and she does not refuse the national wish—but if an intimation could be given that she should partake merely of the same place of deposit it would restore to her mind a calm and repose that this acquiescence in the national wish has in high degree affected.[3]

Thornton was delighted at the prospect of Washington's body being interred at the Capitol because he saw it as an incentive to complete and sanctify the building. Earlier, upon learning of Washington's final illness, he had gone to Mount Vernon to offer medical advice but he was too late. Washington died the day before he arrived. Undaunted, Thornton proposed reviving the corpse with a tracheotomy and a transfusion of lamb's blood, but this preposterous idea was squelched immediately. As Washington's reputation took on an almost divine dimension after his death, Thornton maneuvered himself as close as possible to the hero's legend. He rarely lost an opportunity to invoke Washington's name when defending his design of the Capitol and claimed Washington was the "best friend I had on Earth."[4]

In 1783 Congress voted to erect an equestrian statue of Washington in the capital city once its location was settled. L'Enfant sited the statue on the Mall at the intersection of the Capitol's west axis and the south axis of the President's House. Thornton wanted it placed in the Capitol's rotunda, but nothing came of the statue proposal. The absence of a memorial to Washington in the city he founded embarrassed some in Congress, who saw the centennial of his birth as a perfect time to correct the situation. A member of the House from

Maine, Leonard Jarvis, deplored congressional inaction in a short speech delivered on February 15, 1832, one week before the 100th anniversary of Washington's birth:

> At the close of the revolutionary war, the Congress of the United States, ten states being present by their representatives, had unanimously voted a statue of General Washington, as a testimony of their esteem for his virtues, and the service he had rendered to his country. A resolution had passed unanimously in 1799, for a monument instead of a statue. In 1800, the monument was exchanged for a mausoleum. This last resolution had, in effect, proved as fruitful as those which had preceded it. Several of the States had, in the meanwhile, showed their sense of Washington's virtues and service, by erecting statues to his memory. The United States had done nothing but pass resolutions. When we look around for the statue, the monument, the mausoleum they had ordered, it is not to be seen. These things existed nowhere but in the journals of Congress.[5]

Robert Mills described his idea for a monument to Washington in a letter to the Committee on Public Buildings. He wanted to unplug the opening in the floor of the rotunda and cut a new opening in the floor of the crypt to allow light to fall on sarcophagi containing the bodies of George and Martha Washington.[6] An alternative plan suggested placing a cenotaph in the center of the rotunda. In either case, Washington's remains would be deposited in the tomb below the crypt. Mills predicted the interment would have a conciliatory effect on otherwise contentious politicians. He thought that

> a consciousness of the presence of even the lifeless remains of Washington within the walls of the Capitol would awe the most depraved, and check the emulations of passion, & political party . . . his sage advice would reoccur to our minds, to heal all our political bickering, and make us like a band of brothers, united in love, and determined to preserve the interests of the Union.[7]

A joint committee was appointed on February 13, 1832, to arrange the congressional commemoration of Washington's birth. Letters were sent to Washington's heirs requesting permission to inter his remains and those of his wife in the Capitol as specified in the 1799 resolution. George Washington Parke Custis, writing from his home, "Arlington," across the Potomac from the federal city, quickly approved: "I give my most hearty consent to the removal of the remains, after the manner requested, and congratulate the government upon the approaching consummation of a great act of national gratitude."[8] But the proprietor of Mount Vernon, John A. Washington, refused the request. He did not wish to circumvent the burial arrangement that Washington himself specified in his will, nor did he wish the family plot to be disturbed. The bodies of Washington and his wife were interred in a handsome new tomb and "repose in perfect tranquility surrounded by those of other endeared members of the family. I hope Congress will do justice to the motives which seem to me to require that I should not consent to their separation."[9] Thus, in these few words, the plan to remove Washington's body to the Capitol came to an end. Instead of a place of patriotic pilgrimage, the tomb under the crypt became a storeroom. At mid-century such items as tools, pieces of gas pipe, thirty lamps, and a broken chandelier were stored there.[10]

MARBLE MEMORIAL

Congress devised other ways to commemorate the centennial of Washington's birth. The House Committee on Public Buildings reported a resolution on February 16, 1832, instructing President Jackson to commission Horatio Greenough to sculpt a marble statue of Washington for the Capitol's rotunda. The statue would be full length, pedestrian rather than equestrian, and would copy the head of Jean-Antoine Houdon's famous statue of Washington, which was placed in the state capitol at Richmond in 1796. For better or worse, the resolution left the "accessories" to the judgment of the artist.[11] Discussion of the resolution's merits was brief. Only Elisha Whittlesey of Ohio spoke against it, saying he was opposed "to every proposition for a statue, monument, or mausoleum," but did not mention the reasons for his hardline position. James K. Polk of Tennessee, future Speaker of the House and president of the United States, wanted to know more about the artist named in the resolution. The chairman of the committee, Henry Dearborn of Massachusetts, replied that Greenough was not well known in America but was famous in Europe, where he worked. The sculptor was at the top of

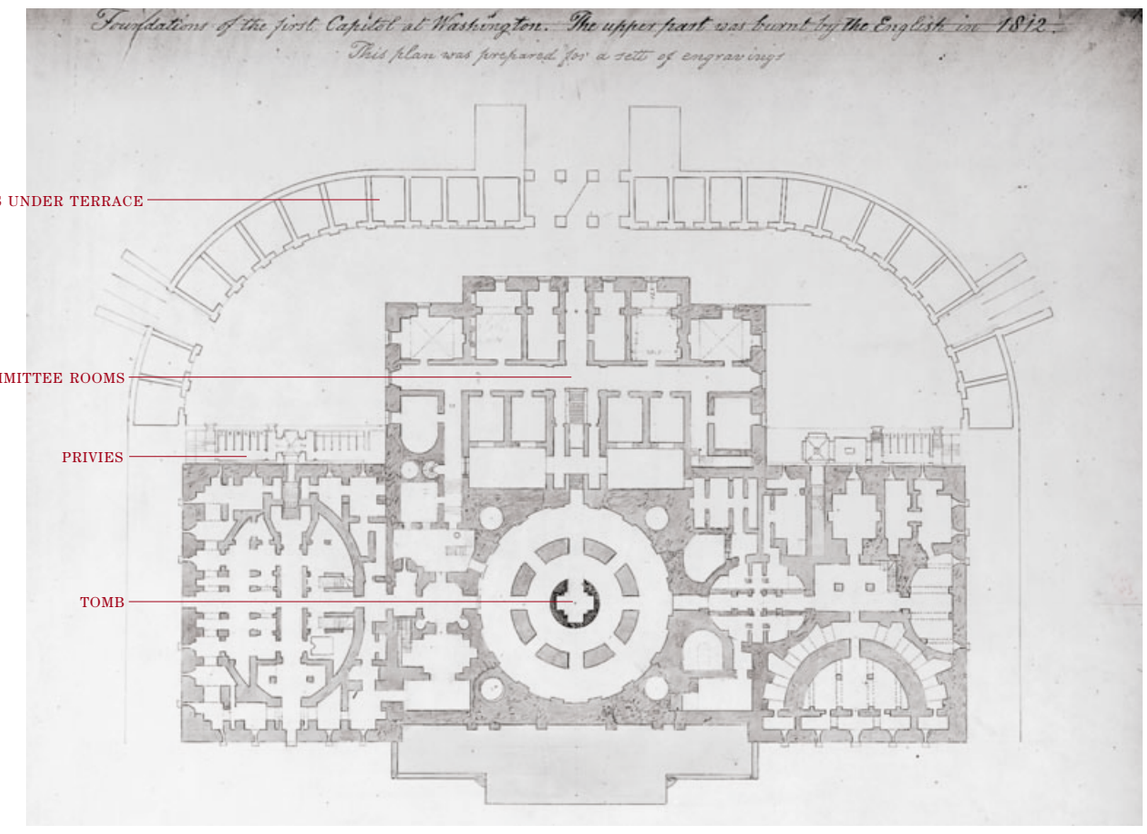
East Elevation and Floor Plans of the Capitol

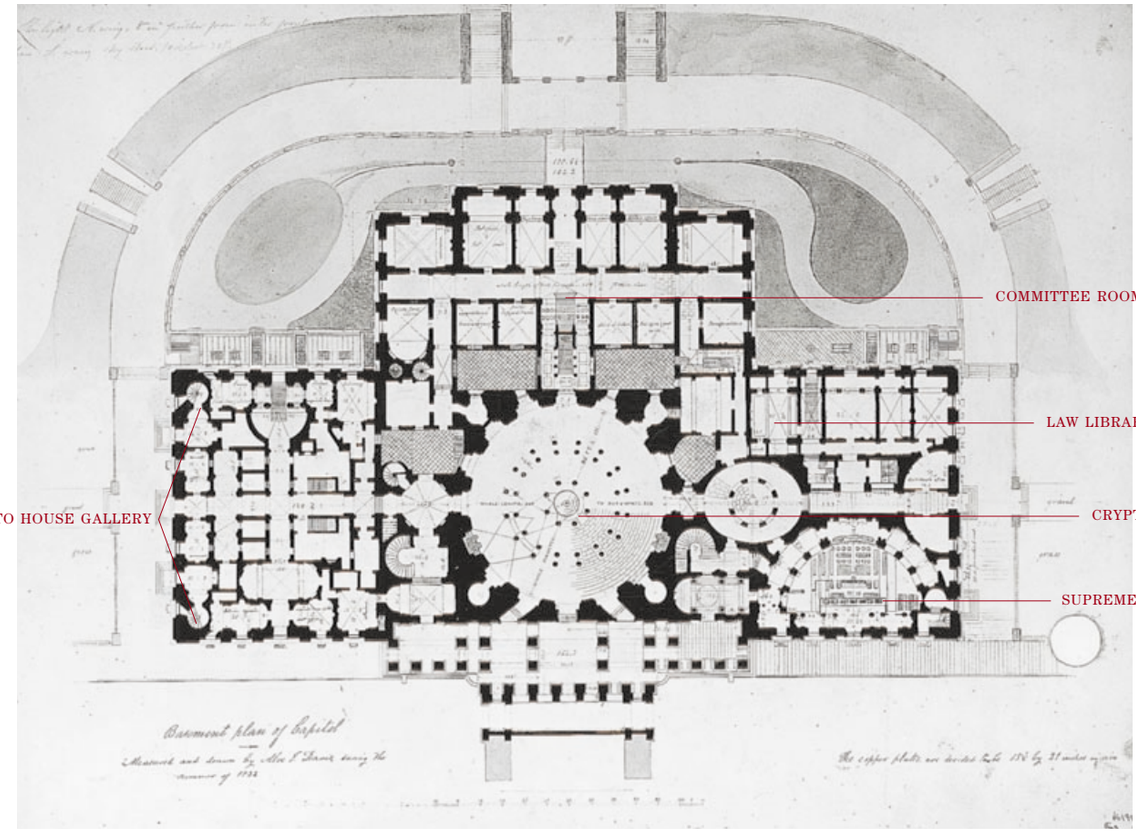
by Alexander Jackson Davis, ca. 1832–1834

Library of Congress

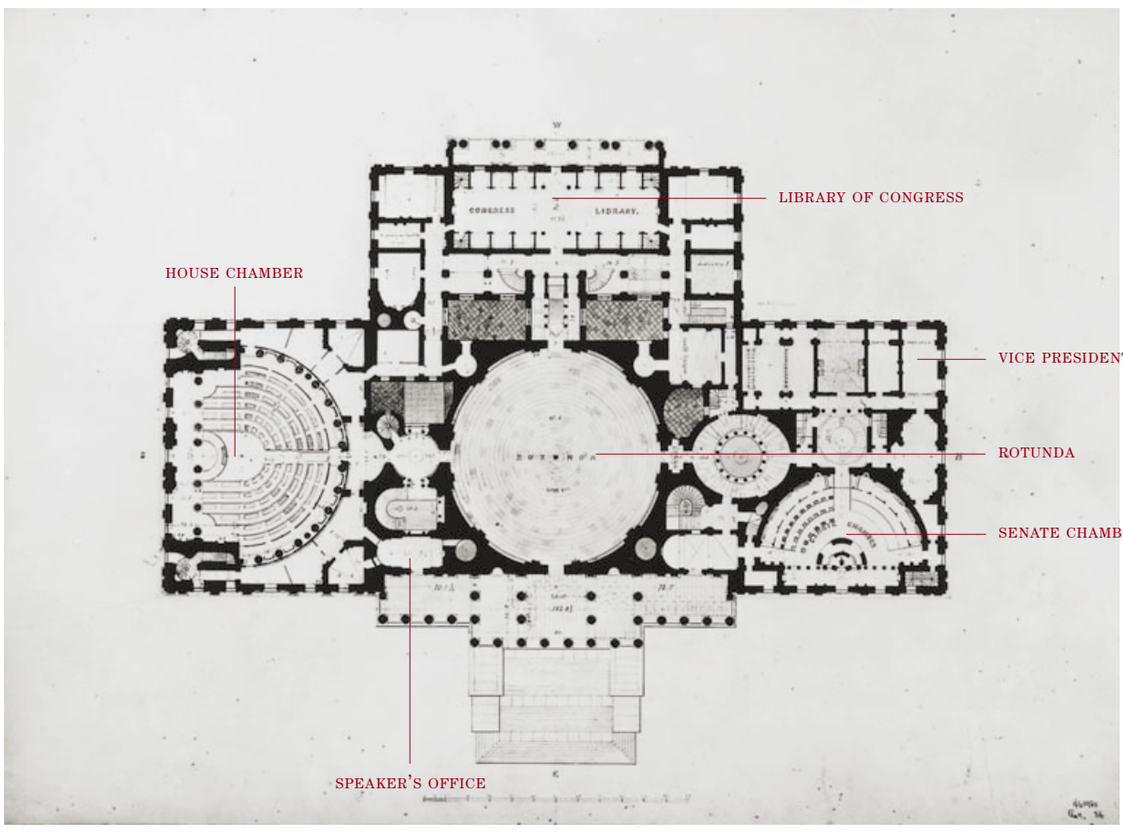
Hoping to issue a portfolio of Capitol views, Davis made measured drawings of the building and sketched important interior rooms as well as an appealing view of the east front. Because of his fidelity to the subject and attention to minute detail, Davis left the most reliable record of the Capitol as completed by Latrobe and Bulfinch.

B. Foundations and Basements





C. First, or Ground Floor



D. Second, or Principal Floor

his art, recommended by connoisseurs both here and abroad. "No other American sculptor," Dearborn explained, "had yet appeared who was fit to be entrusted with the execution of Washington's statue." The fact that Greenough was an American was emphasized again and again, implying that no foreign artist should be given such an important commission. With these matters explained, the House passed the resolution by a wide margin.

The Senate took up the resolution, as amended by its Committee on the Library.[12] (Works of art usually fell under the jurisdiction of this committee because the Library of Congress was an art gallery as well as a repository of books and manuscripts.) It inserted an appropriation of $5,000, which was opposed by John Forsyth of Georgia: while in favor of the resolution's intent, he thought the sum mentioned would be insufficient to accomplish the object. The chairman of the Library Committee, George Poindexter of Mississippi, explained that $5,000 would enable the president to begin contract negotiations and that an additional appropriation would be needed in the future. Stephen Miller of South Carolina objected to "yearly and indefinite grants" without knowing where they might end. Henry Clay of Kentucky followed with an eloquent speech in favor of the resolution, declaring that of all places for a statue of Washington, the capital city, "the center of the Union—the offspring, the creation of his mind of his labors" was not only appropriate but long overdue. Clay reminded his colleagues of the objection of the proprietor of Mount Vernon that thwarted the scheme to bring Washington's remains to the Capitol. There was no use in attempting to revive the interment plan because the proprietor himself had just died and the fate of Mount Vernon was now uncertain. Washington's home and tomb could fall into the hands of either "a friend or stranger," but Congress should not wait to commission an enduring likeness. After Clay took his seat, the Senate voted thirty to ten in favor of the resolution.

In the fall of 1841, more than nine years after the resolution passed, Greenough's heroic sculpture was unloaded at the Navy Yard and hauled to the Capitol. William Easby, a local stone contractor and rigger, charged $2,500 to move the twenty-ton cargo and place it on a pedestal in the center of the rotunda. The pedestal had been made under Mills' direction in accordance with a design sent by Greenough. A year before, Mills constructed a sturdy pier in the crypt to support the statue's weight, which would bear down on the rotunda's weakest spot—the former opening in the floor.

At 10 o'clock in the morning on December 1, 1841, President John Tyler entered the rotunda with the secretary of the navy (who had overseen the statue's journey from Italy) to witness the final installation. About twenty minutes later, the heavy marble portrait was hoisted above its pedestal, but the ropes became twisted, the weight shifted, and one leg of the derrick nearly broke. Disaster was averted when additional pulleys and guy ropes brought the statue back into position. At one o'clock, three hearty cheers greeted the placement of Greenough's Washington on its pedestal in the center of the rotunda.[13]

After the cheers subsided the American public took a closer look at the statue of Washington, which Greenough chose to portray with the body of the Roman god Zeus wearing only a toga and sandals. The sculptor had rejected the idea of portraying Washington in period costume on the grounds that eighteenth-century clothing would be an unnecessary distraction that diminished the timelessness of the subject. One eyewitness said that Greenough's Washington was the most "God-like" thing he had ever seen, and noted that dauntless Daniel Webster did not approach it readily.[14] But Washington's bare chest was a blasphemy few Americans were prepared to accept without comment. A wiseacre said the first president looked as if he had jumped out of bed, managing to grab only a sheet. Many, including Charles Bulfinch, thought it showed Washington preparing for a bath. While he appreciated the sculpture as art, Bulfinch knew that the majority of his countrymen would take the portrait too literally. He warned his son:

> I fear that it will cause much disappointment—it may be an exquisite piece of work, but our people will hardly be satisfied with looking on well developed muscles, when they wish to see the great man as their imagination has painted him . . . [I] am not convinced the sculpture is suited for modern subjects; the dress presents insuperable difficulties. . . . And now I fear that this with you will only give the idea of entering or leaving a bath.[15]

What was perhaps Greenough's most famous work was a failure with the public. The artist thought it suffered from being badly lighted from

Statue of George Washington
by Horatio Greenough, 1841

When the controversial statue of Washington was moved out of the rotunda to the east garden, it was positioned on a granite base designed by Boston architect Isaiah Rogers. Behind the statue is East Capitol Street, stretching through the residential neighborhood of Capitol Hill before fading into farmland less than a mile away. In 1908 the statue was transferred to the Smithsonian Institution and its base was laid as the cornerstone of the Capitol Power Plant. (ca. 1860 photograph.)

the oculus directly above and asked that it be moved halfway between the center of the rotunda and the west door leading to the Library of Congress. Even after this repositioning, critics were not satisfied. The statue was moved out of the rotunda in 1843 and placed in a wooden shed in the east garden. Within a few years, the shed was employed only during the winter months.

CANVAS MEMORIALS

On July 5, 1832, the Senate paid Rembrandt Peale $2,000 for an original portrait of George Washington, which he had painted in 1824. Peale began sketching the subject in 1795 while his father, Charles Willson Peale, was painting his last portrait of Washington. The younger Peale considered his likeness superior and hoped it would become the "standard likeness." A few weeks before the painting was finished, Peale wrote Bushrod Washington, a nephew of the first president:

> Never was there a portrait painted under any circumstance in which the whole soul of the artist was more engaged than mine is in this of Washington. It has been my study for years, and tho' its final completion has been deferred to this period, it will, I trust, be found the more mature and worthy of the approbation of the nation. There is a time for all things, and this is the moment for me, before the opportunity should have passed away forever, now that my command over the materials of my art is better matured to accomplish so difficult and important an undertaking as this National Portrait.[16]

After the painting was completed, it was hung in the vice president's office (modern day S–231), where many who knew Washington firsthand came to see it. Their testimonials were eagerly sought by the artist, who published them in newspapers in order to attract customers to his exhibition hall. Bushrod Washington's assessment appeared in a Philadelphia newspaper, *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser,* on May 26, 1824:

> I have examined with attention and pleasure the portrait you have drawn of General Washington, and I feel no hesitation in pronouncing it, according to my best judgment, the most

> exact representation of the original that I have ever seen. The features, as well as the character of his countenance, are happily depicted.[17]

On July 5, 1832, Pringle Slight hung Peale's portrait of Washington in the north corner of the Senate gallery (five years later he moved it to the center of the east wall, where it could be seen more easily).[18] In 1834 he installed another portrait of the first president, this one commissioned from John Vanderlyn by the House of Representatives for its chamber. The resolution authorizing the portrait, passed on February 17, 1832, instructed the artist to copy the head of Gilbert Stuart's Washington but otherwise to use his best judgment in working out the composition. The painting was to be full length and of the same dimensions as the portrait of the Marquis de Lafayette already hanging in the chamber. (That painting had been a gift of the French artist Ary Scheffer on the occasion of Lafayette's visit to the Capitol in 1824.) One thousand dollars was initially appropriated for Vanderlyn's companion portrait, but eleven years later, on June 27, 1843, the House allowed an additional $1,500.[19]

The only discussion in the House concerned the artist selected for the commission. To some, Vanderlyn was given an unfair advantage over other artists, such as Henry Inman or Thomas Sully, who were both noted for their exquisite portraiture. But these grumbles were silenced by testimony noting Vanderlyn's special talent for copying, and the House wanted the head copied from Stuart's famous likeness. The commission was not to be an original portrait, but part imitation, part imagination. Once the canvas was delivered Vanderlyn's success in carrying out his commission was considered satisfactory but unspectacular. The painting is little noticed in the artist's oeuvre and remains less famous than Peale's Washington hanging in the Senate chamber.

Vanderlyn was also among four artists tapped in 1837 to produce history paintings for the vacant panels in the rotunda opposite Trumbull's Revolutionary War scenes. In addition to Vanderlyn, a committee of the House contacted Robert Weir, Henry Inman, and John Chapman and commissioned them each for a painting at $10,000 apiece. The subjects were to be selected by the artists themselves from general topics regarding the discovery and settlement of America, the Revolution, and the Constitution.[20] Chapman selected a topic from the early history of the Jamestown settlement in Virginia, which well suited the romantic inclinations of the day, and his *Baptism of Pocahontas* was received in 1840. It was followed three years later by the second canvas, Weir's *Embarkation of the Pilgrims.* One writer considered Weir's painting the best of the series, not for its historical accuracy or composition, but for the "specimens of manly and female beauty" it displayed:

> New England still retains a few women who are blessed with the loveliness which makes Rose Standish so attractive to the gazer, and seems to have been given what is left to us of such men as those whom Weir has chosen for his heroes. This type of masculine beauty is found chiefly in Connecticut.[21]

Vanderlyn's *Landing of Columbus* was placed in the rotunda in January 1847. The fourth panel remained vacant until *Discovery of the Mississippi by De Soto* was installed in 1855. It was painted by William R. Powell, who was asked to fill the final panel after Henry Inman died and efforts by friends of Samuel F. B. Morse failed to have him named Inman's successor.

FIRE AND WATER

Fire had always been one of the greatest threats to buildings in the federal city. The Capitol was no exception, and the library fire of 1826 pointed to the value of a plentiful and reliable supply of water. By the time Bulfinch left the Capitol in 1829, there were only two pumps on the grounds and one in a courtyard supplying firefighting or watering needs. These did not provide potable water, so another pump 400 yards from the Capitol was tapped for drinking and cooking. In 1832, while memorials to Washington were being discussed in Congress, the chairman of the House Committee on the District of Columbia, George Corbin Washington of Maryland (a grandnephew of the first president), asked the commissioner of public buildings to investigate the cost of bringing a reliable supply of water to the Capitol by means of a private aqueduct. Commissioner Elgar, in turn, called on J. A. Dumeste of the Army Corps of Engineers to survey nearby water and to estimate the cost of cast-iron pipes, reservoirs, and hydrants needed for the aqueduct. Two springs on

The Ascent to the Capitol, Washington

Robert Wallis after William Bartlett, 1840

When approaching the Capitol from the west, it was necessary to ascend a long flight of stairs to overcome the hill on which it was built. At the head of the stair was the monument to naval officers killed during the Tripoli War. The monument was first erected at the Navy Yard in 1808, relocated to the Capitol in 1831, and removed to the Naval Academy at Annapolis in 1860.

John A. Smith's farm not quite three miles north of the Capitol, another known as Dunlap's Spring, and a fourth spring were examined. They were all at higher elevations than the Capitol and could supply water by the power of gravity alone. The largest spring, one of the two on Smith's farm, was capable of providing fifteen and a half gallons per minute; three gallons a minute trickled from the smallest source. Bringing water to the Capitol from any of the four sources cost about the same—three were estimated at $31,000 apiece, while the largest spring could be tapped for $1,000 more.[22]

Robert Mills condemned the idea of taking water from springs instead of "large streams" such as Rock Creek or the Potomac River. These waters were, in his opinion, "softer, more wholesome, and better adapted for culinary purposes."[23] But the committee favored tapping Smith's large spring and authorized the commissioner to purchase it, to build a holding reservoir, and to run pipes to the Capitol, where receiving reservoirs would be constructed on the east and west grounds. The east reservoir could store 111,241 gallons of water, while its counterpart at the foot of the western terrace held 78,827 gallons.[24] Once the reservoirs were filled, excess water was piped into the Capitol for cooking and drinking, with the surplus drained into the canal at the foot of Capitol Hill. During the summer of 1834 it was discovered that the discharge of water was sluggish and the pipes were clogged with debris. Another of Smith's springs was diverted into the Capitol aqueduct, bringing the rate of discharge to about forty gallons per minute. While Smith did not object to the government's use of the second spring, he did wish to be compensated.[25]

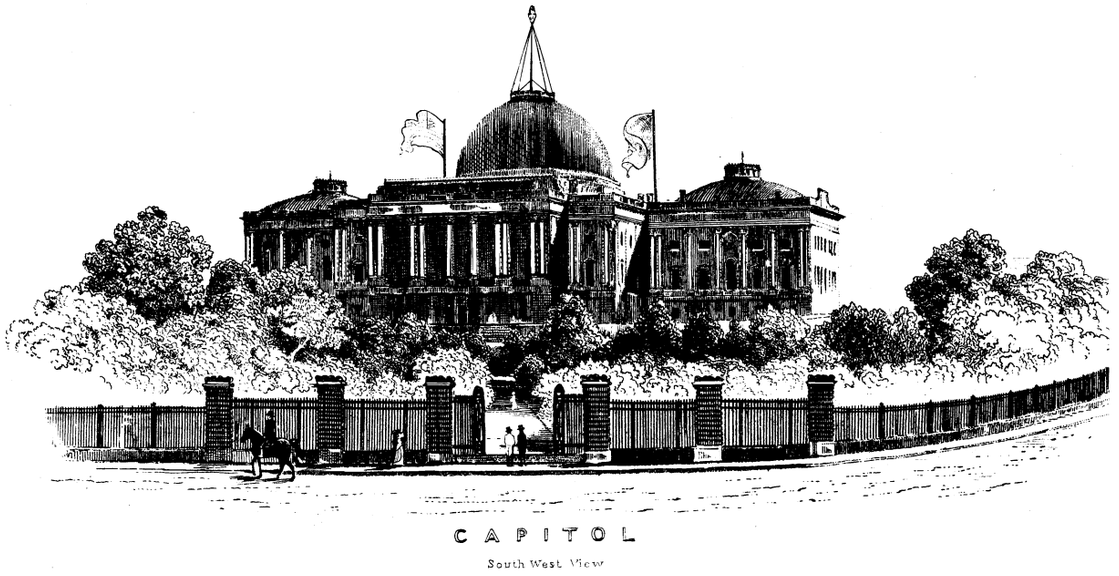
Drinking and cooking water was piped into the Capitol's restaurant, which was located in two rooms in the basement adjacent to one of the courtyards in the center building (modern day SB–17 and SB–18). There legislators could feast on oysters (raw, roasted, stewed, or fried), beef, veal, venison, mutton, pork, or green turtle soup, washed down with coffee, tea, wine, beer, or water.[26] In 1834 water was also conveyed to a public drinking fountain situated between the staircases leading to the upper terrace on the west front. Robert Mills designed the fountain with columns modeled after the Tower of the Winds supporting a plain entablature and capped by a graceful urn. The water spilled from a bronze faucet into a vase and then into a marble basin. It was, according to one critic who decried its location, "entirely too handsome to be hidden away."[27] While the fountain was under construction, the commissioner undertook a welcome improvement to nearby privies serving the House of Representatives. He had a cistern built to collect rain water, which was conducted to china basins in the privies through lead pipes. Opening or closing stall doors activated valves that flushed the basins with water.[28]

CRUTCHETT'S LANTERN

If the 1830s was the decade of running water, the 1840s was the decade of gas lighting. In 1847 James Crutchett conducted experiments converting cotton seed oil into gas in a temporary laboratory on the Capitol grounds, and success led him to propose lighting the Capitol with that fuel.[29] Mills, too, advocated the introduction of gas lighting, citing economy and safety as its principal advantages.[30] Members of the House were eager to bring gas to the Capitol after the cut glass chandelier in their chamber fell

The Capitol
by Christopher P. Cranch, 1841

Writers during the antebellum period often described the Capitol standing "high and alone" on the heights of Jenkins Hill. Looking southwest, Cranch's view conveys an authentic sense of rural isolation but exaggerates the rugged condition of the Capitol's grounds.



Capitol, South West View

unidentified artist
ca. 1847

This view was made at the time James Crutchett mounted his unusual lantern above the Capitol dome.

on December 18, 1840. Although no one was injured in the accident, several desks were "broken to atoms."[31] That lighting fixture had seventy-eight oil lamps arranged in two tiers and weighed 3,408 pounds. Including the balance that allowed it to be lowered for lighting, the whole apparatus weighed an astonishing 7,111 pounds.[32] The lamps burned whale oil, a fuel that added to the dangerous weight looming over congressional heads. Converting lighting fixtures to gas or buying new ones would not only remove the heavy weight of oil, but the cleaner-burning gas produced a brighter light.

Crutchett seems to have been as much showman as businessman. On his own initiative and at his own expense (but with congressional permission), he constructed a mast above the Capitol's dome to hold a gas-burning beacon capable of being seen from miles away. The lantern was not only an exciting addition to the spectacle of the Capitol at night—it was also a conspicuous advertisement for Crutchett's gas business. The mast was ninety-two feet high, while the glass and gilded iron lantern was twenty feet tall and six feet in diameter. Crutchett devised a clever scheme of reflectors to throw light into the rotunda at night. Together the mast and lantern weighed about two tons. Before Crutchett had been permitted to begin, the clerk of the House and the secretary of the Senate had asked Mills to evaluate the safety of the fixture, and he concluded that it posed no danger during lightning or high winds. The mast would be supported by an extensive web of guy wires that Mills claimed would actually strengthen the structure of the outer dome.[33] Crutchett was granted permission to install the Capitol's most unusual lighting fixture in the summer of 1847.

Some members of the House were concerned about the safety and cost of operating the lantern and asked the commissioner of public buildings to investigate. On April 12, 1848, Commissioner Charles Douglas (whom President Polk had appointed in 1847) wrote the Speaker about the lantern and his concerns about the introduction of gas into the Capitol generally.[34] Cutting the walls and boring through arches to run gas lines caused structural damage to the building, but Douglas did not indicate the extent of the injury nor did he propose a remedy. He observed cracks in the outside walls, particularly on the west front that he ascribed to inadequate foundations, settling, and weakness caused by cutting away walls for gas pipes. He was particularly fearful of the lantern, which vibrated in light breezes and acted like a "great lever" in high winds. He declared that vibrations rattling the dome would eventually cause structural damage. It also consumed a considerable quantity of gas and was dangerous to light. Each night, a nimble workman climbed a ladder eight

inches wide in order to light the lamp. Douglas' report predicted dire consequences unless the mast and lantern were taken down. On June 28, 1848, after less than a year in place, work began to remove Crutchett's lantern.[35] Riggers from the Navy Yard took down the fixture that many considered expensive, unsightly, and dangerous.

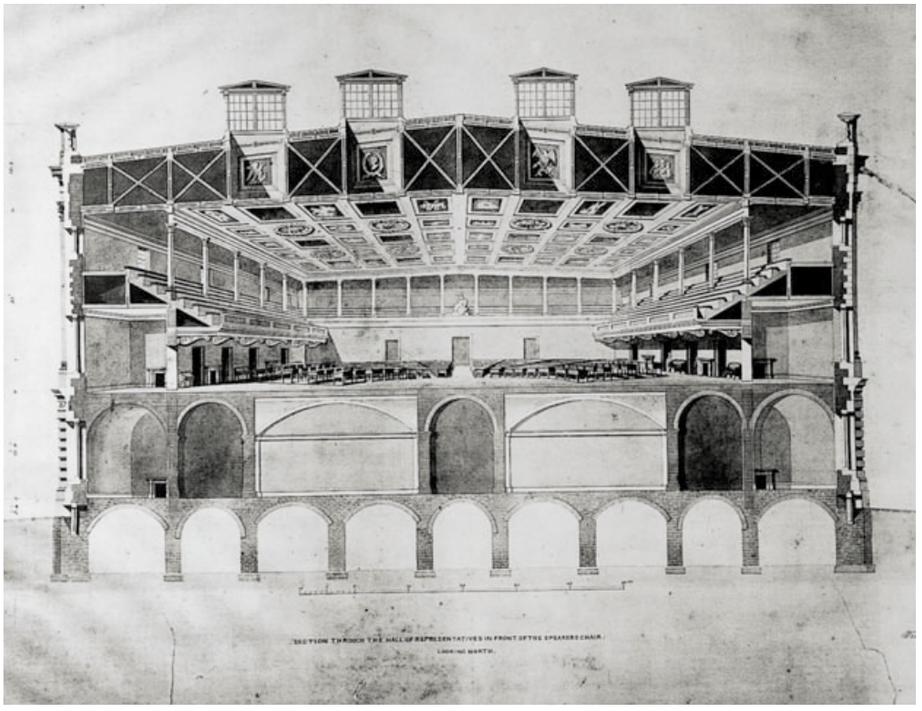
SPACE AND SOUND: CAPITOL DEFECTS

As the Capitol kept abreast with advances in science and sanitation, there were other problems that needed attention. The dreadful acoustics in the hall of the House had caused many grumbles since the room was first occupied in 1819. The smooth, rounded ceiling was the cause of the problem, but no one was willing to alter it to improve acoustics. When proposals were made to suspend a glass or plaster ceiling over the hall, they were defeated by those who defended the room's architectural splendor. In 1832 Mills attempted to solve the problem by placing the Speaker's chair in front of the principal entrance (which was closed temporarily), turning the members' desks and chairs around, and raising the floor. At the same time Mills added a visitor's gallery behind the south colonnade and opened five windows at the third story for light and ventilation. (Why Latrobe had designed these blind windows was not understood by Mills, nor can their purpose be explained today.) A thin, wooden partition was constructed behind the main gallery following the curve of the colonnade. The rearrangement failed to improve acoustics, however, and the room was returned to its original configuration in 1838. A Washington newspaper carried a report of other improvements made to the House chamber at the time the seats were moved back, and was particularly pleased by the new Speaker's rostrum:

> On the immense floor of this superb Hall, a new handsome Brussels carpet has been laid, which of course adds much to the neatness and beauty of its present appearance.
>
> We notice with pleasure that the gaudy trappings which were hung above and around the Speaker's chair last winter have been judiciously removed for more simple, chaste, and appropriate drapery. . . . The curtain is composed of rich crimson silk damask, lined with silk, and trimmed with rich crimson silk fringe of a foot in depth, with tassels to correspond. The ornamental part consists of a massive shield, blazoned in dead and burnished gilt, the outer margin of which is bronzed to give relief. The carving, which appears to be excellent, is executed by Mr. Thomas Millard, Jr. of New York; the gilding by Messrs. Kreps & Smith, of the same city. The upholstery and design are by Mr. Burke, of New York. . . . The curtain occupies a space of 23 feet in height by 12 feet in width. The chair is of highly polished mahogany, covered with crimson silk velvet; it is heavy and massive. . . . From the floor, about two feet in front, is an excellent imitation of marble, painted by Mr. Sengstack of this city.[36]

Complaints persisted, however, about the acoustics in the chamber. Some thought the chamber should be abandoned altogether and a new one built in a new wing. Others wanted to convert the library into a legislative chamber as first suggested in 1821. Zadock Pratt of New York, the chairman of the House Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds during the 28th Congress, prepared two reports on the problem. In the first, issued on May 24, 1844, he discussed the idea of converting the library into a House chamber. His committee had called upon the Army Bureau of Topographical Engineers to study the feasibility of the scheme and it, in turn, had consulted with Philadelphia architect William Strickland. All agreed that the library could not be easily or economically adapted because of space and structural constraints. Instead, they recommended adding a new wing to the south end of the Capitol that would contain a new chamber and additional committee rooms. In 1843 Strickland and the topographical engineers had prepared drawings for such a wing and estimated its cost at $300,000. It was presumed that a similar wing would be added to the north end to preserve the building's symmetry, but it could be delayed until the Senate ran out of space.[37] Strickland's recommendation, made in agreement with the topographical engineers, acknowledged that no place in the Capitol could be converted into a good speaking room for the House, and only a new chamber in a new addition could solve the problem.

Pratt's committee issued a second report in 1845 dealing with the state of the "National Edifices At Washington."[38] Going beyond the problems of the House chamber, the report lamented the



Section Through the Hall of Representatives in front of the Speaker's Chair, Looking North

by William Strickland, 1843

Manuscript drawing CONS 55 [Architectural Records]; Civil Works Map File; Records of the Chief of Engineers, Record Group 77; National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

Beginning in 1820, various schemes were devised to muffle echoes in the House chamber. In 1843 the Army Corps of Engineers and consulting architect William Strickland suggested building an addition to the south end of the Capitol housing an entirely new chamber. A nearly flat ceiling and a room without curving walls were their solutions to babbling voices and reverberating echoes. Also seen here is an early suggestion for a metal roof structure.

cramped conditions found throughout the Capitol, noting that the House and Senate had a total of fifty-seven standing committees while only forty rooms were available for their use. No provisions whatever were made for select committees. "This deficiency of rooms," Pratt's committee observed, "is a great drawback to the convenient transaction of the public business, as members attending committees have often experienced." The Library of Congress needed more space and the Supreme Court would benefit from a "better position." Evidence of the space problem was seen throughout the building: storage closets spilled out into corridors, courtyards were filled in, and rooms formerly high and airy were crowded with mezzanines. And while the Capitol was undeniably a spacious building—containing more than 60,000 square feet—Pratt's committee concluded that "it does not furnish the accommodation for the public business which so large an area would warrant us to expect." It recommended asking the president to have plans drawn for the enlargement of the Capitol. It also suggested that the present hall be converted into a library and that the former library room be rearranged for the Supreme Court. Congressional preoccupation with the annexation of Texas, however, prevented action on Pratt's resolution.

A QUICK WAR, A TROUBLED PEACE

Soon after the United States annexed Texas on March 1, 1845, Mexico severed diplomatic ties with Washington. President Polk deployed troops under General Zachary Taylor to the Rio Grande, well below the Nueces River, which had been the southern boundary of Texas since Spanish colonial days. While the Mexican government considered its response, Polk dispatched an envoy to negotiate the boundary question, as well as the purchase of California and New Mexico. Most citizens considered westward expansion America's "Manifest Destiny," its inevitable and irreversible path to the Pacific Ocean. Mexico, however, saw Taylor's troops as trespassers on its soil, and the prospect of losing its northern provinces to land-hungry Americans was neither preordained nor particularly fair. To check what it considered unwarranted imperialism on the part of

United States Senate Chamber

Thomas Doney after James Whitehorn, 1846

Crowded with the nation's leaders and Washington's social elite, the Senate chamber was one of the most popular theaters in America. Dolley Madison, the widow of the fourth president, is among those depicted in the gallery.

its northern neighbor, Mexican soldiers crossed the Rio Grande in April 1846, engaging Taylor's troops in a skirmish that left sixteen Americans dead. On May 13, 1846, the United States declared war on Mexico. In less than a year, the American army occupied New Mexico and California, annexing them to the United States. A series of victories over the large but ill-equipped Mexican army at Monterrey, Buena Vista, and Cerro Gordo presaged the fall of Mexico City on September 14, 1847. At the end of the war, the United States acquired 500,000 square miles of land from Mexico.

Interest in improving and enlarging the Capitol eased off during the quick war, but it was soon revived at the end of hostilities. During this time, Mills was in the forefront with ideas about enlarging the building. It was apparent that there was more than one way to add to the Capitol. Before the outbreak of war, Mills had proposed building an addition on the east front that would be the same size as the west-central building.[39] He continued to press the plan after war's end. A new chamber for the House would be built in the new wing, the Senate would move to the room occupied by the Library of Congress, the old House chamber would be refitted as a library, and the Supreme Court would occupy the former Senate chamber. This version of "musical chairs" would result in a modest enlargement to the building. It would also, coincidentally, solve an architectural problem that some found bothersome. Building an addition to the east front would place the dome in the center of the Capitol when viewed from the north and south. As it stood, the dome was very much shifted to the east side of the building. Mills' proposal was published in Robert Dale Owen's *Hints on Public Architecture* in 1849 and was the first enlargement scheme to appear in printed form.

While architectural ideas and plans circulated around the Capitol, California and New Mexico

The Capitol

Daguerreotype by John Plumbe, Jr., 1846

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Plumbe's daguerreotypes are thought to be the earliest photographic images of the Capitol. Taken from the southeast, this view shows the tall stone and iron fence that enclosed the grounds until 1873.

were left under military rule. Neither place was organized into a territory with a civilian government because Congress was too deeply divided on the subject of slavery to allow it. But after gold was discovered on the American River in California, and its population swelled with fortune-hunting "49ers," a civil government was needed immediately to restore order in that rowdy, far away place. Soon after Zachary Taylor succeeded Polk to the presidency in 1849, California applied for admission to

Henry Clay Addressing the Senate, 1850

by Peter Rothermel
1855

This scene was drawn five years after Clay's compromise was enacted and three years after his death.

the Union as a free state, setting off an explosive battle in Congress that threatened to divide the nation more deeply along sectional lines. Southerners saw the balance in the Senate tipping in favor of northern opponents to the expansion of slavery. They feared that New Mexico might also want to exclude slavery, further strengthening the northern hand. It seemed that talk of enlarging the Capitol might prove premature, or worse.

At the end of January 1850, Henry Clay proposed a series of laws that together became known as the Compromise of 1850. It was his final attempt to appease both sides of the slavery question, ease sectional conflict, and avert civil war. In addition to California statehood, other issues included the treatment of slavery in the rest of the territories won in the war with Mexico, the definition of the border between Texas and New Mexico, the slave trade in the District of Columbia, and the enforcement of the fugitive slave act, a law meant to return runaway slaves in the north to their owners in the south. Anti-slavery forces in the north opposed extension of slavery into the territories, considered slavery in the nation's capital a national disgrace, and wanted the despised fugitive slave act repealed or unenforced. Southerners supported a man's right to move his property, including slaves, into territories, and insisted upon a more vigilant enforcement of the fugitive slave act.

Debate on Clay's compromise measures lasted from January through September, taking up most of the first session of the 31st Congress. Clay himself delivered seventy speeches during this period. The very existence of the Union was at stake, and there was little doubt that the nation's destiny, whether it be as one country or two, hung in the balance. Mills offered one of the few diversions taking minds off the weighty business at hand. With plans under his arm, he met with members of the House and Senate Committees on Public Buildings, finding the Senate particularly receptive to the idea of enlarging the building by adding a pair of wings. The House seemed to prefer adding a single wing to the east front. Robert M. T. Hunter of Virginia chaired the Senate committee, with Jefferson Davis of Mississippi and John H. Clarke of Rhode Island filling the two other seats. Davis was particularly interested in the issue and on April 3, 1850, asked Mills to prepare plans, sections, and estimates for an extension of the Capitol by north and south wings. Mills responded with a design for wings 100 feet wide and 200 feet long, projecting sixty feet beyond the east and west fronts of the old building and separated from it by courtyards. A new Senate chamber, capable of seating 100 members, and thirty-two rooms for committees and officers would be accommodated in the north wing; the opposite wing would contain a hall large enough for 300 congressmen and another thirty-two rooms. The entire west-central building would be devoted to the Library of Congress, with enough space to shelve 250,000 books. Works of art would be removed from the library and displayed in the old hall of the House, where sightseers would not disturb the studious quiet of the reading room. The Supreme Court would occupy the former Senate chamber and its room on the first floor would be converted into a law library. Mills believed that second-floor accommodations for the Court would be healthier for the justices; in fact, he claimed that some of the most talented former members of the Court had died because of their chamber's

unwholesome ground-level location, and providing them with a lighter, better-ventilated space would be no more than common courtesy.[40] Elevations of the outside showed the effect of the new wings on the Capitol's appearance. In one drawing, Mills proposed removing the wooden dome and adding a new one similar to those at St. Paul's in London and Les Invalides in Paris. It would rise 210 feet above the ground, seventy feet more than Bulfinch's dome.

Although Hunter's committee reported favorably on the extension plan, which it said was "originally suggested by the topographical bureau, but altered by Mr. Robert Mills," it wanted to join with its counterpart in the House to evaluate the interior arrangements before making a final recommendation.[41] But the House Committee on Public Buildings, chaired by Richard H. Stanton of Kentucky, was in no mood to accept the Senate's recommendation, especially since it preferred to enlarge the Capitol eastward and not with north and south wings. Stanton's committee considered an eastward expansion more economical because the east plaza and garden offered an ample, level, and firm site on which to build. Wings, on the other hand, would have to be constructed on the sloping ground west of the building and would encroach upon nearby streets.

Debate on Clay's compromise continued throughout the summer of 1850. Little by little, moderates on both sides of the slavery question gained strength as the country longed for a peaceful resolution. The threat of a presidential veto suddenly ended when Taylor died on July 9, the victim of cholera morbus brought on by consuming a huge bowl of cherries and a pitcher of iced milk, one or both of which were contaminated with deadly bacteria. Millard Fillmore, who supported Clay, was sworn in as the thirteenth president before a joint session of Congress in the House chamber on July 10. In September he signed a string of bills that admitted California to the Union as a free state, created the territories of New Mexico and Utah with slavery to be determined by the "popular sovereignty" of voting residents, established the west boundary of Texas, prohibited slave trade in Washington (although slavery remained legal), and enacted a tough fugitive slave law. For each concession it made, each side received something in return. Not everyone was happy, but most were relieved that these divisive issues seemed to be settled at last. Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois was so relieved that he thought it would be unnecessary to speak of slavery ever again. The president called the measures "a final settlement of the dangerous and exciting subjects which they embrace."[42]

Ten days after signing the last of Clay's compromise resolutions, President Fillmore approved the Civil and Diplomatic Appropriation Bill for 1851. Buried among monies to keep foreign missions opened and light houses burning was an appropriation of $100,000 for the extension of the Capitol. The manner by which the building would be enlarged and who would be named the architect were matters left to the president to decide. The legislation originally written by Jefferson Davis read: "For the extension of the Capitol by Wings according to such plans as may be adopted by the joint committee of both houses of Congress, one hundred thousand dollars for each wing."[43] Because it did not agree with the notion that the Capitol would necessarily be enlarged by wings, the House struck Davis' language from the bill. In conference, it was decided to leave the matter for the president to decide and to restore half the money to begin the project. Congress adjourned on September 30, and legislators poured out of the city. By the truce hammered out in the Compromise of 1850, they felt assured that the Union would go on and that the Capitol would not be abandoned as a redundant relic of a failed experiment. Beyond merely acknowledging the necessity of enlarging the Capitol, the appropriation was a concrete expression of their faith in the peaceful future of a united nation. A dormant period in the Capitol's history was about to end.